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Up the Africanist: the possibilities and problems of ‘studying up’ in Africa En Haut de l’Africaniste: Les Possibilités et les Problèmes de ‘l’Étude vers le Haut’ en Afrique.

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The original call to ‘study up’ asked anthropologists to study the powerful within their own societies, presumed to be American or European. In this special issue on power in 21st-century Africa, we reflect on methodological and theoretical issues inherent in the project of studying up anywhere. Contributors show that a careful understanding of emic perspectives on upward mobility and maintenance of the upper hand is critical to analysis: authors included here show the complexity of power hierarchies that go beyond obvious and durable routes to power (such as whiteness in ‘mobile’ humanitarian projects), to more unstable and contingent ones (such as party politics in Mozambique), and to those that can both empower and endanger (such as queer activist identities in Malawi). In addition, we find that the position of the ethnographer is unstable in many of these power hierarchies. Rather than introducing unique ethical concerns, we argue, this aspect of studying up reveals ethical concerns that affect all ethnographic work. This introductory essay reviews the complexity of ‘up’ as a social position and the ethics of ‘studying up’ as a method. We close with a call to consider the failure to study up in Africa as evidence of the persistence – and persistent erasure – of white privilege within our own discipline.

Keywords: Africa; studying up; power; hierarchy; ethnographic methods; whiteness

L’appel initial à « étudier vers le haut » demandait aux anthropologues d’étudier les puissants au sein de leurs propres sociétés, présumées être américaine ou européenne. Dans ce numéro spécial sur le pouvoir au vingt-et-unième siècle en Afrique, nous engageons une réflexion sur les questions méthodologiques et théoriques intrinsèques au projet d’étudier vers le haut où que ce soit. Les intervenants montrent qu’une compréhension minutieuse des perspectives émiques sur la mobilité et le maintien du dessus sont essentiels pour l’analyse: les auteurs inclus ici montrent la complexité des hiérarchies de pouvoir qui vont au-delà des chemins évidents et durables vers le pouvoir (tels que la blancheur dans les projets humanitaire « mobiles ») vers des chemins plus instables et contingents (tels que la politique partisane au Mozambique) ainsi que ceux qui peuvent à la fois renforcer et mettre en danger (comme les identités militantes queers au Malawi). De plus, nous constatons que la position de l’ethnographe est instable au sein de plusieurs de ces hiérarchies de pouvoir. Nous soutenons que cet aspect de l’étude vers le haut, plutôt que d’introduire des préoccupations éthiques uniques, révèle des préoccupations éthiques qui touchent tous les travaux ethnographiques. Cet essai introductif examine la complexité de « vers le haut » comme position sociale ainsi que l’éthique de « l’étude vers le haut » comme méthode. Nous terminons par un appel à considérer l’échec de l’étude vers le haut en Afrique comme une

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de preuve de la persistance – et de l’effacement persistant – du privilège blanc au sein de notre propre discipline.

Mots-clefs: l’Afrique; étudier vers le haut; le pouvoir; la hiérarchie; les méthodes ethnographiques; la blancheur

Introduction

Nearly a half-century ago Laura Nader asked what would happen if ‘anthropologists were to study the colonizers rather than the colonized, the culture of power rather than the culture of the powerless, the culture of affluence rather than the culture of poverty’ (1972, 289). Nader posed this question as part of a provocation that was at once moral and intellectual. Studying only the poor and marginalized in faraway places was neither scientifically adequate nor politically effective, she claimed. A reinvigorated anthropology would need to study power in all its sites and facets – extending ‘the domain of study up, down, or sideways’ at home and abroad (Nader 1972, 292). Nader’s classic essay, despite its firm grounding in the social turbulence of the USA in the 1960s and its specific call to repatriate American anthropologists to the study of their own society, continues to strike a chord with contemporary scholars working in many parts of the world. This special collection of *Critical African Studies* considers the value of her central arguments to Africanist anthropology in the 21st century.

While the call to ‘study up’ was a particularly famous formulation, Nader’s was just one voice among a cadre of contemporaries in the late 1960s and early 1970s making urgent calls for the application of anthropological methods and theories to the practices of power and the problems of a modern era. In a contemporaneous issue of *Current Anthropology*, contributors reflected on anthropologists’ responsibilities to address the problems of the day and to remain vigilant about their positions in the larger structures that produced those problems, both within and beyond the borders of the USA. Gerald Berreman pointed out that anthropologists were ‘involved whether they wish it or not’ (1968, 395) in global structures of power, and so carried a duty to analyse that involvement. Kathleen Gough made the case that anthropology could and should study ‘modern society as a single, interdependent world social system’ (1968, 405). Anthropologists already excelled at illuminating the interconnections of political, religious, and economic structures within small-scale societies, she noted; it was time to scale that approach up to the larger international system that produced the Cold War, fostered numerous revolutions and counter-revolutions, and ensured the underdevelopment of what today is often called the ‘Global South’. Gutorm Gjessing, in the same collection, argued that anthropological approaches of the time fell short in their attention to powerful actors and thus risked irrelevance. He singled out as an example Africanist Lucy Mair’s 1963 book *New Nations*, in which, he asserted, there was

no mention whatever of the tremendous Western investments, the military interventions, the political conditions for receipt of economic ‘aid’ provided by the Western nations, the high interest and part-payments required for loans given as ‘aid’, or the falling prices of raw materials from these areas. (Gjessing 1968, 401)

Gjessing’s was not the only voice calling for attention to the effects of larger-scale power relations within African studies. Chike Onwuachi and Alvin Wolfe (1966) warned anthropologists to look away from cross-cousin marriage and other ‘traditional slots’ of anthropological inquiry if they wished to remain relevant in contemporary African affairs. It was time to turn ethnographic attention towards race relations, economic development, government succession, and other topics that seemed at risk of forfeiture to other disciplines. For all of these scholars, anthropology’s relevance required an encompassing, holistic approach that situated contemporary social

life, anywhere, within the larger structures of political and economic power that were increasingly seen to be everywhere.

