

**The epistemic politics of ‘academography’:
Navigating competing representations of Africa’s university futures**

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Abstract

This paper investigates the epistemic politics at work in radically contrasting academic representations of African university futures. Euro-American policy entrepreneurs and research funders call for major investments in Africa’s scientific research training capacity to strengthen the continent’s integration into a global knowledge system. Meanwhile, African social scientists and humanities scholars critique the epistemological hegemony of ‘Western’ models of the academy, and call for the decolonisation of African universities.

This paper sets out a three-step approach to dealing with the politicization of ‘academography’ (Thorkelson 2016) in this decolonial moment. The first step is to acknowledge how epistemic power relations shape all analytical moves. The second is to recognize that ‘generative antagonisms’ (Burawoy 2004) are inherent to disciplinary knowledge production. The third is to develop an ethnographic sensitivity to everyday academic practice within these institutional worlds and epistemic cultures. Together these moves offer space for dialogue between different visions of African higher education.

Keywords

epistemic politics, African universities, decolonization, academography

Introduction

‘Africa needs another million PhD scientists to develop homegrown solutions’ read the headline to a widely syndicated 2018 blog-piece by the South African scientist and statistician Alan Christoffels (2018). Christoffels pointed to UNESCO data suggesting that the African continent only produces 1% of the world’s science and has on average 198 researchers per million people (compared to a world average of 1150 researchers, going up to 4500/million in the UK and US). These dramatic statistics lead into a discussion of major African research capacity investments by the UK’s Wellcome Foundation and the US National Institute of Health, and a call for a ‘pan-African framework for increasing and sustaining local funding’. The solution for Christoffels is more ‘home-grown initiatives’ and less funding instability.

Attracting less media attention, but more visibility within the social sciences and humanities, are trenchant calls to radically decolonize African higher education (Mamdani 2018, Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Zondi 2016, Maringe and Ojo 2017, Arowosegbe 2016, Santos 2012). Philosophical critiques of Eurocentrism and the ‘imperial hierarchies of knowledge’ (Arowosegbe 2016) have led to deep skepticism about the politics of ‘capacity-building’ and its destructive impact on African universities (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). Even scholars of political economy are accused of being trapped within a Western epistemology and replaying the ‘Eurocentrism of Marx’ (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013, 8). Informed by Foucaultian and Fanonian ideas, thinkers like Mbembe (2016) and Mamdani (2018) condemn the ‘epistemic coloniality’ that dominates African university cultures. For Mbembe, ‘a Eurocentric canon is a canon that attributes truth only to the Western way of knowledge production’, ‘disregards other epistemic traditions’ and ‘claims detachment of the known from the knower’ (ibid 32). The alternative is clear: to rethink the university, its purpose and form.

This paper analyses these contrasting discourses, the scholarly and institutional interests that inform these visions, and the lack of dialogue between these positions. It explores the deployment of rhetorical oppositions: ‘African needs’ vs ‘global science’, the ‘Western canon’ versus ‘other’ epistemologies. The paper argues for a three-step approach to dealing with the politicization of academic writing about the university, or what Thorkelson calls ‘academography’ (Thorkelson 2016). The first, building on feminist theory and Bourdieu’s critique of scholasticism (Haraway 1988, Bourdieu 2000), is to acknowledge the partiality of all accounts of the university. The second, drawing on work within the sociology of science, is to develop analyses of academic practice that foreground the intellectual antagonisms, fractures and tensions within and between fields, seeing these as generative of new knowledge. The third is to practice a form of methodological relativism, developing an ethnographic understanding of the materialities and institutional logics of African university worlds. This approach is exemplified by three ethnographic case-studies of African research cultures, each of which illustrate the porous nature of the contemporary African ‘pluriversity’ (Santos 2010, Mbembe 2016) and the daily challenges of academic life amidst scarcity.

Put together, this combination of academic self-critique, sociological theory and ethnographic attentiveness can serve as an effective academographic toolkit. Writing about the importance of situating knowledge, Haraway (1988) makes the case for ‘double-vision’, the ability to put different epistemological perspectives into dialogue. The paper draws on feminist insights to make the case for multiple possible future visions, each offering partial solutions and responses to the different demands that African societies are likely to place on academic research and university-based knowledge (Santos 2018).

