Abstract

Postcolonial theory as emerging since the late 1980s has contributed to new approaches to (re-)claiming historical processes, thereby supporting and promoting the (re-)positioning of those forced to the margins in new discourses. But while mainly located in the critique of the dominant theories and providing space for alternative approaches and perspectives, a deeper understanding of complex dynamics requires a challenge in terms of further explorations into representational practices in context. This includes the need for further analyses of ‘othering’ by scrutinising representational practices in context and at the intersection of space and time, also within and not only through lenses of African Studies. This piece sketches the background to this project on ‘African Identities and the Politics of Space and Othering’ and frames the individual contributions to follow.

Introduction

It is easy to think of global trends and developments along temporal lines. For instance, Africa’s place in the global order is often viewed sequentially through the lens of pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial historical epochs.¹ Why then do many of the ills of the colonial era linger in the postcolony, albeit in different guises?² We tend to forget that the ‘post’ in postcolonial is a deceptive marker of time that masks persistent forms of injustice.³ But in recent years we have witnessed a marked shift from issues of temporality to those of spatiality.⁴ Drawing on the work of Henri Lefebvre, who brought space and temporality closer together,⁵ we argue in this Special Issue that any form of contextualisation needs to be cognisant of both temporal and spatial dynamics. Put differently, in the words of the famous novelist and playwright William Faulkner: ‘The past
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is never dead. It’s not even past’. Translated into our engagement with postcolonial Africa and African Studies, this means that any current deeper analysis will have to consider and reconcile history and present within the spatial dimensions of societies for an assessment of the complexity of daily life, and the reproduction as well as future of these societies.

Although geopolitics as a field of study has lost some of its appeal after the Cold War and in an era of interconnectedness, it now manifests in different forms, such as the politics of space or, differently phrased, a geopolitics of identity. Relations across physical space in an era of globalisation may have promoted communicative convergence through technology, but space and (local) place remain a fundamental source from which ordinary people and states draw their identity, as much as governments continue to use the notion of nation and national(istic) discourse as part of their rhetoric and policies. In times of shifting boundaries, not in the sense of a territorial border but in the context of increasingly multiple identities, this is a contested sphere. The fact that place continues to play a key role in the shaping of ordinary people’s collective experiences of identity also leads to contestations and the rejection of others’ claims of belonging to that particular space. Difference, and its construction, is thus fundamentally intertwined with spatial politics and its meaning for identity as well as claims of ownership. This tendency and the impact of such identity formation are not reduced through the new multi-polarity and the additional external players acting within the context of the continent and its societies (or, for that matter, any other continent and its societies). The representatives of emerging economies physically present rather than reinforce politics of identity and contestation as well as matters of belonging.

The forms that these contestations take may be violent (such as through xenophobia, genocide, rape as a weapon of war or violent nationalism), but it is often the seemingly non-violent forms of exclusion of minorities and so-called deviants (including other forms of religious orientation) that are more salient and harmful. The ‘othering’ of LGBT groups, ethnic and religious minorities, and immigrants is a case in point. Furthermore, since large-scale spatial constructs (the major powers) often act as drivers of particular worldviews (e.g. eurocentrism and neoliberalism), their knowledge is universalised at the expense of other (often considered, or actually, in terms of power relations, ‘lesser’) regions and peoples. Such universalising has been resisted on the grounds that Western theory is inappropriate for understanding Africa. The Western lenses are deemed inappropriate, as they do not capture the historical specificity of the African experience and therefore result in Africa being either ignored in mainstream discourses or misinterpreted because the conceptual framework or lenses are suspect. This explains the predominance of ahistorical discourses that favour accounts of war, disease and poverty from which Africans need to be ‘rescued’ and do not place their analyses in the context of broader global political economy shifts.

