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From Quibbles to Substance: A Response to Responses

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Effects of Epistemological Encounters in Africa

I appreciate the scholarly engagement with my article and would like to take this moment to further clarify my central argument and take up a number of points raised in the responses. First, however, it is important for me to make clear that the article entitled “Blinded by Sight: Divining the Future of Anthropology in Africa” (Nyamnjoh 2012b), which appeared in *Africa Spectrum*, represents a two-part conversation. In the first part of the conversation, entitled “‘Potted Plants in Greenhouses’: Critical Reflections on the Resilience of Colonial Education in Africa” (Nyamnjoh 2012a), I outlined in greater detail the central point about the epistemological and social implications of knowledge production in Africa. In all fairness, the argument mapped out there was meant to be the precursor to the article under question – “Blinded by Sight”.

The central argument that I mapped out in part one (“Potted Plants in Greenhouses”) is that education allows for the inculcation of facts as knowledge. Through its formalisation of teaching and learning, it produces sets of values used to appraise the knowledge in question. As I indicated,

When the values are not appropriate or broadly shared, the knowledge acquired is rendered irrelevant and becomes merely cosmetic or even violent. In Africa, the colonial conquest of Africans – body, mind and soul – has led to real or attempted epistemicide – the decimation or near complete killing and replacement of endogenous epistemologies with the epistemological paradigm of the conqueror. The result has

been education through schools and other formal institutions of learning in Africa largely as a process of making infinite concessions to the outside – mainly the western world. Such education has tended to emphasize mimicry over creativity, and the idea that little worth learning about, even by Africans, can come from Africa. It champions static dichotomies and boundedness of cultural worlds and knowledge systems. It privileges teleology and analogy over creative negotiation by Africans of the multiple encounters, influences and perspectives evident throughout their continent. It thus impoverishes the complex realities of those it attracts or represses as students. (Nyamnjoh 2012a: 129-130)

The argument as explored draws on Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* (1984) and other critical voices to argue that education in Africa is still the victim of a resilient colonial and colonising epistemology, which takes the form of science as ideology and hegemony. It is an education which is impatient with conviviality. By conviviality I understand involving “different or competing agentive forces which need a negotiated understanding” that privileges “the spirit of togetherness, interpenetration, interdependence and intersubjectivity” (Nyamnjoh 2002: 111-112). Just as Arthur Schopenhauer's porcupines are compelled to keep their quills in check in the interest of huddling together for warmth in winter (Farmer 1998: 422), conviviality makes interdependence possible amongst humans, whose tendency is to seek autonomy even at the risk of dependencies. Of course, members of the postcolonial African elite often justify the resilience of the unconvivial colonial epistemology and the education it inspires with rhetoric on the need to be competitive internationally. The outcome is often a devaluation of African creativity, agency and value systems, and an internalised sense of inadequacy. In considering this argument as reflected in “Potted Plants in Greenhouses”, I would like to now reiterate my main argument in “Blinded by Sight” in relation to the above concerns of unequal encounters as they pertain to knowledge production, dissemination and consumption in and on Africa.

In “Blinded by Sight”, I argued that many an anthropologist still resists opening up his or her mind to lifeworlds unfolding themselves through the interplay between everyday practice and the manifold actions and messages of humans, ancestors and non-human agents in sites of emerging meaning-production and innovative world-making. Ethnographic representations of Africa are often blindly crafted without rigorous systematic dialogue with the Africans in question. Adequate provision is also not made for competing perspectives and epistemologies within and beyond our discipline, over and above the token interviews and conversations we undertake in the field. Even as we are interested in knowledge as co-production, our reflex is to

minimise that co-production with key local intermediaries by either completely ignoring their voices, contributions and perspectives, or reducing these to a footnote or a list of names and chance occurrences in the “Acknowledgements” section. Despite this possibility of co-birth, there is little anthropological co-production going on. Monological, non-reflexive and non-inclusive representations of parts of an arbitrarily mapped-out and confined Africa continue to be the dominant mode of comprehending the continent, at the risk of further alienation of those who – like Sanya Osha (2013: 131) – feel mocked by anthropology as “a marginal academic discipline that was transformed into a home for academic and social misfits in Europe” and then transformed in turn into an enterprise of denuding “racialised and oppressed Others [...] of voice and constructive representation.” In mapping out this concern, my aim was to put into conversation the partiality of contemporary anthropological practices with the selection practices of our subjects of enquiry. Even though some of my most vociferous critics hardly engaged the central point, the disagreements centered on the problem of South African representational scholarship as the key way to address my core concern about knowledge production, epistemology and power. But this is only part of the story.