Another million PhDs?

In April 2018, the second meeting of the [Next Einstein Forum](#) Global Gathering was held in Kigali, bringing together 1000 young African scientists with entrepreneurs, policy makers. Hosted by a network of African mathematicians, sponsored by an American pharmaceutical company a major German philanthropy, the eye-catching title and sophisticated marketing ensured international prominence. More than a conference, declaimed the website, this 'is a movement to advance African scientific discovery and innovation'. With its secretariat in Kigali, the three-day workshop gave a starring role to Rwanda's President Kagame, and attracted ministers, CEOs and heads of research funding councils. The event offered an upbeat vision of an African scientific renaissance led by an elite cadre of entrepreneurs and scientists.

Africa's perceived marginality within a global 'knowledge economy' lies behind this marketing of the continent's scientific potential to potential donors and investors. Rwanda is a key champion of this sociotechnical imaginary, and Kagame is explicit in his vision to create Central Africa's Singapore. Training new generations of researchers is the first step on this journey. The British PhD may have been a child of empire (Simpson 1983), but today it is the global philanthropies, international research funders and multilateral development organisations that champion African research capacity-building (Stackhouse and Harle 2014), sometimes with unedifying results (Jayawardane 2019). Many African nations have set ambitious goals for doctoral training, building on the African Union's own targets for science and technology funding (African Union 2014) and a suite of subsequent policy declarations.

Within these policy networks, key lobbyists have called for major financial investments in the Africa's 'research base'. From its Nairobi base, a revitalised African Academy of Sciences has taken on a prominent advocacy role for scientists across the continent. Its reputation led to the Wellcome Trust providing \$60 million support for a portfolio of doctoral programmes. Kariuki and Kay (2017) launched the Coalition for African Research and Innovation (CARI) at the 2017 World Economic Forum, describing 'seemingly insurmountable challenges' and 'exciting opportunities'. Worrying that 20,000 professionals leave Africa every year, they cite IMF predictions about future African growth as 'a real opportunity'. Others (Christoffels 2018) criticise the instability of donor funding. These depictions of the continent's scientific 'need' and future potential, are powerful pieces of policy rhetoric. A few voices are more cautious (Dudnik 2017), pointing out that a focus on the future can distract from the lack of resources for today's scientists. One prominent science leader called on African governments and philanthropists to increase their R and D spending, noting that in South Africa, 30% of research and development is business-funded (Marsh 2017).

What of the 'one million' statistic? This was an extrapolation from UNESCO SDG data to suggest that for African countries to match the world average of researchers per head, the continent needs another million new PhDs (Marsh 2017, Christoffels 2018). The target is cited to justify national targets for 'scaling up' the continent's scientific research capacity, such as South Africa's plans to triple doctoral 'production' by 2030 (Cloete et al 2015a). These scientometric visualizations of Africa's research productivity draw on journal citation data and funding collaboration statistics to position the continent's scientists within a global knowledge system. These metrics then become a target (Cloete et al 2018) to justify asymmetric funding collaborations and the channeling of resources to a small cadre of 'elite' African research universities.

These statistical peaks are a masterclass in policy lobbying. They place science at the heart of the continent's future, and make the case for investment in research and development, and the potential for a future 'knowledge-based' economy generated through research (Cloete et al 2015b). In the short term, this ambitious roadmap for African science depends on transnational science partnerships, major donors and global health philanthropies. The targets for science capacity-building are made tangible through the visualisations of global citation rankings,

academic mobility and collaboration activity. Data-driven visualisations of international collaboration offer confident portrayals of Africa's small but growing contribution to a global science system (Marginson 2018), with important national benefits, both for individuals and societies. The discourse downplays the resource inequities and skewed hierarchies of knowledge production within and between African countries.

As a result, a small group of elite African scientists, universities and research institutes manage multiple international partnerships and scientific collaborations. These 'flagship' institutions (Douglass 2015, Cloete et al 2018) are nodes (albeit peripheral) within a global academic system, insulated by a history of international donor funding and patronage. With an initial wave led by the US philanthropies, which between 2003 and 2013 gave \$1 billion to African universities (Jaumont 2016), a small group of institutions continue to benefit from a stream of capacity-building funding initiatives. World Bank and EU funding triggers further backing from multilateral organisations, philanthropies and donors. The media attention given to the Next Einstein foundation and AIMS also helps to raise the profile of a new generation scientists. Policy pledges, such as the 2014 Kigali Communiqué (HESTI 2014), the 2015 Dakar Declaration on the revitalization of African higher education (TrustAfrica 2015), the African Union's 2063 commitment to science, and NEPAD's support for the Alliance for Accelerating Excellence in Science in Africa (AESA), are all part of this advocacy work.