In many respects, Africanists have ‘studied up’ for a long time. Popular culture in North America and Europe all too often depicts Africa as a continent of the needy and powerless. Within anthropology, however, the study of influential elites has been a focus since the early days in which Isaac Schapera (1938, 1956) and others outlined routes to political authority. Even a few examples from the decades surrounding Nader’s essay reveal the ongoing importance of studies on power in Africa. Ndembu ritual specialists called in to heal an affliction, Victor Turner (1967) showed, were sophisticated readers of power relations, if sometimes themselves ambiguously positioned – both influential and marginal. In a polyethnic Ugandan town during a period of rapid urbanization, Joan Vincent (1971) described how the socially savvy could pursue new and multiple paths to power. Successful ‘Big Men’ used land-based transactions such as beer and work parties to maximize stability and continuity within the community as a whole, even while downplaying the ethnic ties that had previously been key to high social position. John Comaroff (1975) explained that while chiefdom was widely respected among the Tswana, incumbents of the office depended in practice upon their subjects for legitimation rather than being granted extensive sovereign power through tradition. Chiefs who failed to measure up in other ways might find even their genealogical claims to rank re-examined and challenged. Herbert Lewis (1984), writing against a then-popular conclusion that spirit possession was linked with deprivation, described the centrality of *k’allu* spirit mediums in Oromo life, and the ways in which spirit possession could serve as a route to both power and wealth. The ‘peasant intellectuals’ that Steven Feierman (1990) studied in rural Tanzania spent most of their time farming, but at crucial historical junctures organized political movements. Their economic independence allowed them to lead dissenting movements, giving them the room for manoeuvre that traditional intellectuals and chiefs did not have. And in central Africa, a therapeutic cult of affliction entwined healing, commerce, and politics through the rites of *Lemba*. John Janzen (1982) showed that the rituals, symbols, and medicines used by Lemba initiates – wealthy traders, judges, the educated and powerful – created a ceremonial context for trade routes and eased the sufferings of those afflicted by capitalism.

Some of the themes these authors developed – the importance of multiple routes to authority, the ambiguity (and sometimes the ephemerality) of high position, the tight connection of politics to healing, the dependence of those high up in a hierarchy on those much lower – appear in this special issue as well, as we discuss below. It is worth noting, however, that Africanist anthropology scholarship in the first decades after Nader’s charge still for the most part neglected to analyse larger-scale relations of power and the routes to influence they created, maintaining instead a focus on traditional or neo-traditional political and religious leadership. As Sally Falk Moore (1994, 115) notes, even analyses of post-independence politics and government ‘often paid insufficient attention to the effects of the larger political environment’ – exactly Gjessing’s critique of Mair, mentioned above.

There were important exceptions. Suzette Heald recalls that Schapera, for example,

did not edit out the impact of traders, missionaries, administrators or the migrant labour system and its recruiters. Not only were they not to be dismissed, they were, he argued, to be studied in exactly the same way as the chiefs and ritual specialists. (2003, 18)

Later, Max Gluckman and other anthropologists of the Manchester school studied the complex and shifting social hierarchies resulting as African urbanization made new social roles available to urban workers (Gluckman 1958). At least a few ethnographers working in African

contexts during late colonial and early postcolonial periods described the lives of bureaucrats, entrepreneurs, and white-collar workers. Much, but not all, of this work was by sociologists – at a time when some anthropologists were still famously dismissing the study of any group in which the men were likely to wear pants (as recounted in Moore 1994, 131; see Daloz 2003 for a useful critical review of the relevant sociological literature). Sociologists Willy De Craemer and Renée Fox, for instance, outlined the frustrations and career trajectories of French-speaking Congolese medical men who considered themselves *evolués* (De Craemer and Fox 1968; see also Pons 1969, drawing from fieldwork in the 1950s, on the *evolués* of Stanleyville). Peter Lloyd and colleagues analysed the ways in which opportunities for Western education, new businesses, and positions within colonial structures of indirect rule produced new ‘national’ elites (Lloyd 1966; see also Cohen 1981; Scudder and Colson 1980). Christine Oppong (1974) described the domestic effects of changing familial obligations and aspirations among an educated class of Akan civil servants. In general, however, until roughly the turn of the millennium, anthropological scholarship from Africa remained relatively long on chiefs, bureaucrats, and political authorities, but short on doctors and nurses, humanitarian workers, and scientists – not to mention female elites of any sort.

This special issue collects work on power in 21st-century Africa. Two themes in particular emerge in the articles gathered here. First, the collection raises methodological and theoretical questions inherent to *any* project of studying up. This interrogation demonstrates that ethnographic production of knowledge about African power and social hierarchies is itself realized within research relationships characterized by inequalities both deep and diverse – inequalities for which notions of ‘up’, ‘down’, and ‘sideways’ turn out to be far too simple. In considering how ethnographic knowledge about power in Africa is produced within relationships that are themselves situated in the hierarchies under study, the collection speaks to the challenges and potential of ethnography to investigate power – anywhere.