Anthropology and the South African Situation

The representational, race and power issues that I raised concerning studies of power and whiteness are hardly new to anthropology. American anthropological publications of the 1980s and 1990s (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Harrison 2008), and especially feminist anthropological writings, were saturated with such interventions (Abu-Lughod 2008; Tsing 1993; Visweswaran 1994; Behar 1993) – so too have scholars engaged in critical perspectives on Africanist engagement with coloniality, postcoloniality and the post-Apartheid state (Scheper-Hughes 1995; Magubane 2004; Mamdani 1996, 1998, 2009; Mbembe 2008). Thus, it is surprising that some of the respondents (Niehaus, Hartnack) take exception to my claims. To clarify, my point was that there is very little published research by white anthropologists in South African universities on white South Africans. The overwhelming tendency in South Africa is to “study down”, but hardly ever horizontally or upwards – let alone “*around*”, as Gordon suggests in his response. If the dearth of studies on white South Africans is anything to go by, it would appear that most South African anthropologists believe knowledge of the country they inhabit must be confined to knowledge of blacks (indiscriminately considered) or of whites who have failed to live up to the stereotypi-

cal comforts of being white.¹ In other words, nativity in Africa is confined to blackness and poor whites.

Both Niehaus (2013) and Hartnack (2013) offer interesting perspectives based on their own experiences and positionality. Both of them contend that I do not give enough credit to the studies that have been done on whites by white South Africans and others. Niehaus is particularly exhaustive, arguing that “[s]even monographs, several important and innovative essays and many interesting Ph.D. theses are by no means a negligible contribution”, by white South African anthropologists on white South Africans (2013: 122). And though his ability to name seven out of the supposedly hundreds of publications is commendable, the reality is that without connecting the production of these seven monographs to my central point he has conceded to the central force of the overall argument – an epistemological one.

The central point concerns the way that power and powerlessness informed by conceptions and articulation of race, place, class, gender and age further complexify the production, dissemination and consumption of those knowledge forms that we accept as legitimate explanatory domains (Nyamnjoh 2004). In “Blinded by Sight”, I simply reiterate a concern black South African scholars, some anthropologists, have expressed as well (Mafeje 1998; Ntsebeza 2008, 2012; Lebakeng 2008; Magubane 2010; Nyoka 2012; Nhlapo and Garuba 2012). Even as recently as 2009, two “black” South African anthropologists published an article in *Anthropology Southern Africa* highlighting inequalities and politicised relations within and between anthropology departments and contested the idea of a single South African anthropology (Petrus and Bogopa 2009) – a paper which elicited responses by Heike Becker (2009), Joy Owen (2009) and Kees van der Waal (2009). In another context, Mpilo Pearl Sithole – another “black” South African anthropologist, who holds a Ph.D. from the University of Cambridge and is associate professor at the University of KwaZulu Natal in Durban – complained about the domination of the peer-review process in South Africa “by scholars allied to Western models of knowledge production, who use their ‘gateway’ positions to marginalise and discourage African schools of thought” (2009: cover blurb).

This is an argument Niehaus misses, confining himself as he does to naming white on white studies in South Africa, with little attention to exactly how such studies reproduce or challenge the hierarchies of knowledge production that have shaped and continue to shape ethnographies of South Africa. So while I accept Niehaus’s concession that “[t]he results of these

1 See Nyamnjoh and Page (2002) for an example of such stereotypical representations of whites in a Cameroonian context.

studies have not found their way into the press nearly as often as they should have” (2013: 121), the reality is that even fewer of them have found their way into course outlines and readings. However, why is that so? What accounts for the non-publication of these studies despite their supposed importance and presumed quality of scholarship? Niehaus as well as Annika Teppo (2013) fall short of mentioning the ambivalence with which some of these studies have been received by fellow white anthropologists, precisely because of their audacity to research whiteness – even in its poor and devalued form. I agree with Teppo that “poor whites do matter”. But why should it be only poor whites who attract anthropological curiosity in South Africa, when blacks (poor and rich alike) are “anthropological fodder”? For even if I were to agree with Niehaus that my list of studies of whiteness was less exhaustive than desired by him and others, the epistemological question about such studies remains. The key point is that blacks provide the “fodder” but hardly the analytic epistemologies through which to make sense of their social worlds.

