TRIALOG 154/155

A Journal for Planning and Building in a Global Context

December 2025

Reflexive Research Practices

TRIALOG 154/155

Zeitschrift für das
Planen und Bauen
im globalen Kontext

Dezember 2025

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Table of contents

This publication was funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) with funds from the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

Federal Ministry
for Economic Cooperation
and Development

DAAD
Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst
German Academic Exchange Service

Introduction
Reflexive Research Practices in the Global South

Nadine Appelhans, Raffael Beier and Janek Becker

While topics of decolonisation have long been discussed in Latin American, Asian, and African academia as part of long-standing independence movements (Escobar 1995; Fanon 1986; Said 1979), a growing body of urban studies and planning literature in the dominant English-speaking discourse has challenged the predominance of theoretical, normative, and conceptual assumptions rooted in the Global North since the 2000s (Simone & Abouhani 2005; Roy 2005; Parnell *et al*. 2009; Robinson 2002; Watson 2009). Reflecting on place and power in urban theory, this literature has worked towards the postcolonial emancipation of cities from Northern representations. Beyond this postcolonial urban critique, academics such as Mbembe & Nuttall (2004), Simone (2004, 2022), and/or Simone & Pieterse (2017) have sought to unsettle – from the South – the ontological grounds of urban knowledge production. Building on the intellectual work of decolonial thinkers and writers from colonised geographies, such as Fanon, Quijano, Chakrabarty, Spivak and Glissant, they work towards new Southern urban epistemologies that exceed conventional ways of seeing, learning, and making sense of urban space. For researchers from formerly colonised geographies, this literature helps describe and conceptualise the everyday engagement with lived realities of the South itself, which have made people question the exploratory power of Western-centric scholarship and theory in urban planning and the wider field of urban studies. Beyond this, such literature practically urges urban researchers, from all global spheres, to work towards a decolonisation of urban research and to re-examine dominant narratives, assumptions, and inherent power dynamics.

Thus, the entrenched global postcolonial structures, characterised by power inequalities that have grown and been reproduced historically, demand a critically reflexive research practice that imagines and works towards decolonial (research) futures. Thereby, the use of the concept of the 'Global South vs. the Global North' can serve to describe inequalities, absences (Appelhans 2024), and unbalanced power-relations, although this bears the risk to simultaneously reproduce the fault lines along which colonial division was practised. Referring mostly, but not uniquely, to current post- and decolonial discourse in geography, urban planning, and urban studies (Ha 2014; Roy 2016; Winkler 2018; Lawhon & Truelove 2020; Schwarz & Streule 2020; Bauriedl & Carstensen-Egwuom 2023; Guma *et al*. 2023), this special issue addresses the very practical questions of research ethics, inclusion, and positionality in marginalised contexts. Particularly in marginalised contexts within the Global South, where power imbalances between researchers and research subjects are most evident, it is essential to reflect on one's own positionality as a researcher, in addition to protecting the 'researched' (Ha 2014; Lawhon & Truelove 2020). When researching the 'marginalised', there is also a risk of reproducing stigmas through the inattentive selection of research sites and reliance on categories, such as 'slums', rooted in North-Western thoughts (Beier 2023; do Prado Valladares 2019).

It is in this context that we, as the editorial team, have decided to compile a TRIALOG thematic issue that centres not on research content and results but, rather, focuses on presenting the negotiations around positionality as a researcher in the field. We thereby ourselves come from different perspectives.

Nadine Appelhans has been conducting research with a regional focus on Africa for 20 years now. What initially drew her into research was the mismatch between what was presented as state-of-the-art in German planning education and the real-life experience of family members in India and South Africa. It became evident to her that planning intervention in these contexts would not be sensible without compiling insights into the sites of intervention. While, in the beginning, her research was marked by what she perceived to be an 'in-between' position, she has come to adapt her understanding to see herself as having multiple-belongings, and as acting as a mediator between cultures and spaces. When working between cultures, the question of whom your research needs to speak to (Serunkuma 2024) is ever more conflicted than for those with clear associations.

As working between cultures does not come without challenges, participating in this issue and making the (inner)conflict of positionality between academic and local communities visible, as well as pointing out the questions of intersectionality that especially female researchers face, is a central concern to her.

Raffael Beier was born and raised in Germany, and has been working on housing-related injustices in various African countries for more than ten years. His PhD about the resettlement of shantytowns (*bidonvilles*) in Morocco revealed to him the imperative nature of relational epistemologies that take the lived experiences of ordinary people seriously (Pieterse 2015; Simone & Pieterse 2017). As a somehow naïve and largely unprepared PhD student who was outside of Europe for the first time (an aspect he looks back upon with discomfort), the emotional encounter with the field opened not only new perspectives but helped to sort his thoughts. Trying to make sense of in-field conversations also made him question his own biased assumptions derived mainly from literature that too often failed to include the perspectives of ordinary residents (no representatives, no experts!) – especially if these would challenge the argument. ("Who am I to speak about displacement if so many *bidonville* dwellers are longing for the resettlement to actually happen soon?") Since then, he has aimed for a people-centred ethic that – through listening – builds on the direct voices of subaltern subjects in order to drive further a decolonisation of academic debates. Beier is extremely thankful for the very personal and honest reflections presented in this special issue, with so many of them stressing the values of openness and honesty in research practice.

Janek Becker is conducting a doctoral project examining leisure practices in the Comunidade do Bode in Recife, using an ethnographic research approach. He was born and raised in Germany, and first came to Brazil in 2011 for a semester abroad. Since then, his personal and academic ties have grown stronger through research and study visits to Niterói, Rio de Janeiro, and Recife. He tries to continually reflect on his position in the field, and the impact of his actions on the lives of the people involved in his studies. He finds it particularly challenging to navigate the close proximity and intense personal relationships in the field, while also being aware of the inequalities and conflicts arising from his privileged position as a White scientist from a German university. Through their insights into their personal conflicts and backgrounds, the authors of this issue have inspired him to further reflect on and adapt his own approach.

The decision for this special issue on positionality in the field met with an overwhelmingly positive response from researchers and activists, resulting in a wide range of carefully crafted contributions. In this issue, we seek to present contributions that discuss working across historical, imagined, administrative, gendered, racialised, and/or geographic fault lines, and how a researcher conducting fieldwork has to negotiate these to find one's own positionality. As an editorial team, we have tried to include the widest range possible of geographies, research approaches, ages, and genders so as to get varied contributions on this topic. Overall, what is particularly evident is the willingness to openly and critically reflect upon problems, challenges, and potential mistakes. This is not something that can be taken for granted. Honesty and transparency were particularly important to us in the process of developing this special issue, in order to give the authors space to open up and think critically about their own experiences. While some experiences overlap, differing conclusions might be reached. Acknowledging differences in positionality, and access to resources and publishing outlets, can foster understanding of different viewpoints and open opportunities to reflect on relationality and power dynamics. While these are often contentious and require careful reflection, active engagement with them can lead to a productive discussion on how to work towards decolonial research practice and theory-making. Such exchanges are crucial for advancing inclusive and representative knowledge production.

To this end, from the outset we decided to publish the contributions in TRIALOG's Perspectives section to facilitate the open discussion. In addition, an internal peer review process was conducted, whereby each article was reviewed by at least one author from another article of this special issue. This provided fruitful inspiration for revising and further refining the contributions. The diversity of contributions is represented by the four thematic sections of this special issue: education, biographical positionality, power-relations 'in the field', and methodologies. This loose grouping, which should by no means be understood as a strict division, demonstrates the diversity of aspects that are relevant to reflexive research ethics and researcher positionality in and beyond the field. The aim of this special issue is to bring together these various approaches on research practices in marginalised contexts, without evaluation. It highlights different approaches to reflexive research and specific assumptions made by the authors, encouraging readers to reconsider their own research practices. We believe that this diversity is precisely what is needed to improve research practices in marginalised contexts in the long term.

Education

In the first thematic section of our special issue, three authors reflect on the influence of higher education on their way of entering the field. In the first two contributions, respectively by the late South African planning scholar Avathakali Sithagu and the Moroccan architect Safiya El Ghmari, university education shaped a technocratic, deficit-oriented conception of informality that forced back the authors' own, contrastive memories of supposedly informal contexts. It was only in the course of reflexive and long-lasting (attempts at) field research that both authors became aware of how the colonial legacy of higher education had biased their way of entering the field. In contrast, the contribution by the Brazilian geographers Claudio Ubiratan Gonçalves, Avelar Araújo Santos Junior and Fabiano de Oliveira Bringel shows how higher education may also play a decisive role in shaping research careers devoted to the struggle of marginalised communities for recognition and equal rights. Whether or not we explain such contrasting experiences in terms of different disciplinary traditions, what all three contributions show with remarkable clarity is

that the way knowledge is taught shapes the ways young professionals and academics see, select, and ultimately enter the field – even though the limits of teaching should not be denied, as Klug notes in his contribution.

In the first contribution, **Avathakali Sithagu** shares an inspiringly personal and honest reflection of her career in between academia and planning practice, vividly describing how she arrived in the field in rural Mpumalanga, South Africa. Backed with the confidence of a recent graduate of an acknowledged institution who had gained initial work experience in urban contexts, she was eager to facilitate the 'formalisation' of so-called informal settlements – only to discover that realities looked much more complex than she had learned to assume. Her own reflexivity and her interactions with diverse local stakeholders laid open the Eurocentric bias behind her technocratic education that, for example, never discussed the role of local chiefs as key institutions in land allocation and management. Speaking of her attempt to impose urban planning norms on rural contexts, where land 'was connected to generations, history, society, culture, and customs', she describes it as a major mistake rooted in Eurocentric education.

Similar to Sithagu, **Safiya El Ghmari** also refers to an influence of Eurocentrism on her technocratic studies of architecture in Morocco, which, prior to starting her PhD, led her to perceive informal settlements as a 'spatial anomaly' that needs to be overcome. Specifically, she argues that 'the legacy of French colonial urban planning […] has often perpetuated biased or reductive narratives about informal settlements'. Referring to an invisibility of informality, El Ghmari points to a scarcity of and a lack of accessibility to primary data, lamenting that early studies were mainly conducted by foreigners influenced by foreign perspectives and concepts. For her, the historical recognition and conscious study of informality presents itself a practice of decolonisation; a helpful tool to 'unlearn imperialism' (Mende 2011). Thus, in her article, she traces informality back to antecedent forms of proscriptive urban rule such as *hisba*, which was established during the early times of Islam in Morocco – more than a millennium before the French protectorate.

Likewise, for **Claudio Ubiratan Gonçalves**, **Avelar Araújo Santos Junior** and **Fabiano de Oliveira Bringel**, decolonialising research is concerned with the lives of people (e.g., indigenous peoples, landless peasants, etc.) who have been marginalised by systems of (post-) colonial rule. Arguing that research practice is inseparable from personal trajectories, they seek to show how their biographies have led them to advance critical geographies focusing on collectivist socio-political struggles against disenfranchisement and dispossession. All three contributors highlight how university education exposed them to the struggles of marginalised communities, and encouraged them to interact and ally with activists and social movements (e.g., through fieldtrips, inclusive teaching, and study projects). Thus, unlike the experiences shared by Sithagu and El Ghmari, university education offered them sufficient space to question established epistemologies and concepts, and later allowed them to shape their own teaching in similar ways.

Biographical positionality

The second thematic section focuses on longer-term, biographical positioning and ongoing reflection of researchers and those being researched, especially in the context of their established biographical privileges and disadvantages. While all of the articles in this special issue describe the researchers' position in the research process, the three articles here stand out for their in-depth examination of the researchers' roles and privileges, stressing a biographical perspective. The articles demonstrate that research is an ongoing learning process, and emphasise the importance of viewing positionality as an ongoing activity that reflects one's role in relation to others before, during, and after the research stay. While Temba Middelmann and Klaus Geiselhart focus on deconstructing their own roles as privileged researchers over time, Tsekiso 'Thabang' Nkwanyana and Kristen Kornienko explore their collaborative partnership and friendship that has helped them to navigate unequal global hierarchies. Thus, the variation in contributions reflects the different levels of self-positioning, which naturally begins with oneself but must always be understood in the context of the research field and in dialogue with others.

In the first part of this section, **Temba Middelmann** explores his own role as a person shaped by his experience of growing up in a middle-class suburb of Johannesburg, and deconstructs his own embeddedness in post-apartheid society. As he takes the reader through his personal experiences, the author disentangles the structures of coloniality and oppression that are still present in everyday life and research set-ups, particularly in marginalised contexts. This profound disentanglement of persisting colonial and oppressive structures is the foundation for the author's call to move towards decolonial research practices. To achieve this, Middelmann identifies the ongoing complicity between researchers and their subjects as crucial. He highlights the importance of this sensitive relationship, which is based on consent and mutual respect, stressing the facilitating role of language.

In the next contribution, **Klaus Geiselhart** reflects on 20 years of research engagement in sub-Saharan Africa. Through his retrospective lens, Geiselhart illustrates the changes and adjustments he has made to his research practices. He begins by questioning the suitability of pre-prepared research agendas, considering the complex living realities of marginalised individuals. He also discusses his experience as a German researcher investigating marginalised contexts in southern Africa, and the emotionally challenging process of getting to know and trying to understand the unknown 'other'. This includes perspectives from different 'angles' in the Global South, as well as from more-privileged contexts. He therefore calls for the 're-humanisation of academia' in the study of marginalised contexts in the Global South, emphasising that personal reflection through the exposure to uncomfortable settings are crucial to approaching the so-called 'other'.

While the initial contributions focused on researchers as rather individual subjects, **Kristen Kornienko** and **Tsekiso 'Thabang' Nkwanyana's** contribution delves into the

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significance of one's own positionality when developing research relationships with others on equal terms. The contribution opens a dialogue on friendship and research partnerships by reflecting on shared research experience in Kliptown, a historically renowned community within the township of Soweto to the south of Johannesburg, which over decades has been struggling with empty upgrading promises and related frustration with the state. By reflecting on everyday research practices and the emerging artefacts of apartheid, racism, and white supremacy, the authors highlight the complexities of understanding each other. Their deeply personal insights demonstrate the importance of positioning oneself in relation to others in order to establish a common basis for (research) collaboration. As with the previous contributions, it is clear that understanding oneself and one's role is essential to achieving a genuine appreciation of others. Through their various approaches, the contributions impressively demonstrate the (im)possibilities to overcome deeply rooted differences and inequalities between researchers and their researched individuals and places. Biographical positionality then helps researchers to reveal and categorise emotional and biographical challenges, as well as their impact on everyday research practices.

Power-relations 'in the field'

The issue of imbalances of power in fieldwork is a major issue in research. When we describe these issues, we already undertake a framing that casts real-life spatial contexts as sites of research, and take on the researchers' perspective of being 'in the field'. This perspective implies that there is a clear-cut distinction, between the researcher and the place of work, in which the researcher is not entangled and faces no conflict of roles. While, historically, this might have been common in the 20th century built-environment research with mainly white male researchers coming from Europe and Northern America to research in Asia, Africa, and/or Latin America, this view has come under increased scrutiny. The growing awareness of multiple-belongings and the diversification of researcher biographies, as well as growing academic education, confidence, and awareness among communities participating in research, mean that these lines are blurred or obsolete. While they might always have been falsely assumed, the contributions by Meryem Belkadi, Neil Klug, and Manuel Dieterich in this section elucidate why these lines can no longer be upheld. The authors in this section trigger discussions on making power-structures visible, and reflect on their own respective positionality in them.

In her paper *Bridging Structural Approaches and Lived Realities when Conducting Empirical Research in Morocco*, **Meryem Belkadi**, a Moroccan researcher formerly affiliated to a North American research institution, describes how theoretical frameworks circulating in the academic discourse on planning scholarship are informed by North-Western experience and clash with fieldwork insights. She thereby describes not only how her role as a researcher who is part of the Moroccan societal and institutional system and her ability to shift between researcher and practitioner roles defined the research set-up and how she was received by decision-makers and research subjects, but also that the research participants displayed significant agency, leading to co-produced research design and knowledge-production. She clearly points out the existential challenges that researchers face straddling between belonging to the research location on the one hand, while working in a West-centric academic environment on the other. Thereby, her experience is exacerbated by being a woman in a male-dominated professional environment and societal order. She, consequently, calls for a conscious reflection on the practitioner experience and local agency as deliberate elements to make research designs more meaningful and ground the fieldwork ethically.

Neil Klug describes the conflict between the role expectations of the embedded researcher caught between researching, advocating, and advising. His article, titled *Reflections of a Technical Advisor/Researcher in the Case of the Slovo Park Informal Settlement Upgrade Project in Johannesburg, South Africa*, discusses how he navigated acting in multiple roles, as well as how these roles stand in conflict to each other, as the community remains marginalised while the researcher has possibilities to retreat to a world of privilege.

In his text *Reproducing Racism – Between Shame and Reflexivity*, **Manuel Dieterich** explicitly addresses the question of how to deal with (post-)colonial power asymmetries by focusing on the aspect of the European researcher becoming a representative and replicator of racist structures in South Africa. While working in Johannesburg, the post-apartheid context there led him to shift his perspective from individual responsibility for not acting racist towards a structural viewpoint on the setting in which he was working. Gaining this insight, he advocates for not only seeing this replication of racism as a moral issue and questioning one's own behaviour, but also for using these incidents to raise wider awareness of the structures in the research set-up, to expose them, and to set the path towards dismantling them.

Overall, this section makes visible and unpacks how feelings of overwhelmingness and inadequacy in the field often tend to mask the larger structural set-up in which the researcher becomes the bearer of knowledge, but also an agent for undesirable impositions. The researcher, although faced with issues of representation and growing accountability, embodies the supposedly acclaimed 'expert' on the topics extracted from the local communities. Nevertheless, he/she is able to enter and leave the situation, while the communities subject to research cannot. These three contributions show that, in order to decolonise and diversify the academic system itself, these questions of power within research set-ups require continued (re-)negotiation in both the academic and societal realms.

Methodologies

In the last section of this thematic issue, the authors put special emphasis on the role and reflection of methodologies for ethical field research that works towards decolonisation. From stressing the relevance of variegated local epistemologies (see Koshy, Purwins) to time-limited co-production (see Kieslinger & Kordel) and becoming a permanent part of local communities and their given fight against exclusion (see Bartholl, also Kornienko & Nkwanyana), the authors in this section present a variety of approaches marked by different degrees of field immersion. However, several key demands towards reflexive methodologies stand out across these four papers and the entire special issue: the questioning of concepts and their understanding, the recognition of pluralist local knowledge, and, in a broader sense, a certain degree of openness, honesty, and sensitivity. Overall, Koshy concludes that ethical methodological practice – especially in marginalised, postcolonial contexts – demands researchers to be guided by a 'strong sense of moral responsibility and social justice'.

In his article about his field research practice in rural Uganda in the context of an interdisciplinary research project on the resilience of smallholder farmers facing severe soil erosion, **Sebastian Purwins** highlights above all the necessity to question assumptions and concepts prior to choosing the right methods and entering the field. He notes how the project team headed by German soil scientists applied a classic notion of 'resilience' as if it were neutral and placeless. Lacking wider recognition and reflection of its (post-)colonial implications, Purwins argues, a narrow and implicitly Northern-centred understanding of resilience may, at a global scale, 'risk perpetuating the very structures that create vulnerability'. Other than 'staring at slopes' while trying to make distant impressions fit into preconceived frameworks, he goes on to stress the significance of openness to the field and interaction with local researchers in designing projects and setting up suitable methodologies (see Bartholl, Geiselhart, El Ghmari). Building on Latour (1999), Purwins concludes that we must accept a certain 'non-neutrality' of knowledge production that affects research practice while nevertheless requiring researchers to truly reflect on their own role, as well as their (conceptual) points of view (see Belkadi, Dieterich, Kornienko & Nkwanayana, Koshy).

The contribution by **Julia Kieslinger** and **Stefan Kordel** builds further on these principles, stressing the relevance of self-reflection and the participation of local stakeholders in all stages of knowledge production, including design and analysis. In their article about field research practice in *bateyes*, marginalised rural settlements in the Dominican Republic, the authors reflect on the very implementation of research designs that build on the methodological notion of 'co-production'. For the latter, open and honest immersion in the field appears to be crucial. While time-limited field research is surely unable to eliminate global power hierarchies and inequalities, the authors argue that co-production should be seen as a practical attempt at challenging and unlearning one's own ways of making sense of local contexts, thereby working *towards* more equality in knowledge production. As Kieslinger and Kordel underline, this may also include practical aspects such as allowing for flexible schedules, sorting out care responsibilities for children, or applying for additional funding to further involve local assistants in research analysis.

If, across the contributions, there seems to be agreement that openness towards the field is a crucial element of a decolonising research agenda, **Mrudhula Koshy**, in her contribution, argues that challenges remain to grasp *multiple* local realities (see also Bartholl). Reflecting on her own role as insider-outsider in rural, disaster-affected Kerala, India, she stresses that immersion in Southern contexts of uncertainty requires a moral responsibility to avoid what the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) refers to as 'the single story'. Such ethical responsibility, Koshy argues, requires an active engagement with local epistemologies as well as a certain mindfulness of local contexts and the way they interact with the world(s) of the researcher (see Bartholl, Kornienko & Nkwanyana). It is also the local habits and traditions – as well as the nuances of local languages – that affect the way researchers perceive what they are able to see. Practically speaking, Koshy describes how she altered the Malayalam translation of 'uncertainty' depending on to whom she spoke. Likewise, she urges researchers to be mindful of possible sampling biases that reproduce local forms of marginalisation and underrepresentation (see Belkadi).

Lastly, but truly inspiringly, **Timo Bartholl** presents insights into what he calls 'militant research', which builds on permanent presence in Rio's *favela* Maré and active involvement in locally based social movements against marginalisation. More than a decade ago, the German geographer decided to settle in Maré, where he founded the small community collective Roça! together with three female residents. After two years without any particular research interest, he re-entered academia and started to link his scholarly work with his activism. Moving towards more reflexive, equal and solidary ways of knowledge generation, he suggests aligning research with the interests of multiple grassroots movements that resist marginalisation. From a more practical perspective, he underlines the significance of reflective field diaries and suggests passing on the pen, allowing local residents to actively contribute to the writing process and to share results. Indeed, what appears to be central throughout Bartholl's contribution (see Kornienko & Nkwanyana) is the question of what research can do for local communities. This question, he is convinced, may only be answered through researchers' reflexive transparency regarding interests, demands, and the political agendas of their research, as well as by providing researched subjects with sufficient space to actively shape the very research design.

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A Tribute to a Dear Colleague and Friend

Avhatakali Sithagu, also known as Taki, was a lecturer and project coordinator at the School of Architecture and Planning at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa, and a PhD candidate at the Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS) at the University of the Western Cape, Bellville, South Africa. Taki very sadly passed away on 13 October 2024.

We knew and collaborated with Taki in various academic settings, including as friends, close colleagues, PhD supervisors, and mentors. Our paths crossed during her time at the School of Architecture and Planning at Wits University in Johannesburg, where she served as a lecturer and coordinated a trilateral graduate school in partnership with TU Berlin, Germany, and the University of Lagos, Nigeria. Before joining Wits in 2016, Taki had already gained extensive experience in both practice and academic teaching through her work at the National Department of Human Settlements, the Department of Land Affairs, and the Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

Her article on the following pages, which she worked on while struggling massively with health issues and taking care of a newborn, grew from her PhD studies. Taki registered for a PhD at PLAAS while working as a lecturer and project coordinator. In a short space of time, she managed to publish six articles that would qualify her to be a senior lecturer upon finishing the PhD. As a PhD student, she contributed greatly to the intellectual life at PLAAS and became a valued member of the postgraduate community. Her innovative research on the intersection of traditional authority, informality, urbanisation, and land in the former homelands opened a special niche research in the age of planetary urbanisation. The quality of her scholarship here was informed in part by her thorough intellectual grasp of her field, but was also led above all by that intangible something that not many scholars have, but which sets apart the truly excellent from the merely professional: a finely honed instinct for nuance and complexity, and the ability to turn fieldwork from the routine collection of facts to real-life detective work. Although she was never able to finish her dissertation, work based on her insights will be continued at UWC. Her insights into the nature of unplanned settlements on traditional authority land (see, for instance, Sithagu 2022 and Sithagu 2024) will, in this way, make a significant contribution to Global South scholarship and to the enduring lacuna in southern perspectives around traditional authority and urban land management. Admiring her extraordinary humility and intellectual commitment, students have been attracted to do research in her research area on urban land and traditional authority, solidifying her teaching as transformative and far-reaching.

Taki was deeply passionate about her work coordinating the Wits-TUB-UNILAG Urban Lab. Managing the scholarship programme, she cared immensely for the students who were given the chance to pursue Master's and PhD programmes at Wits. She was the go-to person for students with questions and challenges, and she made them – and especially international students – feel at home in Johannesburg and welcome in their new academic environment. Her commitment to the students' academic success was evident as she monitored their progress, and she maintained contact with some even after graduation, supporting them in their pursuit of new opportunities.

Her enthusiasm extended to other aspects of the project, particularly academic exchange. Taki was a firm believer in the value of student exchanges and was dedicated to facilitating Wits students' participation in international exchanges, accompanying them to Germany and Nigeria, and ensuring that they benefited from the opportunities and experiences these exchanges offered. By organising summer schools at Wits, she played a central role in hosting TU Berlin students and ensuring that they felt welcome and experienced Johannesburg to the fullest. She was also pivotal in bringing academics from across Africa to Wits for research and teaching, thereby developing and strengthening pan-African networks in the field of urban planning and management.

As a project coordinator, Taki, by employing pragmatic and creative solutions to overcome challenges, was the driving force behind making things work within complex university systems. Her friendly and caring nature, coupled with a great sense of humour, infused a sense of fun into the often tedious work required to foster international cooperation between higher education institutions.

Taki was also an excellent and very organised teacher, coordinating the main course of Wits University's urban management programme. Students will always remember her as a reliable and dependable coordinator. Taki boldly chose to teach a section on African theories of urban management, which was largely absent and is still under-examined in the curriculum. Her lectures stimulated discussions among students, who would comment about moments of discovery and new awareness. She facilitated discussions and debates in class that were deeply rooted in critical engagement. Taki was the definition of simplicity in elegance by being genuine and unpretentious. The students enjoyed her teaching, which used practical examples usually drawn from daily-life experiences. Taki was kind with her time, and had grace in the teaching of other courses often on short notice. She taught not only in the urban management programme, but took time to teach courses in other international collaborations, including leading fieldtrips. As a mentor, students always remarked about how, when conversing with Taki, she dedicated a humongous amount of time to sharing their inspirations, frustrations, and personal experiences and school-related issues, and was always in a good position to gauge the pulse of the students' sentiments and adjust expectations in the course.

Driven by a curiosity about different places, academic systems, and networks, Taki forged numerous professional connections and, more importantly, friendships through academic exchanges. Upon first meeting her, one quickly became acquainted with Taki and immediately recognised her fun-loving nature. She was modest and humble, cherishing small gestures of affection directed towards herself and her family. She often spoke of friends dear to her family and, for some of the friends she met through her work, there were many shared experiences, such as being academics, mothers, and PhD students. There was always much to catch up on when meeting Taki; conversations frequently centred on the challenges of balancing these three roles, consistently encouraging each other to persevere. She was easy-going socially, yet upheld strong professional principles when necessary. She took great joy in ensuring the comfort and happiness of others, whether in Johannesburg, Lagos, or Berlin. She cared for her students like a mother, and supported her colleagues as friends. Even during her struggles, she ensured that a group of fellow PhD students travelling from Berlin to Johannesburg for the African Urbanism Conference were well-accommodated.

Taki's passing exemplifies the saying that good people do not last. We miss Taki tremendously, but find solace in knowing that, although her time on Earth was brief, it was impactful. We are grateful to have been a part of her life.

Florence Abugtane Avogo, Lucas-Andrés Elsner, Mfaniseni Fana Sihlongonyane, Andries du Toit

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Power Relations in the Administration and Distribution of Customary Land

Avhatakali Sithagu

The post-apartheid era's dual governance of customary land in former homelands has led to local municipalities and traditional leaders contesting their respective powers over the management and administration of this land. I use KwaMhlanga, a marginalised and secluded former homeland in South Africa, to share the experience of manoeuvring several centres of power. A series of door-to-door structured interviews were conducted in three villages, specifically: Magodongo, Buhlebesizwe and Moloto. A total of thirty-five households were interviewed using a snowball sampling approach. In my pursuit to understand how the poor access land in the context of parallel governance, I share moments of contrasts in how these centres of power present themselves. Also, the focus is on how, as a researcher, I experienced these power relations. I also focus on my contribution as a trained urban planner to these power dynamics.

Machtverhältnisse bei Verwaltung und Zuteilung traditionellen Landbesitzes
Die zweigeteilte Verwaltung traditioneller Landbesitztümer in ehemaligen Homelands seit dem Ende der Apartheid hat zu Konflikten zwischen örtlichen Kommunen und traditionellen Autoritäten über die jeweiligen Befugnisse in Bezug auf die Administration von und den Umgang mit Land geführt. Ich verwende KwaMhlanga, ein marginalisiertes und abgelegenes ehemaliges Homeland in Südafrika, um die Erfahrungen mit dem Manövrieren mehrerer Machtzentren zu schildern. In den drei Dörfern Magodongo, Buhlebesizwe und Moloto, wurden insgesamt 35 Haushalte mithilfe des Schneeballverfahren befragt. In meinem Bestreben, zu verstehen, wie arme Menschen im Kontext paralleler Governance Zugang zu Land erhalten, teile ich kontrastierende Einblicke in die Art und Weise, wie sich die beiden Machtzentren präsentierten. Außerdem liegt der Schwerpunkt darauf, wie ich als Forscherin sowie als professionelle Stadtplanerin diese Machtverhältnisse erlebt und gleichzeitig zu ihren Dynamiken selbst beigetragen habe.

Introduction

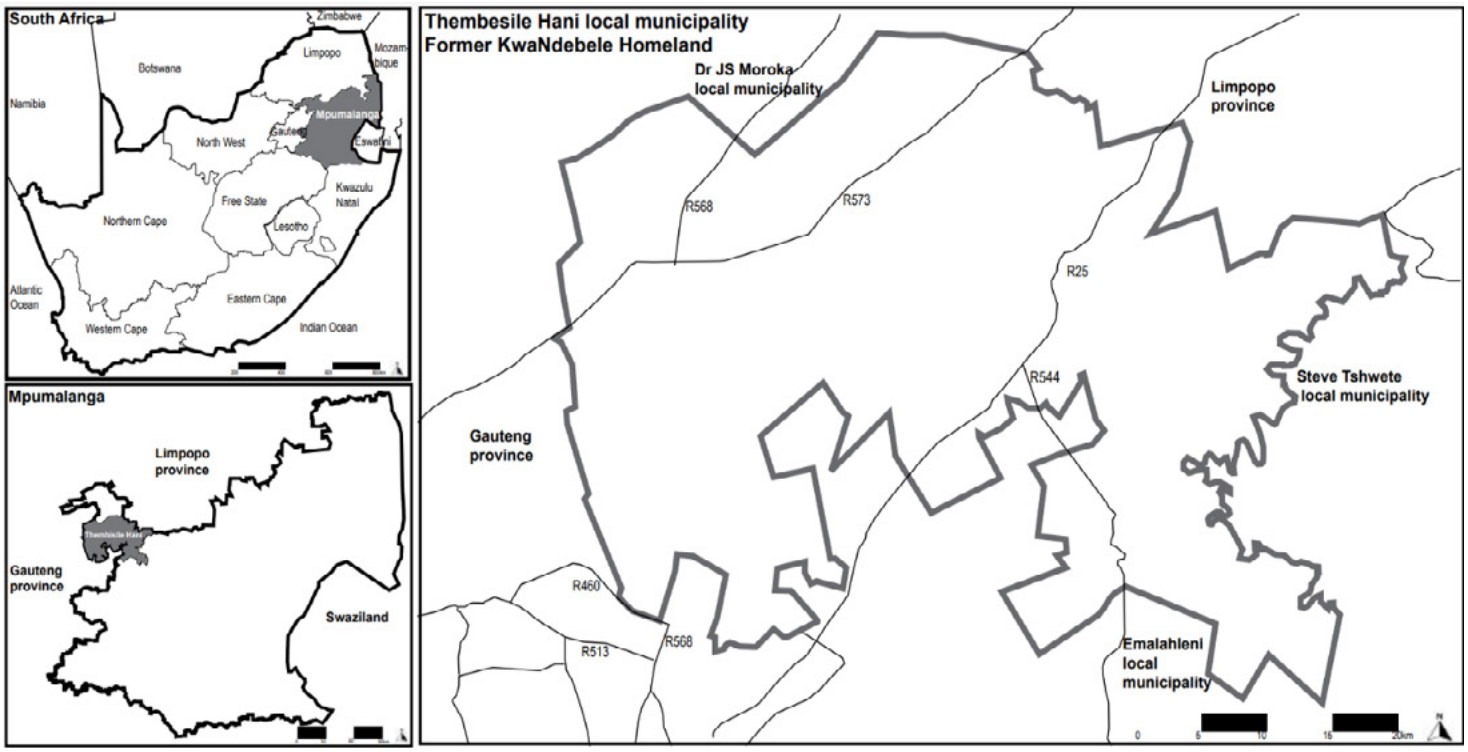
The apartheid regime in South Africa has left many issues lingering in the era of democracy. One area where this is visibly evident is the issue of land. The continuation of colonially influenced practices has persisted and is still active in the democratic era. Some scholars refer to this as 'colonial present' (Kepe & Hall 2018, citing Gregory 2004). The majority of Black people in South Africa remain landless and live on land with tenure insecurity (Kepe & Hall 2004). Post-apartheid South Africa promised redistributive justice through its land reform programme, but this has translated into 'false decolonisation or even recolonisation' (Kepe & Hall 2004: 4, citing Saul 2012).

At the centre of it all, whether during colonisation, apartheid or democracy, is power. The colonial and apartheid state gained power through conquest and violent land dispossession, while the democratic state gained some power through the adoption of laws and practices that are reminiscent of the past. As an example, some land is still held under the umbrella of 'guardianship' and 'trusteeship', a practice introduced by the colonial and apartheid regime simply because Blacks were meant to remain under the control of the state.

The focus of this paper is on the marginalised community of KwaMhlanga, a semi-rural area under the Thembisile Hani Local Municipality in Mpumalanga, South Africa. With a population of over 370,000 inhabitants and a high unemployment rate, KwaMhlanga is among the poorest regions in Mpumalanga (Thembisile Hani Local Municipality 2022). The majority of the land in Thembisile Hani is owned by the state and the National Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development (DALRRD). Some parcels are owned by the Provincial Government of Mpumalanga. Only a few parcels of land, dedicated to commercial farming, are under private ownership (Thembisile Hani Local Municipality 2020). There are also two townships, out of 76 villages, that are under private ownership.

The state serves as the guardian of the majority of the land; traditional leaders, however, control its administration. As custodians of the land, traditional leaders distribute land for a fee to whoever needs it. This means that they also control the spatial morphology of KwaMhlanga. The municipality also claims control through municipal, provincial and national projects.

This paper focuses on the power relations between community members and traditional leaders in the process of acquiring land. In my pursuit to understand how the poor access land in the context of parallel governance, I share moments of contrasts in how these centres of power presented themselves. In addition, the focus is on how, as a researcher, I experienced these power relations and my contribution as a trained urban planner to these power dynamics. A series of 35 door-to-door structured interviews were conducted in three villages, specifically: Magodongo, Buhlebesizwe and Moloto. A total of thirty-five households were interviewed using a snowball sampling approach.



▲ **Figure 1:** Location map of Thembisile Local Municipality. Map drawn by Mitchelle Chikowero.

Paradigmatic predisposition

Social constructivists see the world through the eyes of the participants and seek to understand their varied and multiple experiences (Creswell 2007). However, these subjective meanings and experiences are not only influenced by the participants' current state or reality but are also influenced by their historical, cultural, and social norms (ibid.). In addition, a researcher not only presents these experiences from the perspective of the participants but also recognises that his/her own position, background, and interpretation may filter how the findings are interpreted. My position as a researcher is that participants are the only ones that can tell their own truths and experiences, therefore I aim to present their lived experiences as they are. I do this by including emerging themes, perspectives, and quotes as expressed by the participants. In essence, I do not believe that reality can be presented as a series of logical steps and processes; rather, reality is complex and fluid, and experienced differently by each person.

As an urban planner who studied planning under the vocational Technikon system,[1] I am a technocrat at heart. My technocratic view of land, land management, and administration has been tested with this research, disclosing the layers of Eurocentrism that have shaped planning education and training in South Africa since colonial times. Instead of seeing land, land management, and its administration as processes that belong within the realm of the formal system, the perspectives of the participants have revealed that these processes are more complicated, socially and culturally embedded, and also historically situated. I also present how my background shaped the interpretation of the participants' narratives.

How does the rural fit into my life?

It is said that every Black South African has his/her roots in a village, even if not directly but through family and lineage. There are, of course, many that have lived for generations in urban townships without any direct link to a village, but in many cases, the connection is there. I have lived in a township all my life, with regular school holiday visits to my paternal village. However, every time I meet a Venda (my ethnic group) person, they always ask where 'home' is, and I dare not say it is in Kagiso, a township in Krugersdorp. I simply say that I come from Sambandou, my paternal village in deep rural Limpopo, even though I have never lived there. Strangely, the city is my temporary home while the village is my 'real home'.

The contrast in the land issues in Kagiso and Sambandou never seemed complicated. In Kagiso, my father bought his house through the bank; in Sambandou, he spoke to the chief to allocate him land. It was as simple as that, until I trained as an urban planner, where I learned about the difference between the formal and informal land system. However, I was never taught about the customary land system, in which my forefathers lived for generations, until I had my encounter with KwaMhlanga.

Encountering the rural as an urban planner

As an urban planner, I was assigned to KwaMhlanga to facilitate the upgrading of informal settlements. This was a national programme under the National Department of Human Settlements. This programme made sense in the urban areas, because it aimed to incrementally move the informal status of land in informal settlements to legal tenure. It was not so simple in a rural context. Several stakeholders, with varying degrees of power, exerted some, if not all, control of the land. For instance, the state legally owned the land, but would not brandish this for fear of causing conflict with traditional leaders, who came with a large rural vote. Traditional leaders unapologetically tell everyone who needs to hear it that they are the rightful owners of the land, since it was stolen from their forefathers. With this confidence, among other factors, they

1
In South Africa, the vocational Technikon system refers to the national programme of integrated learning, whereby students, during their B. Tech., spend time working in local municipalities. The author held a National Diploma in Town and Regional Planning from the University of Johannesburg, a B. Tech. from Durban University of Technology, and an M. Tech. from Cape Peninsula University of Technology. At the time of writing this article, she was conducting the research as part of a PhD at the University of the Western Cape.

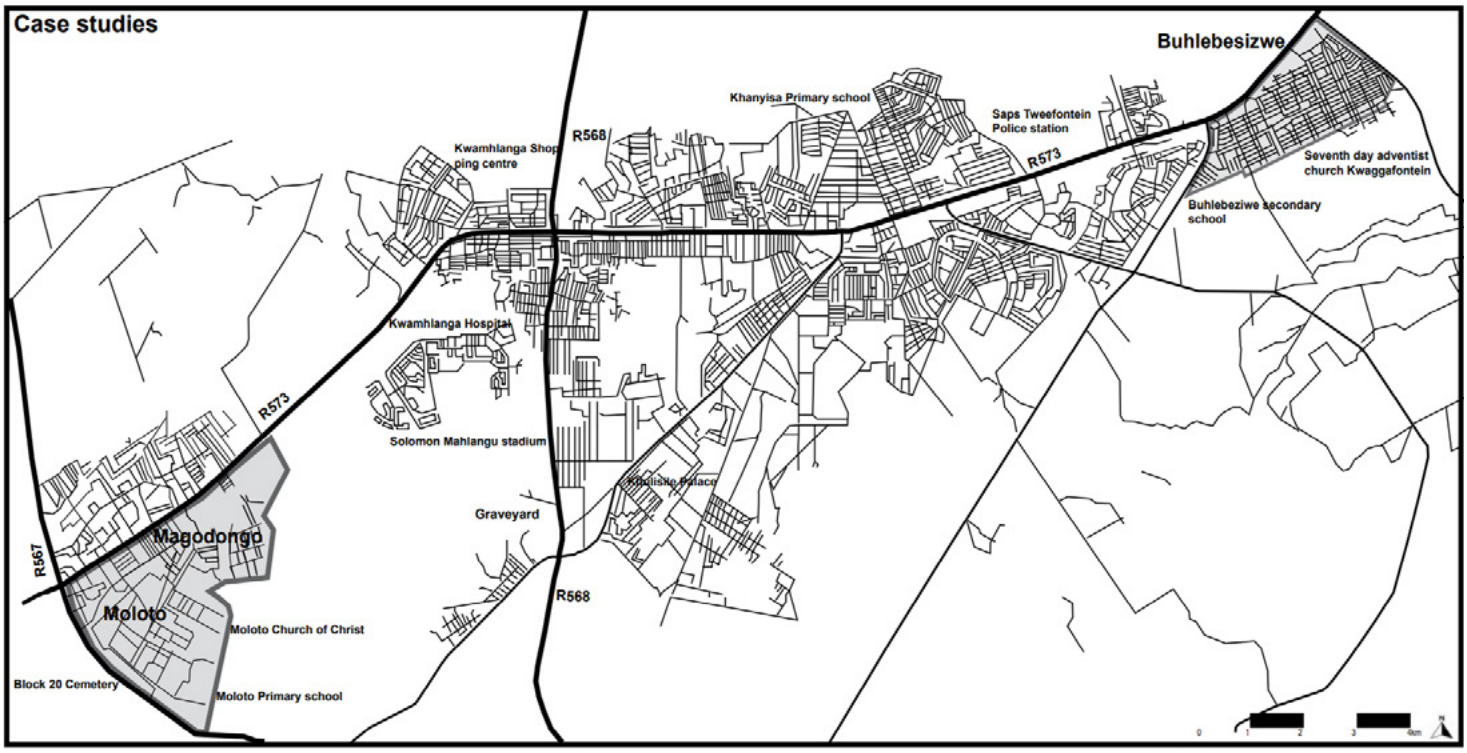


Figure 2: The three villages: Moloto, Magodongo and Buhlebesizwe. Map drawn by Mitchelle Chikowero.

exert control over the access to land and its administration. On the other hand, municipal officials in rural areas often respond to circumstances more than the rule of law. When they need to, they conform to formal processes – for example, during a municipal project. In other cases, they apply flexibility, allowing some things to fall by the wayside. As an example, a receipt given by headmen to new land occupiers can be used to apply for electricity. Here, the receipt, which is an informal document, is accepted by the municipality to initiate the formal process of electrification.

During my time as a state official, appointed to facilitate informal settlement upgrading in the Thembisile Hani Local Municipality, together with the appointed consultants, we used the technocratic view on land. In essence, the land belonged to the state and, therefore, the legal system would apply. Anything outside of this was labelled illegal or informal. We used the same rules and processes as in the urban area, despite being in a rural environment. This meant that the customary system on land, as well as the traditional leadership system, was ignored.

The relationship between the municipal officials, the appointed consultants and me was mutually beneficial, at least from our perspective. We came with the resources, information, and technical skills to upgrade informal settlements and, should the project be a success, the municipal officials would be lauded for eradicating the 'illegal invasion' of land and implementing municipal policies and laws. The goal was to transform land held under traditional leaders into formal land. I remember one of the consultants saying that if the municipality did not have money to start the process of a township establishment, the community could do it by donating money to his planning company and they could start the process. For him, it was as simple as that, and I thought the same. It was a brilliant idea! However, the failure to realise that land in rural areas was connected to generations, history, society, culture, and customs was a major flaw for my team and me.

The imposition of 'urban' planning in a rural sphere had many implications. One of them (surprisingly) was the tension it caused between us (as the state's officials) and the municipal officials. Even though they may have been trained as technocrats, rural municipal officials were a different breed. Much of our training was based on 'Western-centric political imaginations of planning [and] failed to recognise everyday planning practices' (Wesely & Allen 2019: 139). Our planning institutions have continued to produce colonially influenced curricula that have lauded formal planning as the only means of building cities, while informal and customary practices are ignored (ibid.). In a rural space such as KwaMhlanga, municipal officials and planners find themselves confronted with socio-spatial environments that are not in university textbooks. They often find themselves having to abandon the 'law' (in most circumstances) and to deal with the 'real' planning, which is often not under their control. Olaf (2018) builds on the work of Lipsky (2010), who refers to urban public servants who have direct interactions with citizens as 'street-level bureaucrats'. These street-level bureaucrats sometimes have to leave the city and work in rural areas. They do not merely move spatially from the city to the rural, but move within Mamdani's (1996) bifurcated state. We were urban workers who now had to address rural citizens as well as rural workers who were living 'under powerful structures of "customary law" and chiefly rule' (Olaf 2018: 43). We had transformed into what Olaf calls 'bush-level bureaucrats'. We were confronted with the challenge of implementing 'state law within areas of overlapping and contentious political authority and legal jurisdiction' (Olaf 2018: 43). In essence, as the state's officials, we were not offering any 'real' solution; we were simply reproducing 'imaginary' planning. And that is what made the informal settlement programme unimplementable and caused disinterest.

Power relations between state officials and rural municipal officials

The power-relations between us and municipal officials were somewhat complex and tense. We were seen to be imposers, here to disrupt the everyday norms. The project was not theirs, but that of the national department; therefore, they did not answer to anyone. One of the ways that this was expressed was by not answering emails or telephone calls, and not attending scheduled meetings or walking out of them. I remember our first meeting. It was with one of the departmental managers. He was unprepared and had forgotten about the meeting to the point that he had not invited any of his subordinates and sector departments. We sat at his desk, which had piles and piles of paper. Our projector, which would display our project inception presentation, had nowhere to sit. Nonetheless, the presentation went ahead and was projected onto his white wall. At the end of the presentation, we were not sure that our project was welcomed or understood. We felt that we had to involve the municipal manager to help us draw interest in this project. Eventually, as time went by, more people joined the meetings, but there was no consistency in attendance as new people came and left. The project went ahead anyway, despite the challenges. We 'forced' our way into the municipality, met our deliverables, and submitted the reports with recommendations to the municipality. The next step was for the municipality to apply for funding to initiate the first phase of the upgrading programme. As a state institution, we were the 'Big Brother' that came to capacitate and guide the municipality into the structured formal land system.

The one layer that we did not engage with was traditional leaders. It was a calculated decision, because of the view that traditional leaders had a different take on land. For one, while the intention was to move land from customary tenure to formal tenure, traditional leaders wanted customary tenure to remain while simultaneously benefiting from the fruits of formal tenure. They administered land through customary means, with the expectation that the municipality would provide basic services. For the municipality, this meant that they provided basic services without a return on revenue. Therefore, in order for the municipality to produce revenue, the formal land system made sense. And, most importantly, this was in line with national directives that lauded the legal system over customary systems.

Furthermore, there was a level of domination that came with being part of the state. Traditional leaders were viewed as uninformed, unskilled and unable to 'understand' the dynamics of land and, therefore, seen to have nothing to contribute towards formalisation. Traditional leaders would delay the project simply because of the different ways in which the state and traditional leaders view land systems.

Traditional authorities and their power in the community

However, traditional leaders had dominion over the customary land system, even more than the state or the municipality. Was it not rather our own positioning – based on our Eurocentric conceptions of urban planning that we had adopted through years of technocratic training and practice – that set them apart as being 'traditional'? In fact, their authority existed in several layers. The first layer was based on how they viewed themselves: a mix of confidence and pride that came with history, as well as popular support from the community, ensured that they remained relevant.

The second layer is that traditional leaders offer more social support and are highly accessible to the community. As an example, I managed to organise a focus group interview with the Ndzundza-Fene Traditional Council (TAC). As I waited outside, I sat on a bench, where two women joined me. One woman had come to the TAC to complain about her neighbour, who claimed that she was a witch. The neighbour had reported this to the sub-council, and they adjudicated the matter in the absence of the accused. As punishment, the sub-council wrote a letter to her indicating that she must pay a fine in the form of a goat – despite the fact that the woman had not had a chance to defend herself. She then decided to come to the TAC for help. I asked her how she thought the council would assist, and she said she wanted them to talk to the sub-council in her area and convince them to give her a date when she can present her case.

The next woman had come to the TAC regarding her marital matters. She and her husband had bought two stands and had agreed that in the one stand they would build a home for her mother-in-law and, in the other, they would build their own home. They built the mother-in-law her house. The problem started when the woman wanted to build a house in their stand: the husband did not honour their agreement and the mother-in-law started mistreating her. She had come to the traditional council to explain her problems. I asked her what she would get out of discussing this with the council. She said that she hoped that they could intervene and hold a family meeting, with the assistance of the council, so that they resolve their marital problems.

I met another lady who had come to announce her divorce to the TAC. I found it strange that she would announce this so publicly. She also intended to announce that she had begun distributing her traditional herbs and medicine at a well-known pharmacy. Her new business adventure had also landed her a radio interview with one of the well-known radio stations. This was indeed exciting news for her and her new found life purpose. Finally, she indicated that she would soon start establishing her own pharmacy and she wanted the TAC to help her find land.

The three women represent a snapshot of the social issues that communities present to traditional leaders. The municipality would not be able to deal with most of these social issues. This is one of the things that set the municipality and traditional leaders apart. One institution is seen as technocratic, while the other is seen as practical and relevant. However, the next section discusses how this power can be shaken by the very communities that traditional institutions lead.

Power dynamics of land access by community members

Interviews with community members revealed that the majority of households accessed land through headmen;

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however, the authority of headmen in the villages varied. The one thing that led to this was the absence or presence of headmen in the village. For example, Buhlebesizwe's headman was well-known. Also, his inheritance into this position could be attested by the elderly, who had known his father, and this legitimised his authority. In Magodongo, almost half of the interviewed households indicated that there were many headmen in their village. They were not able to identify which headman was legitimate (that is, appointed by the TAC) and which one was illegitimate (self-appointed). At the core of the problem was that when the last appointed headman died, his son refused to overtake his position and, thus, there was a leadership vacuum. This created an opportunity for anyone to take the position of headman. On the other hand, in Moloto, some participants questioned the legitimacy of a headman who had been appointed by the TAC. One participant indicated that he was not a member of the royal family, and that led to him being perceived as illegitimate.

Ironically, some of the residents of Magodongo knew that they were being allocated by illegitimate headmen. This is what some had to say:

> *[You are certain that the one who sold you the stand is legitimate?] No, that one was a crook; he also wanted to eat people's money [So you knowingly gave a crook your money for a stand?] There are many people he sold stands to. [I laugh. She laughs as well. You gave a crook your R500?] Yes! I wanted a place and I was desperate.*
>
> *Interview with a community member of Magodongo (2022).*

> *[How sure are you that you were allocated by a legitimate headman?] Hooo…haai…eissh, I don't know how I trusted him, but I just saw people staying here – then I had this thing that Magodongo has been here for a while and no one has been evicted so far.*
>
> *Interview with a community member of Magodongo (2022).*

I asked if any problems arose with getting allocated by an illegitimate headman, such as the demand for more money or getting evicted. One lady simply said, 'He is not the chief. I will get him arrested.' Another promised that she would take them to court.

Surprisingly, unlike the community members who were willing to put up a fight against illegitimate headmen, there was no evidence of contestation between legitimate headmen and self-appointed headmen. Interviews with the Ndzundza-Fene TAC that had jurisdiction over Magodongo and Moloto revealed no punitive recourse against self-appointed headman. It seemed as though the TAC was letting the situation in Magodongo play itself out. What were they afraid of? Why not take control? Several participants indicated that one self-appointed headman in Magodongo was a troublesome man who had used his aggressive nature to take over a part of Magodongo. Other participants mentioned that one self-appointed headman was related to the deceased headman, and he was using his connection to the royal family to legitimise his role in allocating land to newcomers.

The power dynamics between traditional leaders and community members are varied and contextual. Some communities view traditional leaders as guardians of tradition and custom, mediators, and advocators of moral order. In this case, power is held by traditional leaders. In other cases, the legitimacy of traditional leaders is questioned by communities, therefore destabilising the power they have. And, finally, in some areas, community members are contesting and taking away some powers from traditional leaders.

