

Sociotechnical Scaffolding for a Third Space: The Research Data KE Working Group

By Research Data KE Working Group

Abstract

In 1972, the trio of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Henry Owuor Anyumba and Taban lo Liyong famously proposed abolishing the English Department at the University of Nairobi to make space for literary forms and aesthetics rooted in Kenya rather than outside (Musila 2019; Gikandi and Mwangi 2007). This was part of broader attempts to re-orient extroverted systems of African scientific activities (Hountondji 1990). Paradoxically, the civic vibrancy of this earlier period has now been largely eclipsed, despite both putatively democratic governance and Nairobi's recent rise as "Silicon Savannah". Many people (both tech entrepreneurs and people living in the city's massive, under-resourced informal settlements) feel [over-researched, without reciprocal benefit](#). And the halls of the university are quiet as students and lecturers frantically churn out deliverables for development consultancy projects and strive to publish in academic journals. In this chapter, we describe the nascent work of the Research Data Share working group, established in 2019, that seeks to recollect the vibrancy of Nairobi's public sphere in the 1960s and 1970s, when there was active and creative visioning of a Pan-African future. Formed out of an interest in exploring the unique challenges and opportunities of sharing ethnographic research data, the working group details its current tactics and learnings to imagine the cascading effects of this work and strategize for the future.

Keywords: research collaboration, archive ethnography, open data, Kenya, sociality of knowledge, global South, decolonial knowledges

Preface

[written in first person by Angela Okune]

"I was proud to be a Kenyan today," one of the panelists confided to me (AO) as we munched on the marinated chicken and soft chapati roll provided for lunch. "Oh interesting, why?" I probed, curious how the day-long workshop on research data archiving that I had organized tied into her sense of national pride. "Because Kenyans are doing good things. It can feel really alone when you are abroad there. There are a lot of deficit narratives. But to hear all the interesting things that people are doing here makes me feel part of a community." Chiku smiled, her Maasai beaded headpiece jingling slightly as she took a big sip of fresh mango juice. Abena, who presented on the same panel, also chimed in: "Yes, I never would have considered myself a 'data' person but coming together with all of these people to think about how we need to decolonize our knowledge and infrastructures has connected me with interesting people doing really great things here in our own Nairobi."

The politics of knowledge production have often been reduced to questions of national or racial representation alone. "We need mechanisms to bring in and share work by more African researchers" is a response I have heard to growing, important critique about the lack of representation of Black African

scholars in international academic work. Not to be dismissed, such limited articulations of the problem and solution nonetheless risk reproducing the same over-simplified fetishes and categories themselves, without necessarily undermining the asymmetrical knowledge infrastructures that position certain people and places over others. For example, Francis Nyamnjoh (2019) has explained that while most universities in postcolonial Africa have significantly Africanized their personnel, they have been less successful in Africanizing their curricula, pedagogical structures, and epistemologies. In my dissertation, I have extended this critique beyond the African university to turn the gaze also on the broader research assemblage in Kenya that includes private research firms, libraries and archives, and individual researchers. By understanding how various Nairobi-based actors are caught within and attempting to push back against established research structures, I complicate notions of the politics of knowledge beyond race and nation and focus on the ways that established technical systems; “international” standards and norms; and acceptable languages and genres also reproduce global knowledge asymmetries.

Nairobi researchers do not fit into neat categories. From a young, tattooed Kikuyu woman studying for her CPA exams and translating research surveys into Swahili at night as a part-time hustle, to an over-worked, white German man married to a Luhya woman with two kids who acts as the go-between for a decentralized management team in New York, London, Beijing, San Francisco, and his “local” research Kenyan team, these researchers are highly attuned to the global politics that structure their contributions to global knowledge production. Most recognize their positions within transnational research assemblages and sense that existing structures marginalize them and their contributions. Building an ethnographic data archive in/with/for Kenya then is not necessarily about enabling Kenyans to enter global conversations or showcasing their work so it becomes internationally recognized. It is as much about connecting “already global local”¹ players with each other in Nairobi to spur a collective imagining about what an ethnographic archive for Kenya’s intellectual workers could be.

In the original conceptualization of my project and even as I conducted my fieldwork in Nairobi in 2019, I had no intent to organize a working group to continue the project goals after fieldwork completion. But I was open to opportunities as they presented themselves and after spotting on Twitter an open call to organize an event with Book Bunk² in early 2019 at one of Nairobi’s oldest libraries, my good friend and former colleague Leonida (co-author of Chapter 2) and I applied. We were the only researchers selected as part of a year-long schedule of library programs run by artists and creatives. In November 2019, fifty diverse members of the Nairobi research landscape (described in Chapter 3) gathered under McMillan Library’s soaring arches on a rainy Tuesday to discuss management, access, and responsibilities of open data and collective knowledge production in Kenya. The November 12th panel discussions were rich³, the question-and-answer sessions were heated, and we ran out of time before we ran out of topics to cover. The event was designed to create interest in both the Research Data Share platform and a gamut of questions about the kind of knowledge infrastructure needed in Kenya at this stage. It resulted in the formation of the

¹ Here, as I describe in more detail in the dissertation introduction, I am referring to the ways that the imperial and local are more co-dependent and co-produced than most acknowledge and the subsequent “already global” local subjectivities that are in play even prior to developmental attempts to make Kenyans legible to Westerners. This concept builds on extensive work by those developing Theory from the South such as Raewyn Connell (2011), Jean and John Comaroff (2012), and Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2016) not to mention and other leading postcolonial scholars like Homi Bhabha (1994), and Francis Nyamnjoh (2019).