Second, this collection of recent projects shows the importance of understanding emic perspectives on power and influence. In examining the sociality of African professionals in medicine, government, scientific research, and beyond, contributors find that studying up in Africa requires attention not only to those forms and experiences of power recognizable to western audiences but to locally meaningful hierarchies that may be less immediately familiar. Appreciating emic African perspectives and perceptions of power, or relative advantage within African social worlds, expands the discipline’s attention as a whole to heterogeneous forms of power, inequality, status, and hierarchy. As several of our contributors show, Africans are themselves adept at ‘studying up’; like people everywhere, they perceive and creatively manipulate many possible routes to authority and influence. Including these multifarious routes to power in scholarly analyses is essential in Africa and beyond.

What’s up?

‘Up’ is always a positional or directional indicator that describes the relation of one thing to another. For the human social worlds that anthropologists study, ‘up’ must be determined in relation to someone or some group, whether local or far away, living or dead, real or imagined. To study up in anthropology is to study someone with what Edward Said (1978, 7) referred to as ‘the relative upper hand’ – that is, social superiority or authority as seen in some relationship to someone else. At various points in Nader’s original formulation, ‘studying up’ seemed to mean studying the wealthy or middle class, studying people who shaped attitudes or controlled institutional structures, studying those structures – such as Congress, or law firms – themselves, studying those who had the power of life and death over others, studying bureaucracies, and studying in

situations in which the power relationship did not tip in favour of the anthropologist. It went without saying that one could recognize ‘up’ when one saw it.

Africanist ethnography complicates this ease of recognition: it is not always immediately apparent to researchers who might be ‘up’, and when. Up is always relative, and the axes on which it can be determined – including wealth, social class, institutional authority, ability to work within the realm of spirits, moral authority – are multiple, not perfectly coterminous, variable within a single community, and sometimes surprising. In northern Mozambique, for instance, Harry West (2005) showed that the power to access an invisible realm allowed village sorcerers to thwart and ‘invert’ the edicts of neoliberal reformers who had official authority over markets and the state. Sorcery on the Muedan Plateau, West learned, was both a longstanding source of knowledge about the workings of power, and a way to put power to work.

While this collection does not address power in the invisible realm, moral hierarchies and their inversions and ambiguities appear in several contributions. The urban Ethiopian community health workers that Kenneth Maes describes have very little power to negotiate the terms of their own quasi-employment (for whether they are volunteers or paid labourers is a matter of contention), yet they are held up as morally exemplary by their supervisors. The worker-volunteers with whom Maes spoke held tight to their moral authority, which at some times seemed an avenue for their mobility and at others seemed to be a justification for – or at least a recognition of – their exploitation. The article by Sharon Abramowitz shows how an internationally respected humanitarian group, *Médicins sans Frontières* (MSF), suddenly lost the moral high ground with a decision to withdraw from Liberia in 2007. In the aftermath of MSF’s withdrawal, Liberian and expatriate humanitarian-aid professionals debated the most appropriate courses of action and allocations of funds, justifying very different impulses in similar explicitly moral terms. As Abramowitz shows, these unresolved contradictions among the powerful left a fragmented health system ill-prepared for basic monitoring and rapid response to epidemic disease, even as they cast both humanitarian purpose and reputation into disarray.

Some axes of power and status are all too durable. In the colonial era, the parts of Africa and Asia under European political control were places where mere whiteness conferred high status. Adia Benton’s work in this collection shows that an entrenched hierarchy of colour persists. Black African expatriates working in humanitarian institutions face difficult situations made worse by racism. The durable power of racialized hierarchies does not mean that other axes of prestige are irrelevant, however. Benton’s contribution, for instance, suggests that hierarchies of gender and nationality are at work as well. Decades ago Hortense Powdermaker (1956) studied essays written by students in what was then called Northern Rhodesia, expecting their accounts of difference to be framed in terms of white colonizers and black colonized; she was surprised to find them much more attentive to gender and to wealth. Many of the African school-girls, asked to write on who they could be if they could be anyone, wished they could be African men because then they would have privilege and power – including the power to treat others badly if they so desired. Gender and sexuality continue to be important axes of power, if in sometimes unexpected ways, as Crystal Biruk’s contribution to this issue shows.

Some forms of power are more ephemeral; the fragility of prestige shown in some classic scholarship on African elites finds echoes in the contemporary social order. Ramah McKay’s essay on upward mobility in Mozambican medicine, for instance, shows how a once-unassailable route to a high-status position through party politics has become far less reliable in an era, place, and sector dominated by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). As McKay shows, circulating ‘global’ health models and capital remake the subjectivities of health workers, not just those of patients, by charting new pathways to upward mobility. Similarly, wealth in people, long a form of prestige across diverse Gerhard African societies (Guyer 1993), or at least a hedge against downward mobility (Ferguson 1999), has also become a less stable route to status

(Pellow 2011). The Malawian civil servants described by Gerhard Anders (2010) understand rural kin as a very mixed blessing with whom one should maintain ties – because it is the right thing to do – but from whom one might wish to stay at a safe distance – because it is the better route to success. As Christine Jeske (2016) has recently shown for a peri-urban area in South Africa, markers of prestige that invite exchange relationships with dependents are now less compelling than they once were: increasingly, young people on the rise aspire to wealth in cars rather than in cows.

