Introduction: mainstreaming Africa

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African Studies

The conceptual borders and boundaries of theorising on Africa have been policed through the emergence and consolidation of the discipline of African Studies. African Studies, whose precursors were ethnography and anthropology, eventually came together as a discipline in the 1950s at a time when area studies emerged as the major site for the study of non-western societies. The overarching purpose for pursuing such studies was to overcome ethnocentrism. Area studies emerged as a way of re-imagining space that not only sought to make intelligible the complexities of different regions, but also allowed for these areas to be systematically studied by the social sciences. More importantly, area studies fostered the growth of these disciplines, led to the emergence of a plethora of so-called 'specialists' and increasingly became involved in policy-making. However, from the beginning, area studies was fraught with the difficulty that it was geographically driven and did not have a particular theoretical orientation.

It was Hegel who asserted that, 'what we properly understand by Africa is the Unhistorical, Underdeveloped spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature' (1944: 93–4). This representation of Africa as outside of history had a profound impact on African Studies. Because Africa was seen as a nullity before Europeans appeared, African Studies practitioners were beleaguered by the attack from the social sciences that essentially descriptive 'social translators' dominated the discipline.¹ As Mule (2002: 13) points out, 'there is virtually no discipline in African Studies that is untouched by translation’. Consequently, African Studies was rapidly engulfed by a desire to represent and to speak for its subject.

Area studies including African Studies remain beleaguered by these attacks. There is nevertheless one area of study that appears to have met this challenge and has been successful in breaking out of the area studies mould albeit by continuing to focus on a particular geographical area. The success of the
Subaltern Studies group’s work with a focus on India has meant that it is no longer merely thought of as an area studies project. Rather, it has gained a much greater currency and is read as contemporary social theory. The works of Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Spivak, Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakrabarty, for example, are not read as works that merely deal with India. Rather, these authors are read as important theorists who are breaking down disciplinary boundaries and rethinking problematics that have a wider applicability. This is no small feat in a world where knowledge production remains firmly embedded in the west. It is important to question then how subaltern studies have broken out of being characterised as area studies, how they have made their project mainstream?

The Subaltern Studies project began as a result of several scholars’ dissatisfaction with the ways in which traditional Indian historiography erased histories of subordinated groups. Since then, Subaltern Studies has gained a much wider audience across the world and has developed a broad interdisciplinary following. A great deal of the global interest in Subaltern Studies comes from the ways the project is affiliated with, and constitutes, a larger ‘post-colonial’ critique. The Gramscian category of ‘subaltern’ as it has been deployed by Ranajit Guha and other members of the Subaltern Studies collective has become an important explanatory tool.

The ‘post-colonial’ affiliation of Subaltern Studies, which has no doubt led to its immense popularity, has resulted also in much critique. For example, Arif Dirlik who mounted a scathing attack on post-colonial theory on the grounds that it was essentially a discourse of Third World intellectuals who operate from within their privileged position in the First World went so far as to claim that post-colonialism is ‘a child of post-modernism’ (Dirlik 1994: 348). Furthermore, he argued that the historical innovations of the Subaltern Studies group may appear novel in the context of Indian historiography but were essentially an adaptation of the methods of the British historians such as E.P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm who pioneered ‘history from below’.

In a recent intervention, Dipesh Chakrabarty takes Dirlik to task for this suggestion. In an essay that documents the history of Subaltern Studies, Chakrabarty traces how the Subaltern project developed out of the dissatisfaction with modern Indian historiography into a project in which history itself as a European form of knowledge has been severely questioned. In its latest manifestation, it has further engaged with colonial discourse analysis and with the work of Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak and Edward Said and has come into a direct conversation with post-colonial studies. As Chakrabarty explains:

I have sought to explain some necessary connections between the original aims of the Subaltern Studies project and current discussions of postcoloniality. Subaltern Studies was not a case of the application to Indian material of methods of historical research already worked out in the metropolitan Marxist tradition of history from below. It was in part a product of that lineage, but the nature of political modernity in colonial India made this project of history writing nothing short of an engaged critique of the academic discipline of history itself.

(2002: 19)
Why African Identities?