Conclusion

The move from the urban to the rural was not only a physical shift in space; it proved to be a mental shift for us as the state's representatives. As state officials, we represented the 'image of the state [that] claims for itself supreme law-making powers' (Olaf & Hoehne 2018: 3). Our urban bureaucratic mindset was met with resistance from what we thought were like-minded rural colleagues. Instead, we failed to recognise the complex nature in which rural municipalities find themselves. In line with Mamdani's (1996) bifurcated state, rural officials work within the constructs of entrenched colonial rules, customs, and traditions that have also shifted towards elements of capitalism and socio-spatial developments (Olaf & Hoehne 2018). The entanglement between legal law, customary law and commoditisation of land proved too complex for us, who had been trained within the antagonistic dualism of 'formal vs. informal' planning. Thus, we chose ignorance as the mode of engagement (ibid.) in dealing with traditional authorities and customary law, and we did the state's work regardless of the context. In doing so, our engagements had no meaningful impact.

However, traditional authorities make a significant impact on the ground, with absolute control over the distribution of land outside of the state or municipality. However, they have to contend with the very communities they lead. Some bold community members contest the control of land distribution, thus overturning the power dynamics that has existed for generations. Other villages align with the traditional village life, where traditional leaders lead the distribution of land, and the spiritual and social dynamics. The fusion of loyalty and rebellion towards traditional leaders requires more research in order to understand the shift in power dynamics between community members and traditional leaders.

The rural landscape is no longer isolated, but part of the complex systems of social relations, contestations, and exploitations. Consequentially, the shift in power dynamics between people and the state is like a pendulum, contentiously shifting from one point to another. Colonial continuities, although entrenched, in the era of postcolonialism, they are dislodged by bravery, opportunism, and resistance. This is a great predicament for planning and practitioners, who have to abide by the law, yet deal with the changing dynamics. Is it not worth it, then, to swing with the pendulum?

Acknowledgements

This research was made possible by the DAAD In-Country/In-Region Scholarship Programme SLGA.

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Photo: Bola Oguntade.

Geographies of Experience
Trajectories, Practices, and Reflections on Territorial Research in the Amazon and Northeastern Brazil

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This article offers a reflection shaped by the professional and personal experiences of three geographers working in different states of Brazil: Pernambuco, Alagoas, and Pará. We recognize that both professional trajectories and lived experiences play a crucial role in the formation of geographical practice. Since the early 2000s, we have been systematically and continuously involved with geography, taking on roles in social organizations, schools, and public universities. These institutions operate in contexts characterized by socio-spatial contradictions, conflicts, and profound socioeconomic inequalities. This immersion is reported in the article in the form of a series of biographical narratives. Guided by social praxis, their actions end up merging with the processes of resistance and epistemological/ontological debates experienced in the respective lived environment and professional activity of each of the authors. Cláudio Ubiratan Gonçalves, Avelar Araújo Santos Junior, and Fabiano de Oliveira Bringel discuss their journeys in geography and the social struggles of their space-time in the form of an oral history. They adopt a first-person perspective to closely examine key aspects of the territorial formation of Brazil. In analyzing sociopolitical issues, they observe that conflicts and processes of exclusion are central to the formation of the peasantry and to the recognition and self-recognition of indigenous and traditional communities. In this sense, we argue that research practices and the development of geographical methodologies should prioritize these territorialities and the various mechanisms that promote territorial diversity and inform public policies. This focus becomes particularly vital when seeking to reinforce policies in territories defined by co-participation, coexistence, and autonomy.

Erfahrungsgeographien. Biographien, Praktiken und Reflexion der geographischer Forschung im Amazonas und im nordöstlichen Brasilien

Dieser Artikel enthält Überlegungen, die von den beruflichen und persönlichen Erfahrungen dreier Geographen geprägt sind, die in verschiedenen Bundesstaaten Brasiliens arbeiten: Pernambuco, Alagoas und Pará. Wir sind uns bewusst, dass sowohl berufliche Laufbahnen als auch Lebenserfahrungen eine entscheidende Rolle für die Entstehung geografischer Praxis spielen. Seit Anfang der 2000er Jahre beschäftigen wir uns systematisch und kontinuierlich mit Geographie und übernehmen Aufgaben in sozialen Organisationen, Schulen und öffentlichen Universitäten. Diese Institutionen agieren in Kontexten, die durch sozialräumliche Widersprüche, Konflikte und tiefgreifende sozioökonomische Ungleichheiten gekennzeichnet sind. Im Rahmen dieses Artikels nähern wie uns dieser geographischen Praxis in Form von biografischen Erzählungen. Geleitet von sozialer Praxis verschmelzen die Handlungen mit den Prozessen des Widerstands und den epistemologischen und ontologischen Debatten, die in dem jeweiligen Lebensumfeld und der beruflichen Tätigkeit jedes einzelnen Autors stattfinden. Cláudio Ubiratan Gonçalves, Avelar Araújo Santos Junior und Fabiano de Oliveira Bringel diskutieren ihre Reisen in der Geographie und die sozialen Kämpfe ihrer Raum-Zeit in Form einer Oral History. Sie nehmen eine Ich-Perspektive ein, um wichtige Aspekte der territorialen Formation Brasiliens genau zu untersuchen. Bei der Analyse soziopolitischer Fragen stellen sie fest, dass Konflikte und Ausgrenzungsprozesse für die Gestaltung des Campesinato und für die Anerkennung und Selbstwahrnehmung indigener und traditioneller Gemeinschaften von zentraler Bedeutung sind. In diesem Sinne plädieren sie dafür, dass Forschungspraktiken und die Entwicklung geographischer Methoden diesen Territorialitäten und den verschiedenen Mechanismen, die die territoriale Vielfalt fördern und die öffentliche Politik beeinflussen, besondere Priorität einräumen sollten. Dieser Fokus wird besonders wichtig, wenn es darum geht, politische Maßnahmen in Gebieten zu stärken, die durch Ko-Partizipation, Koexistenz und Autonomie gekennzeichnet sind.

Initial considerations

This article offers a reflection shaped by the professional and personal experiences of three geographers. We acknowledge that both professional trajectories and lived experiences play a crucial role in shaping geographical practice. Since the early 2000s, we have been systematically and continuously engaged with geography, assuming roles in social organisations, schools, and public universities. These institutions operate within contexts characterised by socio-spatial contradictions, conflicts, and profound socio-economic inequalities.

In the following sections, we adopt a first-person perspective to closely examine key aspects of Brazil's territorial formation. In analysing socio-political subjects, we observe that conflict and processes of exclusion are central to shaping the peasantry and to the recognition and self-recognition of Indigenous and traditional peoples. Accordingly, we contend that research practices, and the development of geographical methodologies, must foreground these territorialities and the diverse mechanisms that foster territorial diversity, and inform public policy. This focus becomes particularly vital when seeking to reinforce policies in territories defined by co-participation, coexistence, and autonomy.

When we frame the ways of perceiving, thinking, and practising geography with a focus on Northeastern Brazil and the Amazon, the discussion gains even greater depth and scope. Within this context, we aim to highlight and prioritise reflections on the professional trajectories and work experiences of faculty members and researchers engaged in this field of knowledge.

Research practices are shaped by the insertion of subjects into their social contexts (Silva 1991), and seek to reflect on the development of study methods and academic practice in settings marked by social conflict. In these environments, the territorialisation and monopolisation of space by capital (Oliveira 1991), coupled with socio-spatial injustices (Santos 1987) and territorial diversity (Haesbaert 1999), constitute structural elements that define the experiences of these subjects.

Another fundamental premise in this context concerns the urban-centred model that has shaped Brazil's territorial configuration, and the industrialisation process consolidated nationwide from the mid-20th century onward. This model primarily favoured the centre-south region as the privileged locus for adopting the modern paradigm of wealth accumulation, structured as a driver of economic development and a reproducer of internal coloniality (González 2006). Consequently, the establishment of this urban and industrial centre led to the formation of a periphery of the periphery, encompassing the region where we live and where we produce geographies alongside the peoples who are in constant movement.

Conducting research in these territories – broadly conceptualised as the periphery of the Global South – necessitates moving beyond the notion of a mere *place of speech*. It requires engaging with the scale of the *body-territory,* the most immediate and material expression of being-in-the-world. This realm has been historically inscribed by the violence of colonisation and remains shaped by ongoing struggles for recognition and reparation in the face of persistent coloniality (Quijano 2000).

The assertion of autonomy through the body-territory emerges as a counterforce to the structures and strategies of domination that extend beyond the human body – conceived as an extension of nature – to encompass the very modes of resistance and re-existence against entrenched systems of power and oppression. These dynamics intersect with, and profoundly shape, experiences of class, gender, ethnicity, race, ableism, and aging, particularly among vulnerable social groups such as Indigenous peoples, peasants, Romani communities, artisanal fishers, and others.

Our ontological perspective, deeply embedded in the Latin American and Caribbean context, is grounded in critical geography, which interrogates sociability through the lens of socio-spatial inequalities while advancing toward non-capitalist communitarianism. This model encompasses both institutional and non-institutional forms of human existence and social reproduction, including intercultural education and folk medicine.

Through this approach, we aim to contribute to the reimagining of historical narratives and the expansion of epistemic debates within Brazilian geography. In the following sections, we present three experiential accounts, structured according to the authorship of this work.

First account, first time-space: a perspective through subjects

I am Claudio Ubiratan Gonçalves; my journey into geography was inspired by my high school teacher, Fernando Cavalcante, who had studied at the Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF) in Niterói, Rio de Janeiro, during the 1980s. His arguments, firmly rooted in critical geography, resonated with me and motivated my decision to apply to the same institution in late 1992. Upon entering UFF the following year, I had the opportunity to broaden my academic training through lectures, field classes, intensive courses, and dynamic meetings within the geography programme's student union.

My involvement in the student union propelled my engagement in the broader student movement, within both geography and the National Union of Students (UNE). My activism intensified, particularly through the National Confederation of Geography Students and Organizations (CONEEG),[1] which allowed me to establish deeper connections with the Brazilian Association of Geographers (AGB). Through this experience, I had the privilege of travelling across Brazil, encountering its vast and diverse territorialities and populations.

It is important to highlight two key developments within the Brazilian political landscape of the mid-1990s. On the one hand, the liberalising policies implemented under Presidents Itamar Franco and Fernando Henrique Cardoso had a profound impact. Public universities experienced substantial budget cuts, which severely affected both student aid programmes and the overall operation of these institutions. Meanwhile, the private sector significantly expanded its presence in higher education.

Concurrently, the country was undergoing a reform of the National Education Guidelines and Framework Law (LDB), led at the time by Senator Darcy Ribeiro. This reform compelled the student movement to adopt a critical stance against the top-down approach to discussions surrounding curriculum reform, professional training, and supervised internships – issues that had, until then, been addressed almost exclusively by academic councils and programme coordinators of undergraduate and graduate geography courses, with little to no student participation.

On the other hand, the agrarian state of affairs was becoming increasingly volatile, marked by a surge in land conflicts and a growing wave of occupations of unproductive land. Agrarian reform movements began mobilising students from urban centres, urging their participation in the broader struggle for popular agrarian reform, food sovereignty, and agroecological practices. These were the central debates and causes that deeply shaped my own involvement, particularly through my participation in the Regional Meeting of Geography Students from the Southeast (EREGEOs), the National Meeting of Geography Students (ENEGs), and the National Meeting of Geographers (ENGs). This engagement ultimately culminated in the first Forum on Curriculum Reform for Geography Programmes, held yearly in Brasília, DF, and in my active participation in the Interdisciplinary Residency Programme in Rural Settlements and Popular Communities (EIVs)[2] within the geography student movement during the 1990s, held biyearly.

When I began my master's studies in the Graduate Programme in Development, Agriculture, and Society (CPDA) at the Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRRJ), I was profoundly inspired by the spirit of the

1
CONEEG is active throughout the entire Brazilian territory.

2
The EIVs are organised by the students themselves, drawing on exchanges and shared learning experiences with other national student federations and associations. Particularly noteworthy are the substantive dialogues established with students from agronomy, forestry engineering, medicine, social sciences, and other academic disciplines.

agrarian reform struggle – an experience I had lived intensely in the rural encampments and settlements of northern Rio de Janeiro state. This engagement took shape through direct involvement with the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) and the Landless Workers' Movement (MST), within the scope of university extension initiatives known as the Interdisciplinary Residency Programmes in Agrarian Reform Settlements.

The 1990s were especially marked by dynamic processes of defence and re-existence in peasant territories, even as a sweeping neoliberal reform agenda was being implemented by the state. During this period, students stood in active solidarity with the landless, participating in political mobilisations such as the protests at the stock exchange in downtown Rio de Janeiro denouncing privatisation efforts and targeting state-owned enterprises such as Telebras, Companhia Vale do Rio Doce, and Eletrobras.

Living alongside families in encampments and settlements, as well as with leaders of the landless movement, I came to experience firsthand what Paulo Freire defines as the role of subjects – not objects: the use of dialogue and communication as fundamental tools for awakening political consciousness within the teaching-learning process (Freire 1977). This is a subject-to-subject form of communication, situated within the sphere of political representation and collective action, and marked by the tensions arising from the force and violence exercised by the Brazilian state.

In a certain sense, we found ourselves confronting the state, demanding the fulfilment of rights enshrined in the 1988 Constitution, even as we took our first steps toward democratic practices and participatory engagement after the long period of military authoritarianism.

During this period, I wrote my master's thesis on the role of political mediation agencies in advancing territorial planning initiatives. Simultaneously, I worked full time as a teacher in both the municipal and state public school systems of Rio de Janeiro.

This journey challenged me to cultivate a deep capacity for listening, dialogue, and attentive observation within communities composed predominantly of Black and Northeastern populations, as well as Indigenous peoples rendered invisible – many of whom had not yet publicly self-identified as such. Upon completing my thesis, I returned to Fluminense Federal University to pursue doctoral studies, joining the inaugural cohort of the newly established programme in 2003.

For this reason, we maintain that a researcher who undertakes an investigative agenda – even one minimally committed to addressing socio-spatial inequalities – necessarily engages in a geography rooted in lived experience. It was in this spirit that, throughout our master's and doctoral studies, we chose to focus specifically on the ways geography can assume a politically engaged role through the work of social mediators operating within territorial contexts.

From our perspective, territorial planning mediators are key actors in processes of social transformation. They serve as conduits for alternative worldviews and navigate a range of institutional spaces. Their political effectiveness is made possible through the interpretive mediation they carry out with the social and political groups they engage – without whose support and active participation no meaningful social reform can occur (Gonçalves 2002).

In the doctoral research I conducted in the early 2000s, I focused specifically on the ways in which peasant communities sought to inscribe their practices of defence onto the territory. Through a process of return and spatial displacement, my path led me to the regions of Cariri Cearense and Araripe. As I developed a methodological approach – through repeated journeys and sustained engagement – I came to recognise in artisans, pilgrims, and *pequizeiros* a distinct explanatory power. These actors were bound by a space-time relationship that linked the historical processes of territorial occupation with their contemporary forms of political agency.

I did not encounter an active revolutionary movement, nor a direct subversion of the structures inherited from colonial domination or the authoritarianism of the military regime. What I observed were territorialities rooted in the reproduction of labour power, the cultivation of food and life, and the veneration of sacred and divine spaces.

Therefore, the ethical contribution of artisans, extractivists, and traditional communities must be recognised as fundamental to envisioning a possible path beyond the dominant capitalist ethic. In the creation of 'spaces of hope',[3] these subjects embody a singular, diverse, nonlinear, and unprogrammed way of life – one that resists being fully subsumed by the rational spatial logic imposed by the modern capitalist world (Gonçalves 2022).

We understand these subjects as leading a process of both radical and gradual transformation. Through practices grounded in the lived experience of space, they introduce elements that reinforce and sustain a collective vision of community organisation – one shaped by their own modes of labour and their distinct ways of engaging with and appropriating nature.

Throughout the course of the doctoral programme, I came to recognise the necessity of making certain pivotal decisions. One of these was my resignation from the public elementary and secondary school systems in the state of Rio de Janeiro – a step that marked the beginning of my return to the Northeast. At the same time, it became evident that I needed to devote myself fully to teaching in higher education.

In this context, in 2006, I took the civil service exam for the Federal University of Sergipe. After being approved, I began my tenure as a faculty member in the municipality of Itabaiana, located approximately fifty kilometres from the state capital, Aracaju. There, together with three colleagues, we founded the undergraduate degree programme in geography at the Alberto Carvalho Campus.

During the two years I lived in Sergipe, I witnessed firsthand – through both research and teaching – the profound and transformative impact of cultivating genuine

3
For further discussion on 'spaces of hope', see the work of Emilia Moreira (2009).

proximity between teacher and student, and how this relationship directly shapes the teaching-learning process. While developing a research project – part of the probationary requirements – on the socio-environmental impacts in the lower São Francisco River Basin, I, along with a small group of students, came to grasp the critical importance of forging an epistemic connection with the communities already experiencing the tangible consequences of seawater intrusion into the river.

These impacts manifested in multiple ways. First, dams were constructed for hydroelectric power generation under the management of the São Francisco Hydroelectric Power Company (CHESF). Second, the Ministry of National Integration led the São Francisco River transposition project. Third, private hotel enterprises engaged in real estate speculation to promote tourism along the riverbanks. Finally, shrimp farming tanks proliferated in an unregulated manner to serve the fishing industry.

In light of these intersecting factors – and in response to the destructive advance of agro-hydroindustry across the territories of the peoples of the fields, rivers, and *caatingas* of the São Francisco – we committed ourselves to a research and educational process aimed at deepening the methodology of popular work. As a concrete expression of this commitment, we conducted fieldwork in communities and villages located in the riverside municipalities of Canindé de São Francisco, Poço Redondo, Porto da Folha, and Brejo Grande.

From the outset, we articulated a central guiding question that shaped our investigation: How can we establish a clear and comprehensible channel of communication with the given community? Grounded in the pedagogical principles of Paulo Freire, we concluded that it was essential to co-inhabit the space with the community – that is, to dedicate time to listening to their stories, exercising discernment, and understanding the social positions of both the speaker and the listener. And, when invited, to share our own stories as well – explaining why we were present at that moment and what our intentions were.

Walking through the territory alongside community members became vital to getting to know them and, simultaneously, to locating ourselves within the narrative that emerged as we built a relationship grounded in mutual trust. At the same time, it became increasingly evident that we needed to remain vigilant against the traps and risks inherent in the social bonds forged between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' – and, in this specific context, we were the outsiders within those communities.

Some educators argue that one of the most significant contributions of small-group experiences lies precisely in their capacity to create and sustain alternative spaces. In these spaces, individuals engage in personal learning processes grounded in freedom and autonomy, oriented toward building collective endeavours that generate shared benefits.

To 'learn' is, above all, to be included and to actively participate not only in the creation of cultural products but also in the social processes through which culture itself is produced. Such processes foster meaningful transformation in the everyday quality of commitment, participation, respect for diverse perspectives, a sense of solidarity, and a deep sense of affection among individuals and between them and their educational communities (Brandão 1984).

We consider the perspective of popular educator Carlos Rodrigues Brandão to be essential for connecting the trajectories of all those involved in the teaching-learning process with the broader practice of knowledge-building and popular education. Brandão draws our attention to the steps that unfold after one arrives in the community.

Initially, the focus is on cultivating proximity and establishing the necessary time for listening, speaking, and observing – an effort aimed at creating a space grounded in mutual trust and complicity. The next stage that naturally emerges is the act of sharing. Rooted in a culture of respect, solidarity, and care, this practice of sharing creates space for the expression of autonomy, freedom, and affection within the relational dynamic between learners and educators. Within this framework, everyone – at one point or another – will alternate between the role of learner and that of educator.

Second account, second time-space: a perspective on the Indigenous peoples of the Northeast

I am Avelar, a person who identifies as Indigenous and Black, with ancestral roots in the backlands and transitional zones of Sergipe. I passed through the city of Aracaju – where I was born and raised – and from there, over the past several years, have set out to live in different parts of the world. In the collection of memories I briefly share below, my aim is to present a fundamental part of my academic trajectory, interwoven with a range of life experiences – both collective and individual.

To this end, I focus on the body of knowledge I have cultivated within the field of geography, informed by my engagement with Indigenous peoples and traditional communities in the states of Sergipe, Bahia, Pernambuco, and Alagoas. These experiences, it is important to emphasise, have been shaped by events that have profoundly influenced the ontological formation of my human, academic, and professional identity. As an active subject, I embrace these experiences as social practices that nurture human sensitivity and deepen citizenship within the spaces I inhabit – particularly within the public university.

During my undergraduate studies, I found that, for the most part, the courses offered by the Department of Geography at the Federal University of Sergipe allowed me to confront the limits of formal logic and to recognise the need to transcend the epistemological foundations instilled by more than fifteen years of prior schooling.

At the time, I engaged with a wide range of theoretical and methodological frameworks, presented both within the curriculum and through other academic experiences. These included conferences, fieldwork, research projects, extension activities, and student activism. Through this process, I gradually developed the analytical tools necessary to understand human development

in light of the contradictions inherent in lived reality. In this context, space-time emerges as a fundamental dimension of comprehension.

I consider the period between 2002 and 2005 to have been fundamental to a qualitative leap in my human, academic, and professional development, as it marked my entry into the Master's Programme in Geography at the Federal University of Sergipe. The programme's area of concentration, *Traditional Forms and Processes of Territorial Occupation – Archaeological Studies*, was carried out through a two-year partnership between the Xingó Archaeology Museum in Sergipe and the Graduate Programme in Geography (POSGEO/UFS).

Within this context, the most significant 'encounter' of this formative period took place in 2003 during a field class held in the Caiçara/São Pedro Island Indigenous Land – territory of the Xokó people – located in the municipality of Porto da Folha, Sergipe.

Becoming acquainted – even if only briefly – with the lived reality of the Xokó people, who reside along the banks of the São Francisco River, marked the beginning of a professional, academic, and political engagement that would go on to shape my central areas of interest in geographic study, research, and teaching. These interests remain deeply present in my work to this day.

My visits to the Xokó community became increasingly frequent, eventually culminating in the development of my master's thesis, titled *Terra Xokó: um espaço como expressão de um povo* (Santos Junior 2005). The thesis sought to understand Xokó territoriality through the lens of their historical struggles and achievements, with particular emphasis on the symbolic and cultural dimensions that shape their relationship with their traditional territory.

It is important to underscore that, beyond the academic dimension, my relationship with the Xokó people was forged through bonds of friendship and solidarity – bonds that I hold in the highest regard.

Upon recognising the complexity of the Indigenous question in particular, and the agrarian question in Brazil more broadly, I came to understand that pursuing a doctoral degree was a necessary step. This path would allow me to access new forms of knowledge and, in turn, prepare me to enter higher education as a professor capable of training future educators.

With these broader goals in mind, I enrolled in the Doctoral Programme in Geography at the Federal University of Bahia (POSGEO/UFBA) in 2012.

As a CAPES/REUNI scholarship recipient under the supervision of Professor Guiomar Inez Germani, I developed my doctoral dissertation titled *Conflict Beyond Territorial Regularization: On the Multiple Determinations of Public Policy in the Caiçara/São Pedro Island Indigenous Land in Sergipe* (Avelar Junior 2016). A pivotal moment in the completion of this work was my integration into the research group GeografAR – Geography of Settlements in Rural Areas (POSGEO/UFBA/CNPq), an experience that marked a significant and unprecedented phase in my academic trajectory.

I regard this period as one of profound transformation, particularly with respect to my methodological orientation. It was during this time that I began to rigorously engage with the theoretical foundations of historical and dialectical materialism. This shift expanded my comprehension of socio-spatial reality, which had previously been anchored in culturally oriented geography and phenomenology – frameworks that had, until then, guided my reading and research practices.

The evolving interplay between these distinct theoretical and methodological perspectives enabled me to confront differing interpretations and conceptions of reality. This process unfolded as a continuous epistemological movement aimed at advancing scientific thought – one liberated from epistemological constraints and firmly grounded in the political convictions that inform my position in the world as a historical subject.

I regard this period as foundational in shaping the theoretical and methodological principles I began to adopt across the various spheres of my academic and professional engagement – culminating in my current position as a professor of geography at the Federal University of Alagoas.

Over the course of this journey, I came to recognise the vital importance of a mode of scientific production committed to the transformation of concrete reality – a production aimed at advancing class consciousness and fostering substantive citizenship. Within this framework, based on authors such as Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, David Harvey, Massimo Quaini, Ruy Moreira, and Milton Santos, I identified historical and dialectical materialism as the most coherent methodological approach for guiding my scientific inquiries, particularly in the fields of education, geography, and studies related to Indigenous peoples and traditional communities.

This position has never constituted an ideological imposition. Rather, I regard analytical and reflective diversity as an essential condition for the humanistic advancement of scientific knowledge – especially in a country located on the periphery of global capitalism and still deeply shaped by processes of epistemic coloniality.

Identifying myself as a researcher with a Marxist orientation has enabled me to engage more consciously with my own class position and with my trajectory as a scholar emerging from a working-class background. Moreover, I understand historical and dialectical materialism as a methodological framework that allows us to comprehend reality through the contradictions inherent in social processes and phenomena – conceived as dynamic and continuously undergoing transformation.

From this perspective emerges the imperative for analytical precision in apprehending the materiality of space, taking into account the distinct geographical and historical conditions that shape its production, valorisation, and use by society.

At the same time, while recognising and respecting the multidimensional nature of the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples and traditional communities, I have adopted – through a dialectical lens – a territorial approach as the central axis of my analysis of public policies enacted in the living spaces of the subjects who participate in the collaborative research I conduct.

This relational and dialogical conception is grounded in an explanatory framework that understands the material production of human life as unfolding across successive generations. Each generation continues the inherited mode of activity, but does so within new and transformative historical circumstances – particularly in light of advances in the productive forces at the local level. Yet, these developments remain subject to broader historical determinations and socio-political interventions that transcend both the present moment and the boundaries of local contexts.

It is within this framework that I seek to analyse the contradictions embedded in public policies – viewing them simultaneously as objects of struggle and demand on the part of these subjects, and as instruments of control, exploitation, and domination over their territories and ways of life.

In this regard, I engage with the heuristic potential of these reflections to develop interpretive approaches capable of apprehending both the essences and appearances of the processes of domination imposed on Indigenous and traditional peoples across the diverse contexts shaped by Indigenist policies instituted and regulated by the national state.

Among the variables influencing these interventions, the production and material reproduction of human life take on analytical centrality – not only because they play a key role in shaping the multiple territorialities under dispute, but also because they reflect the power relations that structure the historical trajectories of domination imposed on Indigenous peoples throughout the formation of Brazil's national territory.

In seeking to understand these processes – which directly affect the production and material reproduction of Indigenous peoples' lives within the territories that ground their existence – we recognise public policies as key vectors of domination. Paradoxically, they operate both as instruments of power relations between the state and Indigenous peoples and as potential expressions of liberatory dimensions essential to the material and immaterial reproduction of these social groups.

This complexity takes on particular significance in the studies I have been conducting, largely due to the voices of the interlocutors with whom I engage. The struggle for territorial, educational, and health rights – mediated through public policy – constitutes a foundational element of their narratives and of their demands for recognition and justice.

In this light, a territorial analysis to public policy directed at Indigenous peoples has become the central axis of the research projects and community engagement initiatives I seek to advance. This approach strives to be both critically grounded in the method of historical and dialectical materialism and, above all, responsive to the demands and expectations of the subjects with whom I work.

Third account, third time-space: an Amazonian perspective

I am Fabiano Bringel. As an activist and researcher committed to social struggles – particularly within agrarian contexts – I consider it essential to recover my family history as a central thread that connects the many elements shaping who I am in the world. On my father's side, my family is composed of Northeastern migrants who, in the 1960s, left the state of Ceará – specifically the Sertão do Cariri. Their departure occurred in a context marked by increasing land concentration and the resulting dispossession of peasant communities.

Through the mobility of labour, my family eventually settled in the Amazon, specifically in the city of Belém, in the state of Pará, after passing through several regions and states across the country. Despite this long journey – which included cities deeply shaped by intense urbanisation processes – my father, like all of his siblings, never lost his peasant horizons[4] nor his profound connection to rural ways of life.

This paternal logic later intertwined with my maternal lineage, rooted in my grandparents' deep ties to Marajó Island and its insular dynamics.

These family trajectories have long stirred my interest and shaped the course of my academic formation in geography, drawing me toward the field of human geography, with a particular focus on agrarian space. Along this path – specifically, in 1994 – I had my first encounter with the Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST).

At the time, within the broader student movement, we were actively engaged in discussions on how to make public higher education institutions more inclusive. In other words, we sought to understand how the scientific knowledge produced in academia could be transformed into a tool for changing the lives of impoverished and marginalised sectors of society, particularly in rural areas.

This debate unfolded in parallel with a critique of the traditional methodologies employed by the student movement within universities. In our assessment – formulated at the time through the Geography Student Union (CAGE) at the Federal University of Pará (UFPA) – authoritarian and opportunistic practices had begun to 'contaminate' the movement, generating political and, consequently, social setbacks.

There was a prevailing tendency to prioritise broad ideological agendas at the expense of concrete demands. Meanwhile, unchecked internal disputes for control over student organisations – such as unions, academic centres, and student councils – had turned the student movement into a battleground of power struggles, thereby undermining its potential for genuine social mobilisation.

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The term 'peasant horizon' refers to the enduring impulse to return to the countryside and, by extension, to labour with the land. It signifies a kind of atavistic condition, marked by the effort to reclaim a way of life 'lost' in other times and places, yet one that endures as a form of bio-memory – an embodied remembrance that informs and guides future projects. This process does not necessarily follow a linear or successive trajectory – such as a direct transmission from father to son.

These and other factors contributed to the gradual disengagement of students from the broader student movement and its representative organisations, which increasingly prioritised divergence over convergence.

It was from this critical reflection that the idea emerged to create a student organisation centred on social outreach. The objective was to put into practice the knowledge acquired in classrooms and laboratories, while also sharing that knowledge with those who, in fact, sustain the public and tuition-free university system through their labour and taxes: the working class.

Within this context, we founded a student group dedicated to rural social outreach, known as the University Support Centre for Agrarian Reform (*Núcleo Universitário de Apoio à Reforma Agrária* – NUARA).

Throughout the experiential activities carried out in various spaces of land and territorial struggle, we encountered a reality increasingly prevalent and, in many ways, which paralleled the migratory patterns of my own family. As the agrarian reform process advanced, driven by the pressure of rural social movements through land occupations, rural settlements began to emerge closer to urban areas, and their social base – composed of rural workers – increasingly appeared to have urban origins.

This reality was, in many cases, interpreted hastily, leading certain analyses to adopt perspectives that were, at the very least, questionable. In response, I became increasingly interested in understanding this phenomenon through the lens of the territorialisation process of rural settlements and of the Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST) itself. It was at that point that I decided to pursue graduate studies.

I began my academic master's degree in the Graduate Programme in Amazonian Agriculture, affiliated with the Center for Agricultural Sciences and Rural Development at the Federal University of Pará (UFPA), in partnership with the Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation (EMBRAPA). Within this programme, I developed a research project focused on investigating the socio-spatial trajectories of agrarian reform 'clients'.

Who are these recipients living in rural settlements along the Amazonian agrarian frontier? What is the composition of their families? Where do they come from? What occupations have they held throughout their lives? What forms of knowledge have they accumulated along the way?

These questions were central to critically examining the narratives promoted by mainstream mass media and certain sectors within universities and rural extension agencies. These institutions often sought to discredit the settlers, portraying them as unfit for rural life and agricultural labour (Bringel 2006).

We conducted a study on migration and socio-spatial trajectories. At the time, the research achieved its primary objectives, the most significant of which was the realisation that rural settlements, as units of production, did not encounter difficulties due to the settlers' origins – whether spatial (as most had previously migrated from urban peripheries in southeastern Pará) or occupational (many had worked in gold mining before gaining access to land).

The core challenges faced by these settlements stemmed from the fact that they represented, simultaneously, both a threat and an example. A threat, because from the perspective of rural oligarchies, the peasantry was gaining a degree of autonomy through land access. An example, because witnessing someone like themselves – someone historically marginalised – break free from the bonds of oppression could inspire others to follow a similar path, thereby strengthening land occupations and expanding the broader struggle for agrarian reform.

Methodologically, it would be unfeasible to understand the dynamics described above relying solely on secondary data – most of which are produced by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) and other institutional agencies. The intense mobility of the peasant labour force along the Amazonian frontier, combined with the evolving strategies of rural social movements oriented toward the concept of Popular Agrarian Reform,[5] renders it impossible to capture the complexity the issue demands through quantitative data alone.

In southern and southeastern Pará, the processes of conversion and reconversion of the peasant labour force are marked by high temporal and spatial intensity. To offer a sense of this reality: it is common for peasants in the region to change occupations and labour status multiple times within a single year. Over a twelve-month period, a peasant might transition from subsistence farming to wage labour in the city – often in construction – then to informal work in local markets, take up temporary employment as a ranch hand clearing brushland (*juquira*),[6] head to mining areas, and ultimately return to agricultural activities.

Alongside these rapid spatial displacements, frequent transitions occur across the primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors of the economy. This dynamic, marked by fluidity and complexity, cannot be captured adequately by the static, aggregated, and infrequent data of agricultural censuses, which are conducted only once every ten years.

For this reason, the methodological approach must necessarily incorporate a qualitative dimension, with particular emphasis on the oral narratives of the subjects themselves. Such an approach makes it possible to access their life stories and reconstruct a kind of biographical calendar of their family production units, offering a richer, more nuanced understanding of their trajectories.

Given the elements previously discussed, I came to understand that a territorial shift in my studies was necessary. Any strategy aimed at understanding conflict in rural areas must, by necessity, adopt a territory-centred approach. Guided by this perspective, I chose to pursue a doctorate in the Graduate Programme in Geography at the Federal University of Pernambuco (PPGEO-UFPE), with a focus on this theme.

However, a specific characteristic set the settlements I studied in southern and southeastern Pará apart from

5
The expansion of capital agents across both rural and urban areas, coupled with the systemic subordination of the traditional rural oligarchy to financial capital, has reshaped the contours of class struggle in Brazil. As a consequence, we observe an intensification of the processes of exploitation and oppression experienced by subalternised subjects, alongside growing fluidity and fragmentation within the contemporary working class. In response to this shifting landscape, rural social movements – particularly the MST – have articulated the concept of Popular Agrarian Reform. This proposal recognises the necessity of advancing beyond the traditional peasant subject, acknowledging the inherent mobility of the labour force in a context that transcends the rural-urban divide. It underscores the inseparability of the economic and ideological dimensions of the struggle, calling for a policy framework attuned to the complexities of contemporary class relations.

6
In the pastures of eastern Amazonia, vegetation commonly referred to as juquira is classified as 'invasive' due to its aggressive competition with forage species for essential growth factors such as water, sunlight, space, and soil nutrients.

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those in other regions of Brazil. These settlements emerged within a context of capitalist frontier expansion. In this context, social relations either had not yet fully taken shape or remained precariously organised.

This scenario is shaped by the friction between distinct fronts of capital accumulation, whose defining feature lies in processes of spoliation and coloniality expressed across multiple dimensions (Bringel 2015).

In 2011, I began my doctoral studies in geography in the city of Recife, in the state of Pernambuco. Our activities took place within the framework of the Laboratory for Studies and Research on Agrarian Space and Peasantry (LEPEC) at UFPE – an experience that introduced me to new theoretical and methodological perspectives. As we moved away from 'our' region – the Amazon – and engaged with other geographical 'schools', new possibilities emerged, which I regard as essential to the intellectual maturation of any researcher.

Among the many dimensions that unfolded through this shift, I particularly highlight the openness fostered by the Laboratory toward anti-colonial readings and research practices. Another defining feature of the work developed at LEPEC, equally deserving of emphasis, is its unwavering commitment to engaged scholarship – research that stands in solidarity with grassroots movements, subalternised peoples, and the collective subjects who constitute Brazil's rural social movements.

Throughout this academic journey, I have also cultivated a political activism rooted in the libertarian tradition, particularly within anarchist organisations, over the past thirty years. My involvement has contributed to the reconstruction of the social vector of anarchism in Brazil and Latin America. This work is grounded in the strategy known as *Especifismo* (Corrêa 2015), developed especially by the Uruguayan Anarchist Federation (FAU) over its seventy years of existence.

Especifismo is fundamentally about returning to the exploited and oppressed the organisational tools that anarchist ideology forged for the working class – tools that, due to various historical circumstances and contexts, became disconnected from the class struggles waged across our continent. Among these tools are direct action, political federalism, economic self-management, mutual aid, class consciousness, and internationalism, among others.

In Brazil, this praxis has taken shape through the organised efforts of the Brazilian Anarchist Coordination (*Coordenação Anarquista Brasileira* – CAB), which is currently active in eight states across the federation.

The convergence of these two perspectives – academic and political – has led me, in recent years, to embrace and cultivate a practice grounded in libertarian geography, whose principal forerunners include Élisée Reclus, Piotr Kropotkin, and Charles Perron. Along this path, I also identified a productive dialogue between agrarian geography and political ecology.

Within this movement – which is both individual and collective – I have, in recent years, become increasingly involved in the development of the Network of Researchers in (Socio)Environmental Geography (*Rede de Pesquisadores em Geografia (Sócio) Ambiental* – RP-G[S]A) in Brazil. This network brings together professionals, affiliated with both academic and non-academic institutions, who are committed to advancing critical geographic research.

The Network has two primary objectives. First, to facilitate communication and exchange among researchers dedicated to 'hybrid' themes and issues that lie at the intersection of socio-geographic and eco-geographic inquiry. Second, to contribute to the dissemination of research findings, studies, and critical reflections to a broader audience – not only to geographers, but to the general public – by sharing work that, due to its relevance, may spark interest and prove useful well beyond the confines of academia.

Although its core identity is rooted in research – that is, in the production of knowledge about reality – the RP-G(S)A also aspires to contribute to the transformation of that reality. It is, therefore, a form of science that is both engaged and socially committed.[7]

Another important space in which I am involved – one that seeks to bridge activist initiatives with the field of geography – is the Working Group on Latin American Critical Geographical Thought, affiliated with the Latin American Council of Social Sciences (CLACSO).[8] This group is dedicated to understanding Latin American geography through the lens of a critical perspective: namely, that the newly formed nation-states, from their inception, ultimately functioned as instruments for cataloguing natural resources and organising territories in accordance with the emerging interests of their dominant classes.

One of the Working Group's primary objectives is to critically examine these structural dynamics and to disseminate research findings in dialogue with social movements.

Finally, over the course of this ongoing journey of resistance – both within and beyond academia – I have come to understand that certain research and resistance agendas become imperative for social subjects. Among these is the need to envision alternatives that transcend the dichotomy between society and nature. It is also essential to reject linear interpretations of capital territorialisation in peripheral areas, particularly in regions shaped by capitalist frontier expansion. In addition, it is necessary to critically interrogate the relevance of categories such as 'development' and 'progress'. These concepts, forged within the European context, offer little – if anything – for understanding the diverse societies that inhabit the countrysides, forests, and waters of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Equally important is the call to move beyond stratified and rigid analyses of rural-urban relations and their corresponding processes of urbanisation and the construction of ruralities.

In short, this entails advancing toward a philosophy and a geographic knowledge rooted in the perspective of

7
For a better understanding of the network's activities, visit https://geografia-socio-ambiental.webnode.page/.

8
To follow the activities of the Working Group, visit: https://www.facebook.com/

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those 'from below' – a worldview grounded in the Latin American continent, shaped by a *cabocla*[9] understanding of the world.

Final considerations

The research practices developed over the past three decades by these geographers place strong emphasis on the emergence and centrality of the socio-political subject of research – those who struggle and labour for social transformation in contexts of socio-spatial inequality – rather than on the object of study situated within a presumed framework of scientific neutrality guided by Cartesian procedures and techniques.

Therefore, the meaning and dynamics of social movements have deeply informed our trajectories – paths shaped by constant transformation amid challenging and often disquieting realities, as we engage with territories and contexts marked by power relations and profound socio-spatial inequalities.

From the moment we first encountered geography, still as high school students, and through our involvement in movements of struggle and resistance – such as student, labour union, and Indigenous movements – we came to understand that research practice and methodology are inseparable from personal trajectories and life histories.

In this ongoing process of shifting personal perspective – what we refer to as a trajectory – we must recognise that it simultaneously transforms our understanding of both the conception and the practice of research. The subjects of inquiry are not only 'the others'; we, too, become subjects in the collective process of understanding the world and participating in the struggle for social transformation.

Thus, we understand that socio-political subjects are compelled by the conditions of their lived realities to develop strategies for the conversion and reconversion of social labour, particularly in confrontation with destructive expansion fronts such as agribusiness. We engage with counter-hegemonic spatial practices carried out by Indigenous peoples in their pursuit of autonomy and their lived experience of self-governance.

In this light, the present reflective proposal emerges as a shared analytical-reflective endeavour by these three geographers, aimed at reimagining and advancing new possibilities for practicing geography in response to the pressing challenges of our time.

The colonial project has shaped our geography for at least five centuries, and in contemporary times, it has assumed new forms of territorial control and destruction. This process is manifested not only through the deterritorialisation and dispossession of socio-political subjects – evident in the systematic extraction of natural resources from the subsoil, the surface, and even the biosphere itself – but also through the subjugation of these subjects to conditions of domination that deprive them of fundamental territorial rights, including housing, food, education, healthcare, and social security.

Just as geography emerged and developed in close association with the formation of the nation-state – devoted to the inventory and classification of territories – it now becomes necessary to chart alternative paths. This same geography must confront and seek to repair the harms inflicted through the unfolding of a still-dominant civilizational project, one rooted in the colonisation of territories labelled as empty or inhospitable.

In response to this institutional and state-centred geography – widely recognised as complicit in destructive processes impacting both nature and the ways of producing life and territory – we are called to engage with popular geographies and socio-political subjects whose territorialities, though rendered invisible, persist in acts of defiant resistance.

9
Part of the construction of a philosophy from 'below', a view from the Latin American continent, an Amazonian understanding of the world!pensamientogeocriticolatinoamericano/about.

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Informali-tales: Researching a Mirage

Safiya El Ghmari

Researching informal settlements is navigating a field through missing pieces, starting by the ambiguity that's surrounding their definition, while agreeing on some physical aspects omits a wider range of social specificities. This is also manifested in the dichotomization of formality and informality that oversimplifies a complex spectrum of possible typologies of informal settlements. Paraphrasing Tolstoy words: "All formal settlements are alike, but every informal settlement is informal in its own way." And that's a preview of researching informal settlements. In fact, with 1 out of 3 of the world population will be living in a slum by 2050, it's an evident reality yet we know very little about the dynamics and growth of informal settlements. And while these challenges could be overcome by drafting a comprehensive conceptual framework, studying informal settlements' complexity is again increased by the context of its emergence and its influence. In the case of Morocco, the history of urban informality can't be detached from the colonial history of the country and its postcolonial repercussions. This represents a two-folds invisibility. On one hand informal practices are elusive to document, and on the other, there is a legacy of archival violence that has been surrounding it: spatial data is scarce and access to social data is limited. As a result, our professional attitudes of categorizing informal settlements had resulted in perceiving these settlements as blights that should be erased and perpetrating the violence against them. In this contribution, these research hurdles will be addressed based on project conducted in Morocco, highlighting the fact that while all these challenges did prevent a classic and smooth research process, they spurred an innovative and alternative pathway to conduct research and engage with informality in producing a more nuanced comprehension of the urban dynamics behind it.

Das Märchen von der Informalität – Die Erforschung einer Illusion
*Die Erforschung informeller Siedlungen gleicht einem Puzzle mit zahlreichen fehlenden Teilen, angefangen bei der Unklarheit ihrer Definitionen, deren Gemeinsamkeiten sich auf physische Aspekte beschränken, aber eine Vielzahl sozialer Besonderheiten außer Acht lassen. Dies zeigt sich auch in der Dichotomisierung von Formalität und Informalität, die ein komplexes Spektrum möglicher Typologien informeller Siedlungen zu stark vereinfacht. Um mit Tolstois Worten zu sprechen: „Alle formellen Siedlungen sind gleich, aber jede informelle Siedlung ist auf ihre eigene Weise informell." Und das ist ein Vorgeschmack auf die Erforschung informeller Siedlungen. Obwohl 2050 jede*r Dritte der Weltbevölkerung in einem Slum leben wird, wissen wir doch nur sehr wenig über die Dynamik und das Wachstum informeller Siedlungen. Weitergehend wird die Komplexität informeller Siedlungen durch den Kontext ihrer Entstehung und ihren Einfluss noch verstärkt. Im Falle Marokkos kann die Geschichte der informellen Stadtentwicklung nicht von der Kolonialgeschichte des Landes und ihren postkolonialen Auswirkungen getrennt werden. Dies führt zu einer doppelten Unsichtbarkeit. Einerseits sind informelle Praktiken schwer zu dokumentieren, andererseits sind sie Opfer archivarischer Gewalt: Räumliche Daten sind rar und der Zugang zu sozialen Daten ist begrenzt. Infolgedessen führte die professionelle Kategorisierung dazu, dass diese Siedlungen als Schandflecken wahrgenommen wurden, die – auch mithilfe von Gewalt – beseitigt werden sollten. In diesem Beitrag werden diese Forschungshindernisse anhand eines in Marokko durchgeführten Projekts behandelt, wobei hervorgehoben wird, dass all diese Herausforderungen zwar einen klassischen und reibungslosen Forschungsprozess verhindert haben, aber auch einen innovativen und alternativen Weg zur Durchführung von Forschung und zur Auseinandersetzung mit Informalität angeregt haben, um ein differenzierteres Verständnis der dahinterstehenden städtischen Dynamik zu erlangen.*

Introduction

It all started when, graduating from architecture school, I confronted my childhood memories with my fresh knowledge of urban planning. During my studies, I was myself deluded into believing that informal settlements are a mere physical anomaly that can be fixed by a spatial solution. The turning point was when I gathered my vivid memories of years of walking through an informal settlement on the way to my primary school, and I found that the memories were dissonant with what I was reading regarding the same settlement from an architect's point of view. And that was the first mirage I encountered on my journey of researching and understanding informal settlements.

In fact, researching informal settlements is navigating a field through missing pieces, starting with the ambiguity that surrounds their definition, while agreeing on some physical aspects omits a wider range of social specificities. This is also manifested in the dichotomisation of formality and informality that oversimplifies a complex spectrum of possible informal settlements typologies. To paraphrase Tolstoy: 'All formal settlements are alike, but every informal settlement is informal in its own way.' And that's a preview of researching informal settlements. In fact, as one of three of the world's population will be living in a slum by 2050, the dynamics and growth of informal settlements are an evident reality about which we know very little.

For the sake of scientific neutrality, we use the term 'informal settlement' to designate all forms of unregulated, insalubrious, or shanty housing. This distinction stems from a desire to separate the urban phenomenon of informal settlements from established prejudices; in particular, the pejorative and stigmatising connotations of certain terms. For example, the terms 'shantytown', '*bidonvilles*' or 'slum' are often associated with forms of social and urban exclusion.

In reality, however, the production of informal settlements is not confined to the most underprivileged social classes but can simply be seen as an urban strategy that escapes mainstream norms. In fact, it is a modus operandi (Roy & Alsayyad 2003) that is used by underprivileged city dwellers to get access to housing, or a derogation for more-privileged urban dwellers (El Ghmari & Zabadi 2021).

Thus, the analysis of urban informality through informal housing was no longer the focus of my research, but it became a challenge to the connotations associated with urban informality. Whereas urban informality is always linked to exclusion, lack of planning and lack of means, in reality it is a *modus operandi* in its own right, independent of the previous connotations.

And while these challenges could be overcome by drafting a comprehensive conceptual framework, studying informal settlements' complexity is again increased by the context of its emergence and its influence. In the case of Morocco, the history of urban informality cannot be detached from the colonial history of the country and its postcolonial repercussions. This represents a two-fold invisibility. On one hand, informal practices are elusive to document, and on the other, there is a legacy of archival violence surrounding it: spatial data is scarce and access to social data is limited. As a result, our professional attitudes of categorising informal settlements has resulted in perceiving these settlements as blights that should be erased and in perpetrating the violence against them.

In this paper, these research hurdles will be addressed based on a project conducted in Morocco, highlighting the fact that while all these challenges did prevent a classic and smooth research path, they spurred innovative and alternative ways of challenging the status quo to conduct research and to engage with informality, producing a more-nuanced comprehension of the background urban dynamics.

Given the importance and role that these informal settlements play in Morocco on a political scale, and for security reasons, access to fieldwork, and engaging with the communities, is difficult and rarely smooth to navigate. Hence, the focus of this research went from validating and confronting realities and numbers through a quantitative approach to establishing a contextualised monograph on informal settlements in Morocco. For this paper, the focus will be limited to chasing the mirage to the first apparition of informal settlements in Morocco.

Undisciplined methodology (an informal methodology)

For context, the fundamental question at the outset was oriented towards the definition of informality and its first appearance in urban studies in particular. Indeed, its definition opens to the economy and then covers the social sphere as well (El Ghmari & Zabadi 2021), ranging from Hart's dualistic approach and his first use of informality (Hart 1973) to structuralist approaches that consider the informal sector as subordinate to the formal sector (Portes, Castells & Benton 1989).

Reading through this investigation, I conducted another parallel research to cover the historical definition of housing and the act of dwelling with all its social implications, borrowing from Bourdieu, and looking out for an informal habitus (Bourdieu 1972). This constituted the entry point for understanding informal housing in Morocco.

Initially, the methodology I used was rigorous and classic, but it was unable to pinpoint the urban phenomenon of urban informality. When I first started researching the complexities of informality, which at first glance resembles any other scientific issue that can be identified by the classic 'OHERIC'[1] approach, it was fleeting and barely grasped in the midst of the plethora of definitions I was confronted with.

Following this methodology, during the first two years of my doctoral research I was met with the ambiguity and imprecision surrounding urban informality (Bromley 1978) that started with the term first being coined, during the International Labour Office (ILO) conference, by Hart (1973), as a contradistinction to formality. So, instead of looking for a comprehensive definition of what urban informality meant, my interest shifted towards whom the ambiguity of this situation is profitable, and how it is profitable economically and politically.

Instead of following one stream of research, I switched to an iterative process between different disciplines: economic anthropology, housing sociology, urban policy, historical studies, and postcolonial studies. This process has enabled a dynamic interpretation of urban informality in the Moroccan context. In the end, it is also a question of situating ourselves in relation to the theoretical schools on urban informality and comparing notes with the institutional framework of urban policy in Morocco relating to the management of informal settlements.

Instead of continuing with exclusion-based theories that define urban informality as a particularity of a specific socio-economic category, this new situation dictated a transdisciplinary, deconstructivist methodology, approaching what Morin (2005) calls an 'undisciplined' methodology (*méthodologie indisciplinaire*). It is a methodology that is rooted in mobilising particular knowledge to balance between the dialectic forces, with no intention of resolving this dynamic (Simone & Pieterse 2017).

As a result, our theoretical framework is built on two main hypotheses. The first is related to the reductionist

1
OHERIC – Observation, Hypothesis, Experiment, Results, Interpretation, and Conclusion.

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approach, which opposes formality to informality and offers an antonym as a definition, while the second considers urban informality as a memory and testimony subject to archival violence.

Reducing urban informality to a conceptual duality

Defining informality as an opposition to formality is a reductionist approach that fails to capture the dynamic relationship between informality and formality, which could also be described as a back-and-forth dialectic. Not only is an opposing position misleading, but the total absence of informality or formality in urban processes is impossible. Even in the most formal processes of city-making, there is a significant element of informality, if only in the process of derogation and negotiation. Of all the approaches to informality, Roy and Alsayyad's (2003) anti-dualistic approach best sums up this idea.

In contrast to the legalist approach, which considers the informal sector as a reaction to overregulation and bureaucracy (Soto 2000), and the structuralist approach, which considers informality as a subordinate to formality, the distinction between formality and informality is less important than their interaction at the top and bottom levels of decision-making in urban planning (El Ghmari & Zabadi 2021). Both are modes by which space is produced and regulated, and therefore we cannot study informality outside of a relational continuum (Roy 2015).

