

# 'Anthropological futures'? Thoughts on social research and the ethics of engagement

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*This article was presented as the keynote address at the 2012 Anthropology Southern Africa Conference. The theme of the conference was Southern African Anthropological Futures: Opportunities and Constraints, and as such in this piece I consider some of the themes I see emerging in Southern African anthropology, from my position as a nascent practitioner. Specifically, I examine the ethical difficulties raised by the discipline's emphasis upon bringing to light the ways in which ordinary life unfolds in contexts of structural violence. I argue that the employment of an 'ethics of care' in these contexts carries a danger of alterity, but that this can be guarded against in particular ways. Some of these ways emerge in the second theme on which I focus: that of an extension of our approach to 'the field'. I argue that the increasing tendency of anthropologists in southern Africa to study at home, in combination with the increasing tendency to maintain relationships with interlocuters over very extended periods of time, allows for the mobilisation of an ethics of mutuality rather than care.*

**Keywords:** Anthropological futures; ethics; structural violence; anthropology at home; alterity; mutuality

## Preamble

I am honoured and more than a little nervous to stand before you as a PhD student in order to deliver the keynote address to this conference. As Mugsy Spiegel said when he invited me to speak to you today, however, a theme that explicitly invokes the future places an emphasis on new practitioners: those of us who are entering the discipline and have nascent academic careers and who will, in years to come, take part in the futures we have come together here to envision. I am honoured to stand here as a representative of this new generation of Southern African anthropologists.

In keeping with this, my aim today is to speak about the sort of directions I see being taken in the anthropology in and of Africa. This paper has grown out of a David and Elaine Potter Foundation seminar I held earlier this year on civil society and the ethics of engagement, and as such draws upon the very fruitful discussions held there between anthropologists and members of that very broad and fluid category, 'civil society.' The ideas I present here have also been developed in the multiple conversations I have had with other students and with established academics over the last few years. In particular, I draw on my experiences as part of a cohort of PhD students at UCT who embarked on our fieldwork at similar times, and with whom I have worked, talked, laughed and cried over the last few years as we struggled with the intellectual, the emotional and the ethical difficulties of conducting in-depth anthropological research in the African context. Many of these conversations circled around the ethics of engaging in research: engagement with individual informants; engagement with organisations, youth groups or church groups; engagement in an applied activism; engagement with theoretical viewpoints on Africa; and engagement in the difficult process of removing ourselves from the field and shifting from working with people to working with 'data'.

## Anthropology, structural violence and ethics in southern Africa

My emphasis today, given that this is the Anthropology Southern Africa conference, is of course on the anthropological research being conducted in and of southern Africa. What might the geo-political positioning of the places in which we conduct our work and formulate our ideas mean for the work we do? In what ways does this positioning impact upon the sorts of knowledge that are produced? There is no doubt that the socioeconomic and political contexts of Africa influence the sorts of engagements we have, and the sorts of work we do. After all, research within the social sciences is informed by the broader political and socio-economic contexts in which researchers formulate their questions and devise their methods: in other words, the sort of knowledge that we seek to derive from research is not easily separable from the contexts in which we seek it, be those academic theories or geopolitical circumstances.

In anthropology, for example, the kind of research undertaken in democratic South Africa today differs from that undertaken during the late apartheid period, as a different set of political and, to a lesser extent (in that the structured inequalities of apartheid are still very much present), socio-economic circumstances inform the questions we ask and why we ask them. From the 1960s through to the end of the 1980s, much of South African anthropology was driven by what Spiegel terms "exposé ethnography, designed to demonstrate many of the worst on-the-ground consequences of the apartheid system" (Spiegel 2005:133). Spiegel attributes this to a deliberate ethical stance taken by this cohort of social anthropologists (of which Spiegel himself is a member), arguing that "a sense of moral outrage about apartheid and its effects" (ibid) informed their research. He goes on to outline the ways in which a different set of motivations drives research in democratic South Africa, such as the continuation of apartheid-style inequalities into the post-apartheid era. He thus argues that in the last two decades South African anthro-

pology has shifted towards an ethics based upon a social process of 'care'. Employing an 'ethics of care' is not to abandon exposé where it is appropriate (and that it is still appropriate has been made obvious most recently by Marikana and what it has brought to the public eye about unchanged structural conditions in the mining industry), but rather to "redirect our commitment to an ethical standpoint that is situationally and contextually guided by the particularities of contemporary circumstances" (Spiegel 2005:138), be it one based on exposé or on care. To this list of ethical standpoints I would also add the rise in anthropology of an ethics of activism and intervention, as seen in the shift away from notions of an assumed anthropological neutrality in fieldwork towards what Hale and Gordon (in Angel-Ajani 2004:135) categorise as "carefully considered political engagement." As political contexts shift, then, so do the sorts of knowledge we seek, and the ethical positions from which we seek it.

