



Heading South

by Rosabelle Boswell

In some ways Ariel Dorfman's memoir, *Heading South Looking North*, speaks to my experience of the research process. My life, like my work, is replete with the experience of exiles from which I have attempted to recover. Exile to the African continent as an islander, exile as a black anthropologist in post-apartheid South Africa, exile in the research subject and area specialisation which I chose, and finally a form of exile in the move to a career in management. The theme of 'exile' also emerges in my answer to the question of this volume's subtheme: 'has there been a major (epistemic) transformation towards more balanced global knowledge production? Or have inequalities been intensified?'

I was born in Mauritius, a tiny overpopulated island in the southwest Indian Ocean. My ancestors were primarily African and Malagasy slaves. Their lives were shaped by more than 200 years of slavery under Dutch, French and British colonial rule. In 1965, shortly before the island obtained its independence from Britain, my family left Mauritius for Africa. There, at the tip of the Great Rift Valley, we lived strangely. Strangely because we were embedded in the same racial and ethnic landscape we had sought to escape. Deemed to be racially inferior to the white minority and expected to segregate from the African people who looked like us, we lived a life regulated by the seasons established in the production of sugar. It was a world of white male managers, black artisans, cranes, bulldozers and quotas. It was also a world disrupted by sticky molasses, fine ash rain, intolerable humidity, dust and malaria. A world in which people attempted to retain the tastes and sounds of 'home' by cooking island favourites and listening to LPs of traditional songs.

After fighting for a bursary from the sugar corporation, I arrived in South Africa to attend university. It was a few months after the release of Nelson Mandela but apartheid was still firmly entrenched. There, I was thrust into a place of abstract ideas and arguments. I had come to gain knowledge and to learn the way of communicating with other professionals in my 'field of studies'. This required forgetting what I had encountered before, and adopting the language and world of the discipline. Anthropology offered the possibility of entering worlds unknown. It offered a particular language that could articulate alterity and relativism in the same breath – a way of enticingly showcasing the kind of world I had come from. But in South Africa I was a young black woman anthropologist in the dying days of apartheid. I felt at the time that such people were not taken seriously and were not really expected to become anthropologists. To be taken seriously required being able to slickly quote Geertz and Deleuze and, later on, Latour, Foucault and Povinelli. As someone with a slave history and as a black woman in a still-apartheid South Africa, how could I be a genuine anthropologist? Plus, I was not entirely proficient in the English language and I was still learning the discourse of a discipline. Thus, from the start, knowledge production was difficult to achieve because English is not my mother tongue, and even if I mastered the English language, there was still the challenge of disciplinary discourse. But a worse

obstacle to knowledge production remained. This was the sexist and racist stereotypes of the largely white academy concerning the commitment, ability and contribution of black researchers. In patriarchal and racist South Africa, these assumptions were rampant. During apartheid, black students (especially those attending university in the 1970s and 1980s) were rarely given the opportunity for further study or bursaries. They were hardly invited to disciplinary conferences, and their opinion on matters social or cultural was rarely sought. This curtailed their intellectual reach, making it impossible for them to have the kinds of conversations that lead to truly remarkable discoveries.

Having mastered the English language and found my way through the forest of anthropological discourse, I found myself with a set of unimpressive weapons. Theories heavy with ideological mud. In the late 1990s and early 2000s obstacles to epistemic change were the large, blunt and not very useful theories of identity. Nations, we were told, are imagined. Creolization is everywhere, and 'Western' globalization inevitable. Nervous of academic marginalization and conscious of the power of fashionable theories, I engaged and used such theories in efforts to share the findings of my research. To 'succeed' in an academic career in South Africa, I also had to publish in accredited journals. In these, editors rewarded appropriate references and 'nods' to eminent (read: Euro-American) theoreticians. Citations of eminent theoreticians increased the likelihood of the article being read and cited, which also increased subscriptions to the journals. Knowledge production was stuck in a sort of theory conga, everyone citing the same eminent theoretician and being cited in turn for citing the eminent theoretician. Like Dorfman, I looked Northwards in vain hope of finding something that would help me explain the complex social situations that I was observing and experiencing.

Choosing to do fieldwork at 'home' and in the southwest Indian Ocean region brought about another exile that prompted me to doubt my ability to produce knowledge, since no-one I knew had done fieldwork at 'home'. Thus, a third obstacle to epistemic change is the problem of presuming that there are legitimate ways of engaging a discipline and that there are legitimate interlocutors. When I chose to start with fieldwork in Mauritius (Boswell 2006), the island had shaken off its plantation image and reasserted itself as a premier tourist destination. Doing fieldwork in Mauritius, Zanzibar, Seychelles and Madagascar (Boswell 2008, 2011) elicited 'friendly' charges of tourism and holiday-making. Not so surreptitiously, it was also conveyed to me that real anthropologists are white and are working on the difficult legacies of apartheid. No matter that not long afterwards many retreated back into the same privileges produced by the apartheid system. Parting ways from the anti-establishment anthropology of post-apartheid South Africa and choosing to work in an environment where I looked like the people I was interviewing, I produced what I consider to be some epistemologically useful findings. I wrote on everything that interested me and that I thought would shed light on the immense cultural diversity of the Indian Ocean region. I wrote on heritage, tourism, economics, scent, dress