In fact, in his essay on informality, Lambert states that the distinction between formality and informality is an illusion because it is not about a subaltern way of making cities, a 'fetishised' architecture without architects. Rather, it is about areas that have been prevented from becoming and existing (Lambert 2018). These areas are caught between formality and non-existence. In a way, this ties in with Jane Jacobs' theory of informal areas or slums, which describes the process of 'formalising' informal areas as 'un-slumification'. In her research, she demonstrates that where these areas were not subject to state programmes or institutional violence, they were able to become formal neighbourhoods (Jacobs 1961).

State violence is not only synonymous with policing policies, but also with ambiguity in the recognition of certain informal practices and the sanctioning of others (Roy 2018). Especially since informality characterises areas that are not recognised by the dominant power (Hart 2011). Moreover, cities have always been governmental tools used to make urban space more transparent in order to control it (Bogaert 2011).

Consequently, informality is not just the absence of cities, but also the absence of the state: it is a domain that escapes the law and order of the formal city. It is its opacity that translates into 'a penalty for daring to become, unsanctioned and elusive' (Lambert & Agha 2020).

This view adds more complexity to understanding urban informality. As much as the anti-dualistic approach considers informality as being embedded within any urban process, according to Lambert it is also being used as a tool to intimidate and prevent certain urban formations.

Urban informality as testimony and archive

Another challenging aspect of studying urban informality in Morocco was not only a spatial eradication that prevents a close analysis and study of these settlements but, also, the archival violence and volatility to which they are confronted. In his work covering the methods by which these 'improvised lives' endure the uninhabitable, Simone (2018) delivers a testimony to social practices that renders an account of the violence and oppression endured. His interest goes beyond a quantitative account to understand the mechanisms of adaptation in informal settlements. In this sense, his work is that of a testimonial archive of the violence suffered in these neighbourhoods.

Most formal urban areas are well documented and preserved – maps, inventories, indicators, etc. – whereas informal areas are subjected to archival violence (Henni 2018). This excludes an essential corpus of urban dynamics, given that throughout urban history all cities have begun in mud. In other words, cities have their roots in informality, because the 'formal' and the 'informal' are intimately linked (Ward 2004). In the case of Morocco, it is a painstaking task to find records and statistics of these informal settlements; generally, this information is scattered around in a limited number of essays that focus on the main Moroccan cities and omit most of the country.

This lack of archives and memory of informality deprives us of the ability to conduct forensic studies to understand the dynamics of power and oppression in urban areas. It makes it impossible to trace the socio-economic dynamics inside these settlements, and the only available sparse data are the population numbers of informal settlements in the Moroccan cities that fell under the interest of the colonial administration (Adam 1949). All the more so because, for the most part, this oppression and control is originally a product of colonisation (El Kahlaoui 2018), as was the case of Morocco under the French protectorate. To a certain extent, documenting informality also means building inclusive archives that shed light on colonial configurations of power (Stoler 2002). Albeit, these archives are usually reconstructed based on the oral legacies and stories of the interviewees in our fieldwork.

In the words of Doreen Mende (2021), the study of informality could provide essential lessons that would help us 'learn to unlearn imperialism'. This can also be seen in the French state's ongoing neo-colonial treatment of French suburbs and their residents (Dikeç 2017). Moreover, the treatment of informality as an abnormal phenomenon enables the authorities to justify failed policies (Roy 2005).

This remains true for many African ex-colonies, where colonial structures are not only used but preserved to this day (de Satgé & Watson 2018). In fact, studying

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informality in this sense is a first step towards transcribing and reinventing the relationship between citizens and their urban space without intermediaries, which is the key to liberation (Berque 1964).

Another setback to researching the history of urban informality as a whole in Morocco is also related to the fact that most of the earliest studies were conducted by the colonial administration and continued mostly by foreign academics leaving the field of research shaped by external perspectives..

Is informality in Morocco a colonial legacy? From proscription to prescription

My search to trace urban informality in Morocco also targeted the early period of its history, even before the Roman Empire conquered what is now Morocco. The records I have found show that most of the region was rural, with dwellings consisting of tents, shelters in caves and mountains, and nomadic transport structures (Ibn Khaldūn 1355). At that time, a common set of laws called *azref* ('tablet' in Amazigh) was the canon to which these tribes referred to settle any dissonance, including urban disputes and property conflicts. The *azref* was produced by a collective of notables, the *J'maa*, who represented the tribes and defended the interests of all the tribes in a bottom-up approach (Chaker 1990).

With the arrival of Islam in Morocco, this regulatory framework took the form of *Hisba*. This was a structure of social organisation that was at the heart of ethical urban development in general, but it was more an orientation than a set of concrete rules per se. At the urban level, *Hisba* protected the practical aspects of urbanity, the main objective being not to ensure that everything was for the best but to make sure that nothing was for the worst (Lafi 2021). It is, therefore, a historical continuum of previous imperial regulations in Morocco.

Up until that point in history, there had been no mention of any type of informal housing, with the exception of extramural dwellings. The earliest record of such housing was found in Fez, where some huts were located around the city walls; dwelling in them was neither forbidden nor banned (Le Tourneau 1957; El Jirari 1970). Rural immigrants settled outside the city walls until they could find a house within the walls. These informal settlements had the right to build their own infrastructure without being stopped by the authorities (Adam 1949).

To ensure urban management in Morocco before the French protectorate, the *Makhzen* (Morocco's central authority) relied on the intervention of various urban operators, notably: the governor, the *Cadi* (judge) and, above all, the *Mohtassaib* (Le Tourneau 1957).

'And the *Hisba* is the sister of justice, so it must come from trustworthy people. She is the judge's language, his overseer, his minister and his successor. If the judge apologises, he must be replaced by someone trustworthy and competent. It handles many cases that could tire and confuse the judge, such as those of workers, the poor, the ignorant and people of low extraction. *Hisba* is the judge's language and its necessity is indispensable because people are twisted, disobedient and dishonest. By neglecting their affairs, politics is corrupted and many doors of corruption are opened. (Tajibi 2009)'

> والإحتساب أخو القضاء فلذلك وجب أن يكون إلا من أمثال الناس، وهو لسان القاضي و حاجبه ووزيره وخليفته، وإن اعتذر القاضي، فهو يحكم مكانه فيما يليق به و بخطته.... وهو يكفي القاضي أمورا كثيرة مما عسى أن يكون نظرها للقاضي، فيكفيه التعب والشغب والامتهان مع عامة الناس وخساسهم والعتاة والجهال من ضروب الصناع والعمال، فهو لسان القاضي، والحاجة إليه ضرورية لأن الناس معوجون، مخالفون، أشرار، فبإهمالهم وتضييع أمورهم، تفسد السياسة، وتفتح أبواب من المفاسد كثيرة

The *Mohtassib*, an important figure in urban management, is often associated with the *Hisba* and the *Fikh* (jurisprudence). Although he is primarily known for his role as market controller, his field of activity is not limited to this, but also extends to micro-urbanism and the daily practice of space.

Medieval Andalusian *Hisba* treatises dating from 14th-century Morocco already mention the presence of the *Mohtassib*. The *Mohtassib* was entrusted by the Sultan or his representative with controlling markets, safeguarding the interests of housing and roads, and intervening in all matters, noble and vile, including widening of streets and construction threatening ruin. In their day-to-day activities, *Mohtassibs* most likely drew on the legal casebooks (*naouazil*) made available to them by the jurisconsults (*fakih*). The *Mohtassib*'s duties included ordering the city's inhabitants to build their curtain walls and repair their sewers (El Omari 2010). These social rules played a crucial role in shaping Moroccan town planning law (Lamkinsi 1979).

But as soon as the French protectorate established itself, there was a noteworthy key moment in the history of urban planning in Morocco, namely the shift from a proscriptive urban system to a new prescriptive city management under the French protectorate:

- Prescription involves the establishment of authoritative regulations or instructions, usually by a central administration that holds authority over the area where the regulations will be applied. It is a top-down approach created by officials who may or may not be familiar with the region in question. These regulations prescribe precise solutions to problems, whatever the particular circumstances.

- On the other hand, proscriptive rules generally allow freedom of action and initiative within a framework of restrictions. For example, individuals may be free to modify their property as long as they do not harm their neighbours. Because of their adaptable nature, proscriptive codes tend to evolve over time, drawing on accumulated experience. They are partly linked to customary law, and the prohibitions they imply often overlap with the community's predominant (largely religious) values and ethical systems. As proscriptive rules are rooted in the community, they must be seen as a bottom-up,

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self-regulating system, which makes them democratic in spirit (Hakim 2014).

The world's first formal urban planning code

A few years before the establishment of the French protectorate, the French administration intended to establish an urban continuum between the historic pre-Islamic period and modern French one, based on archaeological studies. The historical continuum was derived from the historical sites of the Roman Empire in Morocco (Ennahid 2022).

Although most of the urban developments that took place in Morocco during the Roman period did not have the same impact and wealth as in other parts of the empire, they nevertheless retained an authentic reproduction of the spatial organisation of the Roman city. Linearity and the grid-like organisation of the city began to be the ideal to which the French administration aspired when planning new towns and districts in Morocco.

This choice placed the historic Roman city in clear opposition to the Islamic city. The colonial administration avoided any reference to present-day Morocco, and ignored any attempt to draw on the context of the Islamic city of the time. However, subsequent studies have shown that even the organisation and management of the Islamic city was a culmination of historical urban planning experience in the Mediterranean region, including the Roman city (Hakim 1986).

Once the protectorate was established in 1912, the French administration began implementing a new governance regime and enacting laws that ran counter to the *azref* and *Hisba*.

In fact, two years later, in 1914, a first *dahir* (royal decree) – concerning alignment, the master plan and urban taxes – was issued by the colonial administration. This *dahir* constituted the first urban code in Morocco. Following this decree, Morocco's ancient cities, the *medinas*, were abandoned in favour of new, modern towns.

In Casablanca, for example, the concentration of capital and production by the French administration between 1912 and 1928 led to an increased demand for housing. While the *medinas* could no longer contain all the immigrant workers, an obvious *laissez-faire* attitude on the part of the colonial administration gave them tacit authorisation to build their own houses around the factories, on the outskirts of the city's new districts: Habous, Maarif, Derb Ghellef…

Most of the immigrant workers came from the surrounding rural areas and were used to living in tents or *nwâlas* (straw huts). They didn't need to adopt the formal housing dictated by the French administration, which didn't correspond to their usual way of life (Adam 1949). Thus began the history of informal settlements in Morocco.

In 1944, the informal settlements around Casablanca were clearly defined as a result of a policy of regrouping, repression and marginalisation, for reasons of hygiene, and to give way to the new, rapidly expanding city. Indeed, the main reason for the housing projects was hygienic: to prevent the transmission of disease to the European population.

In this same context, the municipality of Casablanca issued a decree in 1938 prohibiting residence in *nwâlas* and shacks within the city's perimeter. In response to this decision, a *Comité de l'Habitat Indigène* (indigenous housing committee) was set up between 1938 and 1941 to deal with informal housing, above all in Casablanca and Rabat.

However, the first rehousing operations in informal settlements didn't take place until 1944, after the creation of the *Office Chérifien de l'Habitat* (Royal Office for Housing); these efforts were probably triggered by the presentation of the Moroccan Independence Manifesto on January 11 of the same year. Clearly, to re-establish its legitimacy, the French administration launched vast mass housing programmes for the inhabitants of informal settlements up until 1955, the year of Moroccan independence (Rachik 1995).

The consequences of these colonial settlement programmes were many, including the dispossession of land, which affected traditional social structures, and massive urbanisation, which gave rise to informal settlements.

Informal settlements were often referred to as 'belts of misery' by many authors (Schaedel 1979). These areas were the consequences of the implementation of the colonial administration in the Maghreb while trying to transform the economy. The dispossession of agricultural lands led to the disruption of traditional social structures and the emergence of informal settlements in cities. This reflects the contradictions of the colonial system, and the vast process of destruction it inflicted on the dominated society (Stambouli 1972).

Namely, in the case of Morocco, where it was also the need of the protectorate administration to develop new urban centres close to existing cities or at new sites, and the appropriation of large swathes of land based on strategic and military interests, that contributed to the increase of informal settlements (El Malti 2005). This situation was made worse by the lack of any interest of the protectorate administration to develop any housing programmes for the economically disadvantaged Moroccans (Rachik 1995).

To comprehend the contemporary structures of Moroccan society and its overall dynamism, it is imperative to revisit these two pivotal historical moments. The first moment pertains to the pre-colonial era, characterised by the traditional or original Moroccan social system, which comprised the tribe, the city, and the state. The second moment corresponds to the colonial period, which profoundly altered the traditional Moroccan economy and society, destabilising their foundational structures.

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Urban informality under international agendas

Towards the end of the French protectorate, there were a few last attempts by the protectorate to re-establish their power over informal settlements through the introduction of new tools and policies, like the creation of a *Comité de l'Habitat Indigène* (indigenous housing committee) to eradicate informal settlements in Casablanca and Rabat in 1938, and the launching of a new social housing programme in 1942. The protectorate then doubled down their efforts as soon as the Independence Manifesto was published in 1944, and promptly created another institution, the *Office Chérfien de l'Habitat* (Royal Housing Office), in the same year. While it served the same objectives of the *Comité de l'Habitat Indigène,* the choice of the name denotes the efforts of the protectorate to maintain its legitimacy. It also launched a large campaign aimed at restructuring informal settlements and offering housing, particularly for informal settlements dwellers, that continued until 1955 (Rachik 1995).

After Morocco's independence, informal settlements were still a priority for the new Moroccan government. At the time, the government pursued a progressive urban policy aimed at improving conditions in informal settlements by promoting self-construction, implementing the principle of deferred infrastructure development, and ensuring access to secure land tenure systems to combat the proliferation of informal neighbourhoods. The first operations, spanning from 1956 to 1969, remained punctual and were mostly oriented towards social works and housing programmes. The first initiative was a two-year plan launched in 1957. It was 40% concentrated on the needs of the informal settlements, aiming either to improve their living conditions by equipping them with a few water fountains and other municipal works, or by relocating them to sanitary facilities. As for these operations being forced or voluntary, what is known is that the success of the clearance of the first informal settlement, Derb Jdid, in Casablanca in 1958, was due to a violent fire that destroyed more than half of the structures (Rachik 1995).

With the initial 1957 plan falling short from attaining its objectives, two other plans were subsequently launched in 1960 and 1965. The former was a five-year plan, the latter spanned three years, and both continued the attempted objective set in 1957.

By 1973, when the term 'informality' was first coined and as the first debates around it took place (Hart 1973), the government opted for a slum-upgrading strategy as part of its social and economic development plan (1973-1977). Such strategies were in vogue at the time (following the recommendations of the United Nations Habitat I Conference in Vancouver in 1976) because they were financially supported by the World Bank and USAID, and thus one was included in the plan (Adidi 2006). However, by the end of the plan period, it was clear that only 40% of the plan's housing construction targets had been met, mainly due to poor organisation, inefficient housing staff, and inadequate government budgets (World Bank 1978).

The shift to a securitarian urban policy happened in 1981, due to a national context of riots (especially in Casablanca, which was home to the largest informal settlements). To intervene in an effective way, the government made a series of decisions relating to the socio-political control and the development (and redevelopment) of the urban space of the metropolis: the elaboration of urban planning instruments, the resorption of all the informal settlements, and the building of road networks became a priority for authorities. This led to the creation of the *Agence Nationale de Lutte contre l'Habitat Insalubre* – ANHI (National Agency for the Fight against Insalubrious Housing) in 1984. Its objective was the upgrading and resettlement of informal settlements, the restructuring of underequipped and non-regulatory housing, and the creation of housing estates to de-densify the old fabric of *medinas* (Benlahcen & Missamou 2000). However, by 1987 the only mode of intervention that the ANHI had adopted was the production of lots equipped for rehousing (resettlement) and the implementation of integrated programmes combining both rehousing lots and lots intended for the market. This highlights the state's priority in urban planning at the time: security (Adidi 2006).

After the Istanbul Declaration in 1996, Morocco adopted a new urban policy centred around social action programmes. The first one was the programme for the social priorities that was focused on housing and its infrastructure in both urban and rural areas (Le Tellier 2009), which constituted a discontinuity with the preceding period of securitarian policy. This social reform attempted to reduce social and spatial inequalities while simultaneously ensuring eligibility to foreign capital by following international development agendas (Zaki 2007).

However, after the Casablanca bombings in 2003, the narrative again shifted back to a securitarian approach, at least regarding informal settlements: the suicide bombers had lived in Sidi Moumen, an informal settlement in Casablanca. Consequently, the government launched a national programme for clearing informal settlements: *Villes Sans Bidonvilles* (Cities without Slums) in 2004. The quantitative objective of the programme was to declare Morocco free of informal settlements by 2010. Later, in 2015, the relaunch of the programme was presented as part of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals and, in 2020, as a part of the Sustainable Development Goals. The programme's background highlights the importance of the social and economic integration of informal-settlement populations, establishing a social cohesion and their right to decent housing as part of a full-citizenship declaration (Beier 2024). However, the mixed results of this programme up until 2006, and the methods used to attain that objective, raise serious questions about their validity (Harroud 2019).

All the while, after evaluation, this 'management by absence' of the state has above all contributed to the spatial and social segregation (Zaki 2007; Benlahcen & Missamou 2000). In fact, the risks of displacement and relocation include: landlessness, joblessness, homelessness, marginalisation, loss of access to common services, social disarticulation, etc. (Beier 2019).

Likewise, since the state has begun considering the visible forms of informal settlements as a challenge to Morocco's competitiveness in attracting foreign capital, the fight has shifted away from the promise of social and economic inclusion (Beier 2021).

Meanwhile, theoretical studies on informal settlements have shown that such settlements are not the result of a dysfunction between housing demand and supply. The source of the problem lies in other factors, notably 'regulatory slippage' (Foster 2009), socio-economic inequalities, and social exclusion, and thus shows that informal settlements are more of a structural concern than a conjectural one. Indeed, social exclusion, which translates into spatial injustice, is an omnipresent risk threatening today's cities (Barrera & Thompson 2019). The historical link between informal settlements in Morocco and social risk necessitates an approach that prioritises socially inclusive and reparative urban policies, moving beyond stigmatisation. Achieving this requires a fundamental shift in both practice and research within these neighbourhoods. In this context, critical scholarship must analyse the similarities and differences between these areas without bias, challenging the colonial perception of absolute otherness (Beier 2022).

Conclusion

Coming from a robust technocratic background, with formal training as an architect in Morocco, I embarked on a journey to explore and comprehend the intricate dynamics of informal settlements within the Moroccan context. Initially, I perceived informal settlements as a straightforward physical issue – a spatial anomaly that could be easily addressed and eradicated through conventional urban planning and architectural interventions. However, as I delved deeper into the subject, I came to realise that informal settlements are far from being a monolithic or simplistic phenomenon. Instead, they represent a complex, multi-dimensional issue deeply intertwined with socio-economic, political, and cultural factors. This realisation marked a pivotal shift in my understanding as I began to appreciate the nuanced and layered nature of urban informality.

One of the most significant challenges I encountered during my research was the prevailing attitude among Moroccan urban scholars, who often dismissed informal settlements as an outdated or irrelevant topic, unworthy of academic inquiry. Many viewed these settlements as temporary aberrations that would eventually disappear with the progression of modernisation and urban development. This perspective, however, stands in stark contrast to the growing body of evidence suggesting that urban informality is not a transient phenomenon but a persistent and integral component of the urban landscape, both in Morocco and globally. This dismissal by local scholars has created a gap in the literature, leaving a critical void in the understanding of informal settlements within the Moroccan context.

Another substantial hurdle I faced was the limited access to information and research materials. Despite the importance of the topic, there was a conspicuous scarcity of primary sources, scholarly articles, and comprehensive studies on informal settlements in Morocco. It was only through securing a scholarship abroad that I gained access to fundamental documents, books, and archival materials that were otherwise inaccessible within the country. This experience highlighted the disparities in academic resources and the challenges faced by researchers in the Global South, where access to knowledge is often constrained by structural and institutional barriers.

In addition to the scarcity of resources, I also grappled with the need to critically engage with the existing literature on informality, much of which is influenced by colonial frameworks and Eurocentric perspectives. The legacy of French colonial urban planning and its enduring impact on Moroccan urban studies posed a significant challenge, as it often perpetuated biased or reductive narratives about informal settlements. To counter this, I had to consciously distance myself from preconceived notions and colonial paradigms, striving instead to develop a more nuanced and context-specific understanding of the issue. However, this task was complicated by the limited availability of works by local scholars, whose perspectives are often marginalised or underrepresented in mainstream academic discourse. As a result, I was frequently compelled to rely on secondary sources and international literature to fill the gaps, which, while useful, often lacked the localised insights necessary for a comprehensive analysis.

Fieldwork, an essential component of my research that wasn't highlighted in this contribution, presented its own set of challenges. Gaining access to informal settlements for data collection and on-site studies proved to be an arduous process, primarily due to bureaucratic hurdles and the difficulty of obtaining the necessary authorisations. After three attempts across different locations, only one site was ultimately made available for study. This limitation not only restricted the scope of my research but also underscored the broader issues of governance, transparency, and accessibility that often hinder academic inquiry in sensitive or marginalised areas. The barriers to fieldwork further emphasised the need for more inclusive and collaborative approaches to urban research, particularly when dealing with informal settlements, which are often stigmatised or overlooked by authorities.

In conclusion, while informal settlements are a physical reality, they are somehow a mirage when it comes to scrutinising and understanding their dynamics. And while my journey to understand informal settlements in Morocco was both enlightening and challenging, it has revealed the multifaceted nature of urban informality, the structural barriers to academic research, and the need for a more inclusive and context-sensitive approach to urban studies.

My research process was far from linear, and the challenges themselves became a catalyst for innovation, enabling me to uncover the intricate and often overlooked dimensions of informal settlements. Despite the obstacles, this research has deepened my appreciation for the complexity of informal settlements and reinforced my commitment to contributing to a more equitable and informed discourse on urban development in Morocco and beyond.

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Perspective

Biographical positionality

Towards Others, Towards Public
Reflecting on Public-Space Research in Johannesburg

Temba Middelmann

This paper reflects on several years of inter-disciplinary and ethnographic fieldwork in marginalised, predominantly Black inner-city neighbourhoods of Johannesburg, South Africa. I was and am a relatively wealthy, privileged, White researcher from outside that area, despite living and working close-by the public spaces I have researched, and being a mutual user of some of these spaces even outside my research practice. In acknowledging that coloniality is still deeply embedded globally, this paper calls for approaches that move towards decolonisation and collaboration with marginalised people. My reluctance to claim a decolonial approach stems from recognising that much important work, partly due to ongoing complicity, still falls short of dismantling structures of coloniality and oppression. Even if working towards decolonisation, one may still, like myself, occupy society with privilege, entangled with the continued suffering and oppression of others. Acknowledging complicity does not necessitate shame nor urge towards saviourhood; rather, it requires listening, collaboration, and advocacy. This includes constant self-reflection throughout research and writing, and maintaining consent through relationships with participants and spaces. Learning at least some of the language of research participants can assist in centring their knowledge, amplifying their voices and concerns, and conducting more ethical research by building trust. This involves deeper, more compassionate interactions across difference. Crucial is working from and towards a place of mutual respect, and resource- and power-sharing, through partnerships, notwithstanding personal and circumstantial limitations.

Annäherungen an das Andere und das Öffentliche. Reflexion einer Forschung zu öffentlichem Raum in Johannesburg
Dieser Artikel reflektiert mehrere Jahre interdisziplinärer und ethnografischer Feldforschung in marginalisierten, überwiegend von Schwarzen bewohnten Innenstadtvierteln von Johannesburg, Südafrika. Ich war und bin ein relativ wohlhabender, privilegierter weißer Forscher, der von außerhalb kommt, obwohl ich in der Nähe der von mir untersuchten öffentlichen Räume lebe und arbeite und einige dieser Räume auch außerhalb meiner Forschungstätigkeit nutze. Dieser Artikel erkennt an, dass Kolonialität weltweit noch tief verwurzelt ist, und ruft dazu auf, auf Basis der Zusammenarbeit mit marginalisierten Menschen eine Dekolonialisierung anzustreben. Meine Zurückhaltung, bereits von einem dekolonialen Ansatz zu sprechen, rührt daher, dass ich erkannt habe, dass viele forschungspraktische Ansätze nicht ausreichen, um Strukturen der Kolonialität und Unterdrückung abzubauen. Selbst wenn man auf Dekolonialisierung hinarbeitet, kann man dennoch, wie ich selbst, von gesellschaftlichen Privilegien profitieren, die mit dem anhaltenden Leiden und der Unterdrückung anderer verstrickt sind. Das Eingestehen von Komplizenschaft erfordert weder Scham noch den Drang, sich als Retter aufzuspielen, sondern vielmehr Zuhören, Zusammenarbeit und Fürsprache. Dazu gehören ständige Selbstreflexion während der gesamten Forschung und des Schreibens sowie die stetige Erneuerung eines Forschungskonsens innerhalb der eigenen Beziehungen zu Forschungssubjekten und -räumen. Das Erlernen zumindest einiger lokaler Sprachkenntnisse kann dazu beitragen, ihr Wissen in den Mittelpunkt zu stellen, ihre Stimmen und Anliegen zu verstärken und durch den Aufbau von Vertrauen eine ethischere Forschung zu ermöglichen. Dies beinhaltet tiefere, mitfühlendere Interaktionen über Unterschiede hinweg. Entscheidend ist, ungeachtet persönlicher und situativer Einschränkungen, in partnerschaftlicher Art und Weise Orte zu schaffen und auf diese hinzuarbeiten, die von gegenseitigem Respekt, sowie durch das Teilen von Ressourcen und Macht gekennzeichnet sind.

Introduction

Reflecting on public-space-related research in South Africa between 2015 and 2022, this paper offers important considerations for emerging researchers planning research in the Global South or other marginalised settings. I attempt here to openly and transparently explore my approach in moving towards ethical research, over time trying to increase the honesty, transparency, and accountability with which I conduct my research, especially in interaction with research participants, where I try to embody principles of mutual benefit and 'do no harm'. My approach and practice, discussed in this paper, has changed and morphed over the years as I have learnt more, reflected, and changed as a person. The research journey, which includes reflecting on bringing one's life closer to one's research, can be messy and open-ended, marked by relative successes, failures, and ambiguities. For instance, the 'do no harm' principle of ethical research is an important guiding line, but I have also tried, in my research practice, to be open to how my presence and research activities do make impacts and leave traces, and in turn have tried to shape these impacts positively. Critical reflection brings opportunities to improve on ethical approaches and enhance impact on social issues that are being researched and lived with. I use the term 'towards' throughout this paper in recognition of how no research is perfectly ethical, neatly decolonial, or straightforwardly and equally co-created. Also, because my perspective on research ethics is partly shaped by my own normative stances on the matters I research and my position in them. These are all complex processes, critical to engage with and move towards. However, it is also critical to reflect on limitations and strategies to enhance the impact of our work, *towards* decolonisation and justice.

Across my master's, PhD, and first postdoctoral position, I researched three key public open spaces in

Johannesburg's inner city, along with a walking route that connected them, incorporating sidewalks and streets as vital public space (Middelmann 2020; see Figure 1 below). Along with this variety of publicly used and accessible spaces along the walking route, the three more-bounded spaces researched were Pieter Roos Park (one of the largest green spaces in the inner city), Constitution Hill (a public space and human rights precinct that was transformed from a colonial and apartheid prison into the new Constitutional Court), and Gandhi Square (the main central bus terminus and open plaza in downtown Johannesburg). The key research direction was examining the interplay between history, design, management, and use of public space, and questioning how spatial injustice was broken down or exacerbated through this interplay. Part of the iterative process was finding continuation from my master's, through my PhD, and a subsequent postdoctoral position. This allowed building relationships and networks that were increasingly substantial as I spent more time engaging more broadly with particular spaces as well as public space, its design, management, and use. It may not be possible for some research projects to develop this continuity; part of the impulse for sharing this is to demonstrate the value of spending time engaging with different aspects of the research context. This presence can be achieved in many ways, one example being to allot time in the research context for fieldwork planning, rather than doing so from abroad or elsewhere, which is valuable for building familiarity and relationships. As a strongly introverted person, I have found that gradually immersing myself in these spaces is a difficult but generative entry point into conducting research. Allowing interaction to emerge relatively organically is much less overwhelming than forcing myself to approach people and test out my research and consent scripts. As much as this is influenced by my personality, my ethical approach involves gradually building familiarity and relationships with people and space, which reinforces the iterative methodology.

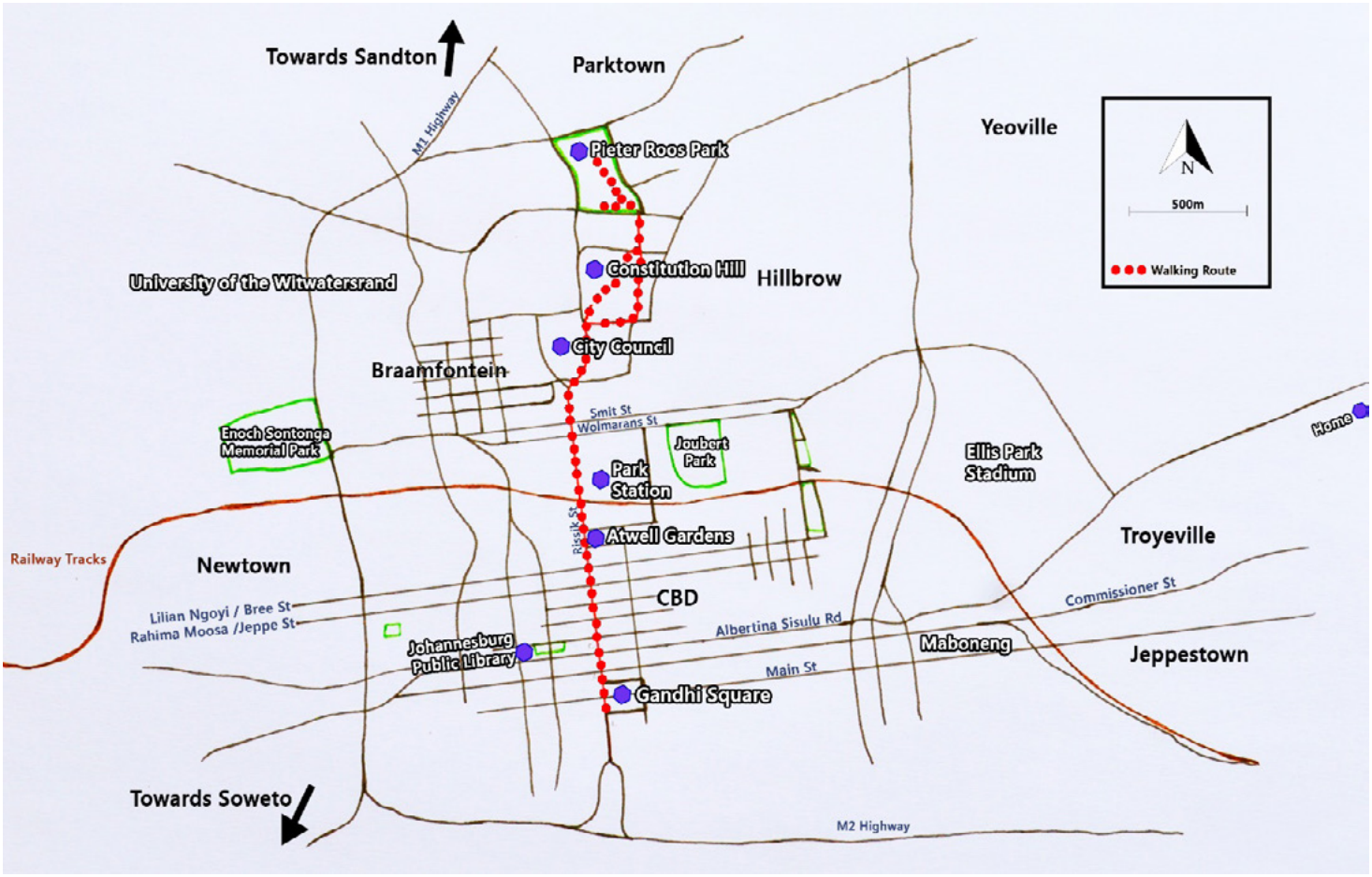
Direct familiarity is important. Researching and exploring local histories, media and policy discourses, and engaging with participants *and* practitioners, activists, experts and officials through interviews, as well as analysis of archives, media (including social), policy and plans, all contributed to building fuller pictures and insights in my work. Also, by working iteratively with mixed methods in this way, my research questions were increasingly shaped by local experiences. Indeed, for my research focusing on public spaces, on-the-ground research directly involving the people whom the research was about proved critical to understanding peoples' experiences of space (Burawoy 1998; Scholl *et al*. 2014). While I had prepared interview questions for users of the spaces, my intuition was to begin the fieldwork by simply observing the spaces and their dynamics and rhythms. I didn't avoid conversation – but initially I didn't actively seek out interviewees to ask my list of questions. Rather, I tried to allow my presence in the spaces, and thus my interactions with other users, to emerge as organically as possible. These relatively chance interactions and conversations were critical in shaping the research and questions in accordance to local knowledge and use patterns. From my PhD field notes in 2018: 'For me this has included being a small *part* of the public life in these places, before I could do research *about* them.' Accordingly, in researching public space, mutual use was foundational in shaping ongoing ethnographic work and other methods. As I moved through phases of my research process, I was more focused when engaging with others, partly based on the increased confidence in the relevance of the questions I sought to ask. In this way, consent became more of an ongoing, iterative process, as opposed to being something that can be simply requested and given.

This paper also reflects on how involvement with individuals and organisations through the research process led to increased collaboration and advocacy around core issues examined by the research. As discussed below, this allowed for opportunities for me to connect my research with other parts of my life in line with an increased focus on the research impact. I explore how my positionality shaped my work, and how certain intentional (and idiosyncratic) practices in turn shaped my positionality in interaction with those I encountered during the research, with closest reference to language amongst other aspects of positionality. I then return to the idea of reflection, discussing the importance of iterative research processes. The final section examines ethical research through the lens of 'moving towards', acknowledging failures and pathways to better praxis.

Positionality: facing inwards, moving outwards

I grew up in a middle-class suburb of Johannesburg, one reserved for White residence during apartheid but gradually desegregating over the course of my life. My adult life was in the same suburb, but much closer to the inner city and some of its adjacent working-class neighbourhoods. The inner city had also been reserved for White residence during apartheid, though there had always been exceptions, and around the time of my birth and childhood at the start of the 1990s, rapidly changed towards being now composed of majority Black residents. With pockets of wealth, much of the inner city is relatively low income. Inequality between the inner city and many of Johannesburg's suburbs is extreme and reflective of the intensity of socio-economic inequality in South Africa. As a White man who has privileged throughout life from the same structures that sustain inequality and poverty, there is a significant power imbalance between myself and many of Johannesburg's residents and those working in the inner city, notwithstanding heterogeneity across the area. Wanting to research public spaces in this area was about wanting to understand myself, the city around me, and the associated connections and disconnections. While the research was driven by the question of how central public spaces related to broader processes and patterns of spatial justice and injustice (Middelmann 2020), it was also driven by this curiosity about my place in these.

Whilst most people I encountered in this research understood English well, Zulu is more commonly spoken in the public spaces of downtown Johannesburg (Middelmann 2019). White people in South Africa have generally not learnt vernacular languages, to a large extent, and in fact often expect others to conform to their use of English, linked to ongoing coloniality and power imbalances (Sanders 2016). Notably, most Black South Africans speak several vernacular languages as well as English. In my case, high-school teachers recommended that students who hadn't grown up speaking Zulu were unlikely to pass final



▲ **Figure 1:** Map showing case-study sites, author's home during and prior to the research, and other notable spaces in the area. Source: Middelmann 2020.

exams in the language. This, combined with some of the same complex reluctance of other White South Africans, meant I had never become fluent. During PhD fieldwork, I began taking another course in Zulu, following some limited attempts during undergrad studies. While I completed the course without becoming completely fluent, the increased understanding helped me be more aware of the dynamics in different places. It also proved to be a way of breaking down racial and other barriers in my interactions with people in the city.

A key aim in my approach to research, reflected on throughout this paper, is to work towards the constitution (or processes) of broader publics. I articulate this aim also as a hope, partly because I acknowledge the methods discussed here are modest in comparison to structural realities that entrench division and inequity. Also, because 'hope'[1] is the meaning of my name, Temba (spelled Themba in Zulu, one of the languages in which the name is most common), a Nguni-language name widespread in southern Africa. My understanding is that my parents (also White) named me in a vernacular language, with meaning tied to local, contemporaneous events,[2] in the same spirit I describe above: to break stereotypes as part of trying to entrench broader publics. Being named in this way has greatly shaped my life and research career, for which I give a lot of gratitude to my parents (as echoed by many Black people I've met over the years when learning my name). Yet, it is obviously not a replicable research strategy. Nevertheless, I share it here in the context of language for three reasons. Firstly, because over time, partly on the insistence that I must learn Zulu if I'm allowed to have this name, I spent time learning and practising my understanding and speaking of Zulu. Secondly, from this process, I learnt how my name and subsequent use of this local language were significant elements in breaking down barriers to engagement with people not just in my research sites, but in the place where I have lived and worked for most of my life. This has been part of my own psycho-spiritual healing as a White South African, as a person named Temba, and as a researcher operating in this locale. Thirdly, to emphasise how positionality is an interplay of systemic (e.g. race, class) and personal (e.g. name, personality, behaviour) factors. To disentangle these different aspects is impossible, and would be disingenuous. While I don't argue broadly that bringing life and research together is necessarily and always an ethical practice, I think acknowledging these entanglements is important. I do argue that ethical principles, if followed authentically, spread across both work and life.

Notwithstanding the complicated interaction between my name and my Whiteness, simply being present, as a White person, in public spaces from which White South Africans have largely retreated post-apartheid (Landman 2019), is a valuable method in itself. While the presence is sometimes fraught, many people recognise these dynamics and thus appreciate it as an attempt to overcome division in a city where people so often act in line with division, especially if combined with speaking a local language. Thus, often my presence in these spaces has sparked an interest of regular users of the space, prompting them to question me, or enter into conversation or interaction. This inherently shapes the type of research I do, but also gives me a particular type of access to participants.

While race, language, class, and other systemic factors do shape research, it is also important not to let these

1
The meaning is often articulated with the connotation of 'trust' or 'faith', along with 'hope'.

2
I was born in 1990, shortly after the ANC and other parties fighting apartheid were unbanned, Mandela and other political prisoners were released, and negotiations for democracy had begun. It was therefore a hopeful time, which is why I was named in this way.

predetermine your analysis or interpretation. Burawoy (1998: 14) expands on this: 'Where positive science proposes to insulate subject from object, reflexive science elevates *dialogue* as its defining principle and *intersubjectivity* between participant and observer as its premise.' Relatedly, Erwin (2012: 99), writing from Durban in South Africa, shows how 'racialised identities are being dismantled or reconstituted in unanticipated ways', arguing that this can be revealing of how identities are formed mutually in the moment of interaction. Berry (2011) shows how these dynamics raise common anthropological ethical issues to do with the way others are represented through writing. As a researcher it is dangerous to be constrained by assumptions about the nature of engagement with subjects, so I aim to 'engage in a continuous process of self-reflection' and remain 'open to new tools for understanding moments of identity construction *in situ*' (Erwin 2012: 98). I offer a brief vignette from my research here to elaborate on this.

During my research in Pieter Roos Park, I would often walk around the park, observing the patterns and rhythms and trying to be open to relatively organic interactions. One afternoon, I noticed two young men sitting on a concrete bench. I experienced a brief moment of fear, partly tied up with racial prejudice, and suddenly one of the men called out to me, having seen me walking up and down the park, perhaps noticeably an outsider. From this mutual openness to difference, we were able to have a long conversation together about the space and our relative experiences of it. Also demonstrating how public culture shifts and manifests in these moments of interaction – in other words, where our identities are mutually constructed – one of the men started by introducing himself with an English name,[3] but as we continue talking and he learned that I have an African name, he started referring to himself by his African name. While at times the interaction seemed framed by our difference, our mutual openness allowed us to connect over our sameness, simultaneously allowing common publicness.

In writing and analysis, I focus on letting people articulate their own identities. While I do my utmost to convey the experiences of subjects according to their own articulations, the ultimate responsibility to shape their stories is my own, and I attempt to remain self-critical throughout research and writing. As part of foregrounding positionality, I write about selfhood here in highlighting the sometimes-silenced role this plays in shaping our research. This partly follows May (2023), who shows that practice-based research can also include autoethnography in how the knowledge, and the body that produced it, become less separated. As such, this reflection is about moving inwards, understanding oneself and context, as much as it is about moving outwards,[4] towards collaboration, allyship, and mutual benefit. My given name and learned Zulu are key entry-points into public space research, as is my race. White presence in many of these public spaces is relatively rare and prompts interaction based on people's interest in reasons for my presence (Middelmann 2020). While being open to chance encounters (and those described here that are shaped in sometimes peculiar ways by a variety of factors, some not replicable), it remains important to work through a variety of entry-points to research, as discussed in the next section.

Reflexivity and iterative feedback loops

Amidst calls for conducting research closer to home (Morreira 2012), part of research design needs to involve careful reflection and consideration of how topics, spaces, and contexts are chosen for research. In my work, I have always tried to be clear about the balance and tension between personal and idiosyncratic motivations (my name, my hometown, my place in its dynamics) and those that pertain more directly to research aims and rationale (selecting a wide range of public-space typologies for comparison). As I discuss in this paper, some of this becomes clearer only with time. This also requires honesty and critical self-reflection, as in Laura Hemming's (2019) reflection on the complexity of overlaps between research and life. Here, she reckons with the nature of shifts from ordinary life and research towards advocacy around critical social issues, stating the urgency of connecting research work more directly with the real-world issues it pertains to. At the same time, it is also crucial to protect the self and find safe space to decompress when researching matters that are potentially emotionally distressing (ibid.).

While shaping the voices of others with your own can be a problematic aspect of research, this can be mitigated by iteratively returning to the people who hold those voices in their bodies and discuss what you are finding and writing. In other words, testing how your interpretations sit with the lived experience of those you are researching. The idea of mutual benefit here is useful, as it does away with the erroneous notion of a researcher ever 'leaving no trace', or 'minimising their impact', on research participants. Instead, the focus is on acknowledging and owning one's impact so that it can be shaped positively, and in collaboration with participants. It is worth being open about seeking personal gain from conducting research to further one's career, as well as desired impacts in the field of study or community being researched. Mutual benefit can take many shapes, depending on the research context, and it is important to be open to contingencies of the process as well as the tension between directly helping someone in their circumstances and using one's research to mobilise or advocate to address those circumstances which, in turn, should help that person. For example, I was feeling stuck as one part of an archive pertaining to my research was not open to the public. However, I was able to make an agreement with the organisations operating the space and its archive in which I assisted with organising and digitising their files in exchange for accessing the required parts of the archive.

Concurrent the openness to emergent interaction and collaboration I've tried to work towards, crucial for more-ethical research and living, is building from the personal to the interpersonal to the structural. As Barker *et al.* (2019) discuss regarding the limits of community building and interaction in public parks, it is important but insufficient to interact with difference and be open to otherness in public parks. As such, my research has taught me about how to move from internal shifts and interacting with space as myself into direct interactions with others as a researcher, and from this towards involvement in networks and advocacy/activist groups, in attempt to influence structural issues through my research work. The initial focus of the research was about public space with a justice lens, and while the inner city of Johannesburg is marginalised in

3
Commonly, in southern Africa, Black African people utilise English names when engaging with some sectors of mainstream society, partly as a strategy to manage the impacts of racism.

4
It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully explore the dynamics of these simultaneous shifts internally and externally. This is explored in more detail, through the lens of the author's triadic construction of self-other-collective, in a paper recently published in *Frontiers in Sociology.* https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2025.1591246

some ways, the public spaces I studied are also central in other ways. During the research, I became aware that homelessness is one of the core issues of spatial injustice in the area, which shaped the research focus, and led me into engaging with Johannesburg and South Africa's homelessness networks. This was also iterative, driven initially by my research interests and over time working towards how I could use my research skills and findings to contribute to this collective work of trying to address homelessness in the city. I started volunteering my time as researcher (and as treasurer as well, because that was a task that also needed doing, despite not being part of my research) for the Johannesburg Homelessness Network. This included trying to operationalise research insights from my own research as well as cutting edge research from elsewhere in the country in engagements with the city department tasked with reviewing the homelessness policy. Doing this advocacy work advanced my understanding of homelessness, which surely sharpened the insights in my research, despite not being direct data sources in my research. Life and research are entangled and, I argue, can be generative when one is open to it.

As mentioned, I have done research in areas of my hometown where I remain in many ways an outsider, working within the tension of familiarity and difference that is common for ethnographers. In this case, however, as well as a process of familiarisation through the research process, I also had a lifelong familiarity that had developed concurrent to the research. While I believe the centring of lived experiences is crucial to research – especially in contexts of marginalisation – the productive tension of outsider-researcher remains. They may bring different, valuable perspectives to those of people enmeshed in complex daily lives, especially given intense precarity, as is the case in Johannesburg's inner city. This is by no means to centre the voice of the researcher in isolation, but to explore the basis for iterative research that moves towards collaboration between researcher and participant, even if the nature of collaboration is complex and contingent. By spending time in research sites and familiarising myself with the spaces I was studying, conversations with more regular users allowed my perspective to be shaped by theirs; in turn, offering my research insights to the same people seemed to affect their own perspectives on the spaces. Collaboration with homeless people, service-providers, and city officials working with homelessness, while often outside of the data collection and research process, allowed my research and attempts to collaborate on action to shape each other.

Towards other, towards public

Part of the impulse for the reflection on positionality is about exploring how our positions might drive our actions in life and in work. As a privileged person, I feel a responsibility that my work and life can play some role in addressing some of the global and local inequalities I refer to in this paper, notwithstanding personal and collective limitations in fulfilling that responsibility. In line with this and the normative stance I take in this paper, I argue that reflections on positionality should include how this guides action. Also, I argue that when researching marginalised people in the Global South, there is an urgent responsibility to centre and amplify their voices. There are spaces and roles to play for researchers from elsewhere in this, but it is also important to question one's own motivations and rationale for researching marginalised groups. It is critical to expand research on the Global South to examine relatively wealthy and elite actors, and their roles in patterns and structures of discrimination, as these individuals and groups often have disproportionate power over matters that shape marginality.[5]

Socio-economic inequity is not just a localised phenomenon within the Global South, but is also signalled by histories of colonisation that entrenched inequality on a global scale. Exploring one's position and complicity within this is a key starting point for ethical research, especially if coming from the Global North to conduct research in marginalised areas of the Global South. In doing so, moving research and life *towards* decolonisation is urgent, not that one's research and the rest of one's life need to be the same, but because an authentically decolonial research approach requires a decolonial principle in life more generally. I argue here to be careful of claiming a decolonial approach because of ongoing coloniality, complicity, and inequality. This is by no means to support 'the general hesitation to engage in decolonisation' that results from 'ignorance, complacency, or seeking to avoid discomfort, that comes from power and privilege' (Ahmed-Landeryou 2024: 34). Rather, it is to start with increased focus on these patterns of power, privilege, complacency, and complicity as crucial in moving towards decolonial research praxis. Indeed, it may be irresponsible to discuss marginality in the Global South without recognising how the wealth of the north is partly based on dispossession from the Global South.

Contexts like Johannesburg, where inequality, poverty, unemployment, and other factors combine to produce high incidences of crime and fear, are frequently the focus of contemporary research. Part of my research was shaped by my fear of physical safety, heightened by the fact that some spaces I was working in were especially dangerous parts of the city. Spending time in these spaces and getting to know regular users helped me understand how the fear of an outsider relates to the experience of living in a space every day. Part of this relates to my positionality, where after days of fieldwork I returned to my relatively suburban home a few kilometres away. Engaging with people about their spatial experiences emphasised the resilience as well as precarity of daily life. And beyond this, how meeting with and talking to people could quickly dissolve my fears, reduce the barriers and divisions between people with different experiences and circumstances, and in the process be part of constituting broader publics, as discussed in the vignette above. Such moments can be fraught, awkward, and tense, bound up in South Africa's painful history and persistent inequality. And yet, my experiences have shown that in most cases, openness to trying – whether trying to speak a local language or engage with difference in a way divergent from the norms of dominant public culture – tends to be appreciated, opening doors to deeper interactions.

Even in severe circumstances – Johannesburg is an intense, violent city – people have enormous capacity for compassion. Learning about myself, the city, and its inhabitants during this research in turn demonstrated clearly

5
A co-authored paper by a team of researchers examining elite practices in infrastructure transitions is currently in peer review, exploring these dynamics more fully.

the local principle of *ubuntu*, which rests on the recognition that 'I am' because 'we are'. Essentially, there can be no selves without others; there can be no public without all of us.[6] Thinking through my research in this manner correlated with attempts to bring my work and life closer together (see Morreira 2012). In doing so, I recognised my interdependence with others more. This brought me towards feeling as a member of the public, which offered clearer paths towards working for common goals. As such, my research is less and less guided by my pre-determined questions, and more and more guided by the nature of my interaction with others, especially in my current work involving community partnership-based research.[7]

Limitations, challenges, tension, and opportunity

Part of the impulse here is transparently and openly discussing our limitations and even failures. For example, co-creation of knowledge with research participants is a desired principle. I hope my research both embodies co-creation to some extent and increases over time. However, there are aspects of my work that involves shaping narratives of people with whom I do not share the same type of embodied lived experience. There have been times when my research has created positive outcomes for communities involved, and times when the impact has been limited or ambiguous, in both cases contributing to the success of my own career. And these are entangled. For instance, one journal article I published about a park inspired a new community organisation to help homeless people there. There have been other instances where I was able to publish an article that enhanced my individual research profile without having a clear impact on the people and places I studied. Intentions are important, but there are also limits to the extent one can fully apprehend and understand the full range of effects and knock-on impacts of the research, writing, and dissemination processes. The practice I reflect on here, which aimed to be engaged, respectful, and guided by participants, moved me towards wider collaboration through participation in homelessness networks, which is all valuable. And yet, there is real pressure on academics, who rely on publications to advance their careers, and many of the outputs of my research have remained solo-authored journal articles.

My work has tried to centre and amplify the voices of those I researched. However, it has often fallen short of true co-creation. My relationships with people in these public spaces could have been more meaningful, intentional, and impactful. There were moments that I worked through fear and prejudice, which allowed deeper, more authentic engagements, but others where my fear made me react in a way that reinforced divisive, exclusive public cultures, sometimes exacerbated by being threatened with robbery or violence. I think about how my fear sometimes hardened me, and while I have a private space to retreat into, many here don't. While I have learnt more Zulu at different moments, practised it with people and used it in my research, I am still not fluent, and sometimes my fear of speaking improperly means I don't speak at all, falling back into the public culture of division. Parts of my research could be seen as more extractive than collaborative; an important learning experience in itself. I admit to having fallen short in many instances and in many ways; here, I offer reflections of how this has influenced my research practice over time, noting how our research, work, and life can always be more ethical. A great deal of the focus in this reflection is on the threshold between life and research, as I believe this nexus is where the practice of ethics actually unfolds. In moving towards and with others, opportunities for collaboration and common goals emerge more clearly. For young researchers building their research practices and developing the associated ethics, it is important to deeply consider your relationship to the research topic. Rather than avoiding reflection on this personal connection by emphasising academic rationale, be open to how your life, the research process, and the spaces and people you research are entangled and play roles in shaping each other. As described above, practical ways of deepening this include learning local languages. The principle remains to work carefully across both difference and sameness, towards and with others, towards public.

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6
An article exploring the dynamic relationships between self, others, and collectives was recently published in *Frontiers in Sociology.*

7
It is beyond the scope of this reflection to fully expand on current, partnership-based research. However, based at the Canada Excellence Research Chair in Health Equity and Community Wellbeing, our research projects are all based on partnerships with community organisations, aiming to embed mutual benefit and positive impact in all aspects of the research process.