As Jeske's example suggests, up may also be a trajectory: a superior position not in relation to another person or group but from one moment to another moment in the same person's life. Attention to this kind of movement and change – which we might call studying upward – can illuminate the routes to power deemed stable and those deemed risky. Maes's article on home-based AIDS care in Ethiopia shows how community health workers weigh their commitments to volunteer work against other possibilities, like migrant labour, that may offer a surer route to familial economic security and may therefore be more obligation than option. Naomi Haynes's (2012) work on prosperity-gospel adherents in the Zambian Copperbelt, pursuing wealth that is out of reach yet visible all around them, provides another example of studying upward trajectories that meld the moral and the material. Drawing on ethnographic observations of leading families in several small independent Pentecostal churches in a Zambian township, Haynes shows that Zambians are expecting material prosperity to be incremental and slow, and they are expecting inequality: 'a country that is truly saved is not one in which everyone is rich, but one in which those who are have enough and are numerous enough to become benefactors of those who aren't' (130). These observations complicate interpretations of African Pentecostalism as corrosive to social life, a spiritual superstructure atop a neoliberal economic base of inexorable inequality (see e.g. Comaroff and Comaroff 2000). Shows of wealth invite interdependent exchange relations with people of lower and higher economic status, including non-believers. Wealth on display, then, provides a path upward for the displayer and the viewer alike.

Studying those anticipating or in the midst of losing superiority, rather than gaining it, also reveals quite a lot about power, influence, and advantage. Recent work by Rebecca Peters (2016) demonstrates that some Angolan development workers strategically conceal certain valuable skills, bodies of knowledge, and professional biographies – lest they lose their tenuous hold on the status of 'local', the only slot available to Angolans in an international 'good governance' NGO. In this collection, McKay's article shows vividly how a senior health worker, holding a status of respect and seniority that had seemed inviolable, watches as a younger colleague more adept in the language and habitus of 'global mental health' passes her by. This depiction reveals unexpected social consequences of large-scale changes in health governance: McKay's analysis calls attention to generational differences both in the forms that power takes and in how power can be achieved. Similarly, Denielle Elliott's collaboration with a senior medical scientist in Kenya – once director of a prominent research centre – draws revealing lessons from his public fall from grace: routes to power often entail unavoidable risk. The most elite members of society may be the most dependent on fickle benefactors and sponsors, both at home and abroad. Dr Koech's meteoric rise was inextricably linked with his subsequent fall.

In its original formulation, 'up' was implicitly up from the position of the ethnographer. But this kind of work in African contexts reveals that neither anthropology nor the ethnographic method offers a stable point against which a coherent 'up' can be determined. Contributors to this collection occupy a range of social positions in their home societies and are in a range of relationships to their informants in their field research locales. In most cases, the same ethnographer is in a superior position to some informants and in an inferior one to others within the same research project and field site. Such contingent positionality can direct a researcher's attention and even shape his subjectivity, as Mattia Fumanti experienced while studying the political elites of

Rundu, Namibia (see Fumanti 2004). Negotiating his own positionality at the transition between research projects, Derick Fay perceptively notes in his contribution to this collection that ‘the relative upper hand’ can change from day to day, context to context, and even conversation to conversation. While it is particularly obvious when ethnographers from wealthy countries study in poorer African nations, that mutability is probably as true for ethnographers working at home – whether ‘home’ be Africa, the Americas, Europe, or elsewhere – as it is abroad.

In sum, up may be the relative upper hand, but that upper hand is determined emically. Perhaps Nader did not need to define ‘up’ carefully. In calling for the study of American institutions by American anthropologists, she may have presumed her audience would already share an emic understanding of power. While contributors to this issue are attentive to those who are high in the ranks of institutions familiar to western eyes – politicians, bankers, scientists, doctors, professors – their empirical work studying up in Africa reveals that power and positional superiority can draw from other hierarchies, both simultaneously and as alternatives: religious, moral, traditional, neo-traditional, bureaucratic, civil, lineage, geographic, to name a few. Race can trump expertise. Sexuality can endanger and can create a path to social mobility. Moral authority can be quite distinct from bureaucratic position. Reputation carries weight but can be ruined. Contributors urge a careful and explicit consideration of what ‘up’ – and, following Nader, ‘down’ and ‘sideways’ – means, and to whom. We will return to the distinctive contributions that arise from this kind of consideration below.

Methodological complexities and empirical contributions

Upward study may feel especially complex to ethnographers, methodologically and ethically. Its complexities and its empirical contributions, as we will show below, are entangled. Methodologically, studying up can change the ways we gain access to communities, and can intensify challenges over who controls the process and outcomes of ethnographic research. Ethically, it fits poorly with the assumptions that underlie common prescriptions intended to reduce abuses of power in research. Human subjects review boards, for instance, nearly always assume the researcher to have the upper hand in the research relationship. By contrast, ethnographers have long realized that our own intersubjective positionalities – of race, gender, sexuality, national origin, class, and other status-determining characteristics – can trouble neat predictions of relative advantage in many ethnographic situations. When a deeply indebted anthropology student is studying wealthy and established professionals, should any aspect of human subjects’ protection change? The presumption that ‘vulnerable’ research subjects should be protected from intrusive ethnographers may seem particularly misplaced when studying the powerful and well-positioned, in almost any social system – and yet, as several of the contributors to this journal issue show, people in high positions *are* sometimes vulnerable. At issue in this set of received ideas about research relationships, particularly ethnographic ones, are the twinned problems of access and ethics.