The growth of global health as a discipline has accelerated this flow of funds to African universities. It has also, finally, brought Western scientific hegemony and the 'awkward relationship between science, aid and development' (Crane 2013) into analytical focus, at least for those interested in the ethical dimensions of international research collaborations. The unequal partnerships of global health research (Crane 2013, Crane et al 2018, Parker and Kingori 2016) are increasingly under scrutiny, and are replicated in many other institutional partnerships and capacity-building initiatives (Adriansen et al. 2016). The bureaucratic requirements of international sustain inequalities of money and power, funders frustrate efforts to forge more egalitarian collaborations. Despite calls for more 'symmetrical' transnational higher education partnerships (Obamba and Koehn 2015), the existing power inequalities are often reinforced.

The UK's Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) exemplifies this challenge. Since 2015 it has used government funds for international development assistance to support interdisciplinary research that benefits the lives of the world's poorest. The involvement of African research 'partners' becomes a key way for entrepreneurial UK universities to pitch for funding (Branch 2018). The GCRF strategy rightly insists on reciprocity, and on strengthening 'capacity for research, innovation and knowledge exchange *in* the UK and developing countries through partnership'. Yet reminders to think critically about the power dynamics within these collaborations are largely rhetorical and difficult to enforce.

In short, the global discourse of scientific 'capacity-building' offers a one-way policy roadmap for African universities. The route is clear: build international institutional collaborations, incentivise research and publications in 'international' journals, develop research cultures and doctoral training. It is a model that largely accepts the hegemony of Euro-American academic cultures, international funding collaborations, and the existence of a global research economy.

It is this future that critics such as Mbembe decry, seeing it as the neoliberal restructuring of the academy to fit the dynamics of global capitalism (2016). Even those analysts who see the potential for global science to constitute 'a vast joined-up zone of free critical enquiry' (Marginson 2018, 2) recognize that in unequal societies, universities can end up reproducing social hierarchies rather than increasing social mobility. And the roadmap ignores the daily challenges facing many African universities: inadequate resources and infrastructure, poor governance, growing numbers of students, low salaries and fragile research cultures (Adriansen et al 2016). No wonder critics advocate a radically different vision for Africa's research

universities.

Decolonising the African University?

Africa's first generation of political leaders were quick to call for the adaptation of colonial university models. Conscientized and radicalized whilst studying at universities in Britain and the US, they were highly critical of the importation of Western standards, cultures and pedagogies. Nkrumah, hosting the first All-African People's Congress in Accra in 1958, championed Africa's own scientific future, insisting that the 'university must relate its activity to the needs of the society in which it exists..taking root amidst African traditions and cultures' (Nkrumah, cited in Ashby 1966, Mills 2008).

The epistemic legacies of European colonialism are all too visible in the present, exemplified by unequal postcolonial 'partnerships. Africa-based scholars are caught within epistemological and material struggles over the future of the African research university. The unprecedented growth in international research collaborations has led some to describe the 'juggernaut' of global science as a 'twenty-first century academic "scramble for Africa"' (Crane 2013).

Across sub-Saharan Africa, the expansion of university provision has presented major resource challenges. Academic staff face packed lecture rooms but are also expected to upgrade their qualifications and complete doctorates. Global research collaborations and a stream of 'international' academic publications are incentivized if not required. International benchmarks drive reforms. New universities and branch campuses multiply to cope with growing student demand, leading to difficult questions about quality and sustainability. The role of national higher education commissions becomes increasingly important, interventionist and politicised. University lecturers combine PhD study with teaching and administrative roles. Students and staff alike rely on consultancy work to supplement inadequate salaries (Wight et al 2014). Ethnic rivalries bedevil institutional collaborations (Arowosegbe 2016). It is the perceived colonial roots of this situation that drive the more radical critiques of neo-colonialism and visions of epistemological 'inversion' and decoupling offered by Lissovoy (2019) and others.