The recent successes of Subaltern Studies and post-colonial studies have meant a certain recovery of how the colonial subject is represented and objectified. Yet, Africa remains on the margins within post-colonial studies itself (Ahluwalia 2001). This is, no doubt, a product of the historical erasure of Africa as exemplified by Hegel, but also the continued marginalisation on the basis of its geo-political position. *African Identities* seeks to bring these questions to the forefront, questioning why Africa has not been mainstreamed. Why the study of Africa remains hostage to the borders and boundaries of African Studies. To that end, it seeks to engage in the project of mainstreaming the study of Africa and the African diaspora.

Before that can be embarked upon, however, we need to take note of a change in direction for Subaltern Studies, post-colonial theory and African Studies that may be heralded by a major contribution to this first edition. Weate (see the present volume) provides the timely warning that many forms of post-colonial analysis rely too heavily on a relapse into the conceptual binary of the ‘colonised’ versus the ‘coloniser’ in theorising on power relations in Africa. In fact, what is implicit in Weate’s contribution is a criticism of western, reductionist models in analysing the complexities of the African situation.

The binary between ‘colonised’ and ‘coloniser’ is inadequate when trying to comprehend the full richness of complex social and power relations that differ from place to place in Africa. It should at least be supplemented by an examination of the potential of human agency to counteract the oversimplifications implicit in approaches emphasising ‘We’ (colonisers) and they or ‘Other’ (colonised) in understanding Oriental and African social and political relations.

Now that post-colonial theory has become a significant approach, it needs to be soberly assessed. Debates on colonialism and neo-colonialism have reached fever pitch in many parts of the world. It has become crucial that academics contribute critically to the discourse by inserting rigour and critical challenge into the global status quo. Weate claims that post-colonial theory is in danger of becoming so enmeshed in its own paradigms that it loses sight of the existential aspects of the contemporary post-colonial situation in Africa.

In a critical assessment of some of the recent work of Achille Mbembe, an emerging voice in post-colonial theory, Weate contends that the fundamental peril for post-colonial theory is that it remains caught up in a frame of reference that blinds it to all phenomena that cannot be referred to as ‘text’. By definition it cannot at present recognise phenomena that are not inscribed. This means that post-colonial theory is destined to continue disengaging with post-colonial lived experience while favouring ever more ornate, over-determining and solipsistic interpretation of texts. There is a need for further research beyond the purely textual paradigm.

Ultimately, Mbembe’s work, *On the Postcolony*, maintains that new forms of writing are needed to capture the rich African imaginaries that are at work in
contemporary African societies. While Weate’s essay outlines the limits of Mbembe’s project to ‘invent’ this new writing, provocative openings are captured in the ways post-colonial theory can push its theoretical boundaries further. The over-reliance on the textual paradigm which has come to dominate post-colonial theory is in need of urgent reassessment. While textual formalisms have indeed created new imaginaires and expanded our ideas of post-colonial conditions, they have nevertheless also produced a highly self-referential inscriptive paradigm caught in the world of signs and signifying systems.

Lived experience, subterranean selfhoods, new sites of liberation and resistance, have been ignored and require fuller attention from theorists engaged in understanding African modes of being and contexts. It is within this development in post-colonial theory that new modes of writing are suggested. This writing, which should be firmly situated within historic-material frames, must free new spaces to theorise the multiple modes of being within everyday life in post-colonial Africa. Not only would such a writing add to the tradition of writing Africa out of the victim paradigm the continent is locked into, it would also help generate discourses that allow new imaginings of alternative future communities and societies in Africa.

We can draw and learn a lot from Subaltern Studies which has displaced notions that theorising on contemporaneous issues can only happen in the west. In the absence of a thriving intellectual elite in Africa, writers reflecting on Africa today point to the other forms of expression that have mushroomed to make sense of daily life on the continent. It has been among Africa’s organic leaders (such as religious leaders, soccer players, entrepreneurs and artists), situated at the grassroots and engaging in practices that otherwise remain invisible to many modes of textuality, that innovative and often enchanting intellectual discourses have been generated. Ample room must be made to bring to the surface and reveal these practices taking form in everyday life.

Unfortunately the textual paradigm has not been able to fully make sense of these new forms of sociality, particularly in African urban life. Here we refer to the syncretic movements that continue to proliferate in African life and the multiple sites of expression that are not captured in texts, but rather in songs, dance, street theatre, play, food, dress, language, film and several other thriving sites. In other words, those spaces that are grappling with Africa in all its contemporaneous complexity. In the momentous task to unearth these imaginaries that are at work in all these diverse sites, the contributions in this issue aim to search other forms of writing beyond textuality, so that the bridge between theory and lived experience in Africa can again be effectively debated and addressed, albeit under different registers.