The end of Nader’s essay briefly raises (and dismisses) four possible objections to the call to study up: that researchers will never get access to worlds of privilege; that the ethics of studying up are tricky because access may require deceit; that one cannot call it anthropology if participant-observation is not part of the method; and that anthropologists prefer the underdog and will not want to study up. The first three of these objections centre upon problems of access. In the years since Nader’s article, access has remained the key methodological quandary for most anthropologists. Hugh Gusterson, for instance, has suggested that problems with access mean that traditional ethnographic methods are probably unsuited to the study of the elite.

Participant observation was designed to facilitate the understanding of small, face-to-face societies, such as the Trobriand Islanders, where a stranger could easily be absorbed into the flow of daily

life and no one was likely to tell the anthropologist that he or she was on private property and should leave. (Gusterson 1997, 115–116)

Scientific laboratories, corporate boardrooms, and law firms are arguably no more or less ‘small, face-to-face societies’ than are islands in the Trobriands. The methodological problem that made studying up distinctive, as Gusterson hints, was never really about scale or attitude: it was always about the loss of ethnographic impunity. It was about a move away from study sites where an anthropologist, often backed implicitly or explicitly by colonial power and by white privilege, could go without being asked to leave and could write without the danger of being read. Although some unwilling research subjects doubtless seized opportunities to mislead, evade, or otherwise frustrate their ethnographic researchers in these colonial contexts, many others likely acquiesced rather than risk any trouble. As anthropologist Mwenda Ntarangwi (2010, Ch. 2) points out, ethnography’s preference for the underdog may be presented in moral terms, but it has had distinctive methodological advantages.

Such advantages, while not gone, have eroded in the new millennium. While wealth and power are if anything more concentrated than they once were, information travels much more freely than it did in the late 1960s, complicating both research access and the afterlives of ethnographic study for investigators and those investigated. Subjects of ethnographic research have new avenues to shape (or dispute) results, and new reasons to refuse access. When the journey to ethnographic impunity no longer involves taking a boat to the Trobriands, a researcher must either make peace with the idea that the subjects of the study can read its findings or else secure the work in other ways, perhaps within dense thickets of jargon in high-priced books or behind the pay walls of low-circulation journals. Either way, in the contemporary era anthropologists are forced more than ever to acknowledge how power and influence – the very social dynamics under study – affect the production and circulation of ethnographic knowledge itself.

Fay’s analysis introduces a related concern: that power shapes the production of ethnographic knowledge in part through the person of the researcher himself. Ethnography always requires investment in relationships. As Fay notes, those relationships shape the researcher – changing the ‘reference groups’ with respect to which one makes conscious and unconscious decisions about what to study, how to study it, and where to disseminate results. Studying up thus becomes also a question of affiliation, alongside questions of access and ethics. Affiliation, access, and ethics are also concerns when studying down or sideways; they are inherent to fieldwork in any complex community, not solely those in which ethnographers are ‘studying up’ (Visweswaran 1994). When ethnographers are affiliated with powerful groups, however, the impact of these shifting affiliations on others may be especially damaging. Fay’s article explores affiliation sensitively, asserting that enhanced reflexivity is called for as roles and positions change over time and in response to others’ demands on the ethnographer. If unmet, he cautions, such demands may themselves preclude access to elites. If met, one wonders, would access elsewhere be similarly precluded?

Yes, powerful informants may exert particular control over access: arranging a single interview can be an ordeal (Herod 1999). Elliott’s contribution to this volume provides an especially clear example of just how challenging negotiations over access can be. Even when they do not exclude anthropologists entirely, powerful informants can shape our research in less obvious ways by controlling the kinds of information and people to whom we are privy (Gusterson 1997). In these situations, Elliott notes, careful attention to the silences and omissions of storytelling is critical. Her contribution maps out an ethnography of narrative negative space, offering one inventive methodological approach to the problem of access.

And yes, valid ethnographic knowledge in such contexts requires relationships of trust that must be earned over the long term. We do not see this requirement as a problem. If our informants cannot tell us to go home, if they cannot exclude us from spaces or processes deemed private, then *that* is the serious ethical concern to be addressed.

Another methodological and ethical problem is especially salient to studying up, however: the temptation to muckrake. Along with methodological care in access, ethics, and affiliation, contributors to this issue also take epistemological care to resist ‘looking for the worst in the good’, as Richard Werbner (2004, 8) aptly put it. Werbner rebuked anthropologists and journalists who engaged in ‘all-knowing deconstruction’ on the basis of thin (or no) close knowledge, presuming African elites to be corrupt, greedy, and blame-worthy. His own work used the experiences and accomplishments of long-time friends and colleagues in Botswana to write against a stream of ‘Afro-pessimist’ research, much of it from political scientists studying ineffective or corrupt government structures within predatory or failed states. Political scientist Gavin Kitching (2000), for instance, reported that he was ‘depressed, that is to say, both by what was happening to African people and by [his] inability even to explain it adequately, let alone do anything about it’. He cited particular frustration with political elites:

Why have African governing elites been particularly prone to behaving in ways which are both economically destructive of the welfare of the people for whom they are supposedly responsible and which have led – at the extreme – to forms of state fision (civil war etc), collapse or breakdown? (Kitching 2000, [unpaginated] emphasis in the original)

Kitching left the study of Africa in the mid-1980s, in an effort to preserve his mental health and as an act of protest against the ineffectiveness of political-science research on such questions. Werbner’s alternative response – to intensify rather than abandon ethnographic research on government officials while bringing to elites ‘the same empathy and insight that anthropologists bring to the rest of the people they study’ (2004, 8) – offers a more productive avenue for research (see also Fumanti 2006 on Namibian civil servants).