Yet Niehaus is more concerned with counting and personal location than he is with the realities that undergird how certain forms of knowledge are taken up and other forms rendered partial and in need of explanatory mechanisms such as political economy, the modernity of witchcraft, and so forth. What are the ethical and epistemological implications of Niehaus’ claim that he and Leslie Bank “worked on black businessmen and wage workers in Qwaqwa. Whilst Bank befriended the local magistrate, I avoided whites like the plague. This is not because I saw local whites as unworthy of anthropological attention, but rather because I found it hard to empathize with their views” (2013: 120)? Granted his empathy with the views of his black elephants, I wonder why he misses the logic of my challenge to anthropologists to indulge in co-production, reflexivity and epistemological conviviality with the perspectives of the Africans he so frequents and admires. Thus, the weight of my original argument about power imbalances in knowledge production, dissemination and consumption remains for a range of reasons:

First, the studies cited by Niehaus are definitely interesting and add details to the discussion, but they pale in comparison to the literature produced by white scholars on black people and other marginalised groups. That is, relatively speaking, the literature on whites by whites is comparably small. Anthropological theory on South Africa cannot survive on such a skewed sample.

Second, Niehaus’s citations notwithstanding, how many black elephants have gained access to the privileged worlds of the blind men or told their own stories in their preferred style for blind people’s consumption? Rela-

tively few black anthropologists, especially in South Africa, have studied the world of whites (however poor and marginalised they are); this is not always for want of interest, but often for lack of access and encouragement. In relation to histories of racism in South Africa, “studying whites” is not as easy as “studying blacks” – especially in a context where racial and material inequalities are near-permanent markers of social visibility and determinants of who qualifies to venture where and how. Anthropology (and, perhaps, South African society at large) is yet to seriously treat the black anthropologist as an equal, a situation suggestive of the prevalent structural inequalities that helps put the following surprise by Niehaus into perspective: “Nyamnjoh holds the chair of Social Anthropology at the University of Cape Town, possibly the most prestigious anthropological position on the continent” (2013: 118). What is it that could make someone in such a supposedly powerful position write a paper such as “Blinded by Sight”? Hartnack begins to suggest a response to this question through his friend’s experience in rural northern Malawi (2013: 110). The hierarchies of humanity and epistemologies embedded in social backgrounds and positions, which affect knowledge production and structure relations, are developed in detail elsewhere (Nyamnjoh and Page 2002; Nyamnjoh 2004, 2006, 2012a). Hence, my response to Niehaus is simple: Who can be better placed than a black African in such a *high* position (call it tokenism) to understand the overwhelming power of the structural violence of Apartheid to put everyone in their place (see also Osha’s response [2013])? As Mbembe argues, “[t]he end of apartheid [...] has not affected the structural positions of the white propertied classes enjoyed during the period of white supremacy.” If anything, whites are doing better economically, socially and in terms of cultural capital, which they use to co-opt blacks – powerful and well positioned or not – as they see fit (Mbembe 2008: 14-15; see also Pillay et al. 2013). Similarly, the body of feminist scholarship (including even the most successful women in a world narrowly configured around manhood) has many lessons and parallels for a post-Apartheid South African society overly determined by race despite the latter’s constitutional invisibility. Thus, rather than wishing Apartheid and its inequalities away with an impressive shopping list of publications, it is important to critically reflect on what Apartheid produced in the form of anthropology (Mafeje 1998; Sharp 2011; Bank and Bank 2013) and what its effects on the present are (Ntsebeza 2008, 2012; Lebakeng 2008; Petrus and Bogopa 2009; Becker 2007, 2009; Owen 2009; van der Waal 2009; Adesina 2011; Nyoka 2012; Sithole 2009, 2012; Mohamed 2012). Is there a place for factoring in the production, reproduction and resilience of white subjectivities in relation to black subjectivities in South Africa?