² Learn more about Book Bunk’s history and work in Chapter 4.

³ Proceedings from the event including video footage, distributed materials and photos are available here: <https://www.researchdatashare.org/content/proceedings-archiving-kenyas-past-and-futures>.

Research Data KE Working Group, which has sustained the dialogue using the RDS site as a virtual workspace.

My broader dissertation looks at ways that Nairobi-based researchers have been attempting to address critiques of research extraction in a city with a long history of extroverted science (see discussion of this history in Chapter 1). Researchers with ties to the country, myself included, are grappling with what it might look like to enact more just, decolonial practices in knowledge production. This chapter describes the Research Data KE working group formation as an example where technical scaffolding (in the form of the RDS ethnographic data archive) as well as the social relations such scaffolding have supported have created new semiotic possibility for articulations of a “third term” (Fortun and Bernstein 1998) for Nairobi research. In Fortun and Bernstein’s conceptualization, charting of the “third terms” means attempting to articulate middle positions that reach beyond ossified binaries. Closely aligned with Homi Bhabha (1994)’s concept of the third space, they argue, “is the space of change and creativity; it’s where the interesting problems and questions are; it’s where things are unsettled, calling for experimentation; it’s where the action is,” (Fortun and Bernstein 1998, 274). Like Bhabha, who contended that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in what he called the “Third Space of enunciation” (1994, 37), Fortun and Bernstein suggested thinking in terms of articulations rather than theorizing, as a way to restore questions about the importance of language to the domains of sciences. They write: “to articulate is to give words to, to try to express, describe or invent something that wasn’t previously a part of language or thought. If theory is the mental capture and representation of an illuminated world ‘out there,’ then an articulation is something one speaks rather than sees, that is expressed rather than mirrored. An articulation is something put as adequately as possible into words, rather than something seen in its true nature,” (Fortun and Bernstein 1998, 39). This description aligns with what we have attempted here, articulating through our monthly RDS calls what it is we want and are doing, and then doubling back, in discussions about and the writing of this chapter, to pay attention to what we have been able to articulate in our search to create a third space that moves away from well-worn binaries of expert/informant and global/local. I have found this kind of recursive ethnographic practice both epistemologically generative as well as motivating and enriching for a growing (sense of) community.

In the text that follows, the working group leads not with theories (of which there are many relevant ones), but rather with articulations of what we want to see moving forward. We invite others to help us theorize as we go. This dissertation chapter comes last in a triad of chapters each focusing on a group of research actors in Nairobi striving for more decolonial research practices. Chapter 4 looked at libraries and archives in the city and how some have turned to progressive librarianship as a way to “decolonize without forgetting”. Chapter 5 focused on initiatives by research companies foregrounding “context” to enact more ethical research. In this chapter we lay out the rationale for our collaborative “Research Data Share” (RDS) formation and what it is the group seeks to hold space for. This group is distinct from those covered in the other two chapters in that it was not a group already in existence which I “studied” but rather one that *emerged* from my study and in which I would consider myself a key participant organizer. This difference makes a difference because it changed the nature of our relationships. An RDS group member described during one of our RDS calls⁴ the awkwardness she felt being a researcher from outside of a particular community—no matter that she shared the same nationality as the research participants—and how despite wanting to engage in a deep and authentic way, because of how she joined them “in a very, sometimes very

⁴ Feb 25, 2021 call; 26:37 (<https://www.researchdatashare.org/content/2021feb26-working-group-writing-meetingaudio-recording>).

problematic way [where] it's an organization which has sent you there, and then you never quite fit in, then you're out in a few minutes," she was not able to sincerely engage with the community, even as a concerned and ethical researcher. The point here is that having more authentic research relations not only requires an understanding of normative research ethics, it also needs the appropriate circumstances under which research connections can spark more organically. That is not to say that the grounds for such collaborations do not require preparation and careful cultivation.

In the introductory chapter of the dissertation, I detailed the experimental tactics and data infrastructure established for my project. These included: installing my own instance of the Platform for Experimental Collaborative Ethnography; developing textual devices such as a collaboration agreement and data circulation form; reviewing and archiving existing data held by research groups in Nairobi, which were in turn used as an elicitation device to produce new data; and co-hosting a public event in one of the oldest libraries in Nairobi on the politics and infrastructures of research. The proceedings of the event were not only archived on the RDS ethnographic archive, they were also analyzed and publicly annotated with interlocutors.⁵ The technical scaffolding afforded by the RDS platform has enabled the conversation to continue. Members of the working group have used the PECE platform to gather and look at shared "cognizable objects" together, both synchronously and asynchronously. The platform itself has also served as a shared object of our attention as the group practiced the technical skills required to navigate its use (including how to upload, annotate artifacts for examples⁶) and reflected on that process. Finally, the platform also hosts an organizational archive⁷ that holds our meeting records, including notes and audio recordings (recorded after verbal consent is received from all attendees).