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Temba is an experienced multidisciplinary researcher, writer, and artist, passionate about understanding the ways people use space and interact with their natural surroundings. His research has focused largely on public space and public goods, examining their history, management and use in the contexts of spatial injustice and the potential for social cohesion. Developing the resonance between his art practice, research, and advocacy, he is currently researching the connection between arts, healing, and community wellbeing. His underlying theoretical endeavour – drawing from research on public space, energy transitions, creative practice – explores the thresholds of public and private at different levels and scales.
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Alikeness and 'the Other'
Making Sense of Postcolonial Conditions in Researching Marginalised Contexts

Klaus Geiselhart

When I first commenced what became a 20-year engagement with Southern Africa, I was equipped with knowledge I had acquired from critical development studies and with ideas of decolonisation that advocate for a mutual learning process for the South and the West. I attempted to take an exploratory attitude of listening and learning, and to avoid pushing through pre-prepared research agendas. It seems to me, however, that it is hardly possible to systematically employ an approach centring on openness to new experiences and the unknown. This essay explores how individuals may be able to enter other cultural worlds of understanding through an emotionally challenging and at times distressing process involving encounters with disconcerting experiences and reflection on them. In recounting a series of key experiences from my empirical fieldwork, I address the challenge of aligning them with theoretical accounts for explaining them to an academic readership. Above all, the question of how 'writing culture' can be carried out to minimise asymmetries led me to the use, in my work, of an analytical modus of critique as mediation. I end the essay with a critique of the concept of 'othering', and thoughts on anticolonial and postcolonial writers from which a call for the re-humanisation of academia can be concluded.

Ähnlichkeiten und das ‚Andere' – Zum Verständnis des Postkolonialen in der Erforschung marginalisierter Kontexte
*Am Beginn meiner mittlerweile 20-jährigen Forschungstätigkeit im südlichen Afrika stand ein Studium der kritischen Entwicklungsforschung sowie die Vorstellung von Dekolonisierung als einem wechselseitigen Lernprozess zwischen globalem Süden und Westen. Ich bemühte mich um eine explorative Haltung des Zuhörens und Lernens und darum, eine vorab festgelegte Forschungsagenda zu vermeiden. Doch zeigt sich, dass es kaum möglich ist, einem Ansatz der radikale Offenheit für neue Erfahrungen und das Unbekannte ins Zentrum stellt, methodisch stringent zu verfolgen. Dieser Essay untersucht, wie Forschende andere kulturelle Verständnishorizonte betreten können – indem sie einen emotional herausfordernden, teils belastenden Prozess, der Konfrontationen mit irritierenden Erfahrungen eingehen und diesen selbstkritisch reflektieren. Anhand zentraler Episoden aus meiner empirischen Feldforschung diskutiere ich die Schwierigkeit, solche Erlebnisse theoretisch einzuordnen und für ein akademisches Publikum nachvollziehbar zu machen. Besonders die Frage, wie 'Writung Culture' so gestaltet werden kann, dass epistemische und politische Asymmetrien möglichst verringert werden, führte mich dazu, einen analytischen Modus der Kritik als Form der Vermittlung zu wählen. Der Beitrag schließt mit einer kritischen Auseinandersetzung mit dem Konzept des „Othering" sowie mit Überlegungen zu antikolonialen und postkolonialen Autor*innen. Daraus ergibt sich ein Plädoyer für eine Re-Humanisierung wissenschaftlicher Praxis.*

I first visited Botswana, Lesotho and South Africa as a student in 2000. The group of students I was travelling with discussed geographical matters around how landscapes, economies and societies develop alongside issues of global inequalities and the impact of development cooperation. At that time, I had been engaging with critical development research, learning about failed development interventions, the way development cooperation is used for promoting exports of German technology, and, more profoundly, the interpretative hegemony of Western academia. The contradictions between a putatively altruistic North and the economic realities of the Global South appeared irresolvable to me, at least on a theoretical level; I was, therefore, interested in gaining first-hand experience of how these issues played out in real-life contexts. I thus welcomed, not without some trepidation, the opportunity I received in 2004 to commence a doctoral research project in Botswana, centring on marginalised population groups.

I

In the project, I should investigate the impact of HIV and AIDS on the ways in which poorer groups within the population managed their livelihoods. At that time, people in Botswana were suffering tremendously from HIV infections, and a medication programme had recently been launched with the aim of providing all those affected access to life-saving antiretroviral therapy. The plan was for my work to draw on the livelihoods concept (DFID 1999), the subject of much discussion in the development sector at that time. Mostly applied to individual households, this theoretical framework examines changes in people's economic outcomes on the basis of different types of capital, their interconnectivity context, and social structures and processes. In other words, I was being asked to apply a typically Western concept to the situation in Botswana. It is, in hindsight, perhaps fortunate that this concept proved completely unsuitable for the work I had to do. I realised that I was not going to be able to visit people's homes asking them how many chickens they had, how much land they farmed, and who among them was HIV positive. It took me nine months to understand that most studies on the impact of HIV on livelihood systems in southern Africa were highly speculative, and, if their findings showed a certain degree of reliability, they were based on completely different study designs for which we did not have the time or funding. At the time, these insights found me obliged to justify myself to my doctoral supervisor. It was, accordingly, a highly stressful period in my career. I saw my funding period slowly progressing, but I had not spoken to a single HIV-positive person.

Instead, however, I found myself free to take my research in a completely new direction. I approached HIV self-help organisations to ascertain views on the most pressing problems their members faced. With a surprising degree of unanimity, they named stigmatisation and discrimination as such, which accordingly became the topic of my doctoral thesis. Their accounts of the issues they encountered included the administratively driven dismantling of support groups, and the exclusion of people living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA) from counselling and support schemes that would, in fact, be the most effective were they in the hands of people with the appropriate lived experience. Alongside its analytical component, my work incorporated forms of action research, such as a conference I organised in Gaborone, where representatives of Botswana's Ministry of Health and various clinical professionals and health-service providers met with PLWHA.

I also learnt how one could be blinded by a lack of personal experience. The PLWHA with whom I interacted always stressed the essential importance of 'accepting oneself'. People working in self-help organisations described it as a prerequisite to 'living positively', which means developing a positive attitude to life despite one's illness. As I had no personal experience with a life-threatening disease, this initially appeared almost tautological to me; of course, I thought, you need to accept your diagnosis before you can develop coping mechanisms. Eventually, an interviewee eloquently explained to me that 'accepting oneself' is an ongoing process that requires far-reaching changes in one's life, including, for example, finding new circles of friends, due to the fact that many people break off contact with PLWHA once they learn about their infection.

It feels important to me at this point to acknowledge those who, through their interest in the subject of my research, provided insights to which I would not otherwise have had access. I count some of these people among my friends to this day. I will, however, refrain from mentioning their names, due to the continued stigma surrounding HIV and AIDS and the proximity of my research to this topic.

II

The poverty I encountered during my research was particularly evident in Old Naledi, a disadvantaged district of Gaborone, where many domestic migrants find their initial accommodation upon arrival. Originally developed as low-standard, subsidised detached housing area (Fig. 1), the neighbourhood has grown in density. Some plot owners could afford building respectable houses (Fig. 2) through renting out tiny and overpriced tenement-like rooms they built in their backyards (Fig. 3 & 4). Throughout the neighbourhood, there are smaller buildings of varying standards and conditions (Fig. 5 & 6), many of which serve as overcrowded homes for numerous occupants. Other residents have put up rudimentary sheds (Fig. 7 & 8). The situation was that Old Naledi was highly structured internally. The HIV infection rate was high, as was unemployment, with many people having insufficient means of subsistence, while others were comparatively well off. Those with better resources often supported community-based activities, e.g. youth sports clubs or self-help initiatives for PLWHA.

Societal marginalisation in unsuitable housing, discrimination, and the experience of a life-threatening illness came together for many of these people to cause immeasurable

◀ **Fig. 1:** Subsidised detached housing in Old Naledi.

◀ **Fig. 2:** Respectable house of plot owners renting out rooms in the backyard.

◀ **Fig. 3:** Tenement in the backyard of the house in Fig. 2.

◀ **Fig. 4:** Rooms for rent or for relatives, which were successively inserted into a backyard.

Fig. 5: Small buildings of varying standards, often overcrowded.

Fig. 6: Small buildings of varying standards, often overcrowded.

Fig. 7: Rudimentary sheds.

Fig. 8: Rudimentary sheds.

suffering. My response to this, as a researcher, was a challenge. The necessity of maintaining a compassionate attitude sat uneasily alongside the need to protect myself from being overwhelmed with emotion, both to retain an analytical view and to avoid falling into the patronising form of philanthropy so often typical of 'Western' interactions with the Global South, which frequently fails to perceive people's ingenuity, their survival strategies, and the support that they provide one another. I felt it was important to show the exceptional skills of the people, such as the potters in Old Naledi, who bake their work in holes dug in the ground (Fig. 9), or the courage of the women who took part in a beauty pageant for Women Living with HIV/AIDS, providing moral support to all those infected with the virus (Fig. 10). Accordingly, I described both the structural disadvantage affecting the population of Old Naledi and the initiatives they undertook for the purpose of improving their neighbourhood. It was my hope that attention to both sides of people's lives – their subjection to unjust and inhumane living conditions and their quest for self-determination – would do justice to their dignity.

At the time of my research, it was prominently argued in academia that white academics should not try to analyse marginalised or culturally different lifeworlds (Deleuze & Foucault 1972). The postcolonial author Gayatri Spivak (1990[1988], 1993[1988]), however, calls upon academics not to capitulate in the face of difficulties in representing realities of life that are not their own, but to give these realities political 're-presentation' and, in this way, to enable marginalised people to use their voices. In the course of my work, many people asked me to help gain political visibility for their marginalisation. In contrast, many other local people were hardly interested in such. Some wanted to benefit financially from my presence, or influence my findings to suit their agendas. At the time of my research, the elites in Botswana – unlike those in South Africa, to name an example – were primarily black, and so were those people I described above, those who hoped to utilise me to their own ends, as were the political and administrative leaders who marginalised and discriminated against PLWHA. This circumstance prompted me to reflect on what has been described in critical development studies as the influence of local elites and 'black consciousness'. The latter is described by Frantz Fanon (1994[1952]) and Achille Mbembe (2017), among others, as a tendency among formerly colonised people, during processes of decolonisation, towards adopting oppressive practices originating from the colonisers, a theorem that white authors hardly dare to discuss – as I didn't in my thesis.

I have always sought contact and exchange with local researchers and professionals in various fields and have had good responses to my findings. However, returning to Germany, I completed my thesis at a time of increasing discussion around approaches to intersectionality in the discipline of geography. Very naively, I thought that my findings would draw interest in the context of these conversations. Through engaging with theories of stigma and discrimination, and with considerations from social psychology, I had identified societal processes that promote or exacerbate discrimination, ways of recognising them, methods of their attribution to particular groups of actors, and potential routes of action towards reducing discrimination and stigma. What I actually experienced was an unwillingness to engage with my findings, which surprised me at the time and has continued to influence my recent theoretical work on academic critique.

III

At this point, I was already aware of a postcolonial bias to which I was subject and which I had long largely failed to notice, as it had, despite my liberation from theories formed in Western discourses, remained well hidden in the discourses of my research topic. HIV and AIDS both derive from biomedical sciences. On occasion, I became aware of how confining they are as an underlying explanatory model. Whenever I was confronted with the fact that PLWHA had consulted traditional healers, or when I tried to write about how the disease phenomena were explained in Botswana even before the HI-virus was discovered, I struggled with my language. I realised that the extent of my identification

with HIV substantially limited my ability to articulate phenomena that occurred at the threshold to traditional conceptions of health and disease. When I travelled back to Botswana, I set myself the objective of developing a decolonised language that would allow me to describe modern and traditional medicine critically but equitably. To meet this aim, I embarked on an ethnographic journey into the observation and study of traditional medical practices. The 'writing culture' debate (Clifford & Marcus 1986) had taught me respectful caution, but its conclusion that ethnographic research cannot escape its eminent authority left me with a dilemma; it is the ethnographer, after all, who chooses what to describe, who addresses a readership, and who ultimately has the means to publish their findings. The call arising from the debate for a 'controlled mode of authority' is strikingly unspecific, and has given rise to a general 'crisis of ethnographic representation'. Again, then, I found myself in a situation that provided little orientation, and struggled emotionally with my association with colonialist, hegemonic Western culture. For the first time, I recognised the fundamental gap between my lifeworld and that of my research subjects. I could not assume that they understood why I was doing my research; indeed, to be honest, I was not entirely sure of this myself at the time. At that point, I was without even a clearly defined research interest; instead, what drove me was my perception of my lack of knowledge. HIV had held my research together, had given it a framework that had somehow created an idea of relevance for both me and my research subjects; even if these ideas were very individual, the rough framework had been intersubjectively intelligible.

Now that I was encountering traditional healers, I was faced with even more particular challenges, e.g. when a *sangoma* student asked me to document her homecoming to her community, which was her final examination and initiation as a traditional healer (Fig. 11). My responsibility in this situation was entirely different from that of recording, for example, the testimony of a school teacher who kept his healing activities secret for fear of professional consequences in light of the prohibition on spiritual practices in Botswana under the never-repealed Witchcraft Act of 1927. Traditional healers have to navigate an opaque web between the demands of their clients, the effects of Christianisation, and accusations of witchcraft. I found myself very much at my personal limits in a number of ways. The conditions under which I had conducted my previous research, such as surveys in remote rural communities, had not been very comfortable in terms of accommodation. That discomfort was incomparable with some of the situations I was now experiencing. The homecoming of the *sangoma* student included a ritual in which she and her entourage, in which she generously included me, had to kneel on the doorstep of her parents' property, followed by various ritual activities, one of which entailed her elders spitting beer on us. After the aspirant had performed her spiritual trial in front of her instructors, a night of incredibly impressive trance dance rituals ensued that I experienced through a veil of ignorance. I understood barely anything of what was happening. I sought to partially reconstruct some meaning by asking questions and later translating and analysing my audio recordings.

I began training with a *sangoma*. In his neighbourhood, he had built a community of followers who came to him regularly for trance dance events and other rituals. He taught me the diagnosis method of how to throw the bones. Particularly disconcerting experiences took place during a ceremony he led, which was the excavation of a witchcraft spell. An older lady acted as a medium; she danced herself into a trance, and dug with her bare hands into earth mixed with glowing coals to extract a packet containing a vial of an unknown substance. To neutralise this malicious medicine, we had to wash ourselves with a mixture of medicinal herbs and the warm blood of a just-killed chicken. The *sangoma* wanted to show me all sorts of other practices, such as how

◀
Fig. 9: Potters in Old Naledi, baking their work in holes dug in the ground.

Fig. 10: Women taking part in a beauty pageant for Women Living with HIV/AIDS.
▼

▲
Fig. 11: Preparations for the final trance dance examination of a *sangoma* trainee at her initiation.

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to bind lovers together, even if one party to the relationship was no longer quite so committed. We talked a lot about the moral significance of such practices. To this day, it remains one of my most impactful experiences that the only way I saw to make him understand that I wanted to break off my training was to take recourse to my socialisation in Christian values, which, by the way, I do not really orient myself to.

IV

The insights I gained during this period are invaluable to me today, although the process of gaining them was often unpleasant, unsettling, and exhausting. In particular, these experiences helped me understand the scandal surrounding the posthumously published diary of Bronislaw Malinowski, the 'father of anthropology' with a broad repute as a sensitive and empathetic researcher. In his diaries, he described numerous situations of discomfort due to arduous research circumstances, and feelings of aversion and often of anger towards local people. Many of his followers felt disenchantment at this publication. What struck me the most, by contrast, is the way in which he follows up a particularly hostile passage in his diary by explaining the purpose of keeping a diary in the first place – as an essential medium of self-reflection.

My processes of reflection helped me uncover some of my biases. Homes seemed dirty to me, until I realised that their occupants had made them homey with all the means available to them. Poor people looked dishevelled to me in their worn out and dirty clothes. Such perceptions derived from my upbringing, which had told me to judge people according to whether they seemed to care about their personal appearance or 'neglected' themselves. Despite the generally questionable nature of this orientation, similar judgements are made in many cultures, including Botswana. In Botswana, however, the visual signs used to make this distinction are completely different from those I was familiar with, and I was initially unable to decipher them, a typical phenomenon of an individual's helplessness in a 'foreign culture'. The admission of such inability and discomfort requires a significant degree of honesty. Recognising them as effects of one's own cultural conditioning can provide impetus to challenge the orientations that these perceptions and distinctions provide in one's cultural context. Being repeatedly thrown into situations that are beyond the control of one's interpretive ability can give a person an experience of decentring from their socialisation and dispositions, and may thus open up an escape route from Eurocentrism. The means of access to this experience of decentring, however, is not amenable to precise definition. It likely requires a series of coincidences coupled with a personal will to learn. It, of course, requires openness; yet, as methodological writings rightly insist, it is not possible for a person to be open on command. Many of my colleagues have done good research that features consistent adherence to prefabricated research designs and never left theoretically established territory. And I admit that their findings are illuminating. Even going on safari, and spending evenings in expatriate clubs with foreign-development staff, is not a hindrance to thorough self-reflection; I did this myself, and found it instructive on matters of global power structures. Problems arise when such behaviour seeks to avoid unpleasant experiences of local cultures and conditions, as I mentioned above, and it is easy for an individual to find themselves on the wrong side of the boundary to escapism.

Like the imperative to openness, the call for researchers to disclose their positionality helps little in their realisation of their cultural conditioning; indeed, this is not the purpose of awareness of positionality, which is intended instead to highlight researchers' entanglements with power-related categories of identity. For German-speaking readers, the debate between Antje Schlottmann and Theo Rauch in issues 3 and 4 of *Geographische Zeitschrift*'s 2018 volume demonstrates that the professional self-conception of a researcher can be more revealing with regard to the perspective they obtain. An equally unhelpful development in this regard, in my view, was the way in which the post-development debate entered geographical development research. My own experience of this branch of research, in Germany at least, is of a long critical tradition underpinned by a broad awareness of the injustices of the global economy and the pitfalls of development cooperation. The general thrust of the post-development debate, however, was that geographers withdraw from development research. The result was an increasing orientation of many geographical research activities towards disaster studies, and in some instances the abandonment of the term 'development' altogether, a move I felt to be almost superficial in comparison to the nuanced debates I had experienced before 2000 around failures of development aid and critiques of structural adjustment programmes or local power structures.

Finding my way through those contemporary impositions of ethnographic and geographic research, the 'controlled mode of authority' I employed as a researcher was that of a 'critique as mediation'. My starting point was the frequent allegations of irrationality levelled against healers by modern medical practitioners and health-service professionals. In view of the association between colonialism and its claim to superiority through 'rationality' (see, for example, Wiredu 2004), I set out to compare the reasonings behind these two systems of healthcare. This meant that I did not aim for the emic perspective of traditional healing as, for example, classical ethnography would aim for. I did not try to understand the purely traditional insider perspectives of the healers, as they seemed to have what Du Bois (2007[1903]) called a 'double consciousness' in relation to their own culture, feeling as if they do not fit fully into either the traditional or modern life in Botswana. The anticipation of the criticism from the superior position of modern healthcare makes the healers pursue a better understanding of modern healthcare than modern professionals are willing to recognise. A critical analysis requires, in particular, an examination of such power relations. In the spirit of mediation, it is to make the more powerful side, in this case modern medicine in its self-declared rationality, aware of the explanatory and diagnostic models underlying traditional medicine.

V

On a jointly organised student excursion to southern Africa, I once found myself in a discussion with a friend and colleague on the issues around how we should seek to raise the students' awareness. My view was that we should open their eyes to otherness, to what is culturally different from what they are familiar with. My colleague disagreed vehemently, suggesting that, instead, we should point out those things that are the same among us, what unites us, our alikeness. His argument stemmed from the theoretical idea of difference, that 'the Other' is always a construction made in contrast to the self. Probably even more influential, in those days, was the idea of 'othering' introduced by Spivak.

The concept claims that regarding someone as the 'other' goes hand in hand with a revaluation of one's own and a devaluation of the denominated other. The fact that the concept of 'othering' is highly reductionist, as it excludes possibilities of intercultural encounters in which the parties meet as different but equal, has unfortunately not diminished its popularity to this day (Albrecht 2012). Against this widespread hesitation for seeing 'otherness', I took the position that we can only behave respectfully in other cultural settings, without violating local conventions, if we are aware of the differences between these settings and ours, and approach these differences in an appreciative manner. It is evident that both approaches, that from difference theory and the appreciative one, have their value and neither should prevail alone for students to encounter the full complexity of postcolonialism and to earn intercultural skills.

Often the argument is raised that a white person with privilege has no right to conduct research into the lives of black or marginalised people. Retrospectively, my very personal assessment is to the contrary, that the attempt to understand other cultures is important for the relations between cultures to become decolonised. Of course, a single researcher is not capable of escaping from postcolonial continuities, nor can he or she fully avoid reproducing inequalities. Looking back, I recognise how my doctoral supervisor overcame his own supervisor's understanding of research, and of what at that time were referred to as 'underdeveloped countries', alongside the habitual attitudes towards people of the Global South often concomitant to these conceptions. Remembering how I struggled with continuing this evolution towards less asymmetrical relationships, and observing colleagues striving for the same objective, I can see that such a process of decolonisation, understood as a decentring of Eurocentric academic practices, is one that takes generations.

The act of entering the unknown of other lifeworlds is possibly the most insight-rich of all possible approaches to cultural research, as it challenges a researcher's convictions in unforeseen ways. When 'the Other' and their lifeworld become present, explanation may fail. Even if understanding the full moral cost of slavery and colonialism is impossible at a cognitive level, an emotional comprehension may take place. Wondering what the experience of freedom for black people might possibly look like makes you – made me – realise that white people share the same world. Any attempts to create freedom for a restricted group on the basis of identity inevitably leads to violence. Thus, the 'Black Atlantic' (Gilroy 1993) engulfs us all; having once driven the circulation of the triangular trade, it still carries drowned slaves, migration, and the voices of the subordinated calling for liberation. It subliminally washes colonial components and postcolonial critique into white people's consciousness, via colonial goods, literature, arts, and, perhaps particularly, popular culture, such as blues, jazz, R&B, and reggae. White consciousness is dual in its own way. Even such a seemingly unashamedly colonial artefact as Rudyard Kipling's poem 'The White Man's Burden' (1899) bears witness to this; while some perceive it as glorifying white colonial supremacy and the violence undergirding it, others interpret it as a critique of white hubris, referencing with dark foreboding the potential consequences of colonial violence.

Post-humanist ideas have recently gained considerable currency in academia, advocating for emancipation of marginalised groups. Among the scholars setting out these ideas are proponents of poststructuralist, post-developmentalist and intersectionalist approaches and identity politics, who often base their work on presuppositions of structural power relations. Post-humanist feminist thinkers such as Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti and Jane Bennett depart from black feminists who perceive their feminism as attempting to approach a true humanism or as rooted in African humanism (bell hooks 1988, Hill Collins 2002[1948]). Black anti-colonial writers, civil rights activists, and theorists of decoloniality, such as Frantz Fanon (1994[1952]), Aimé Césaire (1972[1955]), Martin Luther King (1984[1958]), Paulo Freire (2005[1921]), Paul Gilroy (2009) and Achille Mbembe (2017), agree with post-humanist critiques of the historically exclusive character of modern Western humanism, but do not reject humanism. Their intention is, instead, to highlight the inhumanity of slavery, racial discrimination and apartheid, pointing out their contradiction of the putative modern moral code set out by the Enlightenment. Gayatri Spivak (1993[1988]) criticised the poststructuralist rejection from representing people of other identities and called for advocacy for the subaltern. In this vein, Paul Gilroy argued that the concept of human rights had emerged from interracial sympathy and sensibility, and called the post-humanist attempt to 'dismiss the prospect of any authentic human connection across those carefully selected and supposedly impermeable lines of absolute and always singular "identity"' a 'depressing pseudo-political gesture' (2009: 13). In the introduction to his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon explains his struggle for an inclusive universalist humanism. In a similar manner, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* sees 'the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed [as being] to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well' (2005[1921]: 44), and Aimé Césaire embraces the vision of 'a true humanism – a humanism made to the measure of the world' (1972[1955]: 22).

It is my view that those who feel the urgency of addressing global inequalities and injustices should not shy away from conducting research in the Global South or in marginalised contexts, and should engage with researchers from the Global South. It is certainly not the case that postcolonial conditions will vanish quickly and easily; many authors on decolonisation (among others Spivak, Wiredu and Mbembe), however, emphasise that both the West/North and the South will need to contribute to the endeavour. A reading of decolonial writers leads to the conclusion that a re-humanisation of academia is needed against ideas from post-humanism. Re-humanising academia would mean re-establishing ideas of humaneness as an inclusive principle covering all human beings, with the intent of securing dignity for everyone and guiding humans' appropriate treatment of other species and the environment. One major task of such an effort towards re-humanisation would be a reformulation of rationality and *Vernunft* in recognition of different kinds of indigenous or cultural epistemologies as well as the emotional and affective nature of human beings. This will necessitate revisiting categories of humanist thought, such as responsibility, personhood, community, dignity, morality, and *Sittlichkeit*. Authors such as Quasi Wiredu, Paulo Freire and Achille Mbembe teach us that bringing about an end to the 'dark night' that colonialism has imposed on humanity – if this is ever to be possible – requires human beings to work together against the retaining forces of the status quo. They tell us that this is less a question of identity than of personal reflection and commitment to a common good.

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A Creative Partnership 10 Years On

How Filmmaking and Friendship Emerge from Amidst the Artefacts of Apartheid as a Tool towards More Just Urban Understanding and Co-production

Kristen Kornienko and Thabang Nkwanyana

Prologue

Kristen's phone rang. It was the Wits University gate guard. She and Thabang were meeting on campus for the Wi-Fi and electricity. Thabang was unable to get on campus despite having the necessary ID. As Kristen approached the gate, the guard waved him through. No words were exchanged; the colour of her skin was enough. Thabang and Kristen greeted each other. Then he said with a wry smile, 'I wish I could have your face for just one day.'

That was over 10 years ago. There have been some critically defining moments in our relationship as changemakers; for Kristen, that was one of them. For Thabang, it was a well-worn norm. Thabang's lineages are Basotho and Zulu; he was born in Soweto, the southwest Black township architected in apartheid-era Johannesburg, South Africa. He is a largely self-taught visual creative. Kristen's lineage is White Canadian/American Settler. In 2007, she arrived in Johannesburg on a Fulbright Fellowship after completing a master's degree in landscape architecture; both, she would learn, are currencies of transactional advantage. These positionalities are amongst the bases of our reflective co-production and our relationship-based practice. Our experiences and histories are perspectives with which we step into the social constructs and contracts of racism, Othering, and post-colonial and decolonial power, all of which continue to define the hierarchical roles of the everyday and the institutional activities of knowledge production that are embedded in urban design. Our shift from extractive academic research practice to collaboration and co-production grows through the trust found in friendship. Friendship as a space that can hold difference and healing. Without it, and its inherent resilience, we could not grapple (through art, music, poetry, Steve Biko, Franz Fanon, Ben Okri – the list goes on) with existing binaries, power structures, and hierarchies of knowledges across race, gender, economics, culture, and global locales. And without the depth of that grappling, we would not have our practice, which, to this day, defines, re-defines, and sometime abandons previously believed fundamental signposts of academic research.

Introduction

In this paper, we reflect on and share our experiences across more than a decade of (d)evolving collaborative research, project practices, and deep friendship. Tsekiso 'Thabang' Nkwanyana is a resident, community leader, activist, and visual creative 'born and bred' in Freedom Charter Square, Kliptown, Soweto, South Africa. Kristen Kornienko is a 'recovering' academic, activist, and creative practising in South Africa and Canada. She is a multi-generation White Settler based in Secwepemcúl'ecw, British Columbia, Canada (180,000 km^2 of unceded land stolen from the diverse communities of the Secwepmec First Nation using the international legal mechanism of *Terra Nullius* [Empty Land] under British colonialism).

In 2013, while on a neighbourhood transect walk in Kliptown, we were introduced and fell into conversation around our mutual interest in art. That was the start of our friendship and, critically, trust-building. In turn, that friendship enables our transformative grappling with the neo-colonialising *status quo* in Kliptown's lived everyday and the 'weirdness' of what Kristen was and is doing as a North American White Settler in South Africa. In this essay, we suggest a broader relevance. We use our friendship as a human scale, a real-life metaphor of the global binaries and directionality that pervades much of urban development discourse and its impact on the lived everyday in fragmented cities worldwide. It is, in a sense, a response to Mbembe's (2011: 5) demand for ethics, human-ness, and humanity in his statement that 'the "human" is another name for the future', and that 'what gave ... the future its power was the hope that we

might bring into being ... a systematic transformation in the logic of our social life ... as a result of historical praxis'.

From our diverse perspectives and collaborations across both our networks, we provoke and nurture an ethically driven practice. Collaborative filmmaking emerges as a way to fuse our skills. Through Thabang's camera lens and Kristen's challenging of her research roots in extended case method (Burawoy 2009), a stronger and more accessible community voice matures. Along the way, the process triggers a critical question: Why do White researchers travel to the Global South and its so-called marginalised communities?

We're getting ahead of our story. Before the films, but well into our years of partnership, we came to realise that our way of working, and our outputs, projects, and so-called failures, needed to be housed outside the institutional premises of academia. In 2019, the 'space' in which we work importantly gained a structure as 1955 Creative Collaboration NPC (1955), co-founded by local residents Thabang Nkwanyana and Robert Shai, and academic Kristen Kornienko. 1955 is a social enterprise start-up based in Thabang's neighbourhood and with the connectivity of the internet. We also opened a 1955 bank account, with Thabang as primary signatory and cardholder. Funds come from our co-authored research and project grants, payment for work outputs, as well as from donations during the COVID-19 pandemic (Nkwanyana *et al*. 2020). The bank account shines light on the little talked about, but often demoralising, hierarchy created by money when working in places of poverty. These two locational and economic shifts, in turn, are slowly eroding perceptions and expectations (self, academic, and community) and working to refashion the narrative of our practice. They may be seemingly small moves, but they have been intentional power shifts, within our control, to de-stabilise the ongoing colonial constructs of knowledge production.

Why? Because the gate experience recounted above cannot be neatly filed as an artefact of the past. Last December, Thabang arrived at the same university gate with a group of Kliptown youth for an AI workshop and campus tour. Kristen asked the gate guard the easiest way for everyone to get on campus, the gate guard responded: 'But don't you have a car? You just drive out, pick them up, U-turn and come back through the gate. No problem.'

These lived experiences embody the ongoing, everyday assumptions and aggressions that inform the different navigations necessary within the still largely White-framed, largely Global North-normalised contexts that we all inhabit, valuate, and draw and/or create knowledge from. While these moments have been critical in defining our working relationship, it is important to note their broader relevance. We open with this example because it illustrates the 'unearned advantage and conferred dominance' (McIntosh 1989:11-12) internalised in Black and White bodies and in institutions (Kendi 2023; Goens-Bradley 2020; DiAngelo 2018; Menakem 2017; Fanon 1952/2008 & 1961/2004). It is also critical to note that such ongoing violences are not only faced in South Africa's institutions, but also in Canada's and broadly across the globe (Yusuf 2020; Cornell, Ratele & Kessi 2016; Mbembe 2016). Worth remembering is that both South Africa's and Canada's lineages are embedded with the devastating land and human mechanisms of British (and other) colonisation – albeit with their own unique consequences. And, their own contemporary efforts – though too often stalled, challenged, and inadequate – to address those consequences through restorative justice via their own Truth and Reconciliation Commissions.

This essay begins with a broader abolitionist conversation 'around the gathering table'. Which 'Others' are included? How does ongoing bias and discrimination decide the positioning of the chairs at the table, and so the justness of sharing, conflict, and production? We then look at our collaboration itself. From each of our two perspectives, how we meet at a shifting centre across our different rhythms of knowledges, cultures, everydays, and lives; and why (re)storytelling through filmmaking emerges as our co-production. Critically, we pose that our friendship *is* the trenches of a restorative justice-based practice that challenges the all too often silent presence of White saviourism and racial contract. We conclude with some final thoughts situating our work in our larger belief in the need for beauty as a co-conspirator amidst development policies and practices that remain in broader academic and institutional cultures characterised by White supremacy and in *Others*' places; human and built spaces which, while discussed, all too often remain unchanged. Throughout, residents, river, land, dreams, ancestors all contribute to Kliptown in its role as both stage and protagonist. Like much of our work, this essay draws on academic literature, storytelling, self-reflections, personal experiences, and various forms of the arts. And finally, we leave you with a short playlist, a few of our local favourites that have been like fairy dust; dancing makes sustainable the discomfort of sitting with tough truths that must be part of this work.

Grappling with abolitionism and sovereignty of knowledge at the gathering table

> *'To vision futures is to conjure something that sits outside of your time and circumstance while being firmly rooted in the moment… Fed up enslaved Black people and abolitionist whites built an unexpected set of relationships and opened a new timeline. What we allow ourselves to imagine, what dreams spring from unlikely relationships, is the beginning of the future' (Hemphill 2024:11).*

> *'A powerlessness: the elusive sense that something, some untouchable thing, is wrong. I call this feeling "land loneliness"' (Day 2024:8).*

The concepts of both these quotes align with the critical question in development practice: "Who gets a chair at the research table?" – and, importantly, the positioning of those chairs. Hemphill's 'vision[ing] futures … rooted in the moment' (2024:11) is a potent way of re-thinking and even dissolving the term 'research(er)' in the practice of placemaking, while Day (2024) reminds us of the silent, ongoing trauma from the non-resolution of land.

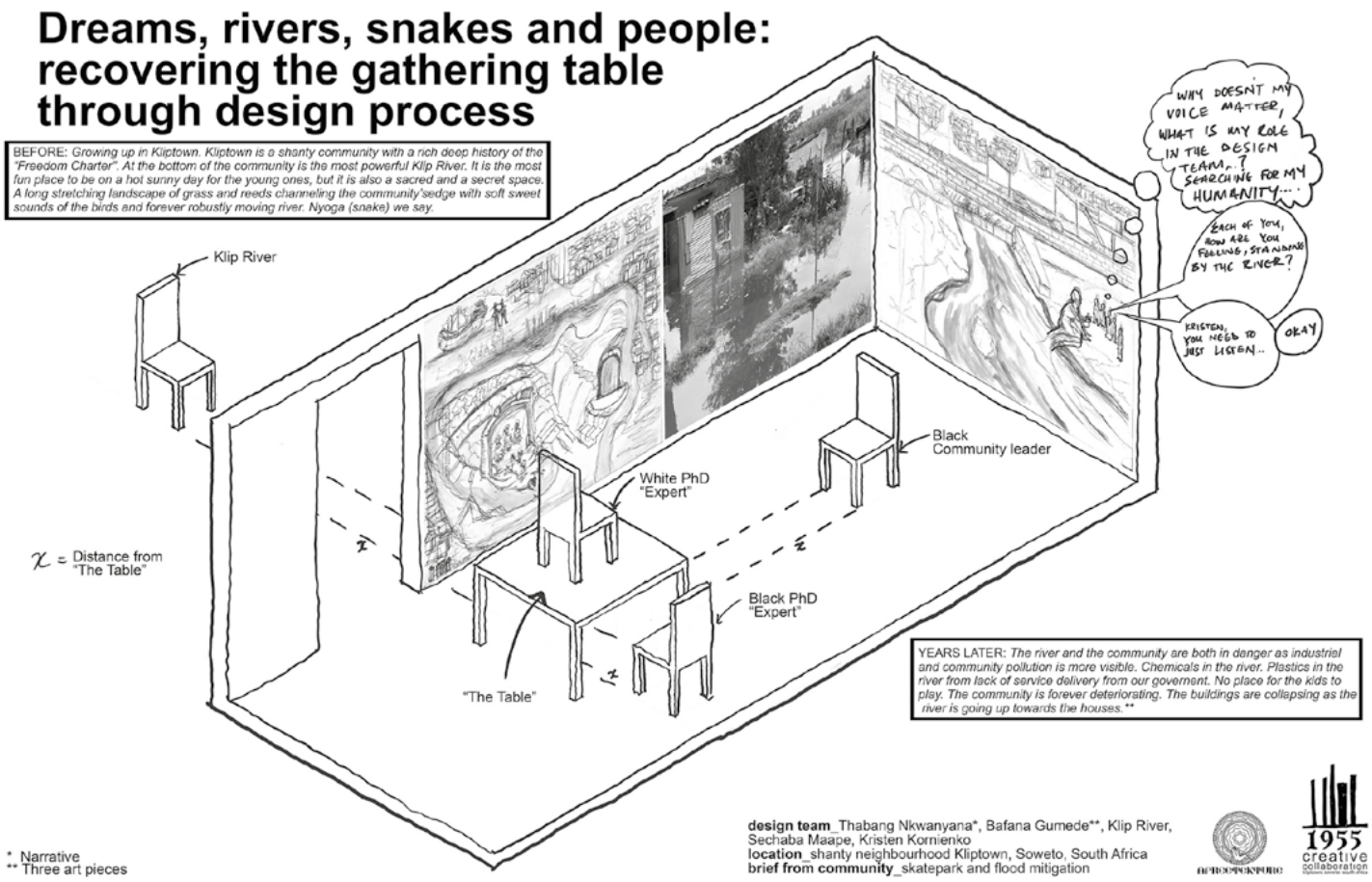

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Figure 1: Who's at the gathering table? Hierarchies in knowledge production and the valuing of voices heard. Source: Maape, Nkwanyana & Kornienko, 2022, with artworks by B. Gumede.

Figure 2: Personal recording of socio-cultural relationship with the Klip River. Source: Nkwanyana, 2022 with prologue by Mumu Fresh.
▼

Together, they suggest a practice that is grittier and more honest, and thus potentially enabling (see also Mahadevan 2024; Mkhabela 2024; Andrews & Khalema 2023).

Figure 1 emerged from our conversations around a radical socio-spatial justice in which land has agency in the research phase of a collaborative project to build a skatepark in Kliptown (Maape, Nkwanyana & Kornienko, 2022). The drawing engages race-related power structures and hierarchies, liminal multi-vocality, and not just who but in what ways *beings* – only some of whom are human – are included in research and project conversations (Edugyan 2021; Robbert & Mickey 2013; Stenger 2010; Malaza 2001; Gyekye 1997).

Thabang's oral knowledge transmission (Figure 2) tells of Kliptown's relationships to the Klip River over time and with the flows of societal and environmental change. In it, we hear both an articulating of the agency of the Klip River and her echoing absence through colonial erasure. Her presence is the water-giver and source of life, but also the *noga* (the snake) who ominously acts in many local animistic belief systems across southern Africa (Maape 2021). The hand-drawn murals on the walls in Figure 1, by local artist Bafana Gumede, document the site's lineage and our practice. Gumede shows the seen and unseen us, the river as a physical presence and a co-contributor to our design in a liminal ritual space alongside the ancestors gathered around the fire (Edugyan 2021; Wessels, Maape, Schoville & Wilkins, 2023). Here it is essential to note the necessity for Kristen, as a guest invited into a Nguni-speaking design team, to find the cultural humility to simply listen (see the thought and speech bubbles in Figure 1). She must sit silently with her urge to contribute in that moment, recognising it as her own internalised western meritocracy.

To do the hard work of extracting the coloniality from this moment on the banks of the Klip River, it is crucial that we acknowledge the layers of its presence. Ghanaian philosopher Gyekye (1997) has consistently argued the consequence of ideology's link to values and, in turn, to the normative roots of constructs and, in turn, actions in society. When commenting on the power 'to realise social and political goals' (ibid:169), as a long-time advocate of communitarianism as a socio-political structure for multiculturalism across Africa, he critically asks the question: 'Based on whose values? (ibid:163-170)' Mbembe (2001:102) further broadens and focuses our thinking to include (post) colonial trajectories of change and emergences from the 'violence ... [of] colonial relationships', implying post-colonial complicity by newly emerged states through corporate and political machinery. Effectively, he frames the replacing of one brand of violence for another. He states the intentionality in government and commercial coding of the 'logics that underlie ... meanings within that society' and 'institutionalis[ing] this world of meanings ... by instilling it in the minds of the cibles[1] [us]' (ibid: 102). Spanning our boundaries to Canada [Kristen's internalised positionality], we point to a parallel in Anishinaabe (de)coloniality scholarship that articulates power as an ongoing contractual relationship of violence, of structural settler domination (Mills/Ma'lingan 2017). And, critically, the demand for dismantling is framed as 'a question of citizenship, not remedy' (ibid:223): 'For settler Canadians: As

1
Mbembe borrows the term 'cibles' from Foucault (1989) as a defining of target subjects.

beneficiaries of settler supremacy, is citizenship premised on domination good enough for you? And as for Indigenous peoples: *Can* citizenship in a state imagined through a social contract allow us to meet our responsibilities to the land, to those who came before us, to those yet to come, and to all of creation?' (ibid:247).

Situated within contemporary African discourses on urbanism and development studies, and from their White Settler perspectives (South African and Canadian, respectively), Huchzermeyer and Kornienko (2025:137) acknowledge that 'the dominant understanding of development is deeply rooted in Global North supremacy and a process of "improvement" following predetermined, Western norms' as opposed to self-determination; in other words, a remedy. From our 1955 action research in Johannesburg and broader Gauteng, it is not a leap to expand the dominance of western [White/Settler] supremacy from the broader development discourse to much of the local top-down, capitalist-based regularising practice (Kornienko 2017, 2016). Johannesburg-based Mkhabela (2024:68) says as much when he advocates change through the exercise of agency in urban practice, 'to question the values that guide city imagination'.

We argue that 'visionings' like *noga*, with a well-positioned seat at the table, pushes back at the inter-generational un-freedom and cultural erasure of western norms-based practice. They give agency to re-imagine and re-story goals, practices, and knowledge systems with the 'emancipatory norms' Ndebele calls for (2017: xii). They still dismissive eye-rolling.

Views on our narrative of collaboration

> *'To take part in the African revolution, it is not enough to write a revolutionary song; you must fashion the revolution with the people. And if you fashion it with the people, the songs will come by themselves and of themselves. In order to achieve real action you must yourself be a living part of Africa and of her thought; you must be an element of that popular energy which is entirely called forth for the freeing, the progress and the happiness of Africa. There is no place outside that fight for the artist or for the intellectual who is not himself concerned with, and completely at one with the people of the great battle of Africa and of suffering humanity. (Biko, writing as Frank Talk, quoting Sekou Toure, 2002: 32)*'

In our collaborative practice, Thabang states, it is through art and creativity that we can change and transform our own spaces and our individual growth. His comment aligns with Secwépemc Elder Ronald Ignace's call for action-based advancement of reconciliation while 'walking on two legs': 'The metaphor of walking implies balance between co-existing knowledges, addressing power relations that privilege western science' (Dickson-Hoyle, Ignace *et al*. 2022:4). Drawing on this principle, but with a healthy fear of yet another binary, we imagine our approach as one that spans boundaries by *dancing to multiple rhythms*.

Kristen's Settler Canadian/American lineage dates back to her grandfather's 1635 arrival as a silenced Puritan minister from England: a so-called 'Founding Father' in search of religious freedom in the so-called 'New World'. The shame echoing in her head and body as she recounts this personal history to Thabang is silenced by his response: 'But you are the reincarnation of that grandfather, you're changing it up (2020).' These actions of vulnerability and the responding humanity spark the type of *mutual* personal healing that Hemphill (2024) argues must accompany the practice of changemakers. While this encounter is unique to us, it should not be viewed as exceptional. We argue that the broader potential and potency of real friendship in research practice as an actionable form of (re)conciliation. The 'terrain of relationship' (Hemphill 2024:93) with the frictions of our own histories, risk taking, honesty, trust and conflict enables transformation of the mind and practice. It is *the trenches*, as posed across disciplinary discourses and global locations, from such authors as Mahadevan (2024), Andrews and Khalema (2023), Diangelo (2018), and Mills/Ma'lingan (2017), amongst others.

Learning from the last decade has meant leveraging our 'boundary spanning' positionality to ask hard questions, often bumping against and challenging our own internalised and entrenched racial (social) contracts and the larger, external White constructs of institutional power (Ressa, personal communication, 19 November 2024; Andrews & Khalema 2023; Kendi 2023; Jagmohan 2015; Mills 1997). We base the relevance of using racial contract theory as a transformative strategy in our contexts of South Africa and North America, but argue its value beyond as 'a global theoretical framework for situating discussions of race and whiteness' and the ongoing prevalence that 'the whites do not think about all these as a history of oppression but rather as "the way things are"' (Mhlauli, Salani & Mokotedi, 2015:210, 212). This boundary-spanning lens raises ugly questions. Is Kristen's research in South Africa rooted in White saviourism? [Self-interrogation.] Is Thabang compensated to fully reflect the value of his contributions to academic knowledge production? [Practice change.] What is the actual impact of a White body in a Black township community like Kliptown (to the community and the actors)? [Self-interrogation and practice change.] How do we reconcile western timelines and timetables with realities of poverty and life expectancy[2] (Dladla 2024)? [Practice change.] Does research like ours contribute to real change on the ground that reflects a restorative justice? [Practice change.] It goes on. It's messy.

Acknowledgement of the relentless Global North to Global South language and overwhelming trajectory (technocrats' physical movement, aesthetic representation, knowledge) touches many a White saviour nerve (Stratton 2024; Adler 2017; Cole 2012; Pskowski 2015). What one critically *decides* to see and to hear in the collective and individual storytelling on social and mainstream media, art, academic literature, and/or documentary film can subtly 're-entrench the power of dominant groups' within our own internalised contracts, *or give opportunity to disrupt them* (Goens-Bradley 2020; Cornell, Ratele & Kessi 2016:115; wa Thiong'o 1986; Mills 1997). For (western) researchers, this choice is an opportunity to self-reflect and to ethically challenge why we are in these places we term 'marginalised'. On a day in Kliptown when Thabang turned to Kristen and said, 'If you're going to be

2
Thabang's life expectancy as a Black man in South Africa is 58 years, while Kristen's, as a White woman in Canada, is 83 years (O'Neil 2024a and b).

Figure 3: Kliptown resident in the shadows of Walter Sisulu Square. The African National Congress (ANC) spent millions on this post-apartheid monument, while just a few metres away in Kliptown (the oldest multi-racial neighbourhood in Johannesburg c. 1903) little has changed. Source: Bremner 2008; photo by Nkwanyana 2021.

another White person wearing a cloak of guilt, we don't need you here', he was insisting she take up her agency *to decide*.

From Thabang

Without any knowledge of who she was or her academic background, I first met Kristen when she came to visit our local gallery in Kliptown, *Post 77 Art Gallery*. We had hosted American street graffiti photographer, Martha Cooper, from *Soweto-Sowebo,* with street art murals around the community of Kliptown. From the gallery, we moved to check the murals, the different buildings, and their details like our pathway paving in the yard. From this meeting, a creative friendship started that inspires and brings about change in the community and other beautiful projects.

Recently, in South African news, there was a story of a video trending on social media showing coloured students in a Cape Town school auctioning Black students for sale. If that mindset can be seen in lower primary school-age kids, it shows how deeply the roots of the challenges we face run. As a Black man born in South Africa in the 1980s and living in Freedom Charter Square, Kliptown, I understand exactly the power of White supremacy and how it is used from generation to generation as a tool and language to oppress by any means necessary. *It is from such experiences that we seek changes in how we build each other to be human*.

Can we start from the inequalities? I guess I understand and relate the most to that since South Africa's *Freedom Charter* was drafted and signed by the Congress of the People in 1955 in my neighbourhood of Kliptown. Seventy years later, from where I sit, the 'New South Africa' has never seen freedom. How can there be freedom – a necessary condition of equality – with no service delivery, no proper sanitation, no electricity, and no infrastructure?[3]

As a photographer and a community activist, using my camera and visual skills helps me to tell or highlight the important issues we are facing in my neighbourhood. Documentary filmmaking, and screening at academic conferences (Nkwanyana & Kornienko 2024; Nkwanyana & Kornienko, 2021; Nkwanyana, Kornienko, Shai & Mulhamvu 2020), has given us, as a community, a voice. The images show what's happening on the ground and in the everyday life of our neighbourhood while facing lacks in development and basic service provision, but also show the neighbourhood as a beautiful community. It is through projects like these, rooted in mutual respect, that we ourselves can shape our own community through potent collaboration. It brings change on the ground, seeing and working toward progressive ideas that matter within the community as a whole. For me, our collaboration means I can advocate and showcase my crafts as a visual creative through photography and mural painting, or by helping to bring others' talents or ideas through in current and captured moments. The collaboration is empowering because it's between us, the affected, and the researcher towards development, rather than the standard way of doing research *about* those affected.

> *'BLACK MAN, YOU ARE ON YOUR OWN!' (Biko 2002: 97)*

From Kristen

My years of friendship and work with Thabang have and continue to be, in turns, radically transformative, tough, a good time, and a privilege. Friendship, as a focus in research methodology, may seem both intriguing and perhaps exceptional. Moving from *working with* to *collaborating with* Thabang has critically and fundamentally shifted my own relationship with myself as a person and in understanding the impact (code for violence?) of both broadly *a* White body and individually *my* White body in (research) space (Figure 4). Our relationship is not a transactional case for my exceptionalism from White

3
See our documentary film Living African Urbanisms in Freedom Charter Square, Kliptown: https://youtu.be/Q63ZLmQmZQI?si=lq6TpTJMd0ph1b1.

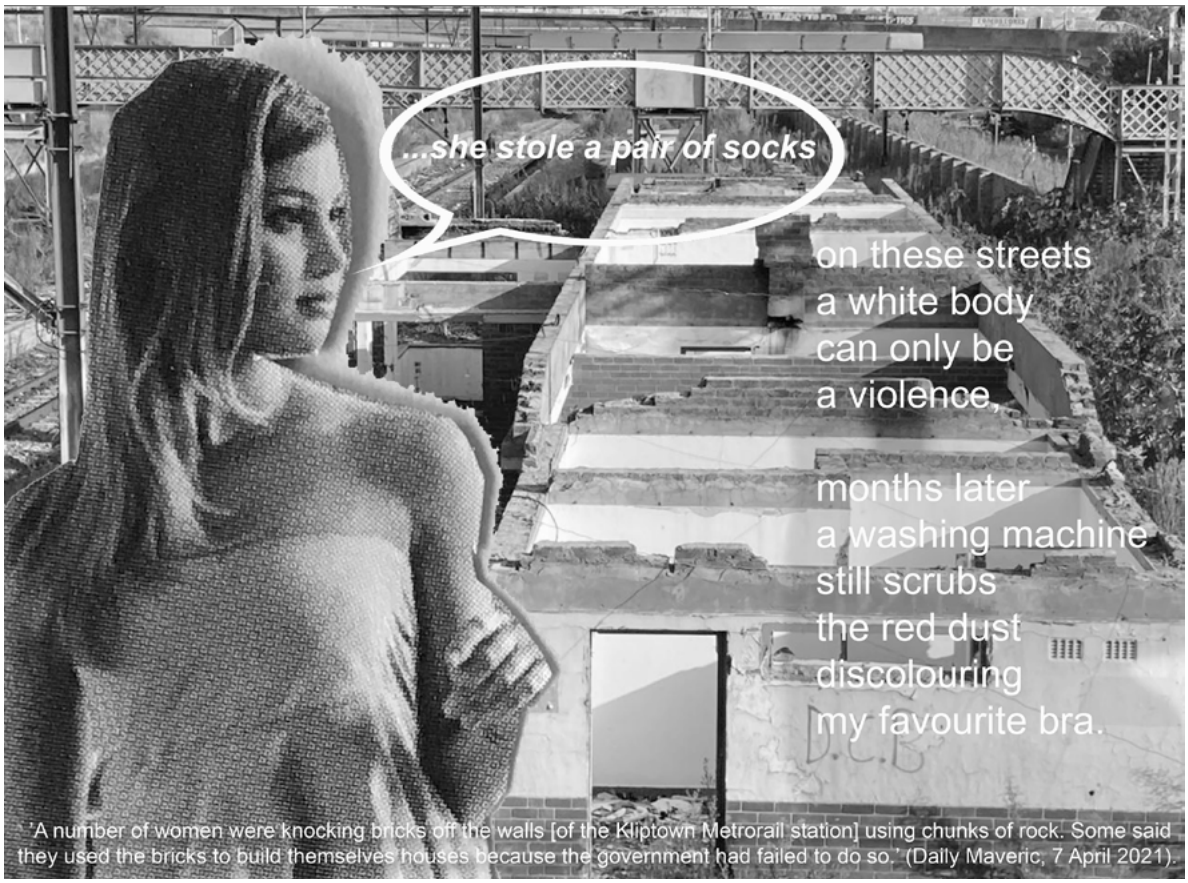

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Figure 4: *She stole a pair of socks* is a self and societal reflection with paper collage, photo, poem, and quote compiled by Kristen Kornienko amidst development-based corruption, oppression, and violence in May 2021 while working in Kliptown during the lockdowns of COVID 19. Source: Drone photo by 1955, poem by Kristen Kornienko. Simelane, 7 April 2021.

supremacist structures and their constructs of racism (Roberts 2021; Jones 2020:235). Looking back, I arrived in Johannesburg in 2007 under the comfortable euphemism of making a difference (code for saviourism) and from the perspective of an, as yet unrealised but deeply internalised, White body frame (Diangelo 2018). Now, I frequently introduce myself with that experience and my subsequent realisings. It was a turning point in my personal and professional reckoning with what I can only describe as our global society's *status quo* of colonising, as an ongoing White supremacy *structure* of violence, rather than as a historical artefact of apartheid or colonialism (Kendi 2023; Goens-Bradley 2020; Mhlauli, Salani & Mokotedi 2015; Tuck & Yang 2012). In the broader topic of this special edition and development or urbanism discourse, contemporising is key because from the place of that frame, the marginalised context of the Global South becomes the 'Other' (Kanai & Gill 2020).