A careful empirical study of national political elites could bring to the study of African government institutions what critical medical anthropology has brought to the study of medical institutions. Consider Wenzel Geissler’s (2013) work showing how performances of equal partnership among medical researchers in Kenya can keep important public health research functioning, and sometimes stimulate social and scientific innovation, even while they mask inequalities and injustices. With Ferdinand Okwaro, he has brought the key take-home messages of this research directly to scientists (Geissler and Okwaro 2014), as well as to anthropologists (Okwaro and Geissler 2015). Claire Wendland (2010) has described a medical profession in which political activism can be a channel for frustrated desires to provide good care, even while it can also pull Malawian doctors away from their clinical work. Ethnographic work by Julie Livingston (2012) and Benson Mulemi (2014) shows doctors, in the cancer wards of Botswana and Kenya, respectively, improvising therapy – to sometimes life-saving and sometimes lethal effects. African popular imaginations often feature disastrous, inept, or inaccessible medicine, and the popular imaginations of Europeans and North Americans often feature ‘White Saviors’ (Cole 2012; Wendland 2012). Ethnographic work on African medical elites refutes both of these stereotypes, contributing much-needed nuance while not overlooking either neocolonial impulses or the failures of medical care on the continent.

Taking the sensitivity of such work on biomedicine on the continent into Africanist political anthropology could provide correction to overblown conclusions about criminalized African states – and could also reveal the kinds of social and ideological pressures that do sometimes lead elites to a ‘politics of the belly’ (Bayart 1993; see also Anders 2010). In this issue,

Biruk's and Elliott's contributions provide examples. Biruk's study among gay-rights activists in Malawi shows them learning to speak the language of donors, socializing with (and indeed becoming) powerful men in smart suits, jockeying for advantage, and using the ethnographer to meet their ends. Elliott provides an in-depth personal history of a Kenyan scientist, Dr Davy Kiprotich Koech, who has done much the same. Adept at manipulating social systems, in both cases these are people who are also hard working, passionate, and courageous. They are also quite seriously endangered – Biruk's subjects by their status as spokespersons for Malawi's deeply unpopular sexual minorities and Elliott's collaborator by the personal and political relationships he forged with President Daniel Arap Moi and other powerful figures in order to make his way.

The man Biruk calls Felix is indisputably an elite, working at high levels of national politics in morally ambiguous ways: 'roping in' donors, commodifying suffering, shaping the personal histories of others to make compelling copy that also smoothes the way for his own professional advancement. In Elliott's study, Dr Koech shows the risks of such a rise: after decades of success, he fell from grace as political mores and milieus changed around him. In these sensitive accounts of influence and connection, it is not only the anthropologist who is complicit in power inequalities. The stakes of Felix's work, like that of Dr Koech's, are very high, and their alternatives are unclear. If it is difficult for readers to see these men unambiguously as either heroic champions or predatory elites, it is also difficult to understand these stories at all without comprehending the exchanges of money, ideas, and influence in which Malawi, Kenya, global health and international activism are awash. Drawing the connections between large-scale flows like these and the dilemmas and manoeuvres of powerful individuals is what studying up can offer empirically. Understanding those connections fully requires avoiding a priori judgments about corruption and greed.

Benton's article on expatriate African humanitarian workers provides important counterbalance to this approach, as do the contributions by Abramowitz and Maes. If the ethnographer who studies up must refrain from the temptation to muckrake, he or she must also refrain from the opposite – from 'looking for the best in the bad', to turn Werbner's felicitous phrase inside out. Anthropologists typically do not have to be cautioned against taking a triumphalist approach to the study of elites, but it is well to remember that ethnographers cannot presume altruism or goodness, and should not take at face value the justifications of those who see themselves or their actions as selfless. Abramowitz's study is an analysis of the moral grey areas in humanitarian aid. Drawing on research from after Liberia's civil war and before its Ebola epidemic, she shows how Liberian and expatriate healthcare administrators argued fiercely over what sorts of institutional actions were morally sound and medically appropriate. What some MSF leaders justified as a moral commitment to Liberian sovereignty, other high-ranking officials and humanitarian-aid workers saw as an unconscionable withdrawal of care.

Away from the policy level and into the world of everyday practice, Benton's analysis reveals the insidious effects of racism in the professional structures of humanitarian aid. Exploring those structures ethnographically, she describes racialized assumptions about the affiliations of black African humanitarian workers, whiteness as proxy for experience and expertise, and blackness as trigger for extra layers of scrutiny and extra barriers to promotion. Despite aid organizations' claims to the humanitarian, the universal, and the humanist, they breed inequality in their very form and function. Benton simultaneously identifies a troubling lacuna in the anthropology of humanitarianism: it too remains nearly silent on racism, pushing analysis of white privilege to the very margins of discussion and thus enabling the perpetuation of racialized inequities. In this case, we must ask why 'studying up' has not allowed a full critique of such global, regional, and national inequalities, and whether the whiteness of the academy and the discipline makes complicity more likely than critique.