In this regard, Cornelissen, Cheru and Shaw capture three trends in scholarship on Africa at the turn of the century, namely postcolonial analysis of colonialism’s legacies in shaping African subjectivities and structures; a discourse of Africa with a tendency of framing the continent in essentialist terms; and a type of internationalism – casting the political economy of the continent against a changing global order. In our view, all three trends share a sense of Africa as the ‘Other’, where both the ‘Self’ and the ‘Other’ use difference to justify their respective roles as oppressor and rebel. Once again, this dichotomy is not abandoned or transcended with the appearance of new global players and their interaction with agencies on the continent. The proclaimed
counter-narratives appear often as ‘old wine in new bottles’ but do not fundamentally transform the structurally anchored divergences, instead only adding new facets to the ‘we-they’ divide. ‘Otherness’ appears and is defined at the same time in more differing and nuanced ways and variations, but not eliminated. It remains a practical and political category used by a variety of actors, and serves a function for all of these.

It follows that Africa’s marginalisation is complex – it is much more than a physical exclusion. The multi-layered way in which Africa is (mis-)represented in academic discourse also drives home the fact that discourse is the violence that we do to things, or a practice that we impose upon them. Consequently, as Mudimbe8 reminds us, Africa becomes an invention; not just in a geographic sense, but also in a metaphorical or ideological sense captured in colonial and postcolonial language and text.9 Space as both a construction and a practice is always tied to historicised experiences of power and systems of inclusion and exclusion.

Postcolonial scholars have laid the groundwork for insights into the notion of othering, voice and silences.10 But a deeper understanding of Africa’s complex dynamics necessitates a thorough scrutiny of representational practices in context. This means, firstly, an analysis of othering at the intersection of space and time; and secondly, promoting ‘a better understanding of the problems of the status quo and business-as-usual, and not just the problems in the status quo’.11 In this regard we want to underline the importance of the relational character of space, counter-space (from where resistance emanates), power and identity. But also the forms of othering created and imposed in what has at times been dubbed as patriotic history will be our reference points. While new forms of power have also created seemingly new discourses, they often reproduce old concepts of power. Despite appearing and claiming to be a postcolonial alternative, these narratives often reproduce similar characters and traits to those of the past, given the at best limited change in power relations and concepts of power and domination.

The aim of this Special Issue is therefore to examine a range of African cases of ‘othering’. This collection of articles aims to interrogate and open up the exclusionary effects of both discourses/narratives and political practices. In particular, we are interested – viewed through a postcolonial lens – in the link between knowledge, power and space. The purpose of our efforts is also to extend the debate beyond traditional ‘West versus the rest’ relations (the so-called ‘outside-in’ perspectives) and particularly focus on ‘micro-otherings’, namely the violence from within, such as xenophobia, homophobia and misogyny. We seek to offer comprehensive coverage of a variety of academic disciplines in a synthesis of insights pertaining to the interdisciplinary or trans-disciplinary through the eyes of power and space on the African continent. Thereby we aim to make an original theoretical contribution to scholarly work on African Studies, as it revisits debates on alterity and the African knowledge project and gives it a current feel through a holistic linking of space, power, identity and knowledge. This takes place against the backdrop of shifting power balances from West to East, and Africa becoming increasingly attractive as a testing ground for new policy issues, e.g. mobile technology for public service information, and also African states manipulating relationships with major donors, such as Rwanda seeking to exert more national control over aid.12 The empirical contribution rests in the fact that the rich case studies draw on a variety of disciplines, such as history, political science, communication science, sociology, cultural studies and social anthropology, to capture the contemporary nuances of othering in an African
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context. Many of the cases will demonstrate how exclusionary epistemic worldviews influence policy and practice in a variety of areas.

Although most of the articles deal with issues that have global resonance, both in Africa and elsewhere in the world, we cluster the articles around four subthemes, starting with the more metatheoretical aspects of the debate. The contributions by Michaela Krenčeyová and André Keet address, in the first subsection, the contested issue of positionality, power and the African knowledge project. The former article emphasises the privileging of African sources as a possible counterhegemonic choice. The latter challenges the epistemic injustices within disciplines. Stephanie Cawood contextualises these debates when she shows how Mandela’s rhetorical identity of resistance reflects the complexity of his multiple locations.