Some forms of cultural expression in South Africa

Many of the contributions to this first issue indeed try to grasp the broader complexities of African life without resorting to reductionist models. Jamal
addresses a crucial question about the advent of greater freedom and a more
democratic dispensation in South Africa: what does greater freedom mean?
Basing his contribution on his analysis of an enduring paper by Albie Sachs, Jamal
challenges all deterministic claims for culture. Sachs broaches the key
proposition: what 'freedom' may or may not mean when applied to cultural
transformation. At the historical moment when Sachs conceives of freedom,
freedom remains a portentous, exotic, idea.

Jamal discusses a significant binary – between the real and the imagined, the
reactive and the active – that forms the seam of Sachs’s inquiry into culture. For
Sachs, 'real consciousness' supposes a cognitive sphere of contestation. More
importantly for Sachs there remains another sphere that is irreducible to this
cognitive and reactive fight for change. If culture can be said to reflect the
human spirit, then what is the spirit of South Africa? This is undoubtedly a basic
question, a question posed by Sachs, which has persistently been neglected or
rhetorically contained. In South Africa, Jamal suggests, the 'ghetto' remains the
defining characteristic of South Africa's cultural imaginary. The 'release' that
Havel, Neruda and Sachs call for has not yet occurred.

Much remains to be said and done if South Africa as a society of thinkers
and artists is to attain this vaunted freedom. Jamal suggests that Coetzee is
right when he suggests that freedom, if it truly exists, is only possible in
and through closure and entrapment. Freedom is conditional and, contrary to
those who rely on positivism and relativism, freedom is today all the more
difficult to achieve given a national and global inclination towards fear and
compromise. If South African society is increasingly bypassing the doctrinaire
legitimacy of the ANC, if it has embarked upon a fatalistic dance with
globalisation, this does not mean that South Africans have wholly lost their
capacity as thinkers and artists. South Africans remain children on the margins
of hope. Though still trapped, South Africans are beginning to articulate the
dream of freedom.

Moore-Gilbert re-evaluates Olive Schreiner's The Story of an African Farm,
referring critically to the influential Subaltern Studies approach. Moore-Gilbert
acknowledges that Subaltern Studies historiography remains one of the most
notable contributions to colonial discourse analysis, the focus of much recent
work in the humanities. While its initial focus was India, Subaltern Studies has
been adapted to a range of other colonised regions, including (southern) Africa.

The Story of an African Farm can be interpreted to endorse a doctrine of
'species domination'. Schreiner would then have to be seen as bound to
Victorian tendencies to typologise and unable to resolve her ambivalence toward
interracial mating. Thus some critics have interpreted this novel as being
'despite all its feminist strong-mindedness ... hardly free from racial prejudice'.

While such criticisms endure, new critical paradigms began to emerge in the
early 1990s. These expressed scepticism not only about Schreiner's racial
politics, but her feminism as well, both in The Story of an African Farm and her
subsequent work. By contrast, other critics sought to present Schreiner's oeuvre
as an essentially progressive, although complicated, inter-mingling of gender and racial politics.

One could argue that Schreiner’s Africa is largely devoid of its indigenous population so that it can operate as a backdrop against which specifically western existential and cultural dilemmas (especially western feminist ones) are expressed. Also, in so far as Africans are present in Schreiner’s text, they are consistently represented in demeaning terms and as stereotypes. Moore-Gilbert argues explicitly and substantively that at a latent level Schreiner’s novel is haunted by a repressed but often sympathetic acknowledgement of subaltern resistance, which conflicts with the general thrust of the text at the manifest level (where it generally endorses dominant imperial truths).

Moore-Gilbert argues that Schreiner anticipates the Subaltern Studies project in uncanny ways. Schreiner’s own invitation to read her novel in a ‘catachrestic’ fashion is unambiguous. Her description of the farm-boys’ subversive response to Otto clearly recodes the myth of the ‘lazy native’ as a form of resistance. Schreiner depicted the deaths of the (proto-)feminist heroine Lyndall and that of Waldo (one of the main characters) as equally pathetic. Because of this – at least when arguing allegorically – Schreiner represents patriarchal imperialism as being as destructive of the autonomy of the native peoples as it is of the proto-feminism which Lyndall’s awakening manifests.