Academic critiques of Eurocentrism and the 'imperial hierarchies of knowledge' that define African knowledge production, and even African studies itself (Arowosegbe 2016, Allman 2019) are increasingly influential across the humanities and the social sciences. They have prompted debates about curriculum reform and institutional change, not only across Africa (Maringe and Ndofirepi 2018) and but also in the UK and US (Bhambra et al. 2018).

These critiques offer a highly oppositional reading of the politics of international institutional partnerships 'capacity-building'. Mamdani, political scientist, and a veteran critic of Uganda's universities, puts it bluntly: 'African universities are still a colonial project' (2018, 9). Calling for African scholars to be trained 'at home', he calls for institutional reform so 'that postgraduate education, research and institution-building form part of a single integrated whole'. He contrasts 'the local production of knowledge...(that) takes account of a society's needs and demands, capacities and aspirations' to 'the global conversation...in which the play of geopolitical forces has less and less relevance' (Mamdani 2018, 34). Criticising existing approaches to research training, Ndofirepi and Maringe argue that Africa 'needs a different form of doctoral education and not one which simply reproduces the knowledge required elsewhere, especially in the global north' (2017, 53). As Crossley (2012, 11) notes, 'universities are being shaped and 'built' in ways that maintain dependency and hegemony (rather) than strengthen stakeholder ownership and voice, and genuinely meet local needs'.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) takes a stronger position, arguing that what is needed is the destruction of 'foreign' institutions and the creation of decolonial higher education. Rather than 'alienate 'African people from their societies and communities' the priority for Ndlovu-Gatsheni is for 'epistemologies, pedagogies, and curriculum that are consonant with specific African historical,

cultural and practical realities' (ibid, 180). Inevitably geopolitical and epistemological divides are reinforced: 'global' versus 'Africa-centred' knowledge 'colonial' versus 'indigenous' epistememes, transnational science' versus 'local' needs (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018, 77).

Coming from a range of disciplines, the critics have a shared target - the 'epistemic coloniality' (Mbembe 2016) seen as defining African universities and knowledge projects. For postcolonial theorists, this critique is the basis from which to imagine radically alternative futures for the academy. Some detail the epistemological rethinking needed. Writing in this journal, Lissovoy (2019, 420) makes the theoretical case for 'inversion' and 'unwinding' as necessary political responses to 'the colonial condition of material and epistemological imposition'. Inspired by Fanon's work, he goes on to insist that 'without a fundamental and wrenching displacement of Western epistemological hegemony, there can be no 'progress,' democracy, or humanism' (ibid 429). Lissovoy suggests that even Marxist and other critical perspectives are complicit with this 'accumulation of epistemological privilege' (ibid, 420), and calls for an inversion in ways of thinking that 'moves beyond the boundaries of Western thought' (ibid, 426). This critique of Eurocentric analytical moves leads to a rejection of dependency theory and a neglect of political economy more broadly.

Some question the future of the university as an institution. Santos insists that decolonised universities will need to be seen as *pluriversities*, producing accountable and pluriversal knowledge (2010, 2018). This is not just a call for disciplinary pluralism. He argues for the primacy of non-academic 'contextual knowledge' whose primacy is its 'extramural application'. The 'initiative for formulating the problems to be solved and the determination of their criteria of relevance to be shared among researchers and users' (2010, 278). University knowledge needs to be confronted with other kinds of knowledge, leading him to argue that society 'ceases to be an object of scientific questioning, and instead becomes a subject that questions science' (ibid).

Mbembe (2016, 37) takes up this argument, insisting that 'decolonizing an African university requires a geographical imagination that extends well beyond the confines of the nation-state', including a 'strategy of openness to dialogue among different epistemic traditions'. As he notes there is 'hardly any agreement as to the meaning, and even less so the future, of what goes by the name of 'the university' (ibid, 32). Writing about the South African context, Mbembe calls for a less 'provincial and more open critical cosmopolitan pluriversalism – a task that involves the radical re-founding of our ways of thinking and a transcendence of our disciplinary divisions' (ibid, 38). The visions of Lissovoy, Santos and Mbembe go beyond rethinking epistemology, questioning the very modality of the university itself as a site for thinking.