Mkhabela (2023, 2024: 67-9) profoundly articulates the power of 'the frame' in his practice of urban scripting (see also Kornienko 2016; Badiou 2005). He describes it as a decision on what to see, 'a crucial moment in the story', as well as the possibility of an intersectional moment for multiple perspectives. Critical to our filmmaking, and of particular resonance to me as our film editor, his approach to storytelling stresses the importance of visual selection, referring to the photographic image as 'words written in light' (Mkhabela 2024:80). Which recalls, from years ago, Thabang sharing his long-time teacher and mentor *Baba* [Elder] Victor Matom's[4] description of photographic storytelling as painting in light.

Despite years of provocative conversations with such colleagues, arriving in South Africa as an introduction to my own White privilege and western arrogance, remains the crucial lead-in panel to my own story. In searching my conscience, that frame opened the space to see my own so-called 'well-meaning' internalised Whiteness and to shift towards practising the transformative skill of 'landing in white superiority' (Goens-Bradley 2020:45). As a Settler or guest working in (post) colonial contexts, that is my emotional work (Hemphill 2024; Kendi 2023; Jones 2020; Menakem 2017). As Figure 4 explores, only then can I see through my own internalised 'knowing' (informed by western social and/or technical norms) and let go to allow the people and realities of Kliptown to lead the direction and timeline of our practice. A White body in a community like Kliptown changes the dynamics of the community work (meetings, discussions, knowledge-valuing, etc.). Internalised expectations (self and others') of White power frequently undermine local leaders and activists, and impact co-workers who live in the community. This letting go (of saviourism) often means *thoughtfulness* around time in community and on projects; and/or listening when people like Thabang tell me that I shouldn't be there – even when I want to be. At those moments, I must believe in our relationship and in our practice to continue the project.

That said, echoes of White saviourism and gains in my own social capital make me careful not to use that frame as a proclamation of 'wokeness'. That term, so frequently used or intimated, makes me uncomfortable. I include it here because a Motswana scholar and colleague in Johannesburg raised it with me as an increasingly present dynamic within the university and beyond. At the time, I struggled to respond with any kind of real meaning. Long before the cultural appropriation and popularisation of this term (Sobande 2019), McIntosh (1989:10), in her

4
South African photographer and storyteller Victor Matom https://youtu.be/Q_Kmdu78dnc?si=uFvjTeoF8fAVxVP8

seminal work on White privilege, critically points to hierarchies in the systems of maleness and Whiteness as 'interlocking'. Specifically, 'white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious' (ibid:10). Is it that *meant* oblivion that I am 'woke' from? Have I stopped spending those assets? Or at least started leveraging them in more just ways?

Closing and ongoing thoughts

In a global environment of ongoing and seemingly increasing norm-based re-entrenchment of White neoliberal structures of supremacy, Thabang counters with humanness. With *Ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* is a central and southern African philosophy of human interconnection and respect. It is not a metaphor. Humanity, he argues, is not something one can buy or study for, but is the way of living within one's self. He describes it with such human-scale acts as not calling for people to hand out food but to instead go around delivering the food parcel, to respect and preserve the dignity of the needy.

Holding up *Ubuntu* in parallel with wokeness and saviourism, we see human relationship next to personal achievement or redemption or remedy. Wokeness implies a completion that lies in deep contradiction to Kendi's (2023) argument for a lifelong practice towards self and structural change. Kanai and Gill (2020) and Sobande (2019) show 'woke-ness' as a tricky intersection of race, gender, feminism, and activism with social justice that can [like saviourism] lend shadowy support to neoliberalism and *status quo* structures of colonialism, rather than actually working to dismantling them. Words like 'decolonisation', 'unceded', 'sustainable', 'informality', 'wokeness' roll so easily off the tongue or onto the page, yet lurk in the nebulous obscurity of metaphor (Tuck & Yang 2012) or euphemism. That should scare us. They can be the trap to more palatably reframe, and so perpetuate, the *status quo*.

So, what is the change? The voices clamouring for an ethical disruption in the all too often extractive nature of, and hierarchical approach to, community-based research is slowly increasing (Mkhabela 2024; Andrews & Khalema 2023; Beier 2022; Malaza 2001 among others). Here, we argue the further need to challenge the ensconced norms and stigmas widely imposed on community-based practices and knowledge values, and further to challenge our own internalised definitions of what we call the 'Other'.

Our collaboration teaches us to nurture our abilities to think *and act* with increasingly more complexity, courage, openness, and willingness to 'fail'. Lowman and Barker's (2015:19) words about what is 'success' in trying to bring about positive transformation in the context of post-colonial Canada resonates within our work in South Africa as well: 'Often the relationships built through common struggle, the lessons learned from confrontation with powerful structures of oppression, or the creative tactics generated on the fly or in the context of an energised and vibrant challenge to power that opens up space for the "radical imagination," are all more valuable – and more realistic – successes than what activists envision might be possible.' Held (2020) echoes this sentiment, reflecting on the problematic characterising of research results within a colonial-style binary of success and failure, the latter often going un-published and un-shared, thus losing opportunities to reflect more communally on the work, the relationships, the story.

Further, we believe (with emphasis from Thabang) that those of us who are White and working in (post) colonial contexts, whether as Settlers or visitors, need to challenge more deeply the theme of White saviourism. It is a term many of us cringe away from. Stevens (2020:98), from the Canadian realm of journalism and critical writing, argues that White saviourism has ongoing modernist roots and mechanistic power to perpetuate patterns. Of particular importance to our discussion in this essay and our practice of storytelling through film – and to the topic of this special issue more generally – is her conclusion that, 'The white saviour trope is an intriguing concept laden with issues of power, domination, and ideology. Philosophically, it requires a deep level of critical analysis. Its persistence across many sense-making platforms may reveal a deep look into the psyche of colonialism and into our own nature' (ibid:99). Thabang's comment to Kristen shared above about wearing a cloak of guilt was a bitter pill in that moment, but his comment challenges a deep ongoing shift in her psyche. It points to a fundamentally critical question raised more generally in practices of restorative justice (Goens-Bradley 2020) and is particularly relevant to this forum: Why do White researchers travel to the Global South and to so-called marginalised communities?

We wrestle with this question. Repositioning hierarchies with 'right-relations' (Mills/Ma'lingan 2017:209) and friendship bonds, the role of saviour becomes increasingly insupportable. This shift raises the relevance of *mutual* personal and collective healing across contexts grappling with (re)conciliation. Deep care for each other as beings and about our communities enables the ability to acknowledge and endeavour to heal racial and colonial trauma in the work we do, without which we almost certainly run the risk of perpetuating it (Hemphill 2024; Kendi 2023; Menakem 2017). Jones (2020:235), like the earlier work of McIntosh (1989), supports that dynamic of healing with his statement that 'the most important step toward health is to recover from our white-supremacy-induced amnesia', in our own psyches as well as institutions. In this essay, we argue the capacity of friendship and the craft of filmmaking as means to speak truth to power, but of equal importance is that we simply love making films together and envisioning a future rooted in dreams and the everyday.

The long-term circular flow of learnings, energies, and resources across our global relationship and its many intersections enables us to span boundaries. Often manifesting as conversations and small-scale civic engagements over coffee or wine or a cold drink or a pause on the street, it re-calibrates our thinking and builds the personal communities necessary to sustain changemaking and being a changemaker. That said, some readers may be taken aback at the ardour with which we acknowledge and dissect the violent presence of White supremacy and racism in our relationship and our co-practice. To understand how we got there, you must look to the length and depth of our friendship and,

with it, the trust to say, and hear, the hard things. Thabang: 'Growing up and living in such a community [as Kliptown], one develops a tough skin and the need to do things in a different way, a way so that people can shape themselves rather being directed or driven. Such collaborations are imperative to the community and needed for self-sustainability.'

Our Kliptown Playlist

- *Spirit* (feat. Wale), Kwesta from *Spirit* (feat. Wale) – single.
- *More Fire* (original mix), Kabza De Small.
- *Sinnerman*, Nina Simone, from *The Essential Nina Simone*.
- *Akulaleki* (feat. Shasha, DJ Maphorisa and Kabza De Small), Samthing Soweto from *Isphithiphithi*.
- *Mama Africa*, Peter Tosh from *Mama Africa*.
- *Tennessee*, Arrested Development from *3 Years, 5 Months and 2 Days in the Life Of…*
- *Let's Eat,* Maimouna Youssef & Mumu Fresh from *Chasing Goosebumps 2: The Healing.*

Acknowledgements

Though not listed as co-authors, years of conversation and work with Sechaba Maape, Victor Matom, Solam Mkhabela, Mpho Nenweli and Bafana Gumede (among others) have contributed greatly to our work and the perspectives in this essay. We would also like to acknowledge all the people associated with 1955 and the community of Kliptown, as well as the support and learning, both financial and human, in our association with Wits University School of Architecture and Planning, with particular thanks to funds (2014-21) from the Wits University SoAP Research and Working Group.

Conflict of interest statement: None declared.

Notes

1. The terms 'Settler' or 'White settler' are used as *parallel colonial constructs* to Indigenous (Lowman & Barker 2015).
2. The racial distinctions of Black and White are 'manifestations of history, not a state of being' (Ndebele 2017: x), and are intentional and ongoing power armatures of White supremacy.
3. We have included literature from journalism because in it the ethics of how we get information and write stories is critically examined.
4. The references included below are both works cited in the text as well as those that contribute to our ongoing personal reckonings with how we work and show up in the world.
5. It is with intent that the terms 'informal', 'formal', 'informal settlement' and 'slum' have *not* been used in this article (Beier 2022 and Huchzermeyer & Kornienko 2024, among others).
6. All figures are shared through Creative Commons. The photographs and artworks remain copyrighted to the artists and cannot be reproduced outside of this publication.

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Tsekiso "Thabang" Nkwanyana

is based in Freedom Charter Square, Kliptown, Soweto. A mixed-race community with diverse cultural spaces; the "Other", the Western-based urban construct of informal. Growing up there was a mixed experience, rich history and culture yet underprivileged and surrounded by poverty, crime, drugs and unemployment. Through the arts he found himself and his voice of positivity. He is a passionate, self-taught visual creative: photographer, graffiti artist, stenciller, filmmaker and museum/gallery installer. He studied at Johannesburg's Market Photo Workshop until he had to drop out because of funding. He co-founded the Kliptown movement and gallery Post 77. Though now closed, it left a lasting legacy. Thabang is currently the co-founder and director of 1955 Creative Collaboration and a leader in his community. He has collaborated with international artists and academics. <iceebang@gmail.com>

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Bridging Structural Approaches and Lived Realities when Conducting Empirical Research in Morocco

Meryem Belkadi

This paper explores the discrepancies between theoretical frameworks informed by North-Western planning scholarship and the lived experiences of researchers and research participants in the so-called slums in the Global South. Prevailing scholarship often emphasises the structural role of institutions and governance systems in shaping and eradicating informality, thereby failing to capture the nuanced and granular realities of these contexts.

Drawing on the author's dual background as researcher and practitioner, as well as on critical post-colonial scholarship, this paper aims at highlighting power balances and imbalances inherent to the research process. It also aims at shedding light on a unique form of agency that often goes unrecognised, that is, the ways in which research participants instrumentalise and shape research and knowledge production processes. This paper also emphasises the existential challenges researchers face in bridging the ethical realities of empirical investigation with the ethical frameworks of Western academic research institutions.

By acknowledging these challenges, this paper calls for a re-evaluation of how researchers can engage meaningfully with complex social, economic, and spatial issues, suggesting that integrating practitioner experience and recognising participant agency may enhance the impact, efficacy, and ethical grounding of empirical research.

Die Überbrückung struktureller Konzepte und gelebter Realitäten bei der Durchführung empirischer Forschung in Marokko

Dieser Beitrag untersucht die Diskrepanzen zwischen nord-westlich geprägten Planungstheorien und den gelebten Erfahrungen von Wissenschaftler:innen und Forschungsteilnehmer:innen in den sogenannten Slums des Globalen Südens. Die führende Planungsforschung betont oft die strukturelle Rolle von Institutionen und Governance-Systemen bei der Gestaltung und Beseitigung von Informalität und versäumt es dabei, die nuancierten und granularen Realitäten dieser Kontexte zu erfassen.

*Aufbauend auf dem dualen Hintergrund der Autorin als Wissenschaftlerin und Praktikerin sowie kritischer postkolonialer Literatur zielt dieser Beitrag darauf ab, die dem Forschungsprozess inhärenten Machtverhältnisse und -ungleichheiten hervorzuheben. Er soll auch eine besondere Form der Agency beleuchten, die oft nicht wahrgenommen wird, nämlich die Art und Weise, wie Forschungsteilnehmer*innen Forschungs- und Wissensproduktionsprozesse instrumentalisieren und gestalten. Dieser Beitrag betont auch die existenziellen Herausforderungen, denen Forscher*innen gegenüberstehen, wenn sie die ethischen Realitäten empirischer Untersuchungen mit den ethischen Rahmenbedingungen westlicher akademischer Forschungseinrichtungen zusammenbringen wollen.*

*In Anerkennung dieser Herausforderungen fordert dieser Artikel eine Neubewertung der Frage, wie Forscher*innen sich sinnvoll mit komplexen sozialen, wirtschaftlichen und räumlichen Themen auseinandersetzen können, und legt nahe, dass die Einbeziehung praktischer Erfahrungen und ein Bewusstsein für Agency in Forschungsprozessen die Wirkung, Wirksamkeit und die ethische Grundlage empirischer Forschung verbessern können.*

Introduction: Problematising displacement research in Morocco

Displacement is a persistent urban phenomenon that affects many urban dwellers around the world. Displacement can be the result of urban development, armed conflict, natural disasters, or state-intervention, to name a few reasons. A variety of terms are used to describe processes of displacement: gentrification (Freeman & Braconi 2004; Newman & Wyly 2006; Porteous & Smith 2001), eviction (Brickell *et al*. 2017; Desmond 2016), or slum clearance (Benson 2016; Doshi 2019; Paris & Blackaby 1979). Other scholars use different terms to situate displacement within specific institutional and political frameworks. For instance, Lees *et al*. (2015), drawing on Smith's (1996) work, describe displacement and gentrification as ways to implement the 'revanchist city'. In the context of war and conflict, Porteous & Smith (2001) refer to displacement resulting from the destruction of homes as 'domicide'. Similarly, Yiftachel (2009) describes the destruction of homes and resulting displacement as the blackening of 'gray spaces'.

These conceptualisations underpin the many drivers and rationales of displacement. They also underpin the structural approach to theorising and problematising displacement. I emphasise here the term 'displacement' rather than 'resettlement' because resettlement policies do not always lead to reterritorialisation (Wang 2022), even if they result in compensation. Shifting the focus to displacement, instead of resettlement, offers a clearer perspective on the spatial and temporal dynamics of displacement programmes akin to the national slum clearance programme *Villes sans Bidonvilles* (VSB) in Morocco. The primary impetus behind this focus lies in the view that displacement, when followed by compensation and a comprehensive socio-economic and spatial approach, can create opportunities for improved living conditions in the Moroccan context. This perspective is shaped by my personal history and the housing insecurity that many of my family members have experienced.

In the Moroccan context, the rationale for displacement that policymakers, and local and central governments, often advance depends on the promise of resettlement and the improvement of living conditions for those in substandard

housing. Displaced households, with the promise of imminent resettlement in the context of the VSB, are displaced on the premise of enhancing their living conditions. However, this displacement process neglects to fully consider what constitutes a comprehensive approach to enhancing living standards. Building on a growing body of empirical research on displacement and urban resettlement in Morocco (Atia 2022; Beier 2021, 2024; Bogaert 2018; Lamia 2007; Navez-Bouchanine 2002, 2013; Toutain 2016; Zaki 2007), this research aims at shedding light on the discrepancies between the needs of the displaced dwellers and the rationales of the policymakers responsible for conceptualising and implementing the VSB programme, and how these discrepancies can be addressed to improve the experiences of those displaced. Thus, this paper does not emphasise the findings of the empirical research but, rather, focuses on the challenges encountered in the fieldwork, when interacting with displaced individuals and policymakers. The goal of this focus is to highlight the importance of overlaying and articulating assumptions, knowledge, and evidence at a granular level to produce multifaceted and intricate stories of displacement trajectories. This paper also examines the researcher's positionality, and highlights the importance of reflexivity in mitigating potential bias. For this purpose, this paper is organised as follows. I set out by setting the empirical investigation in the spatial context of Tangier, Morocco. I then introduce the methodology of this research, with a focus on my positionality and reflexivity in conducting an empirical investigation in the context of Morocco. I then speak of ethical concerns, and the limitations encountered, when conducting research framed by Western ethical guidelines in a non-Western context. I conclude by reflecting on this empirical investigation, and its importance in rethinking empirical research and its normative implications in the context of the Global South.

Spatial framing: displacement in Tangier, Morocco

The concern of my research and empirical investigation is accrued in the Moroccan context, where displacement is prevalent because of historical institutional and political reasons. When the French government ruled the major urban parts of the country, the tabula rasa approach was adopted to clear informal settlements (Avermaete 2010). Consequently, large groups of slum dwellers were frequently displaced from one urban area to another. The objective of these displacement actions was to add to the insecurity and instability experienced by the indigenous populations, while simultaneously dismantling any nationalist resistance movements that could emerge within these communities (Avermaete 2010). Post-independence, with the goal to counter and limit social uprisings and political dissent, Moroccan authorities relied on displacement as a form of urban governance. Following the bread riots in the 1980s, authorities in Casablanca initiated a significant de-densification effort and the displacement of thousands of households to the city's outskirts, with the goal to quell dissent and social uprisings (Rachik 2002). In response to the 2003 terrorist attacks in Casablanca, the King Mohammed VI launched the nationwide slum clearance programme, VSB, with the goal of clearing informal settlements. It is noteworthy that some terrorists involved in these attacks were residents of one of the largest informal settlement in Sidi Moumen (Bogaert 2018; Toutain & Rachmuhl 2014). While the VSB programme is advertised as a social programme, it serves also to preserve order and security in Moroccan cities by mitigating threats to 'the cohesion of the social fabric' (King Mohammed VI Throne Day speech, 30 July 2003).

The implementation of the VSB programme in the city of Tangier is a part of projects and processes of territorialisation taking place in the northern region of the country. Tangier plays a key role in Morocco's global positioning, as it is situated at the northern tip of Morocco, at the intersection of the African and European continents. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Tangier imposed itself as a centre for strategic territorial development in the North (Berriane 2015), attracting sustained interest and large structural investments under the reign of the newly inthronised King Mohammed VI[1] and significantly transforming its urban environment. Post-independence, between 1956 and the late 1990s, Tangier and the northern region endured significant challenges as a result of political repression, economic marginalisation, and negative association with illegal activities such as the drug trade (Mareï *et al*. 2022). These exclusionary mechanisms had their roots in the Rif Revolution[2] and its violent repression in 1958 and 1959 by Hassan II, then heir to King Mohammed V (Vatin 2016). This resulted in a rise in informal housing and settlements. Among these settlements are the neighbourhoods of El Haffa and Haoumat Jamaa, two key sites in which the researcher conducted their empirical investigation.

El Haffa, an informal settlement on Tangier's northwest coast, emerged as a response to post-protectorate urban population growth and housing demands. Initially characterised by shacks, the area saw incremental replacement with brick structures of one to four stories beginning in the 1970s (Le Tellier 2006). Conversely, Haoumat Jamaa was established in the early 1990s, in the midst of widespread protests over the invasion of Iraq during the Gulf War. These protests served as an opportunity for squatter 'organisers' to initiate many squatting campaigns across Tangier (see: interview with Mer_02).

During preliminary archival research, I identified two significant sites. Le Tellier's work was instrumental in elucidating urban development patterns in Tangier, including the proliferation of informal settlements. The researcher was aware that access to these sites, however, depended on the feasibility and opportunity.

Methodological framework of the empirical investigation

At the outset of my research, I recognised the challenges and gaps that I needed to bridge – namely: 1) academic/intellectual, and 2) research-site and participant accessibility. Academically, the existing prevalent literature on displacement often treats it as a standardised process, uniformly impacting all individuals across different contexts. This narrative typically portrays displaced communities as victims of policies enforced by a neoliberal and, at times, autocratic 'state' and its institutions (Roy 2016). This structural approach to displacement overlooks the relational component inherent to displacement processes. More specifically, it overlooks that institutions are composed of a large array of individuals, including policymakers, civil servants, planners, and displaced individuals, whose conflicting rationalities (De Satgé & Watson 2018) can result in conflicts and negotiation, as well as 'heterogeneous or even contradictory experiences of displacement' (Beier 2024).

1
King Mohammed VI ascended to the throne of Morocco after the death of his father in 1999.

2
In October 1958, a protest movement emerged across the Rif, signalling widespread discontent with the policies of the Moroccan authorities. This movement was repressed by the Royal Armed Forces.

◀
Figure 1: View of the remaining buildings in El Haffa showing a combination of shacks and brick buildings of different heights.

In addition, Marris (1987, 1996) sheds light on the underlying structures of meaning that guide the interactions between displaced dwellers and policymakers. Marris describes these structures as complex, interdependent, and hierarchical – akin to an ecology of living things – and crucial in defining the actions and intentions of individuals. He differentiates between personal and public meanings, whereby personal meanings are deeply rooted in attachments to place, people, and institutions, and public meanings are shaped by overarching ideologies derived from law, science, and religion. These authoritative systems dictate the beliefs expected of individuals. The importance, then, of both personal and public structures of meaning is the predictability in patterns of behaviour and action, including when conducting fieldwork.

My professional background as an architect in Morocco since 2010 has afforded me a profound understanding of the institutional structures and dynamics within the sectors of architecture and urban planning; thus, as a researcher, I was equipped to navigate the gap between the 'sanitised' academic narratives of displacement and the complex realities encountered in the field.

In addition, I needed to overcome distinct challenges linked to conducting research in Morocco, namely: accessing the research site and research participants. In terms of accessing the site, I conducted exploratory fieldwork in person and remotely in the summers of 2019 and 2020. I initially considered Rabat as a case study due to my architectural experience in the city and an extensive network of architects, planners, and civil servants. However, I was advised by the same network against this decision because of the political sensitivities surrounding displacement projects in Rabat, compounded by communal elections anticipated to take place in September 2021. Consequently, I redirected my focus to Tangier, located in the northern region of Morocco, where I was referred by my professional and personal networks to actors playing key roles in the implementation of the VSB programme. While Tangier may not be politically charged in the same manner as Rabat, its distinct historical context renders it significant for this research.

Once the research site was identified, I conducted participant observation and in-depth semi-structured interviews and walking interviews with displaced dwellers, as well as in-depth semi-structured interviews with policymakers, researchers, and civil society actors, between April and July 2022, and in October 2023. For all research participants, the sampling methods combine purposive and snowball sampling. At first, purposive sampling resulted in the identification of two policymakers and three researchers contacted through former colleagues and professors. Then, using snowball sampling, the researcher identified additional policymakers, researchers, and civil society actors.

The researcher employed purposive sampling to identify participants among displaced dwellers, facilitated by the *moqaddem* in two planned resettlement sites, and through personal networks in the displacement site of El Haffa and the resettlement sites Essalam 1 & 2. The *moqaddem*, an auxiliary authority agent at the lowest echelon of state representation at the local level (Hibou & Tozy 2020), serves as a gatekeeper of local demographic, occupational, and spatial knowledge.

Reflexivity and positionality in the fieldwork

While the description of this methodology suggests a straightforward ethnographic process, the fieldwork was more complex and faced significant structural challenges. A key challenge in the fieldwork was the complex interplay of trust and distrust between researchers, local authorities, and displaced populations. Policymakers often framed displaced individuals as opportunistic actors seeking to extract benefits from the state, mirroring a broader governance logic that views informal settlement dwellers as both vulnerable and subversive (Navez-Bouchanine 2002; Zaki 2007). Conversely, displaced individuals approached the research process with strategic caution, balancing their willingness to share information with the need to protect their own interest. I discuss these challenges in two steps. First, I provide descriptive and analytical accounts of the relationship held between the researcher and policymakers, especially local authority representatives. Second, I shed light on the relationship between displaced dwellers and the researcher.

Initiating fieldwork in Morocco necessitates obtaining formal authorisations. Securing authorisation from local authority representatives and aligning with them on the objectives and procedures of the research is crucial in preventing gatekeeping of information and community access. However, engaging and establishing contact with these officials can be challenging. At the outset of my research, I attempted to contact the ***caid*** of a district where residents of El Haffa had been displaced. The *caid* functions as the hierarchical superior of the *moqaddem* and acts as the official representative of the central state, overseeing the administration of urban districts. Securing the *caid*'s approval for fieldwork posed significant

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challenges, as demonstrated by the following excerpt from my field notes:

> *Upon my arrival, I waited in a narrow corridor for approximately half an hour. When I inquired with the administrative employees, they informed me that the caid had left, and his return time was uncertain. In Morocco, waiting is practised as a 'national sport'. One should not rush interactions with local authority representatives; it is an integral part of the decorum.*
>
> *Upon the caid's return, I was invited into his office. Initially, the moqaddem was not present but joined later during the conversation. The caid requested my identification, university enrolment documents, and authorisation papers. Additionally, he asked for an interview guide to evaluate the types of questions I intended to ask the local population. After reviewing these documents and retaining copies for his records, the conversation shifted towards persuading me to conduct my research in a different area where recent displacements had occurred. The moqaddem supported the caid's argument and stated: 'These populations were displaced a long time ago; they no longer consider themselves resettled [recasés], as they are already integrated.'*

I subtly showcased to the *caid* my knowledge of the site and the city, and indicated that I had received information from a policymaker working at the Housing Directorate informing me that a significant number of households displaced from El Haffa had been relocated to two resettlements sites situated in the urban district overseen by the *caid*. This information substantiated my interest in conducting research within this particular urban district. Following an extensive discussion, I successfully obtained authorisation from the *caid*. However, he cautioned against an extended presence at the site, highlighting the rapid dissemination of speculation and hearsay in such neighbourhoods, which could potentially lead to disruptions.

This experience, and others not included in this article, highlights the power dynamics involved in engaging in researching informal settlements in Morocco. Engaging effectively with officials in such environments requires a nuanced approach to negotiation and the utilisation of soft-power tactics. Namely, I established credibility by showing prior knowledge of the site and referencing an authoritative source – a policymaker at the Housing Directorate. As such, my inquiry became legitimate and aligned with official narratives and urban governance structures. The response of the *caid*, and the caution to reduce the time spent on site, speaks to the primacy of security concerns, and the reiteration of the gatekeeping role that bureaucracy plays in accessing information and knowledge production. In fact, local authorities often reserve the discretionary right to withdraw research authorisation at any time, which can jeopardise ongoing research projects without prior notice.

Displaced dwellers also extended distrust to the researcher, which could result in hindrances to accessing critical information in the process of conducting the fieldwork and could lead to high-risk situations for both the researcher and research participants. Thus, displaced individuals approached the research process with strategic caution, balancing their willingness to share information with the need to protect their own interests. Excerpts from field notes with two research participants best illustrate this point:

> *During my fieldwork in the neighbourhood known as El Haffa, I arranged to meet with a local contact, A., whom I had previously met through E. at Café El Haffa. Our initial interaction was brief, but A. expressed a willingness to include two other household members in future discussions. […] On Monday, I arrived slightly early at 11:50 am and found A. and his relative in the public park waiting for me. I greeted both by saying sālām, and greeted the mother traditionally, by kissing her cheeks – the intent being to establish rapport. I inquired about the other relative and was told by A. she had to go to Rabat because of a medical emergency. The initial park seating was uncomfortable, so I suggested moving to Café Hanafta for a more conducive setting. A. and his mother, however, declined due to concerns about being recognised and the potential social perceptions of interacting with an outsider in their former neighbourhood. […] Shortly after our conversation began, a young woman in dark glasses and a black dress with brown patterns arrived and greeted A. and his relative. Initially, she stood hesitantly, seemingly assessing the setting and the participants, likely evaluating the safety or suitability of joining the discussion. The precise moment she chose to sit was obscured by ongoing interactions, but her decision to sit to my left markedly shifted the dynamics of the interview. This intensified my feelings of discomfort due to potential breaches of privacy and ethical concerns in carrying on with the interview in her presence. Her initial statement upon sitting was both direct and laden with implications: 'Bghinā naʿrifū ilā kāyin shī taʿwīdāt' [We want to know if there is compensation].*

This inquiry into the possibility of compensation brought to the forefront the complex interplay of expectations and apprehensions that often accompany discussions around displacement and resettlement with displaced individuals. Ethnographic encounters, indeed, revealed instances where participants sought to instrumentalise the research process for personal gain. Inquiries about financial compensation, strategic omissions of information, and performative narratives underscore the agency of research participants in shaping knowledge production. These interactions contest the dominant narrative in Western literature regarding the agency of the displaced, highlighting instead the fluid and contested nature of knowledge exchange in fieldwork settings.

In addition, this exchange underscores the importance of trust-building when conducting fieldwork. Trust is a bidirectional challenge that affects both researchers and research participants. While some participants exhibited hesitation or delayed trust in my intentions as a researcher, there were instances where the researcher similarly found it difficult to fully trust research participants. This reciprocal dynamic of trust underscores the complex interpersonal relationships that develop within fieldwork and the risks it entails for the researcher and the research participants, as evidenced in the following excerpt from the field notes:

> *When walking in the neighbourhood, I observed a man feeding cats outside his house, which piqued my*

interest in engaging with him. Initially reluctant, I approached him for an interview only after failing to get responses at other doors. He agreed as he was entering his house, and we briefly conversed at his doorstep. As he was concluding the interview, his wife suddenly appeared, startling me with her intense demeanour. Coughing and struggling to articulate her words, she gestured toward the house, indicating her residence, and demanded an explanation for my presence. I clarified my research focus on the effects of displacement on individuals' lives. She then inquired whether my visits encompassed all homes in the area, to which I affirmed they did.

Following this interaction, I continued my attempts to engage other community members by knocking on additional doors. A young girl playing outside eagerly responded to my request to summon her mother. As she called out and rang the bell, the same woman from earlier approached me once more, now expressing an urgent need to discuss a matter with me away from the 'eyes of the street'. Her insistence heightened my discomfort, particularly as she acknowledged my unease and repeatedly reassured me, saying, 'Mā tkhāfish, mā ʿindik mināsh tkhāfī' [Don't be afraid, you have nothing to fear]. She persistently questioned my visits and urged me to move to a more secluded location, a request I resisted due to increasing apprehension. I suggested speaking where we stood, emphasising the emptiness of the street and the absence of eavesdroppers, but she remained adamant about moving to a more-isolated part of the neighbourhood. I managed to disengage and proceed with another interview, however her watchful presence created a palpable sense of unease, challenging my ability to maintain a professional and composed demeanour. Upon concluding the interview, I promptly exited the area, moving quickly through the neighbourhood to reach the main street and secure transportation.

The abrupt departure from the field highlighted the unpredictable nature of ethnographic research in environments where the researcher might be viewed with suspicion. This experience sheds light on the complex ethical and methodological challenges of working in contested spaces, where access depends on more than logistics – it's influenced by power dynamics, trust, and perceived affiliations. Specifically, my position as a perceived outsider, particularly as a woman potentially linked to the government, shaped interactions and complicated data collection, emphasising the participants' grievances and their mistrust towards any representative of state authority.

The preoccupation of state officials with maintaining security protocols often results in infrequent and superficial engagements with the community. This approach fosters a governance model where the authorities' engagement with the population is sporadic and task-oriented, rather than continuous and community-focused. Consequently, the displaced populations encounter a bureaucratic environment where their interactions with local authorities are often constrained to formal and procedural matters, rather than addressing their broader social and economic needs.

Such a governance style underscores a disconnection between local authorities and the community, reinforcing feelings of neglect and marginalisation among the displaced populations. This pattern of management by absence not only hinders effective communication and trust-building but also exacerbates the challenges faced by displaced individuals, who often find themselves navigating a system that is more reactive than proactive. The limited and agenda-driven encounters with authorities fail to provide the necessary support and resources for the displaced populations to integrate fully and rebuild their lives, thus perpetuating their vulnerability and precarity. In such circumstances, displaced individuals often view the researcher as an intermediary with local authorities, overlooking the researcher's full disclosure about the aims of their research.

The researcher's positionality was dynamic and contingent upon the context of their interactions with research participants. Among policymakers, local authorities, and researchers, I was perceived as an insider due to my professional background as an architect and my prior involvement in structural projects. This insider status was further reinforced by the mode of introduction, as my engagement with these participants was facilitated through established professional networks. Such affiliations fostered a level of familiarity and legitimacy, shaping the nature of exchanges and the depth of insights shared.

Among displaced individuals, the researcher's positionality was shaped by intersecting factors that positioned me simultaneously as both an insider and an outsider. Linguistically, my dialect signalled my origins in the capital city, distinguishing me from local residents in Tangier and reinforcing my status as an outsider. Furthermore, while my familiarity with displacement through familial experiences provided a degree of contextual understanding, my lack of direct personal experience with displacement further delineated this boundary. Gender norms also played a significant role in mediating my access to participants. As a woman, I was able to foster trust and rapport with female participants, who often expressed greater comfort in sharing their experiences. Conversely, certain male participants were either less forthcoming or dismissive of specific lines of inquiry, highlighting the ways in which gendered social norms shaped the research encounter.

Ethical challenges: Western academic institutions vs. Moroccan state institutions

Before initiating fieldwork, I submitted an ethics application to the Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) in which I outlined the proposed empirical methods and incorporated a flexible framework tailored to the Moroccan context. Drawing on my familiarity with local constraints, I specified that informed consent could be obtained, either verbally or in writing, to accommodate situations where written consent was not feasible. Local authorities did not issue formal written authorisation; instead, they provided verbal permission that remained informal and could be withdrawn at any time. Displaced participants also gave verbal consent to participate in interviews, as requesting written consent was culturally and practically inappropriate. I also proposed a flexible timeline, given the challenges and unpredictability involved in securing local approvals to begin fieldwork in Morocco.

This scenario underscores a discrepancy between the ethics review protocols of North American universities and the operational realities in Moroccan contexts. North American

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standards often fail to accommodate the nuances of fieldwork in non-Western settings, where local officials may be reluctant to formalise agreements in writing. This divergence between verbal and written consent introduces substantial challenges to the perceived legitimacy and procedural integrity of the research, necessitating a re-evaluation of ethics protocols to better reflect local practices without implying the superiority of one system over another.

The researcher made an ethical decision to undertake limited immersion at the site (Krause 2021), a deviation from the extensively recommended longer durations of fieldwork immersion. This decision was influenced by concerns about potential impacts on the site, including increased speculation about the researcher's true identity, affiliations, and underlying motives (Fujii 2010; Krause 2021). The choice for a shorter immersion period was also motivated by a desire to minimise intrusiveness at a site where the researcher's presence as an outsider was conspicuous, thus mitigating potential disruptions or biases that prolonged engagement might introduce to the social dynamics of the site.

Short or limited immersion may be perceived as extractive, especially in communities where participation and integration are considered paramount. Limited immersion may be perceived as a 'hit-and-run' where the researcher's interest lies in collecting the data without great understanding of the local complexities of the site (Fleming & Rhodes 2023). However, this does not reflect the strategic approach of such an ethnographic approach, namely, navigating the balance between data collection and respecting local norms and space. The feasibility of this abbreviated immersion was underpinned by the researcher's pre-existing knowledge of the area and established local networks. This foundational understanding allowed for a strategic approach to data collection that involved varying the sampling sites both spatially and temporally.

Conclusion

This paper offers methodological insights on conducting fieldwork in resettlement planned sites and informal settlements in Morocco. A key insight is the importance of researcher positionality – the researcher's identity and background – in shaping the research process. In this case, the researcher's dual role as a Moroccan architect-practitioner and a Western-trained scholar became a bridge between academic theory and on-the-ground practice. This positionality was dynamic: among policymakers and local authorities, the researcher was seen as an 'insider', leveraging professional networks and status to gain trust and rich insights. Conversely, among displaced residents, the researcher navigated a dual identity as both an insider and an outsider. These intersecting identities required continuous reflexivity and adaptation, as the researcher had to build rapport in one moment and overcome suspicion in the next.

The study highlights that trust dynamics are central to empirical research in such contexts: access to research participants and data depend on relationships and credibility. Indeed, research participants exercised their agency throughout the process – at times instrumentalising the researcher as a potential intermediary to voice grievances or seek information (for instance, inquiring about compensation through the researcher). Rather than being passive subjects, participants actively shaped the direction and focus of the field encounters. These insights demonstrate that a relational, participant-centred methodology – one that acknowledges power imbalances, the researcher's own role, and the community's agency – is crucial for generating ethical and relevant knowledge in displacement research.

The research also grapples with ethical dilemmas that arise when Western academic norms meet local realities. Conducting fieldwork in Morocco revealed a disconnection between the ethics protocols of Western institutions and what was feasible or appropriate on-site. For example, university ethics boards typically require formal written consent and official authorisation, but in the field only verbal permissions could be obtained – local authorities gave oral approvals – revocable at any time. This illustrates a broader point: strict Western informed-consent procedures can be impractical and even culturally alien in some Global South contexts. The researcher had to adapt ethically, accepting verbal consent as valid and proceeding without written agreements, thereby upholding the spirit of ethical research – respect and transparency – while working within local constraints.

Another dilemma involved the depth of field immersion. Classical ethnographic methodology calls for prolonged engagement, but given the sensitive context and the researcher's outsider positionality, a conscious decision was made to limit the duration of immersion. This was done to minimise disturbance and suspicion in the community – a prolonged stay might heighten speculation about the researcher's intentions or affiliations. While shorter immersion risks being seen as extractive, the study justifies it as a strategic balance between data collection and respect for local space and norms. Crucially, this strategy was only viable because the researcher's prior local knowledge and networks allowed for focused engagement without long-term residence.

These ethical and methodological compromises underscore the need for flexibility in research design. The study confronts the Western academic framework with the lived ethical reality of fieldwork, arguing that researchers must often negotiate between institutional requirements and the community's terms of engagement. In doing so, it calls for context-sensitive ethics that do not impose one-size-fits-all standards but, instead, prioritise doing no harm, fostering trust, and respecting local ways of consent and communication.

Ultimately, this paper highlights that conventional methods must evolve if they are to meaningfully capture complex social phenomena like displacement. Researchers are urged to break out of the comfort of purely structural analyses and instead integrate lived realities and relational frameworks into their approach to knowledge production. Practically, this means designing studies that elevate participant voices and agency – recognising research participants not as data points but as co-constructors of knowledge who can offer insights and even steer and re-orient research. It also means the researcher must remain reflexive and adaptable, tailoring methods to the local context and power dynamics. Knowledge produced in this way is more authentic and actionable: it resonates with the reality on the ground and thus can more effectively inform urban planning and policy.

Acknowledgement

Researcher was funded to conduct research and fieldwork by the Vanier Graduate Scholarship

Reflections of a Technical Advisor/Researcher in the Case of the Slovo Park Informal Settlement Upgrade Project in Johannesburg, South Africa

Neil Klug

This article considers the sensitivities, complexities, and ethics of simultaneously being an embedded researcher and a technical advisor to a vulnerable community. This article focuses on the way in which reflexivity plays out in practice, in the interface between marginalised communities, state officials, NGO's and academia.
The article begins with a brief historical and contextual account of the Slovo Park community's thirty-year struggle to get their settlement upgraded and the circumstances that brought them to the establishment of a joint task team with the Johannesburg local government in South Africa. It then summarises the seven years of the Task team's activities that resulted in limited progress.
The article draws on three selected aspects experienced as an academic technical advisor (representing the Centre for Urbanism and Built Environment Studies from the University of the Witwatersrand) to a community on the joint task team. The first pertained to the challenges around personal agency and positionality, the second relating to the complexities of differing ethical perspectives related to one's contextual positionality in the process, and, finally, the limits to academics playing a supporting role to precarious communities.
Finally, the article recommends some considerations when undertaking research and practice in similar circumstances for young researchers or advocate planners.

Reflexion einer Doppelrolle als technischer Berater und Forscher im Kontext des Upgrading-Projekts der informellen Siedlung Slovo Park in Johannesburg
Dieser Artikel befasst sich mit den Sensibilitäten, Komplexitäten und ethischen Fragen, die sich ergeben, wenn man als Forscher in eine vulnerable Community eingebunden ist und diese gleichzeitig als technischer Berater unterstützt. Der Schwerpunkt dieses Artikels liegt auf der Frage, wie sich Reflexivität in der Praxis an der Schnittstelle zwischen marginalisierten Communities, staatlichen Akteuren, NGOs und der Wissenschaft auswirkt.
Der Artikel beginnt mit einem kurzen historischen und kontextuellen Überblick über den dreißigjährigen Kampf der Slovo Park-Community um die Aufwertung ihrer Siedlung und die Umstände, die zur Gründung einer gemeinsamen Task Force mit der kommunalen Verwaltung Johannesburgs geführt haben. Anschließend fasst er die siebenjährigen Aktivitäten der Task Force zusammen, die nur zu begrenzten Fortschritten geführt haben.
*Der Artikel stützt sich auf drei ausgewählte Aspekte, die ich als akademischer technischer Community-Berater (als Vertreter des Centre for Urbanism and Built Environment Studies der University of the Witwatersrand) in der gemeinsamen Task-Force erlebt habe. Der erste Aspekt betrifft die Herausforderungen im Zusammenhang mit meiner persönlichen Agency und Positionalität, der zweite die Komplexität unterschiedlicher ethischer Perspektiven in Bezug auf die kontextuelle Positionalität im Prozess und schließlich die Grenzen der Unterstützung prekärer Communities durch Wissenschaftler*innen. Abschließend enthält der Artikel einige Empfehlungen für junge Forscher*innen oder Planer*innen, die Forschung und Praxis unter ähnlichen Umständen betreiben.*

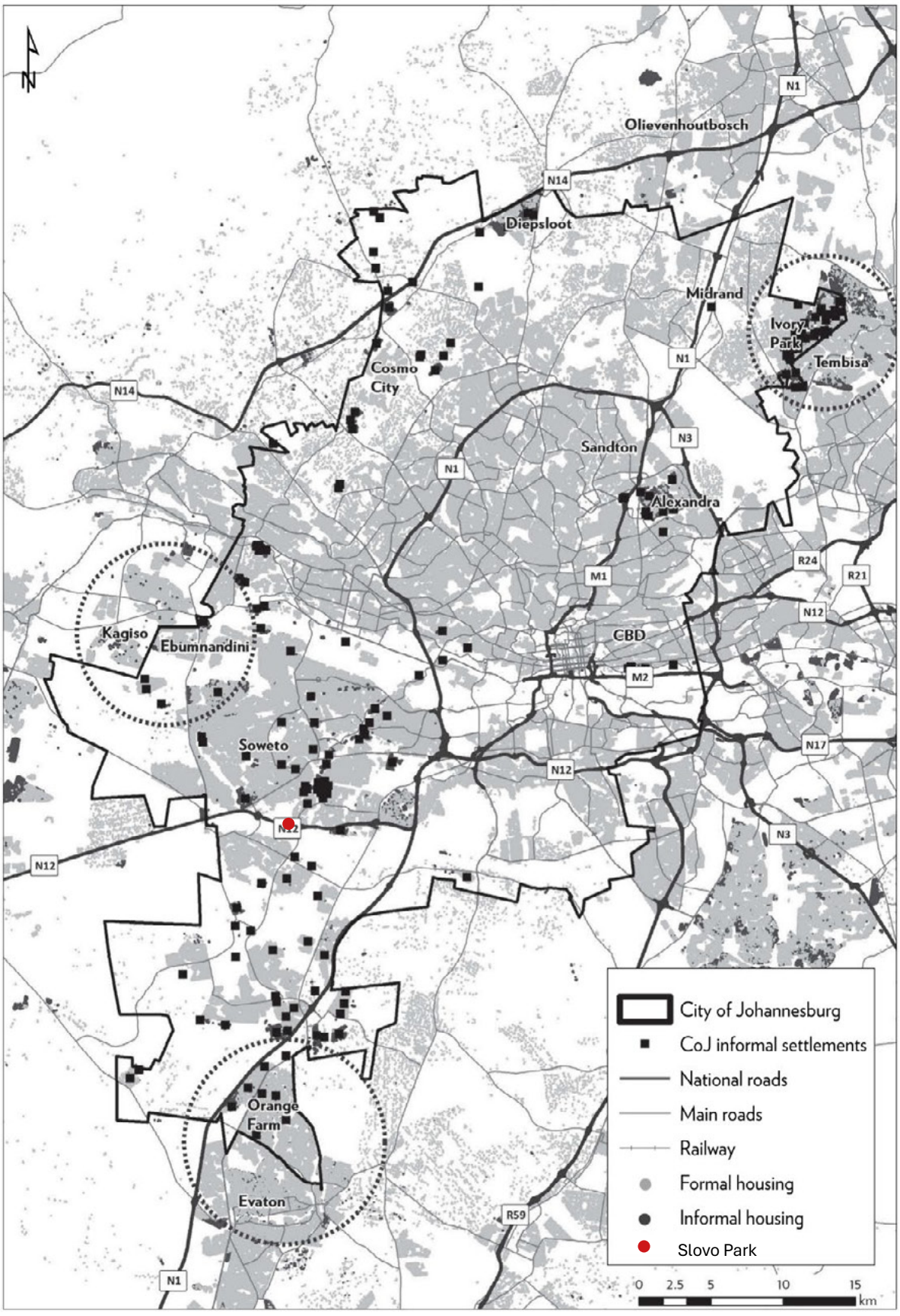
Introduction

The Slovo Park informal settlement community has been struggling for over thirty years (the entire post-apartheid period) to get the settlement physically upgraded and legally recognised. Despite a national policy being in place to in situ upgrade informal settlements, and constant engagement with the City of Johannesburg (CoJ), the CoJ has never committed the appropriate budgets or resources to undertake a full upgrade. This is despite there being a well-organised, informed, and motivated community willing to assist the CoJ in the process. In my recent PhD (Klug 2023), I explain the reasons behind this situation. However, the central objective of this paper is to consider the sensitivities, complexities, and ethics of simultaneously being an embedded researcher and a technical advisor to this vulnerable community. In so doing, as a practitioner, my contribution focuses on the way in which reflexivity plays out in practice, in the interface between marginalised communities, state officials, and academics/NGOs.

To articulate these complexities, this paper reflects on some of my experiences within a joint community/local-authority task team set up[1] to assist the CoJ in the implementation of the Upgrading of Informal Settlement Programme (UISP) policy instrument. I participated in this task team for a seven-year period as a representative of CUBES, by request of the Slovo Park Community Development Forum (SPCDF). As a White, middle-aged man, part of my current privileged economic and educational status can be attributed to the advantages received during the apartheid period. Despite the intervening thirty years post-apartheid, my awareness of the stark inequalities between my daily material circumstances and those of informal dwellers (as a legacy of apartheid) is ever present. As such, these circumstances result in sensitivities and complexities that shape my decision-making and reflections as a practitioner and researcher.

My reflection on how I have navigated these complexities as ethically as I could is based on two selected events recorded during this period and presented in chronological

1
The task team was set up in response to the local authority's inability to respond to a High Court ruling to implement the UISP in Slovo Park.



Map 1: Locality of Slovo Park within the City of Johannesburg. Source: Slovo Park Project (2017).

order. The first event was the non-consultative decision by the CoJ to appoint consultants to prepare an in-situ layout plan for Slovo Park in 2017, and its consequences, which generated substantial debate and introspection. The second set of events concerned the 2021 appointment of a new set of consultants, who offered the SPCDF members remuneration to facilitate a new layout plan. We (Wits colleagues[2] and NGO personnel) advised against this on ethical grounds. I largely draw on extracts from field notes to myself, written in February

2
The Wits colleagues consist of me and my colleague in the Centre for Urbanism and Built Environment Studies (CUBES), which is an urban research and advocacy unit within the School of Architecture and Planning at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

Map 2: Existing layout of Slovo Park showing dolomite areas. Source: Slovo Park Project (2017).

2023, expressing my frustration with the lack of progress in my reflection of the two events above. These field notes were written in 2023, at a point when I felt the project had regressed and I was reflecting on why.

The paper begins with a brief historical and contextual account of the Slovo Park community's struggle to get their settlement upgraded. My reflections are conceptually framed using the literature on reflexivity and the identification of resistant texts. Thereafter, I provide some methodological guidelines for practice-based research, i.e., for those who undertake research within their own realms of practice where they are both participants and researchers at the same time within the complex context of decoloniality.

Background to the attempted upgrading of Slovo Park informal settlement

Slovo Park is an informal settlement located approximately 14km southwest of the Johannesburg CBD (see Map 1); it was established in the early 1990s on state-owned land by workers seeking a location close to where they were employed. The settlement was laid out by one of the founding community members using block measurements from a neighbouring suburb. The settlement covers approximately 47.5 hectares (ha) and accommodates some 3734 households. In 1994, the City of Johannesburg (CoJ) already promised to incorporate the settlement into a formal housing project, which never materialised (SERI 2011). The only infrastructure in the settlement consists of four communal standpipes, 1050 ventilated improved pit latrines (VIPs), and 34 flush toilets (SERI 2011).

The CoJ's own plans of 2010/2011 scheduled Slovo Park to be an in-situ upgrade project. However, because Slovo Park was built on dolomite (see Map 2), which renders the area potentially unstable, Johannesburg housing officials refused to consider accommodating more than 700 units on the site. This position was held from 2001 to 2010, for five planned housing projects on the site. This meant that 'half of the informal settlement (Slovo Park) would have had to be relocated' (Tissington 2012:52). Consequently, all these proposals were rejected by the community. Partly as a result, the first community leadership structure, the Community Development Forum (CDF), was established in 2001. The current SPCDF was formed in 2007.

Between 2010 and 2014, the SPCDF put forward four further development proposals but received no response from either the Gauteng provincial or CoJ administrations (Tissington 2012). Consequently, the SPCDF leadership decided to take the CoJ to the High Court in 2014 to compel them to apply the UISP instrument to their settlement. In 2016, the Gauteng Local Division of the High Court, in *Melani and Others v City of Johannesburg and Others* 2016 (5) SA 67 (GJ), ruled that the UISP was binding on the City of Johannesburg. This High Court ruling set a legal precedent in South Africa (Huchzermeyer 2016).