Third, I concede that we need a new metaphor for our interlocutors and their power relations that goes well beyond “studying up and down” – or even “studying around”. However, this point cannot be seriously taken up by simply counting how many ethnographies of white South Africans exist. It would be akin to determining scholarly excellence from the number of times someone is cited, which amounts to the conflation of quantity and quality. My central point remains: Representations of Africa are often blindly crafted without rigorous systematic dialogue with the Africans in question, rather than reflecting on the way that competing perspectives and epistemologies within and beyond our discipline require a reconsideration of the analytic mechanisms through which we understand Africans’ social worlds.

Frontier Scholarship and Epistemological Conviviality

Over and above the South African context, “Blinded by Sight” highlights the predicament of those seeking frontier scholarship and epistemological conviviality in Africa. In a world of knowledge production infused or obsessed with binaries, dichotomies, zero-sum approaches, contradictions and chasms between rhetoric and practice, scholars who seek to mediate, negotiate or reconcile competing and conflicting minorities are often ignored or treated as anathema. As I argue in “Potted Plants in Greenhouses”, such frontier African scholars like Ocol of *Song of Lawino* must wonder why they should keep knocking for admission into conversations with white counterparts who clearly do not accept them, presumably to limit hybridity and restrict their African collaborators and interlocutors to a legitimating role. African scholars are seldom allowed (beyond token concessions) to assert themselves, except as local clearing officers for theories, concepts, methods and scholarship produced elsewhere. They are schooled to be critical of fellow black elephants, while endorsing the mediocrity or glossing over the excesses of those with enough cultural capital in anthropological circles to determine thought and practice. Sometimes in their zeal and determination to prove that they are not inferior to those who study and classify the elephants of the world, such frontier African scholars must betray whatever African achievements they grew up acknowledging (Nyamnjoh 2012a).

Given such callous indifference and overt disregard even by frontier African scholars (who are available and ready to serve as intermediaries between the blind men and their African elephants), how does one, epistemologically speaking, ensure that the mediocrity of the outside is not mistaken for excellence? What if it succeeds in imposing itself by silencing critique and discrediting alternatives with its emphasis on talking at, talking on

and talking past, but seldom talking to or talking with African counterparts? Where is the science in the reluctance to embrace “insider” wisdom in the construction of ethnographies? What does it mean, empirically, to distinguish between outsider and insider? Or to claim that one is African, at home or not at home? What qualifies one for or denies another the status of inclusion? Is it possible that the African ethnographic elephant, upon closer examination, could be far less at home than the ethnographic outsider’s assumptions of home might suggest? And is there any likelihood that – geographical differences notwithstanding – the outsider ethnographer might in some situations actually be more at home than the purported insider elephant? If we as a scholarly community concede the need for negotiated and carefully articulated intersubjective accounts informed by the cultured blindness of the outsider, on the one hand, and the supposedly untested insights of the insider, on the other, what form does the production of such epistemological conviviality assume? How is copyright to be negotiated and attributed for the knowledge produced therefrom? And how is the subsequent blame, controversy or ridicule by various instances of legitimation – for not quite getting things right or for outright misrepresentation – to be shared? Again, these questions have solicited fruitful debate elsewhere, in feminist anthropological scholarship for example (Behar 1993; Visweswaran 1994), and should not be considered an unreasonable or unnecessary conversation in the study of Africa – which has attracted a large body of sex and gender metaphors in the imagination of white adventurers and in scholarship (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 105-125).

Reconciling Dominant and Dormant Epistemologies in Africa

One cannot proceed on the basis that knowledge is available and affordable to all who seek it. If all knowledge produced is partial, as Warnier (2013) suggests, then it is delusory for anyone to claim to know something in its totality or for us to presume that our analyses of the people we study should not be called into question. Knowledge becomes subject to renegotiation with every new experience and every new encounter or relationship. Therefore, instead of imposing an insincere external objectivity, knowing the elephant should be an open-ended pursuit and conversation that is open to all with curiosities, insights and perspectives within and outside any particular discipline and the academy. All single approaches for framing how we understand the social worlds of those we study are problematic. The myriad of interconnections of these worlds challenge us to adopt and provide for

holistic perspectives that straddle disciplinary frontiers and foreground the intersubjective and the co-productive in the representations of social reality.