Maes' analysis of Ethiopian workers during the global AIDS emergency offers reason to hope that ethnography can reveal the underlying logics of such inequalities even when they are very close to our disciplinary and political heartlands. Maes disassembles the 'human resources' mentality of public health intervention that would treat people as tools. Attempting to study up, down, and all ways, he shows that even those called upon by the powers of global health governance to be selfless find routes to pursue their own interests. Maes suggests that interventions will be more just and more effective when community health workers are understood as whole persons with legitimate self-interests, rather than simply 'tools' in the fight for improved population health. We cannot help but question how the underlying logics of race figure in global-health institutions that remunerate international consultants or pharmaceutical conglomerates so handsomely while simultaneously considering the local Africans who are so essential to the final success of HIV treatment and prevention to have no credible right to recompense.

In sum, we contend that a move away from reflexive suspicion and towards open-minded, critical inquiry is methodologically essential, scientifically necessary, and ethically important ... although clearly not easy.

A last methodological reflection, salient to several of the collection's contributions, concerns the pleasures and the risks that attend the study of people, institutions, and activities that are perhaps more familiar to the ethnographer than they are strange. For many anthropologists studying up in Africa and elsewhere, the study of scientists, social activists, humanitarian workers, and civil servants can feel as though we are studying, if not ourselves, then people remarkably 'like us'. This ready identification can ease access, as when Karen Ho made use of the 'institutional kinship' of her Stanford and Princeton University pedigrees and alumni networks to 'break through the barriers of security and public relations' in her ethnography of Wall Street (2009, 13). Fay's warning about these sorts of similarities is important here: a sense of affiliation can be used in attempts to pull the ethnographer away from his ethical and political commitments to those seemingly less 'like him'.

In some contexts, ethnographers who study elites may also find that researchers and subjects share a cognitive style. Douglas Holmes and George Marcus (2005), for instance, noted that central bankers make use of 'para-ethnographic' modes of observation and analysis: they incorporate social observations, illustrative anecdotes, and intuition into their decision-making alongside technocratic and statistical modes of knowledge. Holmes and Marcus urge researchers who study up to pay close attention to para-ethnographic practices. Several contributors to this issue echo their methodological suggestion. Drawing on research at an embattled Malawian queer-rights NGO, for example, Biruk claims that staff and volunteers there are as able to chart the structures and flows of power as is the observing anthropologist. She raises an unsettling possibility: that anthropologists often fail to recognize that their research subjects may think in the same manner, and draw the same conclusions, that they do as professional social scientists. It can be more difficult to make the familiar strange than to make the strange familiar, and the blind spot Biruk points out is a challenge to be addressed carefully in studies of people 'like us'.

Theoretical and practical implications

Studying up enriches the discipline of anthropology, and it furthers understanding of contemporary African societies. Work on routes to power – in medicine, in politics, in the NGO world, and elsewhere in Africa – has both practical and theoretical implications.

Practically, there is no reason that Nader's original concern for anthropology's democratic relevance should be confined to the USA, especially given the common practices of transnational education among African elites. At our home universities, small groups of up-and-coming African leaders have been invited to tour and study for a period of several weeks, as part of

the Obama administration's Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI; see www.youngafricanleaders.state.gov). The group invited to Syracuse, as Rebecca Peters was told in early 2014, 'doesn't need to learn about Africa'. A curriculum was designed for them around the history and procedures of public administration – budgeting, organizational management, effective leadership, state and local finance, and so on – largely using examples from the USA and Europe. This curriculum risks leaving the impression that Northern situations and procedures are the unmarked, able to stand in for anywhere. We share with Nader the conviction that individuals and groups must better understand the structures of power within their/our own societies as well as beyond them in order to effectively participate in the governing of those societies. Those positioned to lead African nations in the near future should be able to draw that understanding not only from personal experience but from sophisticated and critical social science conducted around the world, including in Africa. Besides lobbying those in charge of the curricula for YALI and similar initiatives on this point, we as anthropologists have a disciplinary duty to produce good scholarship on institutions, governance, and the workings of power in African societies that can inform such efforts.

This research contributes to a better practical understanding of how hierarchical organizations work in Africa, and along which fault lines they are likely to break. In the articles collected here, we are struck by the ways in which elites across several contexts are propped up by the voluntary (or in some cases not so voluntary) efforts of workers in a grey zone between informal and formal labour. The organization Biruk calls Human Rights Now requires – and produces – a constituency of 'WSW' (women who have sex with women) paid with the occasional per diem, and a cadre of peer educators who get tiny stipends for their 'volunteer' work. Community home-based AIDS care supervisors in Ethiopia, as Maes shows, make salaries and have opportunities for professional advancement, while actual care for the sick is provided by workers who receive only the occasional supplement of cooking oil and wheat (see also Kalofonos forthcoming). In many cases documented across the continent, 'volunteer' labourers knowingly take positions like these – in global health research and intervention projects (Prince 2014), in AIDS care (Brown 2014), in 'good governance' NGOs (Englund 2006) – in the hope that they will be paths to something better. Usually, they are not. The space between these grey-zone labourers and their elite managers is clearly a critical zone of tension and possible fragmentation.