Four months after the High Court order, the CoJ prepared a funding application for Phase 1 of the UISP. The

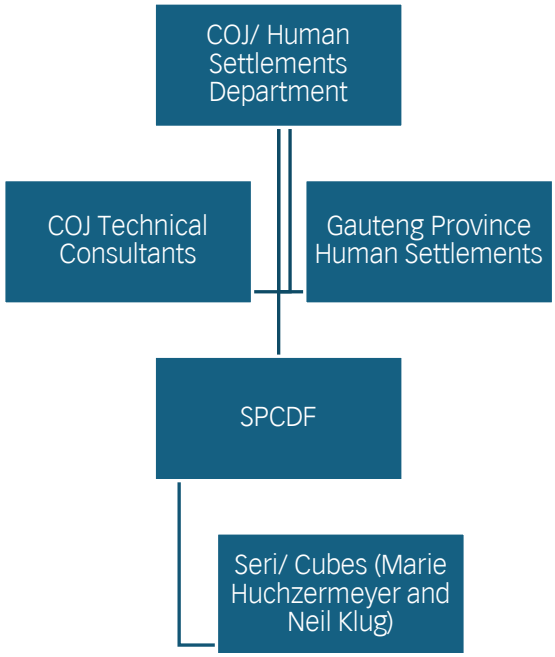


Figure 1: Layers of authority in the Slovo Park Task Team.

application, a reworked existing plan, which proposed building 399 freestanding houses in Slovo Park and relocating the remaining 3335 households to Unaville, 12km south of Slovo Park. In response, SPCDF rejected the proposal and proposed that a multi-party task team (TT) be set up to assist the CoJ to prepare another funding application. This was agreed to by all parties (SERI 2020).

On 6 December 2016, eight months after the high court order, the Slovo Park Task Team was operationalised in accordance with the court order. Its composition and structure (de facto if not de jure, see Figure 1).

The general content of the meetings consisted of the SPCDF asking the project manager on progress of whatever tasks had been agreed upon, or the community expressing dissatisfaction with events and threatening further legal action.

For example, reflecting on the first event mentioned earlier, one of the first actions the CoJ took in 2017, within the TT, was to unilaterally appoint Consultant A to undertake the layout planning for the upgrade, despite other members of the TT raising concerns about the consultant's lack of upgrading experience. The consultant then prepared a top-down layout plan, consulting only a few members of the SPCDF. On our advice (SERI[3]/Cubes), the community rejected the plan because it was not an in-situ layout and required most of the community to be relocated. The CoJ then informally suspended communication with the SPCDF for several months during which a new project manager within the CoJ took over the project. The rejected plan was also quietly submitted to the CoJ Planning Department for approval. In March 2018, the CoJ advocated for Consultant A to be retained and for the consultant to revise their layout plan to avoid delays. The SPCDF supported this as they had concerns about further delays.

At the time, there was much debate amongst the technical advisors and SERI as to why the SPCDF leadership was open to retaining Consultant A, which left me personally confused. In addition, there was anecdotal evidence that Consultant A had promised a financial benefit to the SPCDF leadership to facilitate the plan. We continued to advise against using Consultant A as we had no faith in them being able to rectify the layout plan. In the end, Consultant A withdrew because they wanted an additional payment to revise the layout, which was not available.

An example of the top-down layout proposed by Consultant A (see Map 3), shows how the proposed layout fundamentally differed from the existing layout (i.e., roads designed over the existing sites and structures), is shown below.

In 2018, a temporary electricity network was installed throughout the settlement based on the original layout prepared by the settlement founders. In 2019, the Task Team resubmitted the UISP application to include additional land to accommodate those residents who would not be accommodated in the in-situ upgrade due to minimum density requirements. In 2020, the CoJ, again without consultation, appointed facilitation consultants who provided no tangible deliverables. In 2021, the Gauteng Province took over the implementation of the project due to administrative problems within the CoJ procurement process. This resulted in a whole new set of consultants being appointed, without consultations with the Task Team. The provincial official confirmed that they would be budgeting for the preparation of a full Township Establishment Application[4] and land acquisition. In 2022, all three parties to the process – the COJ, the Gauteng Province, and the SPCDF (with CUBES and SERI) – agreed that a social compact with an MOU was necessary to facilitate joint operating procedures and communication protocols in the three-way partnership. However, no meetings, or MOU, materialised in 2022.

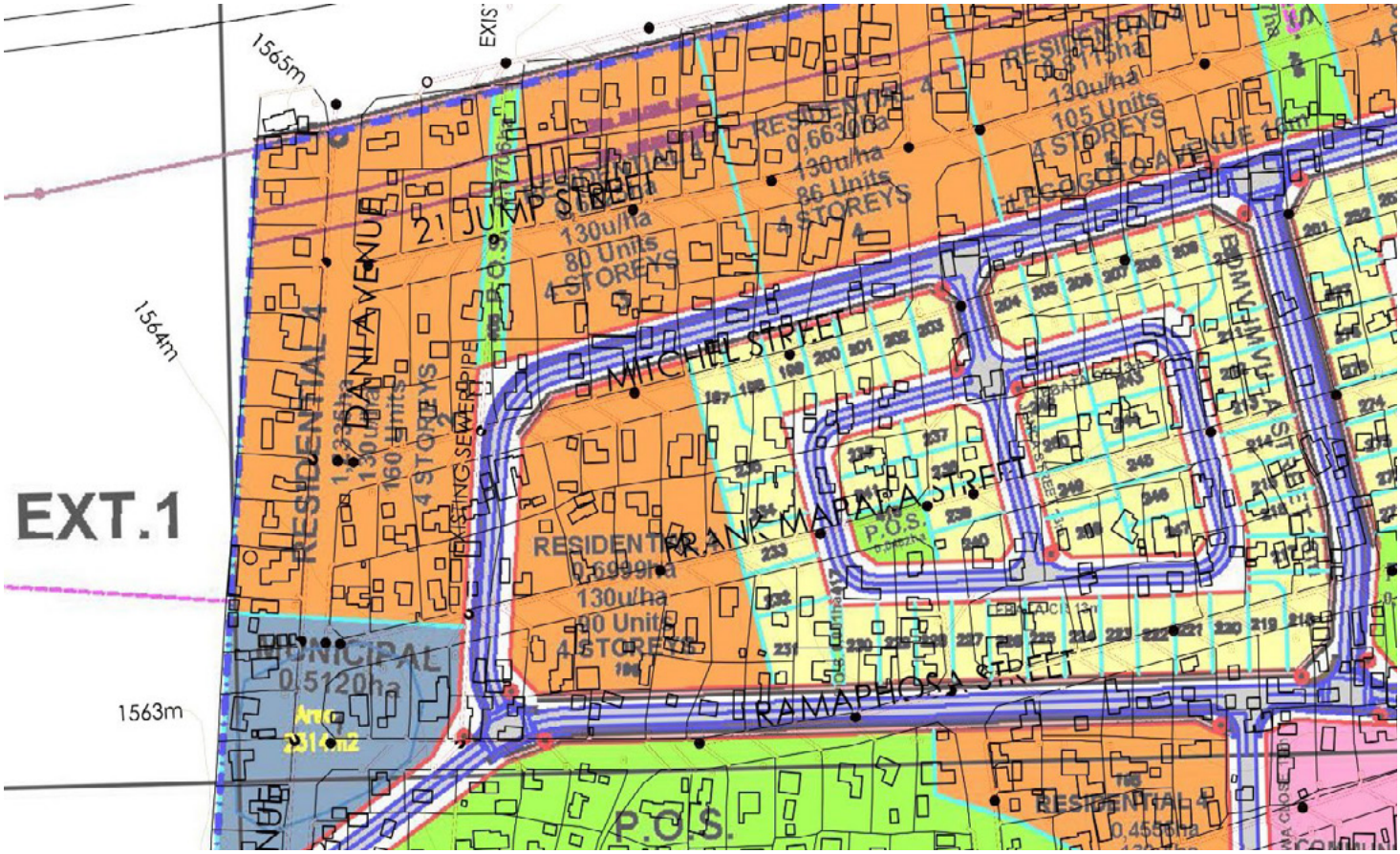
By February 2023, the Task Team had only met erratically, four sets of planning consultants had been appointed by the CoJ at the cost of millions of rands of taxpayers' money, and no progress had been made in developing a viable settlement layout. During this period, we also saw four different CoJ project managers come and go, each with different levels of commitment to the project. The minutes of seven years of TT meetings reflect, overall, a story of broken promises, endlessly ignored deadlines, blatant contraventions, and non-accountability of the CoJ towards the Slovo Park community.

With the only progress made from 2016 being the installation of a temporary electricity network based on the existing plot layout, the frustration of the SPCDF was well articulated in this extract from the TT meeting of 1 October 2021:

> *'We know that, according to a capitalist mindset that the poor are viewed as a liability and a class of people who mean nothing and bring no value to the economy. And our experience is that we have been treated this way for a long time, with us being patient with hopes that things will improve. We would like PM3 (City) and PM (Province) to introspect and have us trade places. Would you really feel that we are moving forward or backwards in light of what had been*

3
SERI – Social and Economic Research Institute is a legal advocacy NGO supporting communities dealing with urban issues

4
A Township Establishment is a statutory planning application to establish a new, registered township in an urban area. It involves pre-planning studies such as an environmental impact assessment (EIA); geotech investigations, land surveying, a traffic assessment study, and the design of a sub-divisional layout that is registered as a general plan in the National Surveyor General's office.



▲ **Map 3:** Consultant A's proposed layout – showing the north-western portion of the settlement shown in Map 2. Source: SERI (2018b).

presented in this meeting so far? An example of the disregard with which we are treated is Province arriving 45 minutes late to this meeting and could not even apologise for being late. For previous financial years, funds have been allocated to Slovo Park but we do not know how it has been allocated or spent. Social facilitation consultants have been appointed but what work is there that they can account for and at cost. What can they point to that they have contributed to improving the lives of people living in Slovo Park…. Our efforts to be patient, and deal with this matter in line with the principles of uBuntu, but we have to admit that this has taken us nowhere.'

Positionality and reflexivity

As the technical advisor to the community, I was equally frustrated over the endlessly delayed process. As such, my analysis of the above is subject to three reflexive episodes. The first from the minutes of 2021; the second reflected in my 2023 field notes (selected extracts below in *italics*), and the third re-reflections in preparing this article in 2025. These reflections expressed some of the complexities regarding my positionality in the project.

On a comprehensive read of the minutes (particularly those of the 20 May 2021) and notes pertaining to the last seven years of the Slovo Park Task Team, what is apparent is the circumlocutory language often used by the CoJ project manager when chairing the meetings. This left me as well as other members of the Task Team perplexed and feeling too awkward to challenge what we thought we had heard or what had been agreed to….

Through the above analysis … reflecting on the role that I personally played as well as our role at CUBES as technical advisors to the SPCDF in this process, it is clear we have been ineffectual. The question is why? At a personal level, I often felt that I was unable or reluctant to be more challenging of the city's behaviour, within the Task Team meetings, than the community leadership due to the fear of doing something that would alienate the community from the city officials even more than they were already. Given the fluctuations in activities between changes in official personnel running the project from the CoJ's side, it is clear that the personal agency of the officials had a huge impact on the project. As such, personally alienating individual officials could have a further delaying impact on the project.

In addition to the above field notes of 2023, I occasionally considered using my academic and economic status/privilege to threaten the officials that I would approach the media or their seniors to expose their behaviour. When reflecting again now on why I did not use my status or challenge the project manager's circumlocutory language, it would have been inappropriate. Firstly, given my position as an academic mother-tongue English speaker, challenging a second-language English speaker from a previously disadvantaged group, currently holding a

senior position, could have been perceived as belittling and therefore racist; and secondly, it would have possibly negatively impacted the (at that time) warm working relationship we had with the project manager. This potential negative impact may also have negatively impacted the relationship between the project manager and the community leaders, as indicated in my notes above. A related concern was also articulated in another extract from my 2023 field notes below.

> *This fear was also based on the reality that as a professional advisor my personal circumstances would not be impacted in any way if the project was delayed (as it has been) while my actions may have a negative impact on their material circumstances in that they remain living in their appalling conditions. Also on reflection, the institutional structure of the joint Task Team involving the various state agencies together with the City's human settlements department suggested a collegial working environment with an assumption we were all working towards a common goal. This was constantly reiterated by the enthusiasm expressed by the City's project manager (between mid-2018 and 2022) towards the project and more towards the overall application of the UISP to informal settlements throughout Johannesburg. This further discouraged any thoughts of challenging the actions of the project manager, in a sense we were duped by his supportive narrative.*

Another consideration was that whatever the outcomes of this process were, they would not adversely affect my material circumstances, but they could affect those of Slovo Park. Despite the SPCDF's frustrations, I felt that I could not compromise the relationship the SPCDF had with the CoJ in any way through being too critical of the officials. As such, I chose to follow the engagement style of the SPCDF and would first strategise any suggestions around confronting the officials. This approach is based on process of 'reflection-in-action', referring to documenting the researcher's own feelings, prejudices, etc. in the process of the research (Schön 1983:309). While the reflexive approach has been critiqued as being too subjective for the required academic rigour, I share Cole *et al*.'s (2011) contention that, under almost all circumstances, the notion of being able to interact totally objectively with research subjects is not possible.

A question of ethics?

Previously, I referred to my then difficulty in understanding why the SPCDF leadership would support the retention of Consultant A given the poor service they had provided.

In 2021, a similar issue arose. This was when Consultant B offered remunerated facilitation and/or community liaison positions to the SPCDF, and jobs to other members of the community, to help the finalisation of the layout. SERI and I advised them against being appointed directly by the consultants. In our view, this would ethically compromise the community as they would then be bound to approve the consultant's layout. We recommended, rather, that a community liaison figure be appointed by the local authority and that their remuneration not come out of Consultants B's fees. Our advice was rejected, and the SPCDF entered negotiations with the consultants.

In these situations, I felt the ethical principle involved was clear: that accepting cash from consultants would create a potentially compromising situation for the SPDCF leadership. But I also realised I was being prescriptive about my values. My positionality has always allowed (and continues to allow) me to hold what I perceive to be an ethical position vis-à-vis the situation just described. I should have perhaps considered the possibly that survival outweighs the perceived issues of being compromised. Furthermore, when considering the political pressures from the community for progress as well as the potential promise of financial remuneration, I was not in a position to place a value judgement on their short-term priorities given our very different daily circumstances. As an employed academic, I was able to take decisions based on long-term goals, where many community members living hand-to-mouth needed to take more survivalist decisions. I had also not considered how the SPCDF might have had mechanisms in place to negotiate their position with the consultants to avoid the issue of compromise.

On further reflection now, this consideration raised the possibility of the role of 'resistant texts' in relation to an alternative approach by the SPCDF to the ethical issue above, not only in relation to different approaches to knowledge production but also ways of doing things in relation to how the western or imperial systems have determined procedures. 'Resistant texts' are defined as alternative readings of texts that challenge dominant cultural beliefs and reject the position the text appears to offer. As set out by Winkler (2018), to open previously ignored or undervalued epistemologies, one needs to start seeing resistant texts.

Limitations of academic support to communities

Another aspect taken from my field notes of 2023 is expressed below.

> *In relation to CUBES, another realisation is that we simply did not have the time or capacity to strategise around the challenges emerging politically and technically from an unaccountable and poorly capacitated local metropolitan government. While we were able to adequately evaluate documentation such as the proposed layout plans of the various consultants, or the UISP application documentation, or the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), we were unable to adequately prepare for each Task Team meeting. Ideally, as advocates for the community we should have met with SERI and the SPCDF prior to every meeting to go through the previous meetings resolutions and to strategise going forward but there was never time to do so. Furthermore, each time the CoJ did not deliver on an agreed deadline they should have been formally challenged in writing which would have required additional research at times. For example, the claim by the CoJ's project manager that SERI could not finance*

the preparation of an alternative layout plan due to 'the complexities involved' should have been formally challenged by the Task Team. This would have required research into the Municipal Finance Act, and other CoJ procurement policies. As such it has demonstrated the limitations of the role university research agencies can play as advocacy agents. Such development advocacy roles are better suited to development advocacy agencies who can have dedicated staff assigned to such projects on a continuous basis. The analysis also raises the need for better co-ordination between the legal and development sector agents within the advocacy group to better understand each other's capacities and limitations.

The above extract reflects on the issue of ethical accountability. This is in relation to me and the other colleagues representing CUBES and SERI all offering our time voluntarily, on top of all our other commitments. Now, on further reflection, giving professional advice is common to all consulting environments where there are binding contractual deliverables, responsibilities, and reputational issues at stake pertaining to the service. As an academic in an advisory role, these checks and balances are not necessarily in place. Despite this, I feel it is important that communities have advocacy planners at their disposal to mitigate the potential shortcomings of the current professional outsourcing mode of the City. Traditionally, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with dedicated resources undertake this role in South Africa.

The above challenges are well documented by Amin and Cirolia (2017) in their analysis of non-state actors in a pluralist governance setting in the making and maintenance of informal settlements. They describe the limitations of NGOs, and the fragile inputs from communities themselves, as being perilous from a sustainability perspective due to their survivalist circumstance and technical lack of skills and experience.

Conclusions and recommendations

This article has drawn on three selected aspects experienced as a technical advisor to a community on a joint task team established to upgrade an informal settlement. The first pertained to the challenges around personal agency and positionality, the second relating to the complexities of differing ethical perspectives related to one's contextual positionality in the process, and, finally, the limits to academics playing a supporting role to precarious communities.

Despite the Task Team's limited progress in improving the lives of the Slovo Park residents (SERI 2020), the process is still intact and other strategies are being pursued. The SPCDF have indicated a desire to retain CUBES and SERI as technical and legal advisors for technical expertise when required, and for outside support when putting pressure on the CoJ to perform. This can be partly attributed to the reflexive nature of the civil society professionals and the sustained support they provide to the SPCDF.

This special edition on reflexive research practices links these practices into the broader literature on reflexivity and decolonisation. The individual pieces in this special issue approach this subject from a variety of angles. I am primarily a practitioner, and my contribution focuses on the way in which reflexivity plays out in practice, in the interface and space between marginalised communities, state officials, and academics/NGOs.

Based on my experiences of Slovo Park and on the above analysed interactions, my recommendations for young researchers or advocate planners are as follows:

a. Always consider your own positionality and associated value judgements against those of stakeholders from very different circumstances, and consider how their circumstances could be influencing their value judgements and decisions.

b. Similarly, your sense of impropriety, in some cases, may be different to someone else's, and one needs to be reflexive in one's judgement.

c. Work with the aphorism of 'first, do no harm' before acting.

d. Be as honest as possible about your own capacity to assist, and articulate the potential implications to communities you are advising.

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Reproducing Racism – Between Shame and Reflexivity

Manuel Dieterich

Global research projects in which scholars from the Global North do research in the Global South have to deal with (post-)colonial power asymmetries. My contribution addresses the question of how to deal with such asymmetries, using the reproduction of racism as example, as it is the most pronounced form of power asymmetries in my field of study. The starting point is something I personally experienced during my field research in the west of Johannesburg: While conducting my research, I repeatedly realised that I got involved in reproducing racism without intending to do so. This was in tension with my academic-political ambition to conduct a non-racist research project, and thus posed a personal challenge that I had problems solving. What helped me, however, was a change of focus towards a reflexive perspective. The dilemma was then no longer a moral-ethical problem that I had to solve individually, but was included in the research as data. This enabled me to understand it as part of the field and how it functions, which deepened my understanding of the field of study. In this sense, the experiences of reproducing racism could not only be understood as morally problematic, but could also be rendered productive for academic knowledge production.

Reproduziere ich Rassismus? Zwischen Scham und Reflexivität
*Globale Forschungsprojekte, in denen Wissenschaftler*innen aus dem Globalen Norden im Globalen Süden forschen, müssen sich mit (post-) kolonialen Machtasymmetrien auseinandersetzen. Mein Beitrag befasst sich mit der Frage, wie mit solchen Asymmetrien aus forschungspraktischer Perspektive umgegangen werden kann, wobei ich die Reproduktion von Rassismus als Beispiel heranziehe, da dies in meinem Forschungsfeld zu ändern die ausgeprägteste Form von Machtasymmetrien ist. Ausgangspunkt ist eine persönliche Erfahrung, die ich während meiner Feldforschung im Westen von Johannesburg gemacht habe: Während meiner Forschungsarbeit wurde mir wiederholt bewusst, dass ich ungewollt an der Reproduktion von Rassismus beteiligt war. Dies stand im Widerspruch zu meinem akademisch-politischen Anspruch, ein nicht-rassistisches Forschungsprojekt durchzuführen, und stellte mich vor eine persönliche Herausforderung, die ich nur schwerlich lösen konnte. Was mir jedoch half, war eine Verlagerung des Fokus hin zu einer reflexiven Perspektive. Das Dilemma erschien dann nicht mehr als ein moralisch-ethisches Problem, das ich individuell lösen musste, sondern wurde als Teil der Empirie in die Forschung miteinbezogen. So konnte ich es als Teil des Forschungsfeldes und seiner Funktionsweise verstehen, was mein Verständnis des Forschungsfeldes vertiefte. In diesem Sinne ließen sich die Erfahrungen mit der Reproduktion von Rassismus nicht nur als moralisch problematisch verstehen, sondern konnten auch für die akademische Wissensproduktion nutzbringend wirken.*

An unsettling insight

After a long day in the fieldsite in the west of Johannesburg, I, a White male scholar from Germany, and Siphelele, a Black male South African who works with me, are sitting together in the car on our way home. We are having a lively conversation, and he tells me various stories of friends and relatives who had been racially discriminated against. One example is his brother-in-law, who has been working for ABSA (a South African bank) for many years now. A recently employed White man, after only five months, has now become his brother-in-law's new boss, although his brother-in-law has worked there for many years and is a senior employee – unlike the White man, who is still very young and inexperienced. Siphelele is very upset about this obvious injustice. Then he recalls the conversation we had some days ago with Miana, a White resident in the suburb of Mindalore. He reveals to me that he was actually hurt by some of her statements. Her claim that after the end of apartheid everything became worse because 'we cannot employ Blacks as gardeners or domestic workers anymore because we are too poor'[1] especially offended him. He criticised that she thinks about Blacks only as gardeners or domestic workers – which would be apartheid-like thinking: Blacks can only do low-qualified jobs that are poorly paid. I agree with his clear analysis of her statement, although I'm a bit astonished that I haven't yet noticed the – now so obvious – problematic content of what she said myself.

I take the opportunity to address an issue that has been troubling me for some time: whenever I meet with right-wing (extremist) White neighbours in Mindalore, I deliberately don't take Siphelele with me as I assume that this could lead to very unpleasant racist situations. However, it feels embarrassing and shameful to me, and also problematic, as I am reproducing a racial divide between him and myself. Siphelele replies seriously and calmly that it is good and important for my research, and that I should therefore definitely continue. He adds that the underlying problem is that Whites don't like Blacks, and don't want to mix with them. This is also shown by the fact that many White neighbours in Mindalore would rather move out than live next door to a new Black neighbour.[2]

Siphelele's words were comforting for me, as he didn't seem to feel personally affected by my avoidance behaviour, with which I tried (in a patronising way) to protect him, as well as myself, from being exposed to racist situations. However, the longer I thought about his statements, the more I realised that there was more to it than a mere absolution of my fieldwork practices that reproduce the racialisation of relationships. Siphelele pointed out that racialisation and racism are part of the field: neighbourly cohabitation in Mindalore functions

1
Protocol Miana, 13.02.2020.

2
Protocol Siphelele and Warren, 18.02.2020.

according to racialised and racist logics. Therefore, it is only consequent that these logics are also reflected in the research of the field in some way. So instead of seeing the reproduction of racialisation and racism as a moral-ethical problem to be solved individually, as I did, he saw it as an opportunity to learn something about the field.

The following considerations take up Siphelele's change of perspective and describe it as part of a reflexive approach in social science research. Such a reflexive approach – according to the thesis put forward here – is a way of dealing with the moral-ethical dilemmas that arise, from (post-)colonial power asymmetries, for research practices. Instead of perceiving these dilemmas only as oppressive, paralysing and burdensome, they can be used reflexively in a productive way to develop a deeper understanding of the field.

The basis for my reflections is my own experiences of reproducing racialised and racist relationships in the fieldwork for my dissertation, and how I dealt with it. The nine months of ethnographic research took place between 2019 and 2022 in the west of Johannesburg, in Soul City and adjacent Mindalore. Soul City is an informal settlement home to marginalised, economically deprived Black residents. Mindalore, a 'Whites-only' middle-class suburb during apartheid, has seen an influx of upwardly mobile Black families since the 2000s, shifting its original monoracial demographics. This neighbourhood constellation and the local dynamics illustrate the social significance of race within the South African context, such as the ongoing racialised inequality, continuing racial residential segregation, as well as the rise of a Black middle class through affirmative action and concomitant racial desegregation processes. The practices of separating races have a long history in South Africa, including colonialism, imperial rule, segregationist policies, and apartheid. Racial separation reached its zenith during apartheid, and 'two South Africas' (Gobodo-Madikizela 2003: 108) were created – a White and a Black one[3] – through separation of urban areas, jobs, education, laws, and even public toilets, park benches, and beaches. Through these institutionalisations and material manifestations, race and racialised differences became 'a "fact" of life' (Posel 2001: 109). The (im)material legacy of racial separation persists even after the formal end of apartheid 30 years ago. This is demonstrated by the continued salience of race as the primary structuring principle of sociality. In everyday life, this is accompanied by a routine and unquestioning use of the racialised categories Black and White for describing neighbours, strangers, and people in general.

One of my personal aspirations for the research project was (and still is) that I do not want to reproduce (post-) colonial power asymmetries, such as racism, and that in the best case these can even be overcome, at least in my personal interactions. This aspiration is also related to my academic socialisation as a qualitative sociologist in Germany, in which a lot of attention is paid to questioning explicit and implicit power inequalities. However, I soon noticed that my personal ambition could only be realised to a limited extent within my research, which is related to the fact that the study is embedded in larger power structures (regional, national, global, etc.) that are ultimately beyond my reach.

For example, the relationship between Siphelele and me reflects such power asymmetries: a White researcher from the Global North with a four-year PhD position and a Black freelancer employed as his field assistant for the duration of the research. Our relationship included racial and economic asymmetries, mirroring global inequalities between the North and South. However, it was beyond my possibilities to fundamentally change this constellation: I could neither employ him for longer nor could I offer him another position.[4] This and other experiences of my involvement in the reproduction of (post-) colonial racist (and other) structures of inequality represented a serious moral-ethical challenge to me. This was accompanied by feelings of shame and guilt about my participation. These personal feelings are certainly not the most important aspect in the reproduction of racist structures of inequality. From a perspective of (South African) critical whiteness studies (see Ballard 2016; Distiller & Steyn 2004; Hook 2020; Steyn 2001, 2005), these feelings can be considered as part of 'White fragility' (DiAngelo 2011). The aim is therefore not to analytically remain with these feelings, but to make them the starting point for a more in-depth analysis of the reproduction of racism, and thus include them as data. To do this, I chose to adopt a reflexive approach, though there are, of course, other ways to address this matter.

Seeing through a reflexive lens

But what do I mean by being reflexive? There are various conceptions of reflexivity in social science literature (e.g. Bourdieu 2004; Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992; Dean 2021; Harding 2001; Lynch 2000; Pollner 1991). Following the literal meaning of the Latin word *reflectere* (= bending backwards), being reflexive is understood here as bending something back. This recalls the initial vignette when Siphelele bended the reproduction of racialised and racist structures within our relationship back to the field and its operational logics. Being reflexive is therefore a 'recursive process' (Lynch 2000: 27) in which researchers position themselves within a specific field. This self-positioning has far-reaching consequences. To recognise oneself as part of a given field means to acknowledge one's own exposure to the field forces at work. In my initial example, this is the reproduction of racialised and racist structures and my troubles in finding an individual way to deal with them. The entanglements with and within the field are not only inevitable, however, but even a necessary condition for better understanding the field, its structure, and its forces.

In ethnographic research, getting entangled with the field is seen as a necessary precondition for quality (see Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland & Lofland 2007; Breidenstein, Hirschauer, Kalthoff & Nieswand 2020; Hammersley & Atkinson 2007, 1983; Ocejo 2019). The process of 'making oneself at home' in the field describes the increasing involvements within the field with the eventual goal of becoming a part of the field – at least in some respects and for some time. Ethnographic fieldwork is therefore successful when it leaves its imprints on the researcher: emotions, reactions, and practices of the researcher get modified through the constant experiences in the field and the exposure to the field forces at work. These imprints are, however, not disturbing elements, as they would distort a supposedly 'objective

3
Though there were other racial categorisations, the difference between White rulers and the oppressed Black majority constituted the central social division.

4
What was in my power, and what I did, was to make him further offers – e.g., to pay him for an online interview with me during the COVID-19 lockdown (https://open.spotify.com/episode/04gpwat3MWEndqYtcqfvbW?si=38ec1acef9c640f2&nd=1 [last accessed 04.12.2024]) – or to offer him contracts for the transcription of interviews.

description' of the field. Rather, they are data themselves, and quite valuable ones at that, as they represent a unique opportunity to make introspection fruitful for field research. But this is not a matter of course: this fruitfulness must be actively developed through processes of reflection – that is the academic distancing from the field and the experiences made. This second step of reflection, of bending back to the field, is only possible if one has also 'experienced the field firsthand'. Then it's possible to ask what my feelings of guilt and shame regarding the reproduction of racism express about the field, about everyday life in the researched neighbourhoods in Johannesburg, and about the local everyday knowledge, practices, and relationships. And, moreover, about the supra-local power asymmetries at work, such as the economic, political, or cultural national asymmetries and, also, the global power asymmetries between the Global North and South. My moral-ethical dilemma, which at first seemed to me a personal problem, thus reflexively comes itself into the focus of the analysis by locating it within the wider field.

The epistemic assumption behind a reflexive approach is that the 'real is relational' (Bourdieu 1998: 3). As such, each field is characterised by a specific net of relationships in which the various available positionalities are arranged and put in relation to each other. If one isolates a single phenomenon – like I did with the reproduction of racism between Siphelele and me – this phenomenon is objectified: it is cut off its relational ties that position it in a field giving it its meaning (see Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 42). Against this background, it seems imperative that the analysis of a social phenomenon includes its constitutive relations. An isolated perspective would ignore the relational character of reality, and is therefore inadequate. A reflexive lens promises a deeper and fuller understanding of social phenomena and is thus 'a tool to gather more accurate and insightful research data' (Dean 2021: 183).

The conceptualisation of reflexivity presented here is application-oriented. The more far-reaching consequences that arise from a reflexive perspective, such as the epistemic possibilities of academic knowledge production or the relationship to power, are not addressed here (for an overview, see the various contributions in Dahinden & Pott (2026) and, generally, Bourdieu 2004 and Harding 2001). This contribution, however, does focus on how a reflexive lens can be a helpful alternative perspective for dealing with one's own entanglements in (post-)colonial power asymmetries instead of merely viewing them as moral-ethical dead ends. In the following section, I discuss another example in which I became unwillingly involved in the reproduction of racism to deepen the reflexive analysis of the fieldsite and the racist field forces at play there.

In the Main Reef butchery

Siphelele and I had visited the Main Reef butchery in Mindalore several times before, when we went there in late January 2020 to buy some Biltong (air-dried meat) for our lunch. Behind the counter stands the White Afrikaner[5] butcher and his Black employee, both of whom we already know and who greet us. The White butcher asks when I am returning to Germany and adds that I shouldn't come back. Astonished, I ask why, and he grimly replies that the situation here would soon deteriorate dramatically. I realise that he probably refers to the ANC's plans to change the land redistribution law, so I reply: 'Ah you mean the land law?' He nods. To my question if he needs to worry since he doesn't own a farm, he replies: 'No, but this is about all property. They will not stop with the farms!' When he says 'they', he looks first at his Black colleague and then at Siphelele beside me. Embarrassed by this racial boundary he erects, I try to counter his argument, saying the law still has to pass through parliament and courts. He insists that it's too late, 'They will come and take it in their own hand. But they should just come, I'm prepared, I will shoot them!' I try to take the edge off his argument again, asking if there were riots or incidents, knowing there hadn't been. He counters: 'There have always been instances, constantly! The problem is that a lot of people don't know history well, especially they!' Again, he looks at Siphelele and the Black butcher. He continues: 'You know, apartheid wasn't invented by us, the Boer, it was the British. And they also took the land, we bought it rightfully. But they don't know history and so they blame us and now they want to take wrong action because of this.' I'm overwhelmed by his perspective, which contradicts everything I know, and by his blatant devaluation of Siphelele and the Black butcher in their presence. Eager to end the situation, I say goodbye. Back at the car, Siphelele and I have lunch and agree how strange it was that the White butcher thought others misunderstood history when we believe his perspective is the inappropriate one.[6]

In this situation, I once again became an accomplice in the reproduction of racism and, therefore, felt ashamed and guilty. I did not directly contradict the racist statements, but merely tried to weaken his arguments in a friendly manner. My discomfort did not lead me to address the racism, but rather to try to leave the situation as quickly as possible. The structure of the conversation itself was already racist: only the butcher and I – the two White people – spoke to each other, while the two Black people present remained silent bystanders. But what else can be learnt about the field from a reflexive perspective – beyond the moral evaluation that the White butcher is a racist, I'm an accomplice, and Siphelele and the Black butcher are victims of racism? How can the situational reproduction of racism better be understood? For a situational analysis (see Gluckman 1940), it's necessary to disentangle the various levels of meaning that constitute this specific situation. Generally, it is necessary to bear in mind that the situation is situated in one of the neighbourhoods of my study (Mindalore), which is part of a larger urban context (Johannesburg), which is located in South Africa, which in itself has a specific global position. The layers of meaning discussed now are not an exhaustive description of the field and its forces, but rather a selection of some central aspects.

The first layer concerns the significance of race for structuring everyday life in Mindalore. This can be seen, for example, in the common knowledge with regard to race. The obviousness with which the White butcher made the racial categorisations indicates how easily racialised group thinking in the sense of 'us versus them' can be activated in the field of study. Without knowing

5
Afrikaners are the descendants from European settlers (mainly Dutch) and have lived in South Africa for generations. Another common name is Boer (farmers), as they historically lived as farmers and many still do today. During apartheid, the Afrikaner minority dominated the country and oppressed the Black population, which today reverberates in various tensions, problems, anxieties, prejudices, and so on.

6
Protocol Main Reef Butchery, 29.01.2020; see, for the historical inappropriateness of his narrative, for example Feinstein 2005 or Terreblanche 2022.

us personally, the White butcher considered my and Siphelele's skin colour to be the central criterion for deducing our political attitudes. This seems bizarre in light of the many political conversations Siphelele and I had, in which we have shown broad agreement regarding our political perspectives. The 'groupist assumptions' (Brubaker 2004: 4) that certain experiences, lifestyles, or even different worlds went hand-in-hand with racial differences was widespread not only amongst my Black and White interlocutors, but also appeared in political discussions – for example, former president Thabo Mbeki's thesis of two nations and two economies in South Africa (cited in Vanderhaeghen 2018: 32). Another example of the significance of race is the racialisation of spaces. This was taken to extremes by apartheid in particular, with racialisation encompassing all geographical scales: South Africa as a White country and the so-called 'Bantustans' as Black, segregated urban spaces, segregated public amenities, etc. In Mindalore, the neighbourhood where the Main Reef butchery is located, many White neighbours still have the impression that this is their – White – neighbourhood, although the racial demographic is changing, as mentioned earlier. Especially specific places, like the Main Reef butchery (and also some of the churches and schools, as well as a local bar) are still considered as 'White space' (Anderson 2015). However, since the formal end of apartheid 30 years ago, White hegemony is being contested, and race relations are being re-negotiated and are complex.

The second layer I want to highlight is the emotions involved in the field. To start with the White butcher: he seemingly oscillates between a self-confident feeling of White superiority and a deep-rooted fear that this superiority is eroding and under threat, indicated by his pessimistic prognosis for the future and his verbal recourse to violence as a necessary last resort, ostensibly in defence. These are well-established tropes of threat among a certain segment of White South Africans (Dieterich 2023; Falkof 2022; Hook 2020). It is within that atmosphere of fear that he appropriates me as his White ally. For me, a White German academic doing research in Mindalore, this appropriation creates a difficult situation: I want to establish access to the field – which includes White and Black residents. I feared that too much dissent could upset the White butcher and I would lose access to him – but neither do I want to offend the Black butcher or Siphelele. In addition, my training as an academic in Germany taught me great reservations about racial appropriations. These feelings compete with the emotional stress (see Collins 2008: 20-21) that a direct objection to the butcher's appropriation would cause me. The result is the form of polite-contradictory enquiry of mine described above. With regard to the emotions of the Black butcher and Siphelele, it is difficult for me to carve them out, because they haven't spoken in the situation nor have I noticed strong facial expressions. In our conversation in the car afterwards, I had the impression that Siphelele was between astonishment and annoyance about the White butcher's statements. Beyond that, I can only speculate as to what extent such situations cause emotional stress for the Black butcher and Siphelele, and how the stress is modified through repeated exposure or the lack of reactions from people seen as allies.

The third layer I want to discuss is interactional features. The historically deeply rooted feeling of superiority held by White residents in Mindalore still characterises various interactions between White and Black neighbours today. This is illustrated by the White butcher's expression of his collectivising racist devaluations of Blacks in the presence of Siphelele and his Black colleague, as well as his direct reference to them through his gaze. This interactional belittling or disregard of those present indicates an imbalance of power, which also occurs in adult-child or in aristocrat-servant interactions. Here, White superiority is therefore an interactional feature that often results in feelings of inferiority on the part of Black interactants (Biko 2017, 1978: 83-86). Besides the obviously racist remarks to devalue Black people directly, the White butcher also used subtle forms that are more difficult to grasp and decipher as racist, such as his gaze towards Siphelele and the Black butcher. This reflects a general shift from more-blatant interactional expressions of racism to more-subtle forms, which has to do with the increasing national and international ostracisation of racism (see Hook 2004: 679-677; Vanderhaeghen 2018: 4-10).

The discussion of the situation is far from extensive, but the three discussed layers should be sufficient to illustrate how racism was reproduced here. Considering the situation as part of the field, it becomes possible to see how the three layers described form a conjuncture in which racist relations can be reproduced relatively easily, while problematising this circumstance is rather difficult. The result was that no one present contradicted the White butcher. In varying ways, and to different degrees, we all contributed to the reproduction of racialised and racist relationships in this encounter – at least by letting him perform. Whilst this is also a moral-ethical issue, what is more important here is what this tells us about the field forces at work. Here, the entanglement with other power asymmetries, which stabilise the reproduction of racism, becomes visible. One example is the economic dependency of the Black butcher on the White butcher, as the latter is his boss and an offence against him therefore bears the risk of losing one's source of income. Another example is the local-foreigner power asymmetry between the White butcher and me. He acts as the established local lay expert, who explains the somewhat naïve outsider from Germany the local peculiarities. These two examples illustrate the complex of power asymmetries that are entangled in this local situation of reproducing racism and, therefore, are considered as part of the wider field.

Being reflexive … and then?

My proposal for dealing with (post-)colonial power asymmetries, using the example of my own involvement in the reproduction of racism in the context of my field research in Johannesburg, is thus as follows: the own involvement and the associated feelings of guilt and shame should be made the starting point for a process of reflection that ties this back to the field of investigation. Instead of getting stuck in an moral-ethical dead end, something can be learnt about the field and 'more accurate and insightful research data' (Dean 2021: 183) can be generated. This is not about absolving me (as a researcher) and the others involved of responsibility for our behaviour that reproduces racism (although this is at least partly a side effect). Rather, it is about

recognising that our individual actions always take place under certain circumstances, i.e. in certain fields with specific field forces (see Martin 2011). Their influence on our actions can be worked out reflexively in order to draw conclusions about the field and the forces at work there.

Writing about one's own involvement in the reproduction of racism in fieldwork is neither easy nor common. This has to do with the images that prevail about the ethnographer and ethnographic fieldwork. One of them is the presentation as being morally upstanding, and not offending, degrading, or harming interlocutors, which excludes the reproduction of racism. This applies not only to ethnographers, but to all social researchers. Fine rightly points out that it is better to overcome these images, which are illusions anyhow, and actively engage with the morally problematic 'underside' (Fine 1993: 267) of research. In this way, we can not only get to know ourselves better and 'improve a bit', but also realise that the inevitable failures are all 'part of the data' (Fine 1993: 289). A reflexive lens, which positions the inner feelings of the researcher as well as the researcher him/herself within the field's network of relationships and thus bends particular situations back to the field, is well suited for this. It is an approach that aims at the enhancement of academic knowledge production. Having said that, it's important to keep in mind that reflexivity can only be one strand alongside others in approaching and dealing with the problem of reproducing racism in research projects.

Acknowledgements

My special thanks for their invaluable feedback on earlier versions of this article go to the members of the UnKUT colloquium at the University of Tübingen. Further, I am particularly grateful to Temba John Dawson Middelmann for his thoughtful and important advice as a reviewer, as well as to the editors for their guidance and support. This research was made possible through the generous financial support of the Collaborative Research Centre (SFB) 923, funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), for which I am deeply appreciative.

Conflict of interest statement: none declared.

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Perspective

Methodologies

The Men Who Stare at Slopes
Reflections on Resilience and Knowledge Production in Marginalised Contexts

Sebastian Purwins

Together with two soil scientists, my supervisor and I, two social scientists, visited Uganda in October 2023. The trip was part of preparing an interdisciplinary research proposal. In the west of Uganda, we studied smallholder agriculture on the steep slopes of the Rwenzori Mountains. The soils there, characterised by high levels of soil erosion, are losing fertility at such a rate that they could be completely eroded within one or two generations. This is what the soil scientists told us. We looked at how people could adapt and how the resilience of the ecosystem could be improved. We drove around and stopped several times to stare at the slopes. We discussed plot sizes, erosion rates, crops, and measures of fertility loss. We were guided by the question of how vulnerable communities can become resilient. Resilience was the idea of helping vulnerable farmers adapt so that they could continue to be farmers. Without knowing what their perceptions of their future were. In this paper, I would like to reflect on this field trip by first reflecting on the way the scientists worked and how this shaped my work and my perception of being in the field. I also want to critically reflect on how we as scientists, and concepts like resilience, reproduce colonial continuities.

Männer die auf Hänge starren. Reflektionen über Resilienz und Wissensproduktion in marginalisierten Kontexten
*Zusammen mit zwei Bodenkundlern, meinem Betreuer und mir, zwei Sozialwissenschaftlern, besuchten wir im Oktober 2023 Uganda. Die Reise war Teil der Vorbereitung eines interdisziplinären Forschungsantrags. Im Westen Ugandas untersuchten wir die kleinbäuerliche Landwirtschaft an den steilen Hängen der Rwenzori Mountains. Die Böden dort, die durch starke Bodenerosion gekennzeichnet sind, verlieren so schnell an Fruchtbarkeit, dass sie innerhalb von ein oder zwei Generationen vollständig erodiert sein könnten. So haben es uns die Bodenkundler erzählt. Wir haben untersucht, wie sich die Menschen anpassen könnten und wie die Resilienz des Ökosystems verbessert werden könnte. Wir fuhren herum und hielten mehrmals an, um auf die Hänge zu starren. Wir diskutierten über die Größen von Parzellen, über Erosionsraten, Nutzpflanzen und Maßnahmen gegen den Verlust der Bodenfruchtbarkeit. Uns leitete die Frage, wie vulnerable Gemeinschaften resilient werden können. Resilienz war die Idee, gefährdeten Bauern zu helfen sich anzupassen, damit sie weiterhin Bauern bleiben konnten. Ohne zu wissen, wie sie selbst ihre Zukunft sahen. In diesem Artikel möchte ich über diese Forschungsreise reflektieren, indem ich zunächst die Arbeitsweise der Wissenschaftler und deren Einfluss auf meine Arbeit und meine Wahrnehmung vor Ort beschreibe. Außerdem möchte ich kritisch darüber nachdenken, wie wir als Wissenschaftler*innen und ebenso Konzepte wie Resilienz koloniale Kontinuitäten reproduzieren.*

Introduction

Conducting research in marginalised contexts of the Global South necessitates a deep engagement with the complexities of ecological, political and social local environments. As scholars, particularly those from the Global North, we often enter these spaces with established frameworks and concepts, such as we did with resilience. These concepts shape our understanding and approach. However, these concepts may carry with them the legacies of colonialism, imposing external ideas of progress and adaptation on communities whose lived realities and aspirations may differ significantly. This commentary emerges from a field trip to the Rwenzori Mountains in Uganda, where an interdisciplinary team of soil scientists and social scientists sought to explore smallholder farming in a region facing severe soil erosion. The experience revealed the limits of our preconceived notions and the need for reflexivity in research practices. By reflecting on our methodological and emotional doubts and the underlying assumptions guiding our work, this contribution aims to critically examine how scientific practices can inadvertently perpetuate colonial continuities and how we might reimagine our roles as researchers in these contexts.

About half a year before the trip to Uganda, I had attended a lecture in Germany by one of the soil scientists who was studying the region. Smallholder farmers in the East African Rift are increasingly forced to cultivate very steep slopes (up to 50% slope gradient) with shallow but fertile soils that are highly susceptible to water erosion driven by heavy tropical rainfall (Chapman *et al*; 2021, Fenta *et al*. 2020). Permanent downslope tillage exacerbates these erosion processes and threatens slope stability in unprecedented ways (Tarolli *et al*. 2020; Wilken *et al*. 2021), making these land-use systems a particularly interesting and highly important 'critical zone' (Latour & Weibel 2020) that is at risk of collapse on decadal time scales. The soil scientists were interested in collaborating and networking to learn more about adaptation and its impact on soil fertility. This is where we, as social scientists, came in. Together, we planned an exploratory phase, initial data collection, and exchanges with local universities and NGOs. We were a group of four scientists from Germany, accompanied for some time by a post-doc from Uganda who had done his PhD at the same university in Germany. So, our setup was interdisciplinary. My professor and I were the social scientists on the team, and on the other side were two soil scientists from Germany. Our goal was to head west to the Rwenzori Mountains, look at steep slopes for possible study sites, and conduct several interviews. The Germany-based Bavarian Research Alliance (BayFOR) funded the fieldwork because it aimed to build a long-lasting partnership and research project.

My last fieldwork in the Global South was during my PhD in Ghana. From a political ecology perspective, my research was about a conservation-exploitation conflict in a forest reserve in Ghana (Purwins 2022). While I was familiar with the context of conservation, the topic of agriculture was more or less new to me. However, my perception was shaped by the presentations I had already attended by the soil scientist, who already did some fieldwork there.

Doing fieldwork

Our field phase began with an exchange at Makerere University (MAK) in Kampala. There was a workshop where we and researchers from Uganda presented similar work on erosion, soil fertility, and agriculture. A few days later, we travelled west and reached Fort Portal at the foot of Rwenzori Mountains. The cooler evenings in Fort Portal stood in stark contrast to Kampala's hot, humid nights, offering a brief respite before we delved into our research. Although the area was familiar to the soil scientists among us, it was a new terrain for the rest of the team, adding an element of discovery to our work.

As we crossed the landscape, I was reminded of Bruno Latour's (1999) seminal essay, *Circulating Reference: Sampling Soil in the Amazon Forest*, a nuanced exploration of scientific practice within the context of soil research in the Amazon. Latour's work is part of a broader inquiry into the processes of knowledge production in science, emphasising how these processes are shaped by the specific contexts in which they occur. During our fieldwork, as we travelled between potential study sites, the parallels with Latour's observations became evident to me. Upon arriving at each site, we would gaze across the valley, attempting to interpret the landscape and stare at several steep slopes. We would repeat this behaviour several times. The soil scientists could identify certain crops from a distance, using them as indicators of soil fertility and erosion. We (the social scientists) quickly learned that cassava, often associated with low soil fertility, served as a sign of eroded topsoil. However, cassava's role is complex, as it is also a heavy feeder with a high nutrient-removal rate from the soil, comparable to other root crops (Adjei *et al*. 2023).

Our observations extended beyond mere identification; they prompted deeper questions about the landscape and its management. We wondered whether the topsoil on the opposite slopes was similarly degraded, and whether the apparent terraces were deliberate attempts at soil conservation or unintended results of landslides. These inquiries underscored the significance of human decisions in shaping the landscape, challenging us to consider the socio-economic factors behind the choice of crops and land-use practices. We stood as observers, not simply surveying the land but actively marking out areas for systematic study. Much like Latour describes scientists in the Amazon dividing the forest into plots, grids, and numbered trees, we too divided the Rwenzori slopes into analytically manageable units. Our criteria for selecting initial study areas – such as soil composition, slope position, land use, and cultivation type – reflected this interdisciplinary approach. By structuring the landscape into scientifically recordable forms, we transformed the complex terrain into an object of analysis, facilitating targeted, comparable, and analysable data collection.

In the evenings, exhausted from the long days in the humid environment of the tropics, we planned our upcoming days. During my dissertation in Ghana, I kept a reflexive journal that included not only observations and field notes throughout the day, but also personal experiences and thoughts. This time, I wrote down my notes on my smartphone. In the first days, I focused on my role as an observer of the soil scientist as described above. These perspectives emphasise the importance of critically examining the methods and processes of knowledge production, and acknowledging their implications for the communities and environments we study. Latour's work reminded me that scientific knowledge production is not a neutral or purely objective process; it is deeply embedded in social, cultural, and material contexts. In the marginalised settings of the Global South, this awareness is crucial – because I didn't want to perpetuate colonial research practices. However, this also led me to take a critical look at our understanding of resilience, which we brought with us (I will go into this in more detail later).

It was clear that after the first few days, my time as an observer was over and I should start with a first field phase. At that time, it was only me and one other soil scientist, while the other two colleagues already left to head back to Germany. Together with a member of staff from the local university, I planned to conduct initial interviews with farmers. I planned the time we would arrive and the questions, and wrote down notes from the observations we did the days before. Together with the soil scientist, we selected the area where I should encounter farmers and talk to them, while he would take photographs from the other side for remote sensing purposes. The involvement of a local university staff member was not only instrumental in building trust with the community and navigating cultural nuances but also enriched the research process through their unique insights and expertise. While the initial planning and design of interviews largely reflected the priorities and assumptions of the Global North research team, the collaboration in the field revealed the value of integrating local knowledge into the research framework. During our time in the field, I engaged in discussions with my local colleague about the goals of our study, during which he shared his perspectives and helped refine our research focus. His suggestions contributed to adjusting some of our interview questions, ensuring they were more relevant and sensitive to the local context. This exchange not only improved the quality of the data collected but also underscored the potential for co-creation of knowledge in collaborative research. Mitigating power imbalances in such partnerships requires intentional efforts to decentralise decision-making and empower local researchers as equal contributors. In future projects, this should include co-developing research questions with local partners from the beginning, aligning project objectives with local priorities, and ensuring equitable distribution of funding and resources. This collaborative process, while valuable, also highlighted the challenges of conducting research in contexts where communities may feel over-researched or underserved by past studies. These dynamics are further complicated by the emotional and logistical realities of fieldwork, particularly in addressing concerns about the potential for

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research fatigue and the varying ways researchers navigate the field environment. *Research fatigue* can be described as tiredness or even annoyance of people who have experienced many researchers (especially White researchers) coming without concrete results or with a lack of communication of research findings. Fieldwork often involves a division of tasks informed not only by expertise but also by differing emotional responses to the field environment. For instance, my colleague told me that the idea of doing interviews and talking to strangers seemed very stressful to him; he was quite happy with doing some photogrammetry. And indeed, in the steep terrain, my physical and mental effort was certainly higher. As we walked through the area and tried to interview farmers from field to field in the heat of the tropics, I was confronted with the same questions from time to time. The farmers' direct questions – such as why our research was conducted in their community and not within our own – brought into focus the broader issue of research fatigue in frequently studied regions. This fatigue reflects a history of extractive research practices, underscoring the importance of ensuring that research not only addresses academic inquiries but also offers tangible benefits to local communities.