The socioeconomic context of postcolonial sub-Saharan Africa and the daily presence of extreme inequalities and poverty in the cities in which researchers live and work no doubt influences the work done by social scientists across the disciplines. I would argue that one of the effects of this has been that social science in southern Africa has a continued emphasis on "studying down" rather than engaging with the powerful, or "studying up" (Nader 1972:284). This then is the first 'theme' if you will, of African ethnography that I wish to focus on: an emphasis upon bringing to light the ways in which ordinary life unfolds in contexts of structural violence. This is not to argue that research is not conducted in the spaces of elites, but rather that by employing an ethics of exposé or of care, we tend to focus to a greater extent on (morally urgent) issues such as poverty and hunger, or any of the many other structural and physical violences that inform much of daily life in postcolonial contexts. A quick examination of the abstracts and panels organised for this conference shows this emphasis: papers on TB and everyday health care in precarious contexts; papers on the complexities of nature conservation in the complicated racialised spaces of the postcolony; papers on both black and white marginality and poverty; an emphasis on townships and the 3<sup>rd</sup> world city, and the lack of access to basic services such as sanitation and water; and a continued anthropological presence in the rural spaces of the Eastern Cape are some immediate examples. The list could continue. Again, this is not to say that there is not any work being done in more elite spaces – that there is, is clear from the abstracts as well – but rather that there is still, more than 30 years after Nader's call to study up, an *emphasis* in African anthropology upon basing our fieldwork in spaces of poverty and inequality. What are the implications of this? Is there not a danger that the employment of an ethics of care and an emphasis upon marginality can easily establish hierarchies or reinforce and naturalise social differences? These are hard questions, and ones that I shall return to throughout this piece.

I think it clear then that the sort of knowledge we seek is informed by the socio-political contexts in which we live. In South African anthropology no doubt it is also informed by a disciplinary history of Marxism and a focus upon analysis of the political economy. Conditions of poverty and extreme structural violence are very difficult for us to ignore; as civically engaged citizens and researchers it often feels that we

are obliged to bring such issues to the surface and to comment upon them. This seems particularly relevant in South Africa in the last decade, as the gaps between political promises and the actualisation of those promises, in terms of the slow rate of delivery of basic services, has led to increased dissatisfaction with the state, as seen in the numerous service delivery protests in recent years. In other countries in southern Africa the need is also pressing – Zimbabwe and Swaziland are the most extreme and politicised examples (and the ones that the South African media has focused most on), but the work of anthropologists in this room on Namibia, Mozambique, Lesotho, Zambia and Botswana shows structural violence to be systemic in southern Africa, and, further, to be a consistent source of anthropological attention.

An effect of focusing on such structured inequality, however, is that we thus ensure that much of our research is conducted amongst the marginalised. What are the ethical implications of this? Does it not open us up to the dangers of alterity, given that the anthropological gaze is once again being fixed upon those with less power? Nyamnjoh and Devisch's edited volume entitled *The Postcolonial turn: Reimagining Anthropology and Africa*, released at the end of last year, considers the epistemological foundations that lie behind anthropology's presence in Africa (Nyamnjoh and Devisch 2011). Drawing particularly on the critical stance taken by the late Professor Archie Mafeje, the book examines whether anthropology has been critical enough of the "intellectual habitus" (African Books Collective 2012:1) employed by its practitioners. Given the extent of anthropology's focus upon marginalisation, it is perhaps unsurprising that Valentin Mudimbe is able to ask of anthropology, in this same volume, "Is it perhaps the Other's precariousness and ethical appeal, or rather mere fascination, that urges the anthropologists' commitment?" (Mudimbe, cited in Olukoshi and Nyamnjoh 2011:13). This is not an easy question: and yet it is one that anthropological theory tends to assume has already been answered, in the wake of the 'Writing Culture' debates and anthropology's 'postmodern turn'. I would like to leave the question on the table for consideration, however: is it 'precariousness' that drives our commitment? (And might we, unsettling thought, trace this to a disciplinary history of salvage?) And if this is so, does it necessarily lead to Othering as Mudimbe implies it does? I would like to think not – but it is nonetheless a disquieting question for anthropology in Southern Africa. Of course, just because people live in conditions of poverty and in marginal economic and political spaces does not mean that they themselves are marginal: further reading of the papers that will be presented at this conference shows, in wondrous ethnographic detail, the agency employed by individuals and organisations. The presence of individual agency, however, does not belie the fact that there are very real power imbalances in place.