Three steps towards a more accountable academography

The inevitability of scholasticism

This paper has described rival academic visions for the future of African universities. One seeks to strengthen and embed Africa's contribution to an existing global knowledge system, the other calls for the radical decolonization and transformation of the university as an organizational form. Both are forms of high-stakes institutional 'academography' (Thorkelson 2016) that offer radically different readings of the relationship of the African academy to the 'global research economy'. The politicization of these oppositional accounts raises the question of whether there can ever be one objective standpoint 'from which this system can be rationally examined' (Thorkelson 2015, 210)?

The fragile meaning of academic objectivity has long concerned feminist thinkers and theorists. Many of these insights, from standpoint theory (Harding 2004) to the importance of locating truth claims and the need for partial perspective (Haraway 1991) have been taken up across the social sciences. Bourdieu constantly returns to the challenge facing sociological writing about

universities. His reflections on the impossibility of escaping ‘scholasticism’ have tended to be neglected. Bourdieu first set out a blueprint for studying the academy as a field of power in *Homo Academicus* (1984). This sociological analysis of the elite French academic world aimed to trap the ‘supreme classifier among classifiers, in the net of his own classifications’ (1984, xi). Using the student uprisings of May 1968 as a critical fault-line for elite Parisian universities, he maps the different forms of cultural, economic, political and scientific capital held by around 400 university professors in a whole range of fields, drawing on a range of data, including their education, parental occupation, and positions of authority. He goes on to develop a three-dimensional map of the ‘economically subordinate but culturally dominant’ members of the dominant class, including the blurring relationship between academics and non-tenured intellectuals, and made the case that his analysis of the French academic elite also applied to other scholastic universes.

Bourdieu reprises his reflections on academic ethnocentrism in *Pascalian Meditations* (2000). He argues that, for each field, ‘there corresponds a fundamental point of view of the world’ and each ‘produces its own intellectual dispositions’ (Bourdieu 2000, 99). This leads him to three scholarly ‘fallacies’ that lead to ‘the universalising of a particular case... favoured and authorised by a particular social condition’. In response, Bourdieu calls for the interrogation of the ‘epistemic history and unconscious’ of the sociological field’. Ever combative, Bourdieu even criticises Geertz for his ‘apparently humble and submissive forms of scientific work’, suggesting that even ethnographic ‘thick description’ leads to him ‘imposing on reality a preconstructed mode of construction which is none other than the scholastic view of the world’ (Bourdieu *ibid*, 52). Bourdieu is warning us not to put too much trust in our disciplinary values, especially if this leads us to ignore their ideological underpinnings (Morley 2003).

Bourdieu also writes about the implications of the ‘magical boundary’ that academics create around the university, and suggests that the best we can do is to fight against our scholastic inclinations through what he calls a ‘constant effort of reflexivity, in and of itself scholastic’. His own analysis of the French academy is not immune to this critique: *scholarly* mappings of academic fields of power (even those of Bourdieu) can elide the different and contradictory forms of disciplinary consciousness about the institution itself. Sociologists have not necessarily got the best view. As Thorkelson (2015, 210) astutely points out, ‘forms of academic knowledge used to advocate and evaluate university models are themselves tactics, at once political, epistemological and ideological’ such that ‘epistemic questions began to bleed into political discourse’. By this argument, academic mappings of universities, in this case, of the African ‘university’, are simultaneously analytical and political moves. The future of the institution becomes a contested space on which to project rival representations.

Writing about American academics writing about American universities, Thorkelson takes up Bourdieu’s ideas. He argues that ‘most overviews are written from the perspective of its leaders or its specialists, and all such projects are at best teetering on the edge of ideology, prone to universalizing and thus misrecognizing their own limited, particular point of view’ (*ibid*, 211). Scientists and humanities scholars alike draw on their own academic experiences to justify particular approaches to institutional reform. Scholarly claims to speak for ‘Africa’ in general, for the university in general, or for ‘knowledge’ in general, are similarly self-interested acts. All knowledge claims come from somewhere (Haraway 1991). Scholars are adept at symbolic representation, but are also emotionally invested and ontologically ‘complicit’ with their epistemologies, as Bourdieu (2000) puts it. Perhaps there is no escape from scholasticism. Labels need to be complemented with self-reflexive academic ‘location work’ (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Here I turn to insights from the sociology of science to make sense of the role that conflict and dissent play in generating knowledge.