In a blog series, Ryan (2020) described the situation when a Paramount Chief chastised her for coming to Sierra Leone to conduct research that would only help her career. '*For a long time after that interview, I felt like I'd failed in the basic premise of thinking that I could go to Sierra Leone for research.* (ibid.:n.p.)' She furthermore argues that these stories of failure go beyond simple methodical reflections. These are experiences where the professional researcher, and us as a person, feel like failing. Situations we are not trained or even prepared for. Confronting questions from farmers about the relevance of my research underscored the need for continuous reflexivity, emphasising how researchers must remain open to critique and adaptive to local contexts.

Fieldwork in Uganda highlighted the importance of collaboration and support in navigating the challenges of conducting research in marginalised contexts. Moments of questioning by farmers about the purpose and impact of our research underscored the broader issue of research fatigue and the ethical responsibility of ensuring tangible benefits for local communities. My colleague from the local university played a critical role in these moments, providing both emotional and professional support. His acknowledgment that our work might not have an immediate effect but was part of building a long-term collaboration reinforced the value of partnerships that prioritise mutual learning and shared goals. The farmers accepted this kind of explanation silently. Yet, it remained unspoken if they related to this idea or not.

These interactions also emphasised the importance of reflexivity and debriefing within research teams. As Stahlke (2018) notes, debriefing with colleagues can mitigate the emotional strain of fieldwork, enabling researchers to critically reflect on their experiences. For example, a casual remark from a soil scientist in our team – acknowledging the difficulty of my interviews – highlighted the shared recognition of different research methods' challenges. Such moments fostered mutual understanding and respect within the team, challenging traditional, masculinist portrayals of the lone 'adventurous' researcher. Instead, they underscored the value of collaborative, reflective practices in field research.

▲
Figure 1: Short break during the fieldwork with a colleague from the local University Mountains of the Moon. Source: Author.

Using concepts

Undertaking fieldwork means entering people's lives and negotiating the boundaries between observation and participation. However, research practices remain deeply embedded in an unequal global system that continues to shape how data is collected and how knowledge is produced (Mertens *et al*. 2020). David Mwambari (2019:n.p.) highlights that '*doing academic fieldwork in Africa, for example, still relies on colonial practices of a white man going to find information in remote African places, inhabited by "vulnerable" and underdeveloped communities. The end goal is to bring back "home" stories of the colonised. While demographics of researchers continue to change, new researchers mimic colonial practices in collecting data.*'

As social scientists, we came from an institutional background that made us address the issue of resilience. However, my fieldwork experience revealed a critical flaw in our resilience frameworks: they often seek to make smallholder farmers more 'resilient' simply so they can continue farming within existing, inequitable systems. This perspective assumes that adaptation and endurance are inherently desirable, without first asking what these communities actually want. This became obvious to me after we, the scientists, discussed several aspects of erosion and resilience while staring at the steep slopes. This realisation, forced me to confront the colonial dimensions of resilience as a concept. It became clear that resilience, as traditionally framed, risks perpetuating the very structures that create vulnerability, positioning communities as objects of intervention rather than agents of transformation.

Yet, resilience in the post-colonial context is far more nuanced. Smallholders in the Rwenzori Mountains are not merely passive recipients of external aid; they are active agents of resilience, employing cultural practices, social networks, and local knowledge systems to navigate the structural inequities imposed by both colonial histories and current global systems. Their resilience transcends mere survival and adaptation, encompassing resistance, innovation, and the assertion of agency. For instance, during my fieldwork, I observed how local farmers integrated

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traditional farming techniques with adaptive strategies to address soil erosion while simultaneously articulating a desire for broader systemic changes, such as access to markets and education. This form of resilience resists externally imposed narratives of vulnerability and, instead, asserts a vision of the future rooted in local priorities and aspirations.

Reflecting on these observations, the project draws from post-colonial perspectives by challenging the universalising and depoliticised framing of resilience often found in neoliberal discourse (Amo-Agyemang 2021). Resilience should not be seen merely as the capacity to withstand crises or return to a prior state; rather, it must be understood as a process of transformative change, rooted in empowerment and the reclamation of agency. As Lindroth and Sinevaara-Niskanen (2019) argue, resilience must account for the historical and structural inequalities that make it necessary in the first place. In this light, the project seeks to reframe resilience as a dynamic, context-sensitive process that amplifies the voices and priorities of local communities while resisting the tendency to impose external solutions.

This reframing of resilience also necessitates a more reflexive approach to research. Navigating the tension between addressing urgent practical challenges and avoiding the trap of 'White saviorism' requires genuine collaboration with local communities. Olivia Alaso and Wendy Namatovu (2022) emphasise that listening is critical – these communities are never voiceless. Instead of assuming their needs, researchers must engage with the modes of knowledge and agency already present in the Rwenzori Mountains. The smallholders' resilience reflects not only their ability to adapt but also their capacity to resist and innovate within a deeply uneven global system.

In many ways, smallholder farmers in the Rwenzori Mountains embody what is resilient about post-colonialism: the ability to draw on historical knowledge, cultural values, and social networks to assert agency and envision alternative futures. This resilience is not about returning to or maintaining a colonial or post-colonial status quo but about transforming the systems that continue to shape their lives. By centring these practices and perspectives, the project aims to move beyond extractive research models and contribute to a deeper understanding of resilience as both a theoretical concept and a lived reality.

In this regard, there is still much for us to understand concerning the modes of knowledge at the steep slopes of the Rwenzori Mountains. In many cases, smallholders do exhibit forms of resilience that are rooted in their own cultural practices, social networks, and local knowledge systems. These forms of resilience are not merely about survival; they also encompass resistance, agency, and innovation.

Epilogue

In the end, I want to draw back on Latour. His research explores how scientific facts are produced, emphasising that scientific knowledge is not simply discovered but is a result of complex social processes. Latour's work sheds light on how scientific facts emerge through the interplay of various social, cultural, and material factors. Just as natural scientists dissect and examine physical landscapes, social scientists explore complex social environments, where the interactions and relationships they observe are closely tied to their research methods and inherent biases.

When conducting fieldwork, social scientists engage with individuals and communities who are often conscious of their roles as research subjects. These participants may have expectations shaped by prior encounters with researchers, or they may experience research fatigue, particularly in regions frequently studied by outsiders. This consciousness inevitably influences the data collected, as participants may adjust their behaviour or responses based on perceived researcher intentions or the legacies of prior studies. The researcher's presence, much like the natural scientist's segmentation of landscapes into grids and plots, frames the way knowledge is generated. Yet this framework is far from neutral; it is shaped by the researcher's positionality, the community's historical interactions with research, and the broader socio-political landscape.

Latour's emphasis on the non-neutrality of scientific practices provides a lens for evaluating the methods of ethnography and anthropology. Reflexivity, in this context, requires social scientists to critically examine how their cultural and academic backgrounds influence their research practices. It also necessitates addressing power dynamics between researchers and participants, understanding how a community's prior experiences with research might shape their responses, and working to ensure that the knowledge produced is authentic, contextually relevant, and ethically sound.

Furthermore, the way social scientists organise their research, by choosing specific individuals, communities, or social phenomena to study, parallels the way natural scientists segment physical landscapes into units for analysis. This process of structuring is a form of knowledge creation that turns complex social realities into data that can be managed, recorded, and analysed. However, this approach can also simplify or misrepresent the complexity of social life, just as dividing natural landscapes into scientific units can sometimes overlook the interconnectedness of ecosystems.

By drawing on Latour's insights, we are reminded that ethnographic and anthropological research is not simply a matter of documenting social reality; it is a process filled with interpretive challenges. Researchers must carefully consider how their methods and interactions influence the knowledge they produce while staying mindful of the broader impact their work has on the communities they study. Embracing reflexivity means acknowledging the researcher as human – recognising not only intellectual but also emotional challenges in the field. Rather than striving for sanitised, 'perfect' outputs, it is through these moments of vulnerability that we can cultivate more authentic and ethical research practices. Because these papers hide the emotional stress we often face during fieldwork, but it is also these experiences which, in the sense of Latour, are also a part of how we do science, of how we collect data and make sense of the world.

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The Need for Immersion in the Field
Confusions and Tensions during Fieldwork in Dominican *Bateyes*

Julia Kieslinger and Stefan Kordel

Immersion in the research field, in an ethnographic sense, is often regarded as a premise for decolonial research practice. Besides becoming familiar with local history, acquiring a sense of place and meaningful face-to-face interactions with stakeholders are crucial aspects of immersion from a life-world perspective, but these can be more difficult in marginalised settlements. In this paper, we reflect on how situations that can exacerbate confusion and tension among participants in all phases of a research setting – but especially during fieldwork – can impede immersion in the field, and how such situations can be overcome. In the course of a research project in Dominican bateyes, which are frequently referred to as 'marginalised settlements', we deployed a participatory research style in which participants became co-researchers, which helped to reduce power asymmetries. In these rural settlements for migrant labourers from Haiti employed in sugar cane production, inhabitants continually experience various forms of discrimination and exclusion as a result of their legal status, language practices, or education. Reflections on the research experience revealed that confusion and tension arose during all phases of the fieldwork, including entry into the field, during the interviews, and when leaving the field. In particular, the academics' professional status and the positionality of researchers and co-researchers, which is negotiated via markers such as status, appearance, or language, as well as via expectations resulting from experience with other stakeholders in the field, play a central role and often result in confusion. We would like to offer guidance on how to critically and systematically examine research practice in bateyes, which we use here to exemplify other rural, marginalised settlements. We show how to deal ethically with the fact that social differences can often not be fully balanced.

Eintauchen ins Feld: Irritationen und Unsicherheiten während der Feldforschung in dominikanischen Bateyes
*Das ethnographische Eintauchen ins Forschungsfeld wird oft als Voraussetzung für eine dekoloniale Forschungspraxis angesehen. Aus einer lebensweltlichen Perspektive sind Kenntnisse der lokalen Geschichte, ein Gespür für den Untersuchungsort sowie Interaktionen mit Akteur*innen auf Augenhöhe entscheidend für das Eintauchen ins Feld. In marginalisierten Siedlungen kann es jedoch viel schwieriger sein, dies umzusetzen. In diesem Beitrag diskutieren wir, wie Situationen, die Irritationen und Unsicherheiten unter den Teilnehmenden in allen Forschungsphasen hervorrufen, das Eintauchen ins Feld erschweren und wie mit diesen umgegangen werden kann. Im Rahmen eines Forschungsprojekts in dominikanischen Bateyes, die häufig als „marginalisierte Siedlungen" bezeichnet werden, setzten wir einen partizipativen Forschungsstil um, bei dem die Teilnehmenden zu Mitforschenden wurden, was dazu beitrug, Machtasymmetrien zu verringern. Diese ländlichen Siedlungen wurden ursprünglich für Arbeitskräfte aus Haiti errichtet, die temporär oder permanent in der Zuckerrohrindustrie tätig waren. Heute erleben die Bewohner*innen dort aufgrund ihres rechtlichen Status, ihrer Sprachpraktiken oder Bildung fortlaufend verschiedene Formen der Diskriminierung und Ausgrenzung. In unseren Reflexionen über Forschungserfahrungen wurden Irritationen und Unsicherheiten während aller Phasen des Forschungsprozesses deutlich, vom Eintritt in das Feld, über die Durchführung der Gespräche bis hin zum Verlassen des Untersuchungsortes. Insbesondere der berufliche Status der Wissenschaftler*innen und die Positionalität von (Mit-)Forschenden, die über Merkmale wie Status, Aussehen oder Sprache sowie über Erwartungen, die sich aus Erfahrungen mit anderen Akteur*innen im Feld ergeben, ausgehandelt werden, können zu Unsicherheiten führen. Auf Basis unserer Forschungserfahrungen in Bateyes möchten wir eine Orientierung für die kritische und systematische Reflexion der Forschungspraxis in anderen ländlichen, marginalisierten Siedlungen anbieten. Wir zeigen ebenso Möglichkeiten für den ethischen Umgang mit der Tatsache auf, dass soziale Unterschiede oft nicht vollständig ausgeglichen werden können.*

Participatory research in marginalised settings

The behaviour performativity and positionality of the people involved is crucial when taking a participatory and ethically sensitive research approach. Addressing the behaviour of researchers, Robert Chambers (2002:8) advises us to unlearn and abandon preconceptions, to relax and not rush, to be sensitive, to respect and empower, to be optimally unprepared and flexible, to improvise, innovate and invent – try new things and be bold – to watch and listen, learn and embrace error, to be self-aware, self-critical and honest.

As participatory methodology is frequently considered to be a research style and 'an orientation to inquiry' (Reason & Bradbury 2008:1) that aims to carry out investigations in cooperation with members of the society under investigation and develop means for individual and collective self-empowerment (Bergold & Thomas 2012; von Unger 2014; Kieslinger *et al*. 2020), it prioritises the co-creation of knowledge through collaboration between researchers and participants. Reflections on participants' lives may also, even unintentionally, result in mutual learning. Besides acknowledging the ethical imperative to do no harm to vulnerable people (MacKenzie *et al*. 2007), participatory methodology also aims to give something back and create some individually or collectively meaningful situations, such as reflection on one's agency. The latter is especially important when working with participants in vulnerable living conditions and marginalised settings.

In order to achieve the above-mentioned goals, immersion in local contexts and life-worlds is commonly seen as a solution. Having its roots in ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation in particular (Malinowski 1922; O'Reilly 2005; Daynes & Williams 2018), 'immersion involves delving deeply into the lives of research participants (…) and is a practical, intellectual, and emotional exercise' (Dumont 2023). Recognising the importance of local perspectives, the research process presented here was co-designed and conducted alongside co-researchers and inhabitants of marginalised settlements; that is, it was designed in conjunction with residents of the *bateyes* in the Dominican Republic. This collaborative approach ensured an insider's view of the life-worlds and practices under investigation. Adhering to qualitative research principles (Flick *et al*. 2019), we employed open and flexible methods for empirical fieldwork. This included informal talks, observation, interviews, group discussions (Bernard 2006), and the use of visual tools (Kumar 2002) to capture the lived experiences of *batey* residents. In this sense, a participatory research style was considered likely to involve the very people whose lives and actions were being studied in the planning and conduct of the research (Bergold & Thomas 2012). According to Chambers (2002:8), 'participatory processes cannot be "properly planned" (…). Part of the key is to know what has to be planned and what is better left open'.

Participatory research approaches aim to reduce power asymmetries, not only during data collection but also during preparation and analysis. Acknowledging critiques of extractivist fieldwork and non-sustainable research (Cruz & Luke 2020; Murrey & Mollett 2023), it should be ensured that participants' needs are continuously considered in all phases of the research. Thus, research teams should reflect how participants can take advantage from the conducted activities. While tools and methods have been covered extensively in discussions of participatory methodology (Kumar 2002; von Unger 2014, Kieslinger *et al*. 2020), in this article we focus on the interactions of three groups of participants – researchers, local co-researchers, and inhabitants of Dominican *bateyes* – in the process of co-producing knowledge. Besides an examination of conversations on site, we were especially concerned to include reflections on access and entry to the field, as well as exit from the field and withdrawal (Gauditz 2019), and to point out confusions and tensions during the immersion in the field.

Setting the scene

The reflections on immersion in the field by means of a participatory research style we present here are based on fieldwork conducted in *bateyes* in the Dominican Republic (DR). *Bateyes* were founded at the beginning of the twentieth century as rural settlements designed to serve as short-term dwellings for migrant labourers, both those from Haiti and to a lesser extent also from other Caribbean islands, who were employed in the colonial sugar cane industry (Hintzen 2014; Riveros 2014; Wooding 2014). From the beginning, *bateyes* were characterised by certain features that had an influence on inhabitants' life-worlds (Kieslinger accepted). Their location was determined by strategic considerations for sugar production, and most of them were surrounded by large sugar cane fields. *Batey* infrastructure was planned according to the functionality of the operational structure and to provide basic services for their inhabitants. Social life among the inhabitants was strongly hierarchical and stratified according to professional position and origin (ibid.).

Since then, *bateyes* have undergone substantial transformations (Kieslinger *et al*. 2024) and four developmental trajectories have been identified: sugar cane *bateyes*, abandoned *bateyes*, *bateyes* reoriented toward the agricultural sector, and *bateyes* reoriented beyond the agricultural sector (ibid.:21-25). Most of the *bateyes* have developed, over time, into permanent dwelling-places for people descended from immigrants (Riveros 2014) and, more recently, for domestic migrants from other parts of the Dominican Republic (Kieslinger *et al*. 2024). But although they have now been substantially transformed, they are nevertheless frequently linked to poverty, Blackness, and Haitian culture in the public discourse of DR (Wooding & Moseley-Williams 2004; Jansen 2013). *Batey* inhabitants face widespread marginalisation and discrimination based on ethnicity, culture, and language (Kieslinger *et al*. 2024). External hegemonic labelling processes, mostly associated with Dominican nation-building and applied to residents of Haitian and/or Dominican descent, racialise this diverse population. Anti-Blackness, ingrained in Dominican migration and border policies, permeates everyday interactions and shapes the life-worlds of populations of Haitian-descent in the Dominican Republic, especially *batey* dwellers (Derby 1994; Simmons 2009; Jansen 2013; Ricourt 2016; Martínez & Wooding 2017; Kieslinger *et al*. 2024).

The aim of this third-party-funded research project was to investigate spatio-linguistic practices, social differentiation, and agency in the *bateyes*. Thematically, we focused on livelihood strategies in the context of (im)mobility systems and resulting multilocal living arrangements. Our perspective was a decolonial one, and everyday practices and knowledge were at the core of our analyses (Blunt & McEwan 2003; Basu 2020). As an overarching conceptual lens, we drew on life-worlds as people's subjective constructions of reality formed under the conditions of their material and immaterial life circumstances (Kraus 2015:4). Consequently, we aimed to approach the life-world perspectives of *batey* dwellers not only through direct interaction but also by assessing their life conditions. Fieldwork was conducted during three research stays between June 2022 and March 2023, each with a duration of three weeks. The first stay consisted of exploratory field visits to ninety-six *bateyes* across twelve provinces, where we undertook participatory observation, informal background conversations, group discussions, and the testing of visual methods. The latter two consisted of forty-five qualitative interviews on *batey* life-worlds with inhabitants and key informants in twenty-eight *bateyes*, and seventy-six biographically oriented household interviews with visual elements in seventeen *bateyes*. All the fieldtrips were conducted with a transdisciplinary team consisting of White academics from the so-called Global North (Germany) and local co-researchers from the Dominican Republic who either lived or had previously lived in *bateyes*. Fieldwork included continuous deeply reflective briefings and debriefings of the research team, documented by means of written

Figure 1: Field entry – arriving in a *batey*. Photo: Kieslinger (16/03/2023).

protocols. In what follows, we present the perspectives of the three groups involved – our own perspectives as researchers, those of our co-researchers, and those of the participants[1] – and reflect on how fieldwork situations that represented key confusions and tensions among the participants involved can hinder immersion in the field and how they can be overcome.

Knowledge co-production and mutual learning

In this section, we discuss the co-production of knowledge and mutual learning in the three phases – (1) field entry and access, (2) data collection and analysis, and (3) field exit and withdrawal – from the perspective of the three groups involved in the research: researchers, co-researchers, and participants.

Phase 1: Getting started – field entry and access

In the initial phase of empirical field research, researchers must navigate a complex interplay of ethical considerations and relationship building, as well as gaining access to research sites (see Kieslinger *et al*. 2020). A good field entry is a prerequisite for building rapport and becoming familiar with people's life-worlds. In this process, to meet ethical and participatory principles, it is crucial to be transparent about research objectives and to address any concerns or questions that arise (ibid.).

From our perspective as *researchers*, the core challenge was to correctly understand a *batey* itself as a subject of research, as well as its current dynamics. The first questions we had to ask ourselves were, therefore, 'what is a *batey*?' and 'where and how to get started?' *Bateyes* were difficult to identify, as they have not been incorporated into the formal political administrative structure and are often located on land that once belonged, or still belongs, to private sugar cane companies. During this phase, it was especially important to know key local informants, such as a reliable and trustworthy driver who knew the local population of certain *bateyes*. Secondly, many *bateyes* have been greatly transformed and their original infrastructural characteristics have been fundamentally altered (facilities for sugar cane production, housing, and provisional services for inhabitants). Thirdly, in contrast to the historical definition of *bateyes*, peoples' lived experience of what constitutes a *batey* varies substantially. In the first research phase, therefore, we opted for field exploration by means of visits, background conversations, observations, and photo documentation (Figure 1). We found ourselves in an ongoing process of negotiation of the question 'what is a *batey*?' among the local population, although some key features persisted, such as hierarchisation and marginalisation, which were often linked to their production structures and location. Furthermore, precarious living conditions are widespread, with residents facing issues like overcrowded housing barracks, poor building quality, and limited access to basic services such as electricity, water, healthcare, and sanitation. While basic infrastructure may exist (shops, schools, small medical units, churches), their quality and availability are often substandard. We started to grasp what *bateyes* meant for local people (whether inhabitants or not), and how their life-worlds were interrelated with the identity of a place. Continuous reflection on the diversity of *bateyes* was helpful for avoiding the reproduction of marginalisation and stigmatisation, and for engaging in a more sensitive way with research participants and the issues under study. In this phase, we finally identified co-researchers, whose role we envisaged would be to contribute to the translation of the Haitian Creole language,

1
Whilst, in many study settings, all participants are subsumed under the term co-investigators (Bergold & Thomas 2012; von Unger 2014), we distinguish here between co-investigators as part of the research team and participants in order to enhance readability.

the arrangement of interviews and background conversations, as well as the organisation of logistics.

Our *co-researchers* took part in the process of negotiating the definition of a *batey*, especially since they themselves had biographical roots in *bateyes*. Thus, they were also able to typologise less- and more-transformed *bateyes* and explain the ownership structures that result in dependency and marginalisation. From the perspective of the co-researchers, we (the researchers) crossed their path by chance, and our requests and needs in the organisation of the planned data collection represented an additional and fairly secure opportunity to earn money. In return, they were prepared to put other professional work and activities in the family environment on hold (by sending their children to live with relatives or friends, for example). At the beginning, there was a great deal of uncertainty about the tasks expected of them and how they could meet the researchers' requirements. The co-researchers found themselves on the middle rung of a hierarchy, in between the people in their everyday lives (at work or in the family, for instance), us researchers as their 'employers', and the local population of the *bateyes*, whose participation had to be sounded out. Within the research setting, their mediating role had to be negotiated constantly, for instance with regard to the selection of field sites to be visited and participants to be selected. They were also interested in bringing the research activity into familiar *bateyes* and households or those of their family members, as they expected certain direct or indirect (economic) benefits. The negotiation between benefit from the advantages of personal involvement and the scientific selection criteria could affect both access and expectation management. Thus, the selection criteria had to be discussed in conjunction with the researchers, taking into account the aims of the study, available resources, accessibility, security aspects, and logistics.

The *batey inhabitants who participated* welcomed us in a friendly way, but with a certain uncertainty and curiosity. The most common questions were about who we were, what our interests were, why we had come to this *batey*, and why anyone should be interested in life in the *bateyes*? It was usually necessary for our co-researchers to take the floor to present the research team and their objectives in accessible language. Confusion arose because *batey* inhabitants expected to gain economic benefit either directly or indirectly by participating in the research activity. Thus, we had to clarify our institutional background and associated resources. In light of our aim to include a variety of voices, we faced challenges in the sampling process: on the one hand, there were people who doubted their own abilities or did not consider themselves sufficiently competent to answer our questions compared to others. Even though we repeatedly explained that they themselves were the best experts on the ground, it usually took the positive encouragement of the co-researchers to help people become confident to take part themselves. On the other hand, we met people who acted as if they knew everything and everyone, and who usually spoke for others. It was often necessary to explain to them in a polite manner why they could not take part in the data collection. Here, the co-researchers also played a very important role, as it was of the utmost importance, for successful fieldwork, that nobody felt offended and that no rumours were created about our team.

Phase 2: Becoming familiar with batey life-worlds – data collection and analysis

In adopting a participatory research style, researchers must be prepared to develop, test, and adapt their research methods to best suit the specific context and people involved (Kieslinger *et al*. 2020; Kieslinger 2021). Difficult conversations, power dynamics, and resource limitations demand sensitivity and transparency (ibid.). Acknowledging markers of difference, like language or cultural background, fosters a more-equitable research process (Crang & Cook 2007:9-10; Caesar *et al*. 2014). It is also necessary to create a research atmosphere that encourages open communication and contains no disadvantages for the participants (Kieslinger *et al*. 2020).

Prior to data collection, the *researchers* piloted a range of methodological tools, experimenting with diverse interview settings and the incorporation of visual features such as mapping exercises, to refine our research design. It was very important to us that the participants were involved in structuring the interview situation. Accordingly, they were asked to decide their preferred interview location and how the data should be collected (via stories or drawings). With regard to the tools, we had to adapt – in conjunction with the co-researchers – to their choice of language in relation to commonly used expressions and everyday colloquial language, as well as to prevailing conceptions in the case of rankings or evaluations. The choice of location, front yards or porches as well as other public places (Figure 2), presented us with a series of unforeseen challenges, as we aimed to create a private and protected atmosphere for our interviews/discussions. However, passers-by would frequently interrupt our conversations, sometimes even joining in or asking to participate, and participants would often suggest continuing the conversation with other family members or neighbours present. Furthermore, background noise also made it difficult to utilise the audio recordings. It was, therefore, necessary to adapt our roles as researchers and those of our co-researchers so that everyone took on certain tasks in the organisation of the interview situation. The following roles were defined and divided among three or four people: addressing the interviewees, introducing the team and the objectives; conducting the interview, including check backs; recording information about the household members (including names and relationship to the interviewee); checking the voice recorders; contact for passers-by and ensuring a quiet environment (for example in the case of loud music); serving drinks during the interviews; and preparing food packages as reimbursement for the participants. As researchers, we also had to deal with the complexity of transnational and translocal life-worlds, since important voices might be omitted due to the physical absence of inhabitants. Moreover, the daily struggle to secure their livelihoods left the inhabitants little time to participate in our research. Household chores or work (Figure 3), for instance, demanded great flexibility and respect for their limited time. Our research aimed to understand the everyday lives of our participants.

However, we encountered various challenges during the conversations. Firstly, many participants struggled to articulate aspects of their everyday lives that they considered too mundane to be worth mentioning. Secondly, the discussions often delved into highly sensitive topics (including issues of citizenship or deportation, or experiences of discrimination and violence), making it challenging to redirect the conversation to the focus themes of the investigation. This presented us with a dilemma: how to avoid re-traumatising participants while simultaneously providing a space for them to discuss their experiences. Moreover, the emotional intensity of some of these conversations made it difficult to maintain a neutral stance as researchers and caused a certain amount of psychological stress for the whole research team. We therefore included phases of debriefing after the interviews where we reflected on the interview situation, the issues addressed, and the personal feelings of the research team.

In different debriefing sessions, the *co-researchers* were asked about their own observations and about certain of the researchers' findings and interpretations in the sense of a joint data analysis. In time and after some negotiation, they reported that they better understood both the objectives of the research and their roles. However, confusion persisted about further data processing and related requirements, for example in terms of the quality of recordings or the allocation of a certain spokesperson during an interview. We therefore held a session in which the researchers presented the initial data outputs to the co-researchers and explained how they were stored and prepared for further analysis (for example, transcription). It was very useful for them to see the importance of creating disturbance-free interview situations. During fieldwork, the co-researchers began more and more to organise themselves and take on different roles independently. Furthermore, they took ownership of the project, becoming highly motivated in their tasks and formulating suggestions and proposals for improvement. They also mentioned the insights they gained into the huge number of *bateyes* in the DR, their diversity, and the living conditions of their inhabitants.

At the beginning of the interviews, there was a certain degree of uncertainty among the *participants* regarding the scientists' intentions. As the conversations progressed, participants sometimes did not dare to speak openly and questioned the researchers' motives (for example, because of their dependence on the owners of the sugar companies). Their citizenship status, which sometimes included elements of informality, posed further difficulty in building trust, while the established hierarchies in *bateyes* and entrenched roles in households posed further challenges for the research team's attempts to ensure equal participation. However, over time, participants increasingly felt heard and valued, especially with the co-researchers' support in clarifying misunderstandings. Although participants often expressed hope that the foreign researchers could help improve their situation, they appreciated the researchers' interest in their lives in the *batey*, including its challenges. At the end, however, the participants' understanding of the research remained limited, highlighting a gap between the academic and the lived experience.

▲
Figure 2: A church was considered a public and safe interview site. Photo: Castillo (19/03/2023).

Phase 3: Challenges when leaving – field exit and withdrawal

The issue of departure, here referred to as phase of field exit and withdrawal, is particularly sensitive, but has been treated less thoroughly in the methodological literature (Watts 2008; Iversen 2009; Reeves 2010; Delamont 2016; Gauditz 2019). Leaving the field often involves a complex process of detachment from the research environment and its participants, since everyone involved may experience a range of emotions, including sadness, guilt, or a sense of loss (Watts 2008).

After the confidential and often intimate conversation they had experienced, the *researchers* often established a more personal relationship. This was challenging for the field exit from a *batey*, since for resource and logistical reasons longer stays in households and further visits were mostly not possible. When leaving the *bateyes*, the social inequalities between the research team and the participants became especially evident. This gave us mixed feelings about our privilege, as we were able to immerse ourselves as researchers in *batey* lifeworlds and able to leave them again at any time. We also had ethical concerns about possible consequences in the field after our conversations, or about ways to provide help. We asked ourselves questions about the purpose of the research and, even if we hadn't intended to, we became aware of the limited possibilities of being able to use our results to make improvements for the participants in any way. As the co-researchers had

Figure 3: A co-researcher conducts an activity at a participant's workplace. Photo: Kieslinger (17/03/2023). ▼

taken ownership of the project, both they and the researchers were interested in further fieldwork and joint data analysis. Since we had built relationships with them and had also been involved in their everyday lives (for example, when they were organising someone to look after their children, when there was illness among their family members, or when spontaneous family visits occurred), we could anticipate their availability according to their life-worlds. For the joint analysis, we could organise a scholarship to pay for one of them to have a short visit to our university in order to discuss the research findings.

The *co-researchers*' experience of the fieldwork became obvious when leaving a *batey*. Their diverse backgrounds and current life circumstances provided a rich tapestry for understanding the complexities of life in these settlements. Accordingly, their reflections about *batey* life-worlds took place against the backdrop of their biographical experience, related social mobility, and agency. The first co-researcher, born and raised in a *batey*, mostly reflected on the historical and contemporary realities of these communities, highlighting the significant transformations they have undergone. His current residence in Punta Cana and involvement in tourism and local politics suggested a complex relationship with his past and a desire to contribute to societal concerns. As the spouse of co-researcher one, co-researcher two had also gained first-hand experience of life in a *batey*. Her perspective complemented her husband's by emphasising the challenges faced by *batey* residents, particularly women and children, their limited access to public services, and the societal tensions experienced by Haitian migrants and their descendants. The third co-researcher still resided in the *batey* where she was born. She was able to begin her academic career despite being descended from Haitian immigrants. Her viewpoint was influenced by her educational background as well as her life experiences. Her work with marginalised groups, including migrants and youth, highlights her commitment to improving the lives of those who face similar challenges. This resulted in a certain tension in the interpretation of the results: for us researchers, the co-researchers' insights were crucial for a more-differentiated understanding of the topics discussed, but their explanations and interpretations also required critical reflection because they were the result of their own positionality and life experiences.

For the *participants*, the research activities and discussions provided a welcome respite from their daily routines and the many challenges of securing livelihoods and basic needs, as well as various other concerns. The research team consistently received expressions of gratitude for visiting the *batey* and for their interest in the residents' lives and challenges. Participants frequently requested that the research findings be shared with policymakers and that the problems faced by *batey* communities be brought to a wider audience, in the hope of fostering positive change. Sometimes there was a palpable sense of sadness and resignation among the participants, who often expressed feelings of helplessness due to their limited opportunities. Towards the end, it was necessary to steer the discussions away from problem narratives and towards possible solutions and personal possibilities for improvement, so as not to leave people with feelings of resignation and helplessness. Finally, they were also curious about life beyond the *batey* and said they would like us to visit again someday.

Discussion

During our research, it seemed that immersion in the field, which originates from an ethnographic tradition (Crang & Cook 2007; Dumont 2023), served as a starting point for ethically reflexive research. Yet, for marginalised settlements undergoing transformation, we derived some peculiarities. Firstly, immersion in the field required a proper understanding of spatial configurations, including historical developments and ongoing negotiation of what a *batey* is. The ongoing transformation of *bateyes* and the persistence of associated meanings in public discourse, such as the predominance of employment in sugar cane production, poor living conditions, or a population composed of individuals from Haiti or of Haitian descent, sensitised us to not reproduce pejorative or stereotyped notions of a *batey* as a marginalised settlement, especially since administrative notions of a *batey* are lacking (Kieslinger *et al*. 2024). Secondly, one has to become familiar with life conditions and life-worlds, encompassing not just livelihoods but also daily routines and mobility patterns (Kieslinger 2021). Understanding how people live and work is crucial, and not just in deciding when and where conversations take place. Knowing the social stratification of *bateyes* and positions of key people made it easier to approach participants and build trust, as well as enabling respectful interaction in the research settings. It turned out that our procedures for immersion in the field helped to reflect on positionality and reproduction of the colonial gaze and to overcome the mismatch between (often pre-determined) research processes and field realities (Ahmed *et al.* 2023).

As we aimed to deconstruct knowledge hierarchies and power asymmetries (Reyes-García & Sunderlin 2011; Brydon 2014; Carling *et al*. 2014; Kordel *et al*. 2018), which could reproduce colonial ideologies (Ahmed *et al.* 2023; Sims 2023), such as the marginalisation of *bateyes*, we elaborated a methodological framework based on participatory research principles (Kumar 2002; Bergold & Thomas 2012; von Unger 2014; Schönhuth & Jerrentrup 2019) and continuous critical reflection of, for example, the choice of methods, the settings of data co-production, the composition and interaction of the research team, and our interaction with participants. During the interactions of all three groups, namely researchers, co-researchers, and participants, various markers of difference – name, ethnicity, nationality, citizenship, profession, gender, age, appearance, and clothing – significantly impacted research dynamics. These markers influenced hierarchies in relationships, the power balance, and the levels of trust between participants and researchers. They also shaped the behaviour of both the participants – in the field and during interviews – and the researchers themselves, in their interactions with each other and with the participants. Consequently, it was necessary to understand the histories and impacts of such social categories as they shaped different self-identities, biographies, experiences, and actions (see also Crang & Cook 2007:9-10). In concrete terms, our European descent and 'Whiteness' became especially obvious when participants anticipated receiving some forms of support or

assistance in exchange for their participation. Professional markers such as being rooted in academia, which is often associated with hierarchisation in the so-called Global South, also evolved as an issue. Despite being transparent about our perspective and the objectives of the research and any potential benefits or outcomes for participants, it was not possible to solve this. Participants may expect research that provides immediate solutions to their problems, rather than purely knowledge co-production. This can lead to disappointment and disengagement on the part of participants when researchers cannot directly help or impact their lives (see also Ahmed *et al.* 2023). Nevertheless, the involvement of co-researchers as mediators, and researchers' own efforts to hold training and debriefing sessions, could help to minimise this tension (see also Kieslinger *et al*. 2020). Besides, continuous reflections on appearance and behaviour in the field, as well as the ongoing negotiation and re-allocation of roles within the research team, are part of this dialogue (Marshall & Reason 2007).

However, immersion in the field can result in dilemmas of trust and intimacy and pose risks to the physical safety and emotional well-being of researchers and participants (see also Krause 2021). Even exceptional fieldwork can inadvertently lead to social disruption, conflict, and chaos in the field (Brydon 2014:25). In our project, ensuring participants' safety, both physical and emotional, was paramount throughout the research process. This involved creating a secure environment, for example by role allocation in the research team that went beyond simply conducting interviews and guaranteed a safe working atmosphere. During our stays in the *bateyes*, peoples' understanding of public and private spaces, which can be associated with notions of intimacy, often did not coincide with what we knew and expected. Thus, interviews took place in semi-public spaces, which consequently suffered challenges such as noise or the intervention of others. Avoiding questions that could cause distress required us to detect what might trigger such situations; in this case, these were questions about deportations or severe illness. Finally, proficiency in Spanish and Haitian Creole was absolutely necessary for clear communication and improved understanding of participants' perspectives, and fostered a more trusting and respectful research environment. Here, too, the participation of co-researchers was helpful, as they contributed their knowledge of local language(s).

Dumont (2023) suggests a more systematic and reflexive approach to immersion and provides four principles for orientation: 'involvement, by establishing a social role; engagement, by adhering to participants' ways of thinking; duration, by aligning with the temporal pacing of the field; and sites, by constructing the field as a space for social action' (ibid.:442). However, given the ethical challenges and limited influence of researchers on the interaction with co-researchers and participants, they may opt for confined or uneven immersion as a strategy (Krause 2021). Based on our field experiences, we suggest a mode of immersion with a certain spatio-biographical sensitivity. Becoming familiar with local history, ongoing transformations, and social stratification on site, as well as the life-worlds of all the actors involved, including participants and co-researchers, are important pillars. Finally, immersion should not be understood as unidirectional in the sense that a researcher delves into the life-worlds of village inhabitants, but rather bidirectional, resulting in mutual learning.

Orientations for reflexive fieldwork in marginalised settings

The challenges we faced during our research in *bateyes* in the Dominican Republic could also inform activities in other settings in the so-called Global South. Reflections on positionality in the field, ascription by participants and negotiation of roles should be an essential part of briefing and de-briefings. Moreover, the tensions between research logics and life-worlds and corresponding daily routines are worth acknowledging: manoeuvring between a binding character and situational actions should be practised. During immersion in the field, the negotiation between proximity and distance should be reflected on at all times: ultimately, it is also necessary to understand local notions of categories, such as public and private space. In the research team, it is essential to develop ways to build trust and create safe spaces for dialogue, especially when sensitive topics come up.

When conducting empirical research in marginalised settings, we would recommend a spatio-biographical sensitivity that considers researchers, co-researchers and participants as actors. A sound and continuous reflection among all three groups involved, on field entry and data collection as well as field exit, is highly recommended. Interviews and conversations should be framed by briefings and debriefings, while during the interview itself one should aim to structure the conversation, for example by explaining the structure and content or by serving beverages at a particular moment. Besides a clarification of roles, which should serve as realistic expectation management, one should intend to go beyond the description of problems and challenges and include possible solutions. This is especially desirable for the creation of reflections on agency (Spenger & Kordel 2023). Finally, maintaining contact ensures respect for the participants and extends the research relationship beyond data collection, but should finally reflect expectations by participants and clear communication of what can be done. In terms of the communication of results and the intention to 'give back' to participants, local structures, possible hierarchisation, and erasure of topics, as well as the means of communication, should be considered.

Acknowledgements

We are thankful to the welcoming atmosphere in the *bateyes* we visited, the openness of their inhabitants, and the time they gave to us. Moreover, we are grateful to all of the co-researchers, Eugenio Castillo, Kirsis Heredia de Castillo, and Wichna Joseph, who enriched the fieldwork enormously. We also thank the organisers of this special issue, the reviewer for his valuable remarks, and Maggie Studholme for their precious work on improving the manuscript in terms of language and style. The project is funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) - 443070760.

Conflict of interest statement: None declared.

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Methodological Considerations for Decolonising Planning under Uncertainty

Vignettes from Exploratory Fieldwork in Peri-Urban South Asia

Mrudhula Koshy

Developmental contexts in the Global South, often overshadowed in planning under uncertainty studies, are the focus of this article. The researcher presents methodological critiques of dominant planning approaches under uncertainty, which are primarily based on quantitative methods undertaken in Global North contexts. This article argues that such techno-academic studies often fail to adequately consider subjective experiences, lived trauma, and local knowledge of affected communities. By doing so, such studies offer limited perspectives on decolonising research on planning under uncertainty in the Global South.

The researcher then presents her accounts of the methodological considerations for researching planning under uncertainty in Wayanad, an example of a marginal developmental context in South Asia. Wayanad is a peri-urban, spatially dispersed, landlocked hill district in Kerala, a coastal province in South India. Wayanad, the least-developed district in Kerala, was affected by unprecedented monsoon floods in 2018, the magnitude of which had not been witnessed in Kerala since 1924. Considered a rare event at the time, it was followed by floods of a similar magnitude in 2019, questioning the rarity of such events and raising the urgent need to better understand uncertainties due to environmental crises. The researcher reflects on her positionality as a female insider-outsider and on the challenges and dilemmas of undertaking research in male-dominated decision-making and governance settings. The article is presented through vignettes from exploratory fieldwork and qualitative research methods undertaken in 2018, 2019, 2022 and 2023, in the aftermath of the two floods in Wayanad.

Methodologische Überlegungen zur Dekolonialisierung der Planung unter Unsicherheit. Eindrücke explorativer Feldforschung im peri-urbanen Südasien

Im Mittelpunkt dieser Arbeit stehen Entwicklungskontexte im Globalen Süden, in denen oftmals ungenau und verallgemeinernd von einer Planung unter Unsicherheit gesprochen wird. Die Forscherin präsentiert ihre methodologische Kritik an den vorherrschenden Planungsansätzen unter Unsicherheit, die in erster Linie auf unzureichend kontextualisierten, quantitativen Methoden basieren. Der Artikel argumentiert, dass solche techno-akademischen Studien oft subjektive Erfahrungen, erlebte Traumata und lokales Wissen der betroffenen Gemeinschaften nicht ausreichend berücksichtigen und somit kaum zu einer Dekolonialisierung der Forschung innerhalb der Planungswissenschaften im Globalen Süden beitragen. Die Forscherin stellt dann ihre Überlegungen zu den methodischen Aspekten der Forschung zur Planung unter Unsicherheit in Wayanad vor. Wayanad ist ein stadtnaher, räumlich verstreuter Bergbezirk im Landesinneren von Kerala, einer Küstenprovinz in Südindien. Der am wenigsten ‚entwickelte' Bezirk in Kerala wurde 2018 von beispiellosen Monsunfluten heimgesucht, die so seit 1924 in Kerala nicht mehr beobachtet worden waren. Zunächst als außergewöhnliches Ereignis bezeichnet, folgten 2019 Überschwemmungen ähnlichen Ausmaßes, was die Seltenheit solcher Ereignisse in Frage stellte und die dringende Notwendigkeit hervorhob, Unsicherheiten als Folge von Naturkatastrophen besser zu verstehen. Die Forscherin reflektiert ihre eigene Position als weibliche Insider-Außenseiterin sowie die Herausforderungen und Dilemmata, die mit der Durchführung von Forschungsarbeiten in einer von Männern dominierten Governance-Umgebung verbunden sind. Der Artikel wird anhand von Vignetten aus explorativen Feldforschungen und qualitativen Forschungsmethoden präsentiert, die 2018, 2019, 2022 und 2023 nach den beiden Überschwemmungen in Wayanad durchgeführt wurden.

Introduction

October in Kerala beckons Thulavarsham, the retreating northeast monsoon season in India. On one such rainy October day in 2019, I travelled by overnight bus to Wayanad, a peri-urban, spatially dispersed, landlocked hill district in Kerala, a coastal state in the southwest of India as shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2. Wayanad is one of the 12 of 14 districts in Kerala affected by massive infrastructural and environmental destruction due to unprecedented heavy monsoon flooding in July and August of 2018 and 2019. Wayanad is also the context for my doctoral research (Koshy 2024). The 2018 floods in Kerala, my home state, occurred two weeks after I had uprooted myself from the Netherlands to start my PhD in Norway. I felt overwhelmed and helpless when observing the aftermath of the unanticipated floods while struggling to assimilate into a new country. From afar, it seemed like the least I could was to select the Kerala floods as a case study for my doctoral research on planning under uncertainty. By the time I had built up sufficient emotional courage to view the disaster objectively from a social scientist perspective, the 2019 floods had occurred, and the Kerala state and district administrative apparatus was working overtime to change reactive status quo disaster response mechanisms. Therefore, I was curious and excited about commencing the second and main exploratory fieldwork in Wayanad. I looked forward to hearing directly from the local governance officials, NGOs, and community actors about their experience with the floods over the last two years.

Transportation options to Wayanad are limited to road transport, as the district does not have a railway station. Throughout the night that I was travelling, it rained heavily and endlessly. When I eventually arrived at Wayanad at the break of dawn, an apologetic bus conductor handed me my thoroughly damp suitcase. Water had

permeated every inch of the suitcase, soaking my clothes and books. The air was thick with seasonal moisture. I spread the books and clothes on every available space in the hotel room – on the bed, desk, and chair – turning them around, flipping pages, and leaving the ceiling fan on despite the seasonal chill. Everything took nearly a week to dry. The air was cold, and sleeping on the wet and cold bed, which had absorbed some of the water, was unpleasant. This was one of the many lessons on the potency of water. It is life-giving, cooling and refreshing, but can also wreak havoc. I was frivolously agonising about a suitcase of material things; the communities in Wayanad had lost much more: their homes, property, livelihoods, and lives due to excess water. My memory of the fieldwork and the ensuing abductive research continues to influence how I understand uncertainty. How existing uncertainties are reinforced and corroborate to create new uncertainties, how resource-scarce urban and peri-urban areas and actors negotiate and find their way around these uncertainties, and what these uncertainties mean from a political, social, cultural, economic, and spatial perspective (Zeiderman *et al*. 2017) are questions that continue to press upon me, even after the conclusion of my doctoral research. Conducting fieldwork in an area that was the centre of an ongoing environmental crisis was overwhelming, nevertheless life-changing.

Even though I am from Kerala, I grew up in Qatar for the first 15 years. I have lived in various European countries (Norway, the Netherlands and Italy) for the last 12 years. Therefore, I have been a migrant most of my life and have spent only 10 years in Kerala. Kerala is, therefore, my home yet not my home at the same time. During this period, I earned my bachelor's in architecture in Trivandrum and worked as an architect for 2.5 years in Kozhikode, a district north of Kerala, neighbouring Wayanad. This article, therefore, not only presents key methodological considerations regarding undertaking decolonial research on planning under uncertainty in developmental contexts, it also captures my personal accounts. I reflect on my position as an 'insider-outsider' – recognised in social science research as the dilemma of the researcher who is from the place yet not fully embedded in the place (Merriam *et al*. 2001) – and how this has influenced my epistemological positioning, perspective, methodology, and interpretation of results. I also reflect on my experience as a female researcher in male-dominated decision-making and governance settings, as discussed by other female researchers in the Global South (Sultana 2007; Vasudevan 2023).

Firstly, I present a few definitions of uncertainty from a spatial planning perspective. From a planning perspective, Abbott (2005) defined uncertainty as 'a perceived

Figure 1: A map of India, with the state of Kerala on the southwest coast and the location of the district of Wayanad in the north of Kerala coloured in white. Source: Google Maps, adapted by the author.

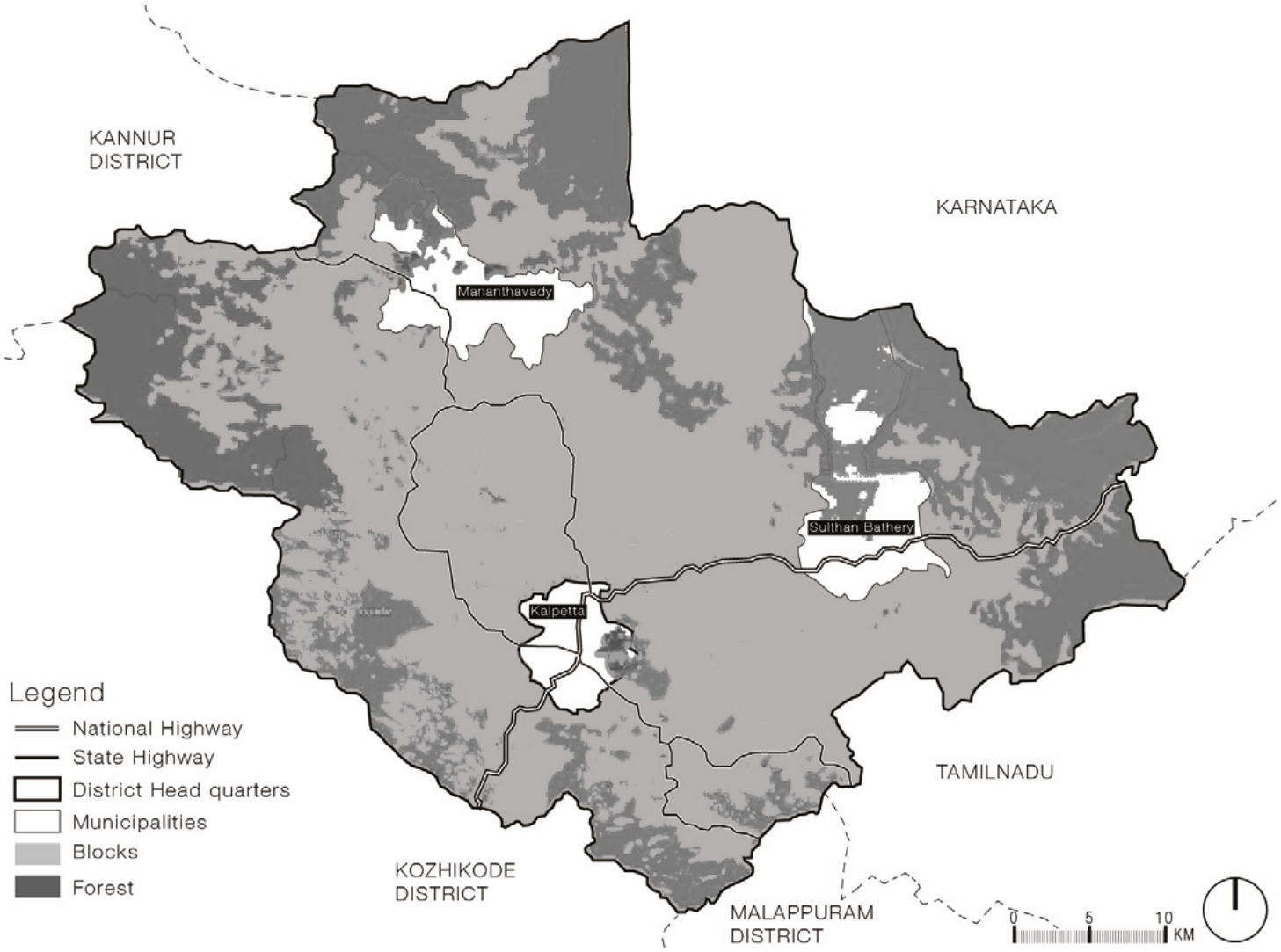

Figure 2: A map of Wayanad, with the municipalities and the district headquarters, and the border peripheries of Wayanad, with protected natural reserves and forests. Source: Basemap from IIA (Indian Institute of Architects) and CTP (District Town and Country Planning Office) (2018), adapted by the author.

lack of knowledge, by an individual or group, that is relevant to the purpose or action being undertaken' (p. 238). However, this definition only takes into account the knowledge perspective. It does not take into account the uncertainty due to inherent, evolving environmental conditions, or uncertainty arising due to conflicts, lack of consensual understanding, and differences in interpretation among diverse stakeholders (Koshy *et al*. 2022). Brugnach *et al*. (2008), therefore, emphasised that recontextualising 'uncertainty in a broader way – relative to its role, meaning, and relationship with participants in decision-making' is necessary for foregrounding plural perspectives and solutions along with an embrace of wicked problems (p. 1). Accordingly, Brugnach *et al*. (2008) advocated for a relational understanding of uncertainty and defined uncertainty as 'the situation in which there is not a unique and complete understanding of the system to be managed' (p. 4). *Developmental contexts*, characterised as 'weak institutional mechanisms, chronic vulnerabilities, and scarce resources' (Koshy *et al*. 2022: p. 5), are living embodiments of non-linearity, chaos, and complex urban trajectories. From this perspective, uncertainty could also be understood as 'a potential space of radical openness which nourishes the vision of a more experimental culture, a more tolerant and multifocal one' (Sandercock & Lyssiotis 2003: p. 120).