Intriguingly, Schreiner’s perception of the way in which the colonised inscribe themselves within the identity of the coloniser anticipates both Guha (described by Moore-Gilbert as the principal inspiration behind the Subaltern Studies project’s attempts to discover the rebellious voice of the subaltern) and Said. In 1909, Schreiner wrote that ultimately the subjected people write their features on the face of the conquerors.

In a contribution investigating aspects of African culture in a non-textual environment, Titlestad interprets Abdullah Ibrahim (Dollar Brand), the noted South African jazz pianist, as both ‘pilgrim’ and ‘healer’, if not quite the ‘bloom, the complete and perfect flower in the desert’ of South African cultural life that Bessie Head speaks of. Titlestad sees Ibrahim’s art as ‘cutting through the lethargic routine’ of the commercialised cultural wasteland of South Africa potentially redeemed only by the independent aesthete with ‘the disconcerting force of revelation’. This role of Ibrahim’s is concordant with Zygmunt Bauman’s view of pilgrimage in the sense that Ibrahim and his art open some of the cultural and historical possibilities of the pilgrim’s journey (in this case, through South Africa).

How do representations of Ibrahim and his music transcend the humdrum of everyday life and how is this a potentially therapeutic response to the violent history of apartheid? This is the question Titlestad attempts to answer. Ibrahim represents himself as journeying, through the ‘hell’ of improvisation, towards knowledge where, through the tactical struggles of musical statement, the greater reality in which we participate will be revealed. Ibrahim claims that music is a healing force. It reaches the heart of human beings. What is deepest in the heart of human beings really propels life on this earth.
Ibrahim does not think of himself as a pianist or a composer. He sees his talent as a medical formula handed down from the creator. 'I am a dispenser of medicine.' In the traditional society if, at an early age, someone showed any musical inclination they were drafted forthwith into the field of medicine, because in the traditional society medicine and music were synonymous. A healing force.

Ibrahim’s generic ‘traditional society’ contrasts with the contemporary ‘nervous condition’ of the dispossessed; music has been cheapened (commodified as entertainment) and has lost its therapeutic role in the life of both individuals and the body politic. The colonist’s ‘western’ modernity has excluded the ‘traditional’. There are, in Ibrahim’s music, many elements that speak to the listener’s subconscious: discernible traces of African tribal rhythms and European folk tunes and religious hymns, classical and jazz strains (especially Ellington and Thelonious Monk).

Thus Ibrahim has developed an inclusive and relational South African musical idiom. Linking diverse strands of ‘traditional’ music (African poly-rhythms, Malay tonal structures, Eastern and Arabic influences) and a history of black Atlantic music expressed in the century’s European and American jazz, Ibrahim releases overlooked histories and places them in living relations that articulate with the present.

Having long understood the ways in which apartheid, that ‘constant institution of cultural imperialism’, has driven ‘the purity and the innocence and the rhythm of the community’ underground, Ibrahim is committed to the recovery of what has become ‘subterranean culture’. His music has long been imagined as sounding the first note of a new syncretic nationhood, of a genuinely inclusive national identity. Drawing sustenance from ancient wells, his practice has always held out the hope, perhaps the necessary idealism, of nurturing new growth, of ‘giving life’.

Some aspects of African culture

In many cases, African youth have not only been exposed to the ravages of war, but have also been active agents during armed struggles, claims Maxted. Their agency creates special, diverse needs in post-war periods. This article examines the variable experiences of young people in the civil war in Sierra Leone and the implication of these for post-war rehabilitation.

Youth are not a single, homogeneous entity either globally or locally. In any given situation the youth population not only reflects the divisions of wider society but also creates new subcultures and counter-discourses to prevailing norms. Maxted argues that, as a social category in the analysis of conflict and peace processes, youth must be analysed in relation to variables such as ethnicity and geographical location, religion, class and gender.

Consequently, the differing contexts and different identities in question must be considered when making plans for post-war rehabilitation. In particular, the
political and participation needs of youths must be recognised. Different needs apply to those who were forcibly recruited and those who volunteered, those from poor families and regions and those from less disadvantaged situations, those who fought with the support of their communities and those without, those who demobilised to their home communities and those in refugee camps, and girls and boys.