A sociology of ‘generative antagonisms’

If it is impossible to escape scholasticism, can sociologists of African university futures still

make a robust case for reform? Contemporary sociologists of higher education have a valuable tradition of engaged scholarship on which to build (Peters and Barnett 2018). Kerr's (1963) *Uses of the University* describes a 'multiversity' that could no longer claim to have a single unifying purpose, be that of teaching (Newman) or research (Humboldt). After five years spent resolving Californian industrial disputes, Kerr's commitment to administrative compromise shines through in his account of the multiversity as a 'city of intellect', a pluralistic institution with multiple subcultures (and endless conflicts). In a more philosophical vein, Readings (1996) argues for the impossibility of privileging any one point of view (be it that of the student, the administrator or the academic) within a postmodern 'community of dissensus' (1996, 196). In their different ways, Kerr and Readings acknowledge the irreconcilable rivalries and divisions within the university as a whole.

Amidst a rich field of scholarship on the university as an idea and institution, feminist theorists, STS scholars and sociologists of knowledge have helped theorise knowledge conflicts within and between fields. Merton's sociological work on scientific norms (1973) and Kuhn's theory of scientific paradigms (1970) were highly influential, while Haraway (1988) creates a whole new language through which to think about objectivity. Abbott's (2001) description of the 'chaos of disciplines' uses complexity theory to argue that academic dichotomies generate 'fractal distinctions' and a 'perpetual slippage of the concepts and language of social science' (ibid, 12). For Abbott, the relational character of these fractal distinctions shape our positions in relation to others within our fields, generating 'endless misunderstandings and a disturbingly powerful tool for non-substantive argument' (2001,13).

Burawoy's work is particularly useful for critical academographers. His first published sociological study was of class and race in a Zambian copper mine, and he went on to study labour politics and work in America and Hungary. Returning to South Africa in 1990, Burawoy was inspired by what he saw as the 'public activism' of sociologists in the labour movement, acting as 'organic intellectuals' of the liberation movement.

A decade later, Burawoy was far more pessimistic about South African sociology, suggesting that it was subject to a 'pincer movement' (2004, 24). The field, he suggests, was increasingly internally fragmented, over-regulated and underfunded within a centralised university system. Worse, it found itself subject to 'external benchmarking' against a 'hyper-professionalised' and 'lavishly funded' Western sociology. His reflections on South African sociology offer a critical account of the tension between academic work and activism in his home field.

His analysis of the 'tendencies' facing post-apartheid sociology in South Africa divides the field into four quadrants (professional sociology, policy sociology, critical sociology and public sociology). He argues that the political economy of South African higher education, and the 'assault' on sociology, had led to a move from reflexive to instrumental knowledge practices, and a shift in disciplinary priorities from non-academic to academic audiences. As a result, the space for public sociology had been largely left to NGOs and activists to fill. It was an analysis informed by Marxism, postcolonial theory, and the dangers of intellectual 'extraversion'. His analysis foregrounds the risks of epistemic coloniality, but avoids calling for 'delinking'. Any recuperation (or adoption) of ideas from American sociology must be made on South African terms, in alliance with 'other sociologies of the South'. He proposes research programmes that would create 'autonomous spaces for reflection and debate' (ibid 25), arguing that the vibrancy of public sociology depended on the strength of professional sociology.

Burawoy uses a similar approach to map the 'division of sociological labour' within the American discipline (2005). Again, he graphically details the tensions and contradictions within and between professional, policy, critical and public sociologies, their 'antagonistic interdependence' (ibid, 259), and the asymmetries of power, with 'instrumental' knowledge dominating more reflexive and critical approaches. The model has its blind-spots, including its disregard of much existing public sociology, its lack of attention to gender and race, and the

limitations of a two-by-two explanatory matrix (Calhoun 2005). But its attention to the complex entanglement of contrasting forms of academic practice within a disciplinary field makes it an important contribution to simplified academographic renditions of the university.