We believe that disputes over the proper compensation for grey-zone labour are part of a larger challenge to dominant moral frameworks. As Ferguson (2015) has recently argued, many southern Africans are making strong claims for a 'politics of distribution', a recognition that one's rightful share should be adjudicated neither by the market alone nor by narrow legal rights, but rather by one's membership in an interdependent collective. In healthcare as in other arenas, we can expect tensions over what constitutes a rightful share and to whom it is due, and pushback against business models that violate commitment to a collective by privatizing profitable activities while relegating unprofitable but necessary acts of social care to 'volunteers' – or to state workers.

Research presented in this collection suggests that explicitly moral arguments over rightful sharing will play out not just between elite managers and unpaid volunteers, or between powerful politicians and chronically unemployed low-income citizens, but among elites themselves (cf. Fumanti 2007). The articles by McKay, Benton, and Elliott all feature elites using affectively charged language to address concerns about right and respectful treatment, just compensation and fair recognition. Recognizing the contextual contingencies of elite status provides insight into the fragility of the national and international organizations that are the backdrop of several contributions in the collection. It also draws attention to the rhetorical strategies that shore up these institutions or threaten to break them apart. In an era in which the language of business has become the default way of thinking about health, illness, and care, it is striking that a diverse array of actors resists these metaphors in favour of locally salient *moral* languages (cf.

Minn 2016 on health workers in Haiti, and Yarrow 2008 on moral frameworks among development workers in Ghana). The stakes of moral arguments over rightful action may have been highest, and the consequences most tragic, in the case Abramowitz recounts. Doctors, nurses, and paramedical staff in Liberia were left without the resources to do their work because locally salient languages of morality and commitment did not sufficiently overlap with the languages of morality and commitment embedded in the structures of transnational humanitarian institutions.

Even among fully employed elites – doctors, aid workers, managers, and supervisors – the contributors to this collection see fractures and insecurities. Some elites have greater social and geographical mobility, greater institutional power, greater room to manoeuvre than have others. Degrees of privilege can derive from business success or educational achievement as Elliott describes; from expatriate status as in Abramowitz's contribution; or from generation or political affiliation, as McKay demonstrates. They can vary with one's job title, as Fay shows for a 'community relations' manager at a game reserve, an educated, employed elite who is nevertheless professionally marginalized – in part, one suspects, by a sort of social contamination from the marginalized people with whom he works. Privilege to varying degrees can even come from sexuality and one's willingness to leverage it, as in Biruk's article. Each form of privilege is accompanied by quite concrete and specific forms of vulnerability – as Elliott's biography of Dr Davy Koech shows clearly in the life of one man.

Race, as discussed above, remains a particularly consequential fault line. Benton's contribution to this issue shows that race is a critical axis of power as black African humanitarian workers must prove their expertise again and again, to peers and supervisors, even when it seems that whiteness is adequate evidence of others' expertise. In some cases, as Benton shows, the proof of expert competence punctures local expectations of solidarity (or complicity), expectations to which white humanitarian workers are not commonly held. The double binds these organizational elites face have personal, professional, and institutional consequences thus far neglected within a scholarship reticent to face its own, comparable, structures of inequity. Analyses that consider nationality and citizenship while ignoring race, Benton suggests, in fact tacitly endorse white privilege by rendering it invisible.

The persistent power of racialized hierarchies and the persistent erasure of white privilege also matter within our discipline. As Ntarangwi (2010) and Francis Nyamnjoh (2012) have both pointed out, black African anthropologists face double binds similar to those described by Benton for humanitarian professionals. Their very education (in a discipline many Africans consider inherently racist) may render them suspect among Africans, while their African origins may render them marginal – perhaps dismissed as 'native' scholars – among the non-African anthropologists who dominate our discipline. They are simultaneously too African and not African enough. Nyamnjoh (2012, 84) takes this critique a step further, calling on anthropologists (whether they identify as white, black, or something else) to expand their studies of Africa empirically and pointing out in particular a failure to study the powerful whites of Africa.

For anthropology to survive and thrive in Africa, we must not define and confine Africa a priori, racially, geographically or otherwise. It is important to be flexible and accommodating to the possibility of Africa surprising us in most unlikely ways by appearing where we least expect it, or being invisible where we most expect to find it ... [W]e are required to pay more than lip service to the flexibility, negotiability and processual possibilities of identities in and of Africa. For this reason, nobody in the geography of 'Africa' should be above the anthropological gaze.

Just as Berreman (1968, 395) challenged anthropologists to recognize that they were 'involved whether they wish it or not' in the international power plays of the Cold War,

contributors to this collection challenge contemporary anthropologists to recognize that we are involved in dynamics that systematically privilege some people and render others suspect. Many of these dynamics are at work within our own institutions and discipline – in Africa and everywhere. We cannot understand Africa, anthropology, or power adequately without studying up, upwards, sideways, down, and inward. We cannot understand Africa, anthropology, or power adequately without considering the nuances and axes of ‘up’ in emic terms, and without analysing how those nuances and axes are shaped over the long term of history, understood within the changing perspectives of disciplinary trajectories, and revealed or concealed by the methodological and ethical complexities of ethnographic work. This special collection has resisted defining ‘up’ in purely modernist, western, *or* traditionalist frames, following instead the richly complex emic determination of relative superiority in each study site, a determination shaped itself by long histories of unequal power. This grounded approach contributes much to the broader discipline, both towards scientific adequacy and to public relevance.

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