Such diversity necessitates conflict-specific and deeply ethnographic approaches to the study of post-war situations if we are to be able to make recommendations about rehabilitation. Attention to the agency of young people is of particular significance in this current post-accord phase with its twin challenges of violence prevention and societal reconciliation and reconstruction. Youth embody essential elements of both challenges: posing at once potential threats to peace and peace-building resources.

A number of other contributions relate specifically to the non-textual aspects of African culture. In many countries, childhood acts as a crucial site for the maintenance of nationalism. Cheney argues that Ugandan children not only occupy a space of negotiation over national characteristics, but that they also become significant social actors in the construction and negotiation of national identity. Both childhood and the nation are sites for sentimental identity and enunciating beliefs about tradition and modernity. Yet childhood is often considered to be a particularly apolitical space in which children do not yet fully participate in the duties and struggles of citizenship. The experiences of many children in contemporary Uganda suggest quite the opposite: that children are at the forefront of certain struggles that are shaping the character of national identity.

Schools are among the most crucial institutions for social reproduction. Uganda’s National Resistance Movement government recognised this when they came to power. They saw a need to encourage national pride and unity among primary school students as part of educational reforms, in order to counteract the lingering social effects of years of civil war and ethnic conflict. The Ministry of Education and Sports sponsors the music festivals that arose out of this effort as part of the primary school curriculum each year. Festival themes are aimed at awakening awareness in Ugandan society of the development taking place in the political and socio-economic arenas.

By seeing such events as sites where adults and children, government and populace engage in mutually-constitutive imaginings of contemporary Uganda, we may start to understand the ways in which children actively shape the ideologies of the societies in which they live. Through critical engagement and improvisational play, children can and do make important contributions to the process of building national identity and civil society, but adults are still ultimately the gatekeepers to that process. Its effectiveness as an exploratory space for such negotiations will depend on positive and engaged participation by all involved.

Dogbe examines a highly visible aspect of West African video film – dress – and the multiple roles it plays on as well as beyond the screen. Through in-depth content analysis of selected films, the contribution examines the role that dress
plays in Nigerian and Ghanaian video films, which are popular beyond the West African region, across the African continent and also in niche markets among African immigrants in Europe and the Americas.

The four films discussed offer idealised interpretations of modernities, heightened by the delectable array of dress styles that promise real and imaginary pleasures. Yet, limiting the multiplicity of fantasy-inducing experiences and identity-altering options are enduring hegemonic structures that eat away and sometimes endlessly defer the consummation of those affective desires. As the continent marks time in a frantic search for structural and political direction, African audiences will not give up their visual and sartorial comforts. They await the next video film ‘release!’

Bakare-Yusuf critically reviews the book *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (1997) by the US-based Nigerian theorist Oyeronke Oyewumi. Oyewumi claims that, historically, gender did not socially structure the Oyo-Yoruba people in western Nigeria. The contemporary influence of gender is therefore attributable to European cultural and epistemological imperialism. African cultures have not historically been ordered according to the logic of vision, but rather through other senses. Instead of the visual logic that informs social division and hierarchy through gender, sexuality, race and bodily capacity, Oyewumi argues that it is in fact *seniority* that orders and divides Yoruba society.

Oyewumi’s account of seniority must be taken seriously and be explored beyond her own project. She succeeds in cautioning against automatically importing concepts from the socio-historical experience of one society to another. Bakare-Yusuf rejects any attempt to assign a particular conceptual category as belonging only to the ‘west’ and therefore inapplicable to the African situation. For millennia, Africa has been part of Europe as Europe has been part of Africa and out of this relation a whole series of borrowed traditions from both sides has been and continues to operate.

Notes

1. Robert Bates (1996), who sees area studies practitioners as mere social translators, has mounted a particularly vitriolic attack.
2. For example, John Beverley along with several colleagues launched a Latin American Subaltern Studies project. In his *Subalternity and Representation*, he examines the relationship between subalternity and representation by analysing the ways in which that relationship has been played out in the context of Latin American studies (Beverley 1999).
3. It is not intended here to deal with Dirlik’s critique as it relates to post-colonial theory. For a detailed analysis, see Ahluwalia (2001).

References