What might it mean to employ an ethics of care in such contexts? And how can we ensure that the ways in which we conduct research do not result in alterity? Let me attempt to speak to this with an example drawn not from my research sites but from academia. A few years ago, an Honours student in our department who had just begun her first major fieldwork experience came to me for advice. She was finding the field difficult, but not for the sorts of reasons she was

expecting. She had anticipated the effort involved in the research part of fieldwork: asking questions and accessing data, the difficulties of keeping field-notes and mapping spaces and finding the right sorts of people to speak to, and she was able to cope with those. She had even, having been forewarned in class, anticipated the ways in which she might manage the expectations placed upon her by her informants, as a comparatively privileged person working in a space of extreme poverty. We are taught as students to be careful of the promises we make in the field, and to be aware of our own limitations. The Honours student was thus fully cognisant of the potential for all these difficulties before entering the field. What she had *not* anticipated, however, and the reason she came to speak to me, was the strength of the relationships she would build in the field, and the effects this would have upon her own feelings. How, she asked, do career anthropologists manage these relationships? How does one deal with the fact that 'informants' are actually people with whom one is in a social relationship, and thus not as removed from the anthropologist as individual as she had previously imagined 'an informant' (or even an 'interlocuter') was? This conversation really drove home to me that the advice we give to researchers entering the field for the first time is often not nuanced enough. We expect students to develop relationships in the field: ethnography as method is predicated upon it. The student's surprise also brought home, however, the fact that relationships are at the heart of what we do, and that it is through these relationships that our ethical position is mobilised. As she befriended the people she was working with, her views on the ethical position to take shifted. As Fiona Ross (personal communication) has noted, then, we might be better off considering the possibilities of an ethic grounded not on care, with its attendant hierarchical implications, but on *ubuntu* principles of mutuality. It is not possible to 'participate' in any one social space without building the social connections that are so central to what it means to be human. The relationships built in fieldwork are often, at least with key interlocuters, intense and intimate. Our ethical stance, therefore, plays out in terms of the social relationships one builds. It is not, then, an abstract commitment to an ethical position, nor, in Mudimbe's (in Olukoshi and Nyamnjoh 2011:3) terms, the "appeal of the precariousness of the Other" that drives the sorts of ethical positions we take. In my view, then, ethics do not play out in the abstract, but rather occur in the daily spaces where we do our work with real people, not with an essentialised Other.

### Extending the field – anthropology at home, and anthropological relationships over time

An ethics that is located in relationships thus may be one way to address problems of alterity. The relationships developed during fieldwork are fundamentally ordinary, social relationships, albeit ones where one participant in the relationship might be a particularly nosy one. The notion of the centrality of ordinary social relationships leads me to the second major theme I see in southern African anthropology: that of a re-imagination (or, perhaps, what can be more accurately described as an extension) of what constitutes the field in response to the slow violences of the postcolony. How are anthropologists today positioning themselves in relation to

the field, and, indeed, re-envisioning what constitutes the field, in order to conduct ethical research? I would argue that one element of this is an emphasis upon conducting anthropology at home, and another is an emphasis upon maintaining field-based relationships over extensive periods of time. A key result of both of these factors is the potential for a shift in the production of knowledge from an ethnographic authority deriving solely from the intellectual habitus of the anthropologist (in line with Mudimbe and Mafeje's critiques of the anthropological endeavour), to the rise of what Devisch describes as "mutually enriching co-implication" between author and host community (cited in Olukoshi and Nyamnjoh, 2011:16). Let me expand.

Firstly, it has long been clear that anthropology is progressively moving away from the idea of fieldwork research as bounded. One side effect of this is that, at least amongst the cohort of students to which I belong, we are no longer able to imagine fieldwork as something that occurs in places and spaces that are somehow removed from our daily lives. Rather than conducting research in far away spaces, there is an increasing tendency to do fieldwork close to home, and to acknowledge and even appreciate the ways in which the field and the anthropologist's daily life can merge together and overlap.