In the second subsection the focus shifts to gendered and queered ‘others’, capturing a variety of public (state) and private or everyday discourses and practices. Framing this subsection, Francis Nyamnjoh and Divine Fuh argue with the meaning of hairstyles as a case in point that African personal and collective identities are fluid and diverse, navigating perceived contradictions in their everyday understanding and articulation of reality in novel ways. This sets the scene for the engagement of Nadine Lake with ‘corrective rape’ as a rather sensitive topic, illustrating how this horrific form of violence is a brutal consequence of the othering of black lesbians. The intersectionality of multiple axes of marginality, i.e. sexual, class, racial and gender marginality, helps to explain their particular vulnerability to homophobic violence. Sabine Hirschauer draws attention to rape and state complicity as another kind of intersection. She reminds us that this form of othering – the so-called political narrative of rape – has become naturalised as a result of the historical continuum from apartheid to the post-apartheid era. The final article in this section shifts the attention to gendered ‘othering’ during mass violence and genocide: Heidi Hudson analyses international protectionist discourses and essentialised agentic inclusions in the context of Rwanda and Libya and shows how gendercidal violence draws on interwoven gendered roles, expectations and behaviours.

The third subsection captures contestations around ethnic and racial identities. Continuing with a perspective on post-genocide Rwanda, Cori Wielenga provokes us to think beyond ethnic markers and consider alternative conceptualisations of identity that encapsulate the complexity and multiplicity of everyday ‘lived’ identities and interrelationships. Anusa Daimon continues this theme when he discusses how Malawian migrant descendants in Zimbabwe have grappled with (and resisted) the redefinition of their rights to citizenship on the basis of ethnicity and political affiliation. Moving to Nigeria, Aghogho Akpome analyses the non-fictional narrative ‘In the Shadow of a Saint’ by Ken Wiwa. He interrogates the marginality of the Ogoni through the lens of the intersection of ethnic and national identities during periods of transition. And almost as if to frame this section, finally and similar to the piece by Nyamnjoh and Fuh, Akpome’s interview with Achmat Dangor, acclaimed South African writer, confirms the intersecting nature of our being.

In the final subsection we return to South(ern) Africa with contributions by Matthew Graham and Henning Melber. Both authors critique patriotic narratives of the liberation struggle for their ‘othering’ effects. Graham challenges the notion of a collective, regional solidarity as a key feature of the ANC’s success in the liberation struggle. Such myths leave little room for alternative explanations and narratives. In similar vein, and drawing on the Namibian experience, Melber
revisits the mental legacies of settler-colonial rule in Southern African societies under liberation movements as governments and argues that the ‘we-they’ divide under post-colonial governance effectively silences dissenting views.

The general concerns highlighted above, as well as the specific thematic contributions by the individual authors, all fit with the publication history of *Africa Insight* and its multidisciplinary Africa focus, but also deviate somewhat in order to add hitherto not yet conventional perspectives to the intellectual agenda. This follows trajectories presented in recent papers that have explicitly considered the issue of identity, mainly as related to South Africa, but also on trans-African identity and/or on African Humanities. The attention devoted to this topic is somewhat limited and we therefore seek to both extend and consolidate debates on African identity.

The compilation of texts for this special issue had its origins in discourses within the thematic focus of a Colloquium entitled ‘Researching Africa across the Disciplines’, as part of the Africa Day celebrations of the Centre for Africa Studies (CAS) at the University of the Free State (UFS) on 22 May 2013. The aim of the symposium was to raise awareness and theorise the interdisciplinary nature of African Studies across the Humanities and the Social, Natural and Health Sciences. The event aimed to showcase cutting-edge work done at the interface of various disciplines, and to explore the politics of interdisciplinary research on Africa. The African knowledge project with all its contestations was therefore central to the deliberations on the day. The event was co-sponsored by the UFS Postgraduate School and the National Research Foundation. As editors of this issue, we took matters further and invited other colleagues to join us with their contributions. We are grateful that *Africa Insight* offered us the opportunity to publish the results. Authors and editors much appreciated and benefitted from the constructive and competent recommendations by the anonymous reviewer for the final revisions of the contributions that follow.

**Notes and References**

1 See as the classical archetype the eight volumes of a *General History of Africa* published between 1989 and 1999 by UNESCO.


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