Each of Burawoy's four domains 'calls for profoundly different cognitive practices, different along many dimensions — forms of knowledge, truth, legitimacy, accountability, and politics. Each has its 'own distinctive pathology': insularity, irrelevance, 'mechanolatry', dogma, policy capture by funders and clients, compromise, complicity and intellectual vanguardism. And each domain has to be 'mutually accountable'. Rather than resolve these tensions the model foregrounds the generative nature of disagreements and antagonisms, and the importance of public engagement that extend beyond the boundaries of the university itself.

Recognising the diversity of African academic practice

I have proposed a three-step approach to academography. The first is to acknowledge one's analytical position and scholastic disposition. The second is to recognize the generativity of conflict and disagreement. I now turn to the third: the value of an ethnographic attentiveness to everyday academic lives, student learning and research practices. This involves methodological relativism, a wary suspicion of epistemic norms, and an empirically grounded understanding of the local logics at work.

There are a growing number of accounts of African science practice that exemplify this third step. This paper offers three brief examples. Wendland's (2010) ethnography of student lives in a Malawian medical school, the Whites' (2015) anthropological reflections on working at Gulu university, and Harsh et al's (2018) study of East African computing science, all describe everyday practices of research, scholarship and training. None start from an imagined normative vision of how African universities ought to work. These are ethnographically nuanced accounts of African research cultures that complement the abstractions of sociological models. By focusing on the everyday resource struggles richly complex and divergent understandings of knowledge practices and the building of educational 'capacity'.

Wendland's evocative (2010) ethnography of Malawi's only medical school benefits from her own professional training as an obstetrician. Drawing on individual medical student biographies, she describes their challenges as they try to reconcile their scientific training with their initial clinical experiences in the hospital, faced with drug shortages, electricity cuts and broken autoclaves for sterilizing instruments. Even the preclinical students struggle to access textbooks and keep up with reading. With few copies available, and no money for photocopying, students share key texts for a few hours at a time. She questions Western assumptions that there is a lack of technical skills or expertise, pointing out that staffing shortages are caused by people choosing to leave and practice medicine abroad. The responses of those that remain vary: some become fatalistic and cynical, whilst others combine advocacy and a missionary approach, 'offering their hearts to their patients and putting themselves at risk' (ibid, 207). Wendland's attention to individual practices of care leads her to develop what she calls a 'more capacious model of capacity' that does not start from an assumption that Malawi (and other African countries) need to catch up with Western scientific models or technical solutions. Instead she argues that capacity building needs to be 'grounded in specificity, attend to material difference, be flexible and innovative, and involves as much learning as teaching (2016, 419). Rather than use European health-care as a benchmark, she describes the 'unique capacities' and diverse skill sets of Malawi's medical students and teachers.

Wendland uses her research to develop a critique of the discourse of capacity building that can dominate global public health, and that seeks to render African universities indistinguishable from their European partners. Her focus is on the 'specificities, histories, peculiarities or inner workings of African institutions' (2010, 338). She points out how the funders often bypass

existing institutional research cultures in favour of new high-profile training initiatives. Hers is a form of analysis that refuses neat epistemic oppositions or analytical dichotomies, acknowledging the expertise of individuals rather than blaming institutions.

Two anthropologists with a long personal history of support for Scandinavian 'capacity building' initiatives in Ugandan universities (Whyte and Whyte 2015) reflect on the 'tensions and contradictions' within these institutions, given the gap between 'global' funder visions and the realities of 'local' academic practice. They worked in the country for over twenty-five years, carrying out research and supervising early career researchers at Gulu university in the far north of Uganda. Without sufficient local supervisory capacity, Gulu's academic staff studying for a PhD are dependent on academic supervision from Makerere, 300 miles away. The Whytes foreground everyday materialities, describing life for those 'managing on scare resources', and the challenge of juggling non-academic consultancies, research projects and heavy teaching loads. Their pedagogy of care and support leads to friendships, collaborations and a deeper understanding of how these material conditions shape career options and daily lives. Questioning the wisdom of funders simply replicating Swedish and UK models of academic career preparation, the Whytes ask whether Ugandan scholars and their research practices should always be oriented to 'international standards' rather than 'local needs'.