Traditionally, planning has operated in a synoptic, instrumental, technocratic, and rational comprehensive manner wherein diagnosis, efficiency and logic were prioritised (Mack 1971; McCaskey 1982; Weick 1995; Koshy 2024). Instrumental planning procedures focused on identifying and depicting problems and end goals, and instrumental planning tools such as master plans and land-use zoning plans sought to accommodate certainty as a desirable key aspect in urban development (Hiller 2013). This meant there was little room for flexibility and speculation. Planning and uncertainty have had an oxymoronic relationship, and uncertainty was not seen as a viable and influential component in the above-mentioned static planning perspectives (Koshy *et al*. 2022). Such planning approaches, therefore, did not accommodate unprecedented events nor sufficiently consider the subjective experiences of communities and municipal actors. The latter perspective is critical to consider when researching planning under uncertainty in developmental contexts.

Developmental contexts are more likely to be invisibilised in planning under uncertainty studies (Koshy & Smith 2024). There is a hegemony of mainstream uncertainty narratives based on empirical insights from Global North contexts despite several marginal developmental contexts being epicentres of valuable socio-spatial insights, as acknowledged by various engaged scholars (Robinson 2016; Watson 2016). In the sections below, I present methodological critiques of current planning approaches under uncertainty, predominantly based on

quantitative methods undertaken in Global North contexts (Hallegate 2009; Haasnoot *et al*. 2013).

A methodological critique of dominant planning approaches towards uncertainty

Several planning approaches in recent decades have put forward perspectives on explicitly considering various facets of uncertainty (Rauws 2017; Albrechts & Balducci 2013; Koshy 2024). These include post-structuralist planning (Healey 2006; Hillier 2013), resilience-based planning (Krishnan *et al*. 2023), adaptive planning (Hallegate 2009; Haasnoot *et al*. 2013), complexity-oriented planning (Zellner & Campbell 2015), and contextualised contingency planning (Koshy *et al*. 2022). An elaborate account of each of these planning approaches is outside the scope of this paper. I present a few methodological critiques of some of the above-mentioned planning approaches from a developmental context perspective.

Methodologically, it is unclear what it means to contextualise and localise a post-structuralist way of planning (Healey 2006; Hillier 2013). Techno-academic studies on resilience-based planning (Krishnan *et al*. 2023) focus less on the subjective experiences of local communities and local political decision-making and governance dynamics (Lizzaralde *et al*. 2020). Adaptive planning tends to depend on quantitative methodologies such as climate change modelling, scenario analyses, cost-benefit analyses, and multi-criteria decision-making analyses (Hallegate 2009; Haasnoot *et al*. 2013). Similarly, complexity-oriented planning uses labour-intensive, expert-driven analysis strategies and tools (Zellner & Campbell 2015) that are not easily accessible to communities in developmental contexts. Furthermore, uncertainty in the above-mentioned mainstream narratives is mostly theorised based on quantitative empirical observations from Global North contexts. These are contexts with high resources, an environment of consensus, significant equity among populations, and robust governance mechanisms, aspects that are far removed from the realities of developmental contexts.

In contexts such as Wayanad, the above-mentioned quantitative methodologies have limited operational scope and contextual impact due to a lack of precise documentation and available datasets, limited access to cost-intensive modelling software, and limited know-how. I argue, therefore, that such techno-academic studies do not sufficiently take into account subjective experiences, lived trauma, and local knowledge of affected communities (Lizzaralde *et al*. 2020) and, therefore, offer limited perspectives to research uncertainty in Global South marginal contexts such as Wayanad (Koshy 2024). Furthermore, these methodologies do not sufficiently consider the social learning of affected communities, local governance officials, and other formal and informal actors (Sword-Daniels *et al*. 2018), which formed an important part of the crisis response in Wayanad (Koshy & Smith 2024). Intersectional specificities such as gender, income, age, class, religion, and caste that are crucial for understanding lived experiences, social identities, and lived trauma are often not taken into account for planning under uncertainty (Akerkar & Fordham 2017; Sultana 2020). This was also evident during my fieldwork in Wayanad, where local social, cultural, economic, caste, power, and gender dynamics implicitly appeared to influence who took leadership in local crisis response during the floods despite indications of a unified positive and collective response from the interviewees (Koshy 2022).

What would the alternative be? Would qualitative methods be a suitable complementary or stand-alone approach for compensating for this methodological and empirical shortcoming? Here again, insights on traditional qualitative research have been dominated by the 'Western gaze'. In their often-cited work on undertaking fieldwork research in developmental contexts, Scheyvens *et al*. (2003: p. 168) ask, 'How should you behave when you are interacting with people who are obviously much poorer than you, or who are minority ethnic groups, lower-class women, or children?' They also give benevolent advice to researchers eager to undertake research in 'perilous contexts'. 'These warnings should not, however, necessarily deter researchers from Western countries from engaging in development fieldwork in the Third World … nor should this deter Third World researchers wanting to conduct research in unfamiliar locations "back home" (Scheyvens *et al*. 2003: p. 141).' Here, the researchers make several paternalistic assumptions about marginalised and vulnerable communities in Global South contexts, evident from the repeated use of the by now archaic term 'Third World'. The narrative is symptomatic of stereotypical tropes and reinforces knowledge regimes that reduce rich, multi-faceted ethnic cultures into a singular term, that of being 'obviously poor'.

I argue that departing from the hegemony of such singular and confining narratives, and recentring the sites of knowledge production and dissemination, is necessary to decolonise planning under uncertainty studies. Here, I would like to invoke the words of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a Nigerian writer of fiction, who comments on the incompleteness of stereotypes in her TED talk 'The Danger of a Single Story' (2009):

> *'The problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story the only story. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person but to make it the definitive story of that person. Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story.'*

To counter the normalisation of the hegemony of knowledge production in planning, Robinson (2016), Watson (2016) and other engaged scholars from the Global South have called for theorising from 'elsewhere' (Robinson 2016). This call for widening empirical contexts also critiques how some contexts in the Global South are more studied than others. For example, global megacities such as Mumbai (Gandy 2008), Delhi (Dupont 2011), and Cape Town (De Swardt *et al*. 2005) continue to be studied much more than the periphery cities in developmental contexts. This gives rise to an entrenchment of dominant empirical insights. Structural uncertainties internalised

since historical times in some contexts are often less discussed than others, and valuable learnings on uncertainty from marginal contexts tend to be invisibilised in many prominent studies (Koshy 2024). Such contexts are relegated to the periphery of mainstream academia and practice, and warrant a positionality and methodology that is empathetic and supportive of socially just and critical responses (D'Souza 2010). Therefore, I argue that methodologies that foreground local epistemologies are needed. This could include ethnographic methods that foreground situated experiences of local communities and contribute to 'narrative justice' (Forester 2006) and 'in-depth account of events, relationships, experiences and processes' (Denscombe 1998). Such methods include exploratory fieldwork, in-depth interviews, group interviews, focus groups, transect walks, participatory observations, storytelling, mapping, and action research.

In the next section, I present methodological considerations I took into account while researching planning under uncertainty through exploratory qualitative case study research in Wayanad, with the unprecedented floods as my main case. Wayanad is one of the 12 of 14 districts in Kerala that was affected by unprecedented monsoon floods in 2018, the magnitude of which had not been witnessed in Kerala since 1924. Considered a rare event then, it was followed by floods of a similar magnitude in 2019, which were followed by landslides. The otherwise picturesque mountain landscapes, as shown in Figure 3, were devastated due to the landslides, as shown in Figure 4. This questioned the rarity of such environmental crises and the need to better understand uncertainties due to environmental crises. The section is presented through vignettes from my exploratory fieldwork. The main fieldwork was conducted in 2018 and 2019, in the immediate aftermath of the Wayanad floods, with follow-up interviews in 2022 and 2023 to validate some of my findings with the key informants. The main qualitative method was semi-structured, in-depth interviews of a total of 61 formal actors at various governance levels at the state, district, *tehsil*[1] and village levels, in addition to NGO representatives, community actors, local researchers, local self-government representatives, and local representatives of national and international humanitarian organisations. In addition, I complimented the semi-structured interviews with group interviews, focus groups, transect walks, and participatory and non-participatory observations with various formal and informal actors and local communities in 2018 and 2019. This qualitative approach bolstered my understanding of the socio-spatial context, power, language, and gender dynamics specific to cultural norms, and informal decision-making and governance routines, and continues to influence my evolving epistemological positioning as a critical realist.[2] I elaborate on this in the next section.

1
Tehsil is a sub-administrative unit in the decentralised governance structure in India.

2
A critical realist perspective maintains that reality exists irrespective of our understanding of the world but insists that 'our knowledge of the world is fallible and theory-laden' (Sayer 1992: p. 5).

Figure 3: Tea plantations in Wayanad. Source: Author.
▼

Methodological considerations for researching planning under uncertainty in developmental contexts: A personal account

Since 'uncertainty' is a fuzzy concept, easy-to-understand translations of the word into Malayalam, the native language in Kerala, proved challenging. The literal translation of uncertainty into Malayalam is '*anishchithathwam*'. This is, however, not a commonly used term in the colloquial language. I instead opted to use the term '*apratheekshikam*', when interviewing key informants. The latter term means 'unexpected' or 'unanticipated', and is commonly used in lay language to describe unknown and unprecedented events. Interviews were conducted through a combination of English and Malayalam, the native language of Kerala and my first language. In Kerala, using English words while speaking in Malayalam is common. This made it easier to explain terms and interpretations without fudging the interviewees' perspectives. 'Perceptions of how uncertainty influences decision-making' were evident from the terms that 'several interviewees at various governance levels used [both in English and Malayalam], such as "unexpected", "unfamiliar", "unanticipated" and "unpredictable", when referring to the occurrence of the floods' (Koshy 2022: p. 7). The differences in meaning attributed to terminology and keywords could have led to a fragmentation in understanding due to multiple perspectives on uncertainty. Furthermore, linguistic decisions to use '*apratheekshikam*' instead of '*anishchithathwam*' may also have influenced the nature of the respondents' answers and consequent insights as the term 'uncertainty' as understood in English encompasses wider epistemological and ontological dimensions (Brugnach *et al*. 2008) than the 'unexpected' and 'unanticipated' nature of crisis events. A key informant interviewed in 2018, the first time the unprecedented floods occurred, for example, highlighted how misplaced anticipation could lead to maladaptation, as illustrated by the quote below:

> *'Rest assured that there will be a huge fear that this will happen next year. So in a very rudimentary way, they will try to anticipate and do whatever they can…. My worry is that it will be a sort of limited anticipation based on a very limited perspective and vision. So it will be an anticipation of what is known. Not an anticipation of what is not known.' (KI 1, NGO representative)*

Marginal developmental contexts such as Wayanad are typically understudied, impacting my secondary data collection. Wayanad is considered the least-developed district in Kerala, with fewer services, infrastructure, and health and educational facilities. In developmental

Figure 4: The area devastated by the landslides in 2019. Source: Author.
▼

contexts such as Wayanad, chronic vulnerabilities, weak institutions, and resource scarcity persist, and unequal power relations signified by patriarchal gender relations and caste and class inequalities (Adam et al. 2018; Raman 2020) heavily influence dynamics in decision-making and governance settings. In such contexts, actors with the power, means, and agency to make decisions are not necessarily the ones who are the most affected (Dubash et al. 2018; Sultana 2020). Eighteen per cent of Wayanad's population are marginalised indigenous tribal communities with lesser access to services, education, and jobs when compared to the rest of the population. This significantly affects their representation in local governance institutions, inhibiting their decision-making capacity. As highlighted below, this systemic marginalisation was also evident in snowball sampling.

When conducting qualitative research on planning under uncertainty in a plural and diverse country such as India, I had to be mindful that uncertainty may have different interpretations due to varied philosophies, cultural traditions, belief systems, and centuries of colonial rule. This included considering the difference between everybody's perception of 'uncertainty' and 'actual uncertainty'. These socio-cultural nuances typically influence data collection, particularly in bottom-up ethnographic research. I, however, undertook a study on decision-making under uncertainty from an institutional perspective. This meant there was less emphasis on the biases in decisions due to the decision-makers' class, caste, and socio-cultural standing. Even though most interviewees recounted a uniform and inclusive disaster response, there were obvious indications that Wayanad and Thiruvananthapuram's decision-making and governance settings were male-dominated. Most of the decision-makers interviewed in these two contexts were male for all three fieldworks. The female interviewees were in the less-influential roles, with the newly appointed District Collector after the 2019 floods and the Chief Town Planner and the sub-collector interviewed in 2022 being the exceptions. Most decision-makers at upper governance levels appeared to be from middle-class backgrounds, had graduate or higher education degrees, and spoke English. These contextual observations also highlighted a class and gender divide; despite overall advanced literacy rates and high development indicators, traditional patriarchal, gender, class, and caste norms continue to persist in Kerala (Adam et al. 2018). In addition, the snowball sampling did not lead to representatives from marginalised tribal communities who might have been formally involved in high-level decision-making but appeared to be invisibilised in dominant governance settings. Some of the actors from these communities whom I interviewed were critical of the general handling of the consequences of flooding for marginalised tribal communities, which was also documented in online media reports (Ameerudheen 2018[a]). I acknowledge that limited possibilities for interviews with marginalised community members might have partially led to a reinforcement of mainstream narratives of the handling of the floods in the empirical findings. In such situations, snowball sampling replicates existing power imbalances and gender and class divides. Limited documentation of insights from communities affected by the crises likely influenced my understanding of the ground realities, subjective experiences, and local accounts, hindering a full, true, and necessary decolonisation of conventional methodological choices and research practices.

Kerala follows a decentralised governance structure due to a left-leaning government campaign in the early 1990s for greater devolution of power to the lower administrative levels, that of villages (Heller 2001). While decentralised governance was found to be a key factor for proactive flood disaster response in Wayanad (Koshy 2022), the complexity of existing institutional structures and networks was also challenging to navigate and influenced access to all relevant local communities and institutional actors. A range of formal actors from various departments at multiple governance levels, elected representatives from local self-government institutions (LSGIs), non-state actors (including NGO actors), representatives of national and international humanitarian organisations, and informal actors such as community actors comprised the governance during the floods in Wayanad. This led to a plethora of formal-informal collaborations, networks, and initiatives, some more represented than others. Extensive documentation of such informal governance collaborations was challenging. The fieldwork also highlighted limitations to how decentralisation can enable an understanding of ground realities. Per state mandates, government and administrative officials in Kerala (and India) are transferred every 1-2 years. Most interviewees in Wayanad whom I interviewed in 2018 and 2019 were no longer in office in 2022; they had either retired or transferred to positions in other districts in Kerala. This state-mandated transfer of government and administrative officials led to a discontinuity in conversations. This limited my aspiration to build long-term trust with the interviewees, likely influencing the scope of my future research in Wayanad.

My research focussed primarily on understanding how decisions manifested under uncertainty in the aftermath of the two floods. I mainly relied, therefore, on stakeholders' recollections and recounting of decisions and actions after the floods occurred. Decision-making under uncertainty is, however, often understood to be irrational and influenced by cognitive biases, subjective experiences, and personal statistics (Dietrich 2010; Khanpour *et al*. 2020). Such partisanship was also evident in the opinions and perspectives raised by key informants. A local NGO actor interviewed in 2019 commented on the initial ineptitude of the local government in the aftermath of the first occurrence of the floods: 'Y official's dedication and commitment saved the DA [district administration], in the beginning, the DA was clueless (KI 10b).' In contrast, a local representative of an international development organisation who closely worked with the state government officials complimented the proactive measures undertaken by the government: 'Government had redressal mechanisms. Maybe even the UN was slower than the government. For a state that is not very disaster-prone … they have taken leadership (KI 13).' Discrepancies due to cognitive challenges in recounting and recollection and personal biases likely influenced the clarity of empirical data. Furthermore, due to a lack of adequate documentation of rescue, relief, and response measures by the involved stakeholders, there were challenges in triangulating the collected empirical insights with publicly available data.

Uncertainties and ambiguities surrounding local politically sensitive issues are also challenging to document. Key stakeholders were less forthcoming about sharing their insights on sensitive issues, such as excessive quarrying of ecologically sensitive areas, which may have influenced empirical findings. When I enquired about perspectives surrounding excessive quarrying to a local government official, they acknowledged that 'quarrying is sensitive and has its own issues' (KI 9b) but declined to share further insights on this. Other government officials, however, candidly shared insights regarding the evolving perceptions on the issue of quarrying following the floods: '[The] state relief commissioner, before the floods, he used to argue when we used to talk about quarrying. Now after the floods, he says he is an environmentalist (KI 4, State government official).'

Such empirical insights highlight the intertwining of social, spatial, political, economic, cultural, and environmental aspects and the ensuing complexity of the context. This makes it crucial to adequately consider the spatial-temporal and political ecology dimensions of connected cases. This raises several important questions that forced me to consider in-depth reflexivity and positionality in research in developmental contexts. In complex developmental contexts, how do you define the crisis? What is the boundary of the crisis context? How far out can you go to articulate decolonial planning under uncertainty perspectives adequately? Such complex contextual perspectives from Wayanad continue to influence my epistemological positioning as a critical realist and my involuted relationship with the context.

On the one hand, understanding the language and cultural norms, and my affinity with the architectural and planning community in Kerala, helped me gain access to some actors who later pointed me to other relevant actors. On the other hand, as a result of my lived plural experience in five countries and ten cities, I have always been conscious of my position as a woman of colour and as an Indian woman. I have navigated intersectionalities and social determinants of gender, colour, class, and race in all the countries I have lived in. Because of these subjective experiences, I firmly believe it is crucial to embody the 'histories of colonialism, development, globalisation and local realities' to avoid exploitative research, education, and practice activities (Sultana 2007: p. 375). Nevertheless, navigating existing dominant power relations as an insider-outsider in developmental contexts is challenging. Such contexts tend to normalise systemic discrimination, and continue colonial institutional practices and hierarchical attitudes in planning, which often favours power brokers and already privileged communities (Dutton et al. 2025). Consequently, power relations must constantly be negotiated, especially as a female researcher in male-dominated decision-making and governance settings (Sultana 2007). Such negotiations are often in contrast to my feminist and intersectional values, attitudes, and perspectives that have been hugely influenced by engaged scholars whose memoirs, fiction, poetry, and activism have strived to afford dignity, freedom, and equity for marginalised communities irrespective of gender, class, age, race, and social standing (for example, Lorde [2017], Angelou [1997], and Mandela [2008]). As a minuscule contribution to alleviating systemic inequalities through my research, during the exploratory fieldwork, I consciously tried to interview female decision-makers, practitioners, and researchers who did not figure in the snowball sampling, and sought valuable perspectives from scholars from marginalised communities, to counter the mainstream and often patriarchal narratives in the context. I also consciously tried to use literature written by (female) scholars from Global South contexts to address the disbalance in citation and referencing valuable work from minority perspectives in the South. However, I acknowledge that my position as an insider-outsider (Merriam et al. 2001; Dwyer & Buckle 2009) may have led to biases and limitations in empirical insights. Keeping in mind the need for reliability, validity, objectivity, and generalisability (identified as crucial components in all kinds of research methodologies, including qualitative research by Denscombe [1998] and Yin [1994]) of the data and analysis, I maintained an objective and critical stance. All the collected data was processed and triangulated with other reliable sources of information such as post-disaster needs assessment reports, statewide climate action plans, online news reports, academic articles, and grey literature. Looking back, knowing what I know now, I would have adopted more ethnographic perspectives and methodologies with concerted efforts to foreground insights from female formal and informal actors and stakeholders from marginalised indigenous communities. This could have afforded the much-needed legitimacy that local epistemologies deserve as a viable contrast to grand narratives to take into account the contextual social, political, and cultural perspectives from Wayanad (Koshy 2024).

The collision between my different worlds, everyday challenges, and social realities that I experience as a migrant who currently resides in Norway, a high-resource welfare state in contrast to Wayanad, the context of this research, which is besieged with scarce resources and chronic vulnerabilities, has also influenced the need for a critical-realist lens when examining approaches for planning under uncertainty (Koshy 2024). This has reaffirmed my belief in continuously reflecting on my positionality and the interspersion between power dynamics in various settings and its consequent influence on 'methods, interpretations and knowledge production' (Sultana 2007: p. 376). I conclude by reiterating that decolonising research on planning under uncertainty, therefore, needs to be accompanied by a strong sense of moral responsibility and justice wherein a callous understanding of uncertainty leads to redundant, deficient, and maladaptive interventions (Zandvoort et al. 2018).

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Rolee Aranya and Hilde Refstie for feedback on the methodology chapter in the author's doctoral dissertation, and the doctoral trial lecture presentation, which formed the basis of this article. The author would also like to thank the doctoral committee members Darley Jose Kjosavik, Marcela Brugnach and Markus Schwai, who formulated the topic of the doctoral trial lecture, which was instrumental in crystallising the narrative structure of the article.

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Reflections on research work at the interface of social struggles at urban peripheries and university

Timo Bartholl

Without struggle, resistance and insistance, the spatial form urban periphery could not exist. In this context a question we must ask ourselves as engaged or willing to engage researchers (that is anyone willing to engage with research) is how we can turn science and research into tools that can strengthen and support community mobilizations in slums and urban peripheries. For a decade and a half now I have been living in Maré, a favela neighbourhood in the Northern Zone of Rio de Janeiro that counts an aproximate 125.000 inhabitants. Based on participation in grassroot mobilizations and activities I have been concerned about how the Geographies I am involved in can play an adequate role in relation to peripheries and their territorially anchored resistances. So far, I have not been able to share much of these experiences in dialogue with English speaking colleagues, so the idea of this paper is to share a short overview of examples of research processes I have had the opportunity to participate in to try and extract from these experiences some more general assumptions and reflections on what matters when it comes to living and working with and in urban peripheries while participating in and researching on community and grassroots mobilizations that take place there.

Reflexionen über Forschungsarbeiten an der Schnittstelle von sozialem Kampfs in städtischen Peripherien und der Universität
*Ohne sozialen Kampf, Widerstand und Beharrlichkeit könnte die räumliche Form der urbanen Peripherie nicht existieren. In diesem Zusammenhang müssen wir uns als engagierungswillige und engagierte Forscher*innen die Frage stellen, wie wir Wissenschaft und Forschung zu Instrumenten machen können, die die Mobilisierung der Gemeinschaften in Slums und urbanen Peripherien stärken und unterstützen können. Ich lebe seit anderthalb Jahrzehnten in der Maré, einem Favela-Viertel im Norden von Rio de Janeiro, das etwa 125.000 Einwohner zählt. Aufgrund meiner Beteiligung an Mobilisierungen und Aktivitäten an der Basis habe ich mich mit der Frage beschäftigt, wie die Geographien, an denen ich beteiligt bin, eine angemessene Rolle im Zusammenhang mit den Peripherien und ihren territorial verankerten Widerständen spielen können. Bislang konnte ich diese Erfahrungen im Dialog mit englischsprachigen Kollegen noch nicht wirklich teilen. Die Idee dieses Beitrags ist es daher, einen kurzen Überblick über Beispiele von Forschungsprozessen zu geben, an denen ich teilnehmen durfte, um aus diesen Erfahrungen einige allgemeinere Annahmen und Überlegungen darüber zu gewinnen, worauf es ankommt, wenn man in und mit urbanen Peripherien lebt und arbeitet und sich gleichzeitig an den dort stattfindenden Mobilisierungen von Gemeinschaften und Basisbewegungen beteiligt und diese erforscht.*

In the midst of an era of pandemics, new war-ridden geopolitics, and the ever-growing critical challenges of climate change, the topic of urban inequalities seems to have been kicked off the list of top-ranking urgencies on the global agenda. Urban peripheries have received less attention from researchers, policy makers, and international institutions over the past years when compared to the first decade of this millennium. At times, when trying to grasp the impacts of the impressive degrees of urbanisation reached at a global level, mostly over the second half of the past century, the 2003 UN report *The Challenge of Slums* drew widespread attention that, in urban sciences, was also enforced by Mike Davis' *Planet of Slums* (2006), a work broadly nourished by data from the report and its critical analysis.

Taking into account that recent data estimate that 1.1 billion people live in 'slum-like' conditions around the world – mostly in the Global South, of course – and that the projections are that, over the next 30 years, another 2 billion more are expected to do likewise, it is questionable whether it is very wise to pay less and less attention to the question of how to tackle urban inequality.[1] While the global agenda perspective shall not be our focus here, the notion of the lack of attention urban inequalities receive helps to understand why, from a view within urban peripheral territories, it is necessary to continue to self-organise, mobilise, and struggle for better living conditions: not much improvement seems possible, with low pressure on public authorities to act on behalf of the spatial expressions of the extreme urban inequalities that globalising capitalism has been bringing upon ever-bigger urban areas.

Settling in with the tides of Maré

For over a decade and a half now, I have been living in one of those urban peripheries where continuous community mobilisation is necessary: Maré, a *favela* neighbourhood in the Northern Zone of Rio de Janeiro that houses approximately 125,000 inhabitants, according to the last census (2022).[2] Maré owes its name to the fact that those who first built their houses here did so over the bay water, on stilts, under the influence of the tides, '*maré*' in Portuguese. Apart from those who dwelt on the only hill in the area, the Morro do Timbau, where I live, the dwellers were, as *mareenses* affirm, 'struggling for land where there was not even land yet'.

Participating in grassroots activity here, I have been curious about how the geographies I involve in can take an adequate role in relation to peripheries and their territorially anchored resistances. In this context, it was crucial for me that I connected to the Maré territory for the first three years without any academic objectives attached. I was not studying or thinking about studying what I was doing. I did it because it seemed to make sense to do it, and I wanted to learn from

1
See: https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/goal-11/. Last accessed 30/3/2024.

2
See: https://extra.globo.com/rio/noticia/2024/04/censo-2022-complexos-do-alemao-e-da-mare-perderam-moradores-enquanto-rocinha-e-vidigal-cresceram.ghtml. Last accessed 4/4/2024.

friends in the *favela* and their ways of living and resisting despite the many odds they face due to where they live, the social class they are part of, and their ethnic background. My going back to university, alongside my interest in geography and research, had to do with the need for a longer-term institutional link so that I could get a more stable visa. At the time, I was part of a small community collective called Roça!, which we – 'we' being three women from Maré, who were engaged in community work of different kinds, and I – founded in 2010. The first long-term research process I got involved in here was the PhD research I conducted from 2012 to 2015 as a student at the same university I have now worked for since 2019, the Federal Fluminense University (UFF). After a year of studying urban research and planning, I found that critical and territorially sensitive geographies, such as those developed by my former PhD advisor and now dear colleague and friend Rogério Haesbaert, were open to the kind of territorially rooted and subject-focused perspective I felt was necessary to attempt to somehow comprehend *favela* dynamics and contribute to the *favela* resistances I had become connected to. A centralised perspective that is 'seeing like a state', as James Scott (1998) puts it, needs to be overcome so we can connect to the deeper layers of contextualised understanding of what goes on at the margins.

Maré as a pivotal territory for my learning and research experiences

So from 2012 onwards, I realised a militant research, seeking to understand how small grassroots initiatives in *favelas* in Rio realised their grassroots work as part of territorial dynamics that are characterised by a complex, multi-territorial (Haesbaert 2021) composition of relations of oppression, versus explicit and implicit forms of resistance and subordination. In the end, I accompanied four groups (including the collective Roça!, which I am still part of) in different *favelas*, and tried to capture and understand more about the given group's practices accompanying their work with small, collective self-reflective workshops and co-writing processes. What most marked that process is, on one hand, that when we are directly and actively involved in a struggle that is also the topic of our research — something I would refer to it as 'militant research' as a specific sub-case of action research – it is important that we define specific methods and delimit specific moments where explicit data gathering of our research takes place. In a way, all we participate in, related to the territorial struggles we do, is part of a broad process of 'observative participation' (see below), so, first of all, it is important that we keep a research diary, we take notes, and we register our own reflections as much as possible. On the other hand, I recognised how much time it can take to find an adequate methodological path that we can follow with co-researcher and collaborating groups, and how important it is that we are open to adjustments, during the course of the research, based on the constant feedback and collective reflections of those involved in the research.

Another thing that marked that process was that even though I was deeply involved in one of the *favela* collectives that the research was realised with, the writing that resulted from the research, as part of individualised PhD studies, still consisted, mostly, of 'knowledge-with', which differentiates from the 'knowledge-over' of more-distanced or 'conventional' subject-object-based knowledge, but is still different from 'practical' or 'movement knowledge' (Bartholl 2018). To mark this difference, I consider that 'movement knowledge' has no specific authorship and our academically generated knowledge can become part of movement knowledge once the specific authorship dissolves in cycles of collective practical doing and collaborative reflecting – providing, of course, the scientifically based knowledge we share with movement partners seems of relevance to their practical doing and reflections.

One thing I regret about this research is the part where the text, taken out of my own writer's hands to take the form of four collectively written texts based on recorded workshops, was not immediately transformed into a small and independently printed publication to be handed out to the participating groups so that they could use it for their exchange with others. Of course, the PhD work as a whole circulated in PDF format and was sent to all involved, and we did collective presentations of the groups and their work when it was finished, but I was too sure I would soon be able to review the entire work and publish it; after ten years, I have only been able to accomplish the first of three intended parts, the one which discusses geographies in movement(s) as a tool for struggle (Bartholl 2018, 2021, 2023). So, the smaller the parts, and the timelier we can share research results, the better – which is why, in more-recent research projects, I have always tried to include journalistic texts for more-immediate circulation, and for the use on social media, so as to share the reflections derived from the research experiences we had the opportunity to be part of.[3]

After this, my longest and most intrinsically long-term and inside experience of research (including my change of post-graduate programmes, it lasted five years), I worked for a Global North-Global South research project in which we focused on the issue of food sovereignty from a *favela* perspective and that we designed as a participatory community research (Bartholl *et al*. 2024). We formed a group of ten community members, each active in different fields, such as community communication and public health, but that also included a small agroecological farmer and a market vendor of vegetables. As this group, we worked for a year and a half on the relation of the *favelas* of Maré to struggles for food sovereignty, and the learning process our group went through was one of the main desired outcomes of the research.

One great difficulty we had in the execution and design of this research was how to present action research data as relevant and measurable data in an environment – and in the face of funder expectations – that expects countable data units and countable research outcomes above all in quantitative terms or, also, in terms of institutionally recognisable or useful results. It was important to know how to communicate, as a main research result, that we, as a group of ten community activists, had learned much on food sovereignty, agroecology, and the correspondingly linked struggles, and that we would continue our work based on these learnings.

After this research experience, in 2019, I entered a long-term work relationship as professor at the Federal Fluminense University (UFF), and have since engaged in smaller research projects such as, for example: on 'peripheries in movements', with visits to and reflections on *favelas* in smaller cities in the interior of Rio state; a research on the solidarity fronts that formed and mobilised in *favelas* during the pandemic; one with the objective to design a collaborative online map on peripheries and their subjects in movement(s); and a recently initiated 'extension project' based on collective work experiences of

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For examples of some short texts, some of which were collectively written and published on the alternative media platform *desinformemonós* (based in México, but with a Latin American thematic scope and writership) – for example, the one on urban agriculture in the *favela* Margem da Linha in Campos do Goytacazes (in the North of Rio State) – go to: https://desinformemonos.org/cultivando-los-margenes-el-poder-de-la-agricultura-urbana-comunitaria-en-la-favela-margem-da-linha/. Links to other examples are found to the right of that article.

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geography students in agroecological grassroots work at peripheries to which exist long-term relations. In these projects, while my degree of institutional involvement and dependency has gradually and significantly increased, I maintain the political idea of the 'one foot in, one foot out' approach: the social movements I engage with, I do so as a person who lives in an urban periphery and personally relates to the people who live there as neighbours, friends and family, as much as I do as a person who participates in social movements independent of the job I have and the academic context I am part of.

This high degree of integration of personal, social, political and professional spheres implicates different processes of constant (re-)negotiation between social-personal, social movement and institutional-professional engagement and where the possible lines are that should not be crossed (or may be better not to cross), and requires a sensitivity to when changes occur that mean we need to readjust the relation of these engagements. (What kind of relation and what degree of integration is possible, at what moment and in what specific context?) Here, I prefer to design research proposals around empirical dynamics and conceptual approaches that connect to social-movement realities but do not depend on one specific movement or group. Social-movement reality changes, so we need to develop adjustable research designs as much as social-movement work needs to be kept as independent as possible of, and adjustable to, changing institutional settings.

In this regard, a basic question I adhere to is what science can do for social movement mobilisations (and, while doing so, what science can learn and what theory can be generated through this process) rather than what social struggle can contribute to the development of science. Here, I remember and try to remain as faithful as possible to an early point of view formulated 20 years ago: '[T]he self-interest, composed of personal and political interest in the sense of participation in collective efforts, takes precedence over academic or scientific interests. [...] I do not participate in a process because I want to study it, but I study it because I am involved in it. [Freely translated from German, Bartholl 2005: 71]' This idea, and the related proposal to invert the qualitative method of 'participant observation' into 'observative participation', started to seem reasonable to me while conducting a master's thesis research (still called '*Diplom*' at that time) that was action research by spirit and an eclectic-mix-of-approaches research in practice on the Intercontinental Youth Camp as part of the 2005 World Social Forum in Porto Alegre. I still feel this take can help prevent me from instrumentalising social mobilisations for academic purposes. But, of course, it refers to some of many possible relations of those who research to those who mobilise.

Based on the above experiences, I would like to try to do two things in the following parts of this text. For one, I would like to share a few thoughts on how my perspectives on *favelas* and the corresponding dynamics were influenced, besides from the daily-life experiences and learnings of those who live there and have firsthand knowledge, by a few of what I consider to be key works on urban peripheries on different – global, Latin American, Rio – scales, and what their perspectives can teach us on how the way we look at peripheries influences what we can see and what our blind spots are. For the other, I would then like to share some of my learnings through and on research engagement with urban peripheries and its subjects.

What needs to be stressed is that the perspective of my reflections is intended to dialogue with those who, as in my case, are at university, study there, get a scholarship or earn their salary there, and work in research projects or plan to do so, and those from peripheries that have connected to research experiences and might consider studying or to deepen their link with science in some way. If the same issues were addressed to comrades from social movements, neighbours, friends and family from *favelas* – for them to think about what research can do for them/us, and the many attentions that need to be paid when engaging with research – the text would be very different.

On how we read peripheries

Mike Davis (2006) was aware that his work on slums, *Planet of Slums*, which very justly drew international attention when it was published, was mostly a desktop piece with a focus primarily on the problems slum inhabitants face and not on the many life-saving and survival-guaranteeing solutions they collectively come up with. Unfortunately, his plans to elaborate a complementary counter-piece of this way of looking at the question of slums, which would have been on the struggles slum dwellers engage with – a report on 'Global Fire', as he announced it several times – seem not to have been concluded.[4] *Planet of Slums* presents the dimension of the phenomenon of urban marginalisation at a global level and the tremendous and numerous problems *favela* inhabitants face in their daily lives, many times abandoned by those responsible for urban management and urban policies. The more I connected to *favela* territory, the more I felt, when coming back to the book, that the analytical distance and the slight cynicism of Davis' writing style at times seemed quite offensive towards those who live in *favelas*. This is the case, for example, when, on page 47 of his book, Davis states that 'the principal function of the Third World urban edge remains as a human dump'. Here, the fine line between an analysis that neoliberal city management treats the urban poor as human waste and the affirmation that slums *are* 'human dumps' had been passed by Davis – and that is the case several times throughout the book, where stigmas are reaffirmed rather than questioned. The main point I want to make here is that Davis' desktop take on *favelas*, on a global scale, brings together and critically reflects upon important data but, at that time, for me as an outsider, it affirmed my view of these urban areas as areas of lack and, thus, reproduced a centre-periphery view of what might be going on at the places instead of challenging it.

In a way, Raúl Zibechi's (2012, 2015) take on *favelas*, this time the main scale being Latin America, that he articulated in his book *Territories in Resistance: A Cartography of Latin American Social Movement* – the original Spanish-language title reading: '*Political* Cartography of Latin American *Urban Peripheries*' – revealed my outsider ignorance. Despite already living in Maré and carrying a Global North perspective within me, I tended to agree with the idea that *favela* inhabitants, considering the massive problems they face, were little organised to do so – a view that is still not uncommon also on the left political spectrum, and that is also based on a comparison to the numerous, diverse and explicitly organised mass movements in rural Brazil. Zibechi, however, brings territorialities of rural and urban resistances and ways to read them into a dialogue, and suggests to differ between rather explicit and rather implicit forms of (territorial) resistance and – in a complementary or oppositional way, depending on how we look at it – rather

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Davis mentions the intentions of elaborating a work on, and titled, 'Global Fire' in a footnote of the book I refer to here.

than highlighting the lack of almost everything in Davis' terms, reveals the magnitude of resistance(s) that make urban peripheries primary territories of struggles and life forms that, potentially, stand against-and-beyond the capitalist social form.

Joining in with Zibechi on a metropolitan scale, to sensibly try to grasp *favelas*' historical-geographical and socio-territorial dynamics, another key work on *favelas* is Andrelino Campos' (2007) *Do quilombo à favela: a produção do 'espaço criminalizado' no Rio de Janeiro* (translated: 'From the *Quilombo* to the *Favela*: The Production of "Criminalized Space" in Rio de Janeiro'). Campos draws an important and direct line from Black anti-colonial resistances to the urban-form *favela*, reinforcing the idea that Indigenous, Black and peasant struggles and life forms find their way to the city's margins through migrant groups' occupation of lands, which are subsequently transformed by the occupants into their urban-life strongholds – *favelas*.

Zibechi's and Campos' works thus help understand that *favelas* do not exist *because* of exclusion and marginalisation. Exclusion and marginalisation are the reason why people are at the margins, but *favelas* exist because people respond to them: they exist as spatial forms that express how people resist and exist (re-exist) despite their marginalisation and the negation of their being. Any slum or urban periphery is, in that sense, a spatial documentation of processes of de-reterritorialisation of people, their lives, their plans and their dreams. Without struggle, resistance and insistence, the spatial form urban periphery could not exist.

It is in this context that a question that we must ask ourselves as engaged or willing to engage researchers arises: How can we turn science and research into tools that can strengthen and support community mobilisations in urban peripheries while we try, together with the communities, to better understand the dynamics in which these take place? The three takes on *favelas* I cited above point to the importance of the perspective we assume when looking at peripheries and their dynamics. Above all, it is not about living there or not, it is about how we shape our ideas and, deriving from that, our research perspectives – how we connect to the peripheries that are part of our research work, whom we spend time with, whom do we dialogue and collaborate with, and how we adequately contextualise what we study and research regarding these territories. Of course, I have learned a lot about perspective and contextualisation, considering that the way I read (works on) *favelas* has changed a lot more as a result of getting to know *favelas* more and more from within and from a day-to-day life perspective than I would think deeper studies and research would have changed it. This experience strengthens the perception that scientific knowledge is a form of knowledge that can help us to better understand, and in a different (conceptual, theoretical, analytical) way, some aspects of peripheries and their dynamics. But it must be seen in its complementarity to other forms of knowledge – practical knowledge, insider knowledge, movement knowledge, traditional knowledge, popular knowledge – considering that the socio-territorial dynamics at peripheries cannot nearly be captured in its complexity through scientific knowledge alone.

Learnings from, and reflections on, research at the periphery

There is South also in the North. Considering a world shaped by migration movements, the Global North and its urban areas are characterised by what we can consider Global South in the North. Therefore, respecting each singular local historical-geographical context of how to relate to an urban periphery and its subjects in movement, and how to support their struggles, seems to be a global question that we need to find local answers for.

And, of course, the opposite is also very true: **there is a lot of North in the South**. Therefore, it takes time and extensive dialogue with locally involved subjects for non-local researchers to be able read what research works look at in the periphery, and from what kind of perspective. To just assume that someone who is from Rio de Janeiro, for example, and researches *favelas*, does so from an insider perspective would misread the strong divides between classes, ethnical groups, and parts of the city that can shape research perspectives: Eurocentrism is much present in research work on peripheries and related topics in social sciences in Brazil.

Decolonisation can be our horizon, not a pure state or relation that we can achieve. Or, in dialogue with the invitation to this special issue of *TRIALOG*: **on the *im*possibilities of balanced power relations in research collaborations.**

Whenever and/or wherever we propose, or receive a proposal, to establish some kind of research process in urban peripheral contexts, we must be sincere to ourselves so we can be sincere with all else involved regarding the hierarchies in university-community relations. When universities, institutions and any kind of financing mechanisms are involved in what we do, there are and will be hierarchies in the relations we establish. Universities, as public institutions, are a constitutive part of the modern-colonial nation state and, as such, are permeated by coloniality. Radicalising the argument of decolonisation ultimately points to the need of overcoming these colonial forms. Any proposal to stop half-way, to defend that making university a bit less colonial is where we want to go, leads to the reduction of the 'decolonial' to a mere label; an attribute that adds a bit of feel-good to what we do, when we do science. Any attempt to fit efforts of decolonising in reformist, state-centred moulds is a deeply colonial move.

Politically, therefore, peoples in movements in Latin America prefer to refer to their struggles as *anti*-colonial or *counter*-colonial. As Nêgo Bispo used to affirm: 'Only those who have been colonized can be decolonized. [...] [D]ecoloniality is a theory, not a trajectory. There has never been a decolonial movement that has acted resolutely on behalf of a people. Counter-colonialism is different. The *quilombos* were not colonized. [...] The people in academia who call themselves progressive and only read European authors do need to decolonize themselves.'[5]

The anti-colonial as a negation of the capital-labour relation is more radical, in the sense of 'to the roots', than any of the revolutionary currents that have surged in worker's struggles in Europe could ever be, as these are about how to oppose capital *after* having been expropriated, colonised, and reduced to labour. Sílvia Rivera Cusicanqui provokes us to think of the post-colonial as a desire, the anti-colonial as a struggle, and the decolonial as a fashionable neologism that she sees as 'antipathic' (Cusicanqui 2015, as discussed in Haesbaert 2021: 96). That is why I prefer to refer to the decolonial as a horizon that can help us diminish coloniality of power and knowledge in our relations but not something that we can, more or less simply, make become reality.

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So, whatever the setting, when engaging in community research it is problematic to ignore the power hierarchies we operate in, or to suggest there aren't any, or that those that exist are somehow very flat, easy to overcome, or do not matter much. They exist and they do matter. A problem that I have experienced, when the underlying power relations are treated as not very relevant and are not made explicit, is that responsibility and work tasks can be delegated by those 'higher up the ladder', those who are in charge of a research, to those who do the on-ground work, covering up resulting unequal divisions of workloads as an attempt to flatten hierarchies – a process I would refer to as 'academic Toyotism'.

As part of institutions that represent and also reproduce the modern colonial nation state (if we work at public universities, that is), we will not be able to fully overcome coloniality. But it is necessary, and worth continuously trying for – also to keep tension between what we do and the institutions we are part of. It would also be a problem if we were to conclude that we better not even try to establish subject-subject relations, since we cannot really get it right, and go back to traditional desktop and subject-object based research as a consequence.

The institutional responsibility or social guilt trap. As university-based researchers, we have a more or less steady income, sometimes even a lifetime guarantee of our job, and we engage with subjects from the peripheries that work under much more precarious conditions, and have much less income. At times, we might feel guilty about that, or feel that since the State is deeply in debt towards those we work with, our university or research institution has to make up for this debt. And while we need to continuously defend public institutions functioning in favour of the marginalised, a problem here can be if, in our research work, we want to make up for the inequality towards the peripheries by trying to make a *big* difference. A researcher who wants to engage with resistance practices and wants to make such a big difference, though, can become a problem for those who resist, since more horizontal relations seem more likely to establish where we have a notion of resistance processes as a collective effort. So what we should try to do is to support those who resist so that the struggles they engage in can make a big difference for them, mainly through their collective effort, which we connect with and can become part of, but not through an effort that mainly we or our research group protagonise. We should recognise ourselves as one more of different agents that contribute to struggles that can only be strong if they maintain relative independence from institutionalised structures. In a bit of a cynical take on those, like me, from university, in different community research contexts I have learned that if researchers do not cause their research collaborators trouble, and are no obstacle to collective mobilising, they are already doing pretty good! Important here, also, is that the agenda is set by movement necessities and not research necessities; tensions that exist between the distinct temporalities and spatialities of research and struggle must de resolved on the research side of things.

Doing research is part of our job. If we are paid researchers due to, for example, the projects we participate or because we have a contract at university, we need to be transparent about that: the work we do, we do to economically reproduce our *own* lives. Action research is not about philanthropy. It is about working together. Therefore, in order to research with those who live at the peripheries, whenever possible they need to get paid as research collaborators, so the work they do will help economically reproduce their lives, even though this might only be the case partially and for a limited period of time. Of course, there are other possible returns from participating in community research, so there will be non-paid relations and participation as well. What needs be clear is who has what role and what kind of work; the research process implicates what kind and type of participation, and creates what kind of possible or desired outcome, and for whom this outcome is of relevance and helpful.

***We* know little, so *we* must learn.** Much of what 'science knows' about peripheries can be rather common-sense knowledge for those who live and struggle at these peripheries... more so, of course, if we think about researchers from external contexts or the Global North, and research collaborators and their living realities from Global South peripheries. Or, in dialogue with a Fanon-inspired idea of differentiating between zones of 'being' and 'non-being', knowledge generated in the zones of 'being', when in touch with the reality of the zones of 'non-being', can transform into 'non-knowledge'. The Movement of Popular Communities (MCP), which is building popular communities in different peripheries in the Southeast and Northeast of Brazil, dialogues with a Freirean pedagogical approach when they claim: '*Antes de ensinar o povo, devemos aprender com ele*' ('Before we teach the people, we must learn from them').

The objective behind the attempt to make dialogue as horizontal as possible is that we can *generate* 'knowledge-with' rather than *produce* 'knowledge-over'. The latter process *favela* collectives have referred to as the work of '*favelólogos*', something like 'favelologists' or '*favela* experts'. Whenever we hear someone local 'joke' about our work in a manner like this, it is a good sign we should sit and listen and adjust the way in which we precede. One objective of critical self-reflection, and openness to critique from those we work with, is that we do not make the same mistake over and over again. If we can assert what we did wrong before and 'only' make new mistakes we then try to learn from, we are on a reasonable path.

Means cannot come before ends. The coherent dialogue between means and ends is crucial, yet in research terms, our means – our methods, that is – cannot come before the ends that we commit to. For example, if we propose a participatory cartography workshop and we organise a couple of meetings and the whole collective dynamics do not lead towards the design of a participatory map, not being able to come up with any map is a suitable result. The question is what do we want to achieve with the maps, and sometimes this can be achieved without coming up with a map at all, while at other times great maps can be an outcome when we may not have even planned to make one. Here, we cannot fetishise the outcomes of what we believe to be creative and relevant action or collaborative research methods. The more collectively and openly we formulate the ends of an action research, the less we will feel specific methods have to be applied and specific outcomes have to be achieved.

Research as act of active solidarity? Or: what can make practice-related and action research at urban peripheries in the Global South a tool of struggle for those who live there?

I would like to briefly try to reflect on possible ways to answer this question, mostly by pointing to more questions that we can or need to ask ourselves when we start considering to conduct research in collaboration with subjects in movement at a periphery.

Where do the demands come from? Who formulates the research questions and objectives? It makes a big difference if we design a participative research model, formulate questions and goals to reach and then try to find people to be part of what we designed, or if we first reach out to people, understand what their demands are and, in collaboration with them, try to formulate research questions and objectives. Of course, the latter is what we should try to do, as is keeping the research design as open as possible so adjustments can be made in accordance to the suggestions and ideas of those who are part of the research.

Who are we in relation to the research? And are we transparent about that towards those whom we invite to be part of the research? In my opinion, the possibility to answer the first question and to answer the second affirmatively is connected to another fundamental aspect: *Who are we politically? Besides from, as much as in the context of our work as researcher, how do we engage in politics? And what kind of politics do we believe in and support?* Are we reaching out to a grassroots movement so we can formulate proposals for city governments based on their knowledge, or do we want to support them to strengthen their resistance towards this government? *Do we think like the State? Or do we also try to think despite, against and beyond state?*

Many times, I have experienced that a general idea of doing something at an urban periphery is already considered a good thing, since so much needs to be done there. Here, I often remember a line from the German band Kettcar's song from 2002 *Im Taxi weinen* ('Crying in the Taxi') that says: '*Das Gegenteil von gut ist gut gemeint*' ('The opposite of good is well intended'). It is not enough to be a well-intended researcher, we must be very and critically aware of what our presence at a periphery means, whom we group with, whom do we support and how, and what effects the generated knowledge will have – on and in favour of whom.

Who is who in the research process? Who participates on what grounds? (Paid, voluntary and student research work, action research work that integrates community and research activities, etc.) *Who contributes how and who gets what out of the research? What do we want to achieve on practical grounds and in scientific terms? How will the results of the research be made available and how will they be communicated? Will the community members own the results and the outcomes of the research?*

And a last question I find crucial is how much do we demand of those that we invite, or from those whom we receive a proposal to conduct research, in terms of time and energy that is needed to be part of an ongoing research process? Here, my experience is that for those at the peripheries, low-intensity long-term relations tend to be more supportive, while intense, short-term ones tend to be more demanding. Participating once a month in a community activity and guaranteed continuity can be of great worth for local groups, while being all in for an event or a week of community life and then hardly show up again can be rather frustrating. If we try not to put ourselves in a role where we, as researchers, should make the *big* difference, maybe we can think of a big difference to be made as a sum of small ones. Often, the small things we do, and how much these are part of the research itself or derive from the subject-subject collaborative relations we establish, are not so relevant, but they actually can sum up and make an *important* difference. So maybe not getting it too wrong when we research at the periphery is about creating a process that opens opportunities so many small differences can be made for all those involved, including us, and for the community they are part of as well as for science that learns along the way as we research in action and try to support and strengthen those who live and resist at the peripheries.

Impressum/Imprint

Herausgeber von TRIALOG / editor: TRIALOG e.V., Verein zur Erforschung des Planens und Bauens in Entwicklungsländern <www.trialog-journal.de>

Postadresse für Redaktion und Verein / address: TRIALOG e.V. c/o A 53 Habitat Unit, TU Berlin Straße des 17. Juni 152, 10623 Berlin

Vertrieb / distributor:
ISSN Nr.: 0724-6234; V.i.S.d.P.: Dorcas Nthoki Nyamai
Redaktion / volume editors: Raffael Beier, Janek Becker and Nadine Appelhans

Satz / layout: Eleonora Silva, Caracas
Proofreading: Bryin Abraham, Berlin
Druck / print: bis500 Druck, Ilmenau

Umschlag / front and back cover: Timo Bartholl.
- Treffen der Bewegung für Wohnraum „Cooperativa de Viviendas La Creciente" auf dem von ihr seit mehreren Jahren besetztem Grundstück in Rosario, Argentinien. Während der Dialog mit der öffentlichen Hand zäh verläuft und finanzielle Unterstützung zum Ausbau der Wohnungen fehlt, nutzt die Bewegung das Grundstück für diverse kollektive Initiativen wie einen agrarökologischen Stadtgarten mit Beteiligung der Nachbarn. *September 2024. [Meeting of the movement for housing "Cooperativa de Viviendas La Creciente" on the site it has occupied for several years in Rosario, Argentina. While dialogue with the public sector is proving difficult and financial support for the expansion of the apartments is lacking, the movement is using the land for various collective initiatives, such as an agroecological urban garden with the participation of neighbors. September 2024].*
-Blick in andiner Abendsonne über einen Teil von Ciudad Bolívar, Bogotá, einer der größten urbanen Peripherien Lateinamerikas. Aufgenommen während des „17° Festival Internacional de Cine y Video Alternativo y Comunitario ‚Ojo al sancocho'". Oktober 2024. *[A view in an andean evening sun over part of Ciudad Bolívar, Bogotá, one of the largest urban peripheries in Latin America. Taken during the "17th International Festival of Alternative and Community Film and Video 'Ojo al sancocho'". October 2024].*

TRIALOG Kto. No. 1237 2813 00, BLZ 4306 0967
GLS Bank 44774 Bochum, SWIFT: GENODEM1GLS
IBAN: DE06 4306 0967 1237 2813 00

TRIALOG 147 kostet/costs 10,-€+Vers./postage
Stand /up-dated 09/2025

TRIALOG ISSN 0724-6234