Of course, the tendency to conduct anthropology at home is closely linked to economic constraints: for most students in Africa, the funding is simply not available to conduct fieldwork elsewhere. I have no doubt that most students in this room would love to get their teeth into an ethnography of middle-class America – but this is not an economically reasonable expectation. There are clear globalised structured inequalities at work here. South African institutions experience a high traffic of scholars from around the globe who are passing through as they conduct their fieldwork in South African sites. Conversations with peers at prestigious institutions in the US and UK suggest that there is still greater disciplinary symbolic capital attached to conducting one's ethnographic work 'elsewhere.' Whilst academic institutions in Africa no doubt benefit from the sharing of knowledge that such traffic in scholars brings, such an emphasis on the need to conduct fieldwork in far away spaces is potentially a little ethically worrying in light of the direction of the gaze. Reversing the gaze is not a position that is open to scholars based in African universities, as the resources are simply not there: African students, even at the most prestigious and well-funded African institutions, cannot travel vast distances in search of the elsewhere. (Or, a further unsettling thought, perhaps we *need* not travel far to find the elsewhere, in that Africa falls within Trouillot's (1991) 'savage slot'). In thinking through anthropological futures, then, we may ask ourselves, what impact does staying at home have on the work we produce? Is there a difference between anthropology *in* Africa and anthropology *of* Africa? Does it matter if the field is next door or thousands of miles away?

The changes in the disciplinary constitution of the field over time are beautifully illustrated in a piece by Wendy James on the ways in which she has related to her field in North East Africa over the course of her career (James 2000). Unlike the ideal for anthropologists of her generation, when James began fieldwork in Sudan in the 1960s she did so whilst

simultaneously teaching at the University of Khartoum. When she first presented her work to colleagues in England, it was heavily critiqued on the grounds that she had engaged and disengaged from her field-site rather than, in her terms, spending the requisite two years, "luxuriat(ing) in local culture, Malinowskian style." (James 2000:74). James argues, however, that her continual presence in the space of the university in Sudan (which was considered separate from her field among the Uduk) was central to her ability to do the work she did, arguing that, "I was never able to think of it as something self-contained, insulated from my 'normal' life." (ibid:76). As such, she was able to get more nuanced data about the wider political economy of the Sudan; and to maintain long-standing relationships with the community with which she worked, even as they themselves were displaced multiple times. Very few of the PhD students I know in Africa have been able to think of fieldwork as something 'insulated from our normal lives', and few of the established academics I know either. Here, then, is one way in which an anthropology at home is different: in African anthropology, most of the time the field is not something we enter and leave but rather a state of mind and a place we continually inhabit. When I travel on the trains in the morning, or listen to debates on the radio, I do so as both anthropologist and citizen, and sometimes episodes from my daily life that occur long after I have ostensibly left the field find their way into my written work (and sometimes, too, do remembered incidences from long before I had any anthropological training). Our disciplinary future, then, would seem likely to be one in which 'home' and 'field' are increasingly entangled.

There is, of course, a key difference in positioning between James and myself (aside from the obvious fact that she is a prestigious and lauded anthropologist who has been awarded an OBE for her work while I am, well, as I stand before you). James, of course, is British whilst I am African – and as such she falls into the category of scholar mentioned earlier, who comes from the so-called first world to the elsewhere of Africa. Does this matter? Indeed, does it matter that I am a white African who works with both white and black interlocutors? The difference in origin between James and myself, and the difference in racial categorisation between myself and a black African researcher, seems to me to be less important than does our approach to the field. James's Sudanese fieldwork has taken place over the course of her career; the relationships she developed as a researcher based at the University of Khartoum in the 1960s are still relevant to her today. Anthropology has always emphasised long term fieldwork; the approach taken by James, Devisch and the approach taken by anthropologists 'at home', is to extend that beyond 'long term immersion' in a Malinowskian sense to relationships that can last a lifetime. Whether they are between white foreigners and black Africans, or black Africans and black Africans, or black Africans and white Africans, or any of a number of permutations, seems to me to matter less than does the long term nature of the relationship itself, and the application of an anthropological awareness of historical context and power relations. Yes, position matters, but not to the extent of incommensurability across categories (for, indeed, who chooses the categories, and how do we find one to which we belong?); to suggest otherwise seems to me

to be to over-emphasise difference at the cost of those extended shared relationships.