Rigid prescriptive gazes in the study of Africa produce the effect of a workman whose only tool is a hammer and to whom every problem is a nail. If, as Warnier (2013) reminds us, we prioritise and legitimate as knowledge only what our senses make possible and confine ourselves to the ethnographic present, then we are seldom in a position to fathom the realities of our elephants beyond our senses and our presence amongst them. We would be reduced to keeping up appearances by claiming knowledge that we could never really access, however hard we tried, simply because our idea of and approach to knowledge production is rigidly one-dimensional. Given such blinkers, would we – in a position of power – be tolerant of less powerful others equally involved in keeping up appearances, albeit in a different way and with claims distinct from ours? Would we confront and contest, or seek to understand and accommodate them? Would we invite them to a discussion of how to provide a level playing field for competing sources of “ignorance”? Given these unresolved epistemological concerns and unequal power relations – informed by race, place, class, gender and age, *inter alia* – no one in “Africa” should be above the anthropological gaze. If this requires prescription and guidelines by the ethical committees of global and local anthropological associations, so be it. Like Pierre Bourdieu (2004: 114), I would argue that such collective discipline is liberating as it is well placed to free Africans and Africanist anthropologists from the “biases” linked to our positions and dispositions.

Furthermore, fieldwork and participant observation do not have to produce a one-size-fits-all practice. Regional variations require flexibility rather than prescriptiveness. Along with these concerns about fieldwork are concerns about “native” anthropologists and anthropology “at home”. Again, as critical overviews of debates and practices repeatedly demonstrate, anthropology is all the richer with creative diversity. Therefore, anthropologists studying Africa should seek to recognise such diversity in the conceptualisation and implementation of their research projects as well as in how they provide for co-production and collaboration with “native” and “at-home” anthropologists and across disciplines. Such co-production calls for teamwork over and above professional collaboration, along with multi- and transdisciplinary endeavours, to include the very people we study in the conceptualisation and implementation of the research process. It is not to be confined to or conflated with co-publication.

Given the fact of blindness as a human condition, it follows that human elephants are just as blind as their explorers and hence have no special advantage in knowing themselves. I am not calling for the replacement of

blind explorers' perspectives with the perspectives of the elephants themselves, but rather for a platform and equal playing field for conversations from and between multiple perspectives on being and becoming an elephant informed by competing and complementary blindness. This precondition calls for a critical interrogation of our often unproblematised claims to scientificity (soft or hard) through our explicit or implicit suggestions that our ways of knowing are superior to those of fellow academics or those we study. Such often-unsubstantiated claims to intellectual superiority, if widely shared by scholars in powerful positions, are a license to validate and impose mediocrities, ignorance and preconceptions as knowledge. Reflexivity and co-production as processes might not be sufficient to overcome blindness, but they most certainly are a useful starting point towards the reinvention of anthropology around big questions – involving, *inter alia*, long-term histories and comparisons.

As a way forward, let us return to “Potted Plants in Greenhouses”, which calls for epistemological conviviality through the creative reconciliation of the myriad of ways of being African as depicted by Okot p'Bitek in the characters of Ocol, Lawino and Clementine. Such reconciliation requires an articulation of being African that is simultaneously cognisant of history and the ethnographic present, structure and agency, blood and choice, elite and non-elite, cosmopolitan and particular, and tradition and modernity. It calls for listening to ordinary men and women who (like p'Bitek's Lawino) challenge the prescriptive gaze, while at the same time demanding that recognition and relevance be married with analytic formulations that seek to explain our social worlds. With Africans seeking conviviality and interdependence between competing and conflicting influences, “Blinded by Sight” argues for the recognition of the ongoing, popular creative processes of negotiation of a range of knowledge forms. And through this point, I hope that my interlocutors will join me in interrogating the conceptual future of our discipline and the work ahead for us all.

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