Since March 2020, group members have identified artifacts--found in traditional media, social media, or captured by members themselves via photographs--and uploaded them towards producing an ethnographic archive of materials reflecting on diverse experiences of COVID-19 in Kenya⁸. The work continues in bursts and spurts, but our group holds together through monthly conversations, which go on regardless of what has been done on the technical platform. I always leave the meetings buoyed by thoughtful conversation. I love learning from everyone else's work and experiences and sharing my own ideas for their thoughts and feedback. It is important to clearly state that to me these are meetings not with "research participants" but with peers and friends with whom I listen and learn from and with whom I also share what I am learning. The recordings that we are making are not "data" to be used just for my own project; they are records of our conversations and an attempt to build collective public memory about what we are trying to figure out and how we are getting there. The data produced by the group provides the building blocks for us to practice careful listening (of each other and ourselves) and iterative (self)-observations.

Of course, we have differential stakes; for me, working on these questions forms the basis of my everyday work as a full-time doctoral student, while for others, this is not directly tied to their job. Even among the other academics involved, this collaborative formation and any outputs we produce may not "count" within their field. With these considerations, I have therefore been more than happy to take on the

⁵ To see the public annotations, scroll to the bottom of this page and click the individual names listed at the bottom: <https://www.researchdatashare.org/content/proceedings-archiving-kenyas-past-and-futures>

⁶ Find tutorials I created for the group here: <https://www.researchdatashare.org/content/technical-onboarding-rds-platform/essay>.

⁷ Link to the organizational archive is here (<https://www.researchdatashare.org/content/research-data-ke-design-group-organizational-archive/essay>).

⁸ Find the essay here: <https://www.researchdatashare.org/content/news-and-public-discourse-covid-19-infromabout-kenya>.

bulk of the organizing work: ensuring that the audio data is uploaded with proper meta-data; that meeting reminders go out in advance; crafting a tentative agenda; and setting up the Zoom link. Like I learned while [collaborating on my orals documents](#) with James Adams in 2018, collaboration as a process is ongoing and can have different valences over time, sometimes tightly coupled and at other periods, more loose ([Adams and Okune 2018](#)). I learned from collaborating with James that beyond individual inclinations or institutional structures (which have been the large focus of analyses of collaborations), external factors also affect the outcomes of a collaborative endeavor.⁹ In the RDS collaborative instance, the context of COVID-19, which began to spread globally just as we held our first meeting in March 2020, may have in fact helped to coalesce this collaborative formation. While there is no way to know, one of the working group contributors mentioned that personally she would likely not have had as much time to dedicate to RDS had she been in Nairobi working her usual job instead of sheltering in place in her hometown.

The standing title of this chapter has been the “deutero” chapter which is in reference to a set of “deutero” questions¹⁰ that Kim Fortun has developed as part of an analytic set thinking across scales and systems (K. Fortun 2009; M. Fortun and Fortun 2019). “Deutero” here refers to Gregory Bateson’s notion of “deutero learning” (1972) which is concerned with understanding the learning frameworks and assumptions that underpin what one learns and values. Bateson contrasted this kind of learning with rote learning, noting that deutero learning could lead to questioning of fundamental premises and habitual behaviors that are seldom questioned and usually taken as given. In an analysis of Bateson’s concept, Tognetti (1999) argued that such questioning could lead to a reframing of the problem in a broader context that might allow participants to view a wider range of factors as affecting their capacity for action. So here, in the final chapter of this dissertation, we write as deutero actors, part of and studying the reflective learning capacities in Nairobi, leveraging what we see as the potential of research data, broadly construed, to serve as a cognizable object of our shared attention through which to further build our own deutero capacities as we reach for a third space. Following Franz Fanon, Achille Mbembe (2015) has argued about how disengaging from a Eurocentric knowledge regime does not require substituting an Afrocentric one. Rather, it means developing new practices, especially new pedagogies and arrangements that democratize the knowledge institutions. Connell et al. (2017) and others have described some of the spectrum of strategies and practices by which knowledge workers across the global South negotiate their positions in the Northern-centered global economy of knowledge. In this chapter we describe and position the Research Data KE Working Group as another example and detail the tactics and approach being leveraged by the group.

[FULL CHAPTER FORTHCOMING]

⁹ My experiment in collaborative analysis with James was unfortunately cut short when he had a family emergency.

¹⁰ These questions--meant to be adaptable rather than formulaic--include but are not limited to: “How are people and organizations denoting and worrying about the phenomena you study? What reflective learning capacities are there in this setting and problem domain?” (Fortun, forthcoming).

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