To return to the Honours student I mentioned earlier, then, the most pressing question she asked me was not 'how do I do my fieldwork' as it was clear to her that the process was similar to 'doing' ordinary life, but rather, how, having established these relationships, do I leave? The question of ethical dis-engagement was one that formed the kernel of a series of discussions that took place between myself and four other anthropology students over the course of a year as we all completed our fieldwork and attempted in various ways to retreat to the university to reformulate our engagement from that of social relationships to that of an analysis of data. It is now close to two years since the members of that cohort have 'left the field' – and all of us are in close and frequent contact with our informants still. Yes, we no longer maintain the daily presences in the field that we once did, and, yes, we have disengaged enough to be able to consider our fieldwork as data and to work it up into ethnography. On some levels disengagement is necessary for the academic project. But none of us have disengaged from the social, or collegial, relationships we built whilst in the field. It does not seem likely that we will do so in the future. The nature of the engagement may shift – I am now on the advisory board, for example, of the organisation in Cape Town in which I conducted fieldwork – but relationships are maintained and a shift in positioning allows for different sorts of insights. This seems to me to be one of the greatest strengths to emerge from the fact that we do research in our own backyards. Rather than merely gazing upon and writing about the marginal, it opens spaces for a kind of anthropological civic engagement that is based on "creative discomfort and a constant, unresolved questioning, rather than a simplistic commitment to 'activism'" (Ross 2005:196). This is of course not confined to anthropologists at home, as James's career (amongst many others) has shown, but it is certainly made easier by a continued presence in the same geographical spaces (although the rise of new technologies is shifting this). The maintenance of relationships, and an engagement in interlocutors' projects as well as our own, may then be one way in which "a mutually enriching co-implication" (Devisch, cited in Olukoshi and Nyamnjoh 2011:16), or indeed an ethics of *ubuntu*, might be achieved.

A central voice in the seminar on social research and civil society in which the roots of this paper lie was that of a key interlocutor of mine, Langton Miriyoga, a Zimbabwean refugee living in Cape Town. I met Langton, purely by chance, in two fieldsites: that of a local NGO in which I was conducting research where he was acting as a paralegal, and that of a class in human rights law at UCT. Langton's position, as refugee (a category whose vulnerability we are constantly reminded of) and as an active member of the refugee community involved in advocacy work and now in possession of a Masters degree in law, reminds us that a focus on structural violence need not be a focus on marginality. At the seminar, Langton was asked to speak broadly on the relationship between research and civil society. He chose to highlight the importance of the length of time that research connections were maintained. When researchers (local and from abroad) use the organisation as a springboard for rapid assessment, he

argued, it is of little benefit to the NGO, and can in fact endanger their relationship with the people they work with. When researchers have long standing relationships with organisations (and, centrally, individuals within those organisation), on the other hand, he saw it as mutually beneficial (Miryoga 2012). This idea is a cornerstone of anthropological research. Institutional and economic pressures have increasingly worked to ensure that spending extended time in the field is very seldom a possibility for most academics, however. Nonetheless, conducting anthropology in our backyards can bypass this constraint, and can work to lessen the power imbalance of the anthropological gaze. A focus on structural violence need not be a kind of poverty tourism, but rather, with the input of time, allows for the building of relationships with diverse members of local communities, professional networks and local experts. This in turn allows for a shift in the power dynamics of knowledge production in African anthropology.

### Conclusion: mutuality and the co-production of knowledge

In closing, then, let us return to Devisch's (2011) ideas of co-implication in knowledge production. The notion of a shared authorial authority in anthropology is not a new one; indeed Collins and Gallinat (2010:4) have noted of notions such as reflexivity and polyvalence that they have "become a kind of reflex that is all too often confined to a preface or introduction as the new badge of ethnographic legitimacy." Such affected piety is something we need, in all our anthropological futures, to be wary of, and to write and speak against when we encounter it. The possibilities of shared knowledge production are still deeply relevant, and I would argue, necessary if anthropology in Africa is to respond to critiques such as Mudimbe's and Majefe's. Anthropology as a discipline is predicated upon a sharing of knowledge – our texts would not exist without our interlocutors. Yet, as Olukoshi and Nyamnjoh (2011) point out, there is a paradox at the heart of the discipline in that although we spend our time accessing local lifeworlds from the actors' points of view, we present those worlds in the terms of western epistemology. Although there is a rise in emphasis on subjectivities, one of the effects of this epistemology in scholarly work is a continuation of a mode of writing which has the effect of distancing. Thus, although we engage in real relationships in the field, an Honours student was able, having read anthropological texts for four years, to still enter the field thinking that there was somehow an essential difference in the nature of engaging with people in real life versus in fieldwork. To Devisch (2011) then, anthropologists in the future need to not only formulate our ethnographic insights and arguments in dialogue with informants, but also to attempt to find ways to present those arguments in ways that reflect other systems of the organisation and presentation of knowledge – by, in Olukoshi and Nyamnjoh's

terms (2011:17), "selectively integrating, with the epistemology of scientific rationality and objectivity the innovating force of local, African traditions of knowledge practices and systems." This is not an easy task but nor is it an impossible one, and the idea seems one worth bearing in mind as we continue our discussions over the coming days.

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