A third ethnographic example (Harsh et al. 2018) comes from a comparative three-year study of two East African computer science departments at Makerere University and the University of Nairobi. They describe two dynamic sites of knowledge production that combine 'local' research autonomy, regional priorities and 'a degree of global competency in scientific and technological activity' (ibid, 36). In each case, the story partly depends on the charismatic leadership of individual academics. Professor Barya started at Makerere as a teaching assistant. He went on to do a doctorate in Norway, and then came back to direct the fledgling Institute of Computing Sciences. Setting up a fee-paying undergraduate programme, he ensured the proceeds were fed directly back to grow the faculty from 10 to more than 100 staff. Brokering a 'sandwich' doctoral training programme with the Dutch government, more than 25 students were awarded doctorates (more than any other African university outside of South Africa). Private companies funded student projects to digitize content and develop software. Attracting an international postdoctoral researcher to work with him on AI and data sciences, Barya went on to become Vice-Chancellor before founding his own private university in 2012.

Their Nairobi case describes the role of a private university (Strathmore) in setting up a semi-independent research and innovation hub called @iLab. It used lucrative commercial consultancies (often for clients in the Global North) and work for international donors to fund faculty research. It went on to develop an MSc in Mobile Telecommunications sponsored by Safaricom, Kenya's largest mobile network. Students had to develop a mobile app as part of their course, alongside their thesis. They go on to describe IBM's decision to build a research lab in Nairobi as an example of the new IT research ecosystem that benefited from entrepreneurship and the commercialization of higher education.

Responding to Mamdani's (2007) critique of the privatization and commercialization of African tertiary education, Harsh et al (2018) point out that national governments have never been able to support their own research base. As a result, researchers have long had to rely on international donors, private philanthropies and commercial collaborations. They document how a range of 'nested contexts' – including the epistemic qualities of computer science, the local commercial environment, creative organizational and institutional strategies, the entrepreneurial leadership of key actors, flexible professional identities and distinctive cultures of innovation – combine to foster a dynamic and engaged research culture. This allows 'researchers to pursue their own agendas that express their regional aspirations and priorities' (ibid, 37). Their analysis shows the importance of these commercial links for graduate recruitment and subsequent employment.

Harsh et al (2018) refute any suggestion that African research cultures are unable to develop their own intellectual and material 'capacity'. The case shows the rich potential for knowledge exchange between universities and a range of publics. The authors acknowledge the constraints of consultancy culture, but argue that researchers can 'bootleg' these funds, redirecting them to priority research areas. This movement of people and ideas, they suggest, generates a dynamic educational knowledge 'system', with diverse research capacities located both within and beyond universities. Their description of a lively, spatially distributed research community questions any overly-narrow focus on the university as institution.

These three ethnographic cases offer grounded academographic examples for studying the past, present and future of African university research cultures. Each carefully describes the capabilities of individual students and researchers, the constant challenge of resource constraints, and the emergent cultures of scholarship, science and care that result.

Conclusion

This paper has mapped the fraught epistemic politics visible in academic writing about the future of African universities. Science policy champions international collaboration and collective capacity-building. Humanities scholars fear that epistemic coloniality will fatally undermine Africa's future as a knowledge producer. Each vision is partly informed by professional identities and disciplinary interests. Each has its gaps. The vision of science as a global public good says nothing about a scholarly community's responsibility to, and engagement with, a range of local publics and stakeholders. This vision has little to say about relevance, utility and contribution to national societies. On the other hand, radical calls to decolonize African universities are often silent on the practicalities of institutional reform, the challenges of financing or the value of transnational scientific collaborations.

The challenge for 'academographers' (Thorkelson 2016) is to develop a set of analytical tools that are at once grounded in practice and able to engage with a 'global research imaginary' (Kenway and Fahey 2009). This paper has argued for a three-step approach. The first is to value 'double-vision' (Haraway 1988, 154), acknowledging the partiality of one's research identity and disciplinary values. The second is to use sociological insights into the generative nature of disciplinary antagonisms and tensions, and the combative relationships between fields of knowledge production. The third is to draw on the methodological relativism of ethnography to examine the everyday cultures of academic training (Wendland 2010, Whyte and Whyte 2015) and research practice (Harsh et al 2018). These case-studies demonstrate how academic knowledge practices in Africa cope creatively with a lack of resources, traverse institutional boundaries and reshape existing disciplines. Away from the distant statistical peaks or dystopian visions, policy debates about a decolonial future for African universities and their burgeoning research cultures will benefit from a close academographic attention to the complexities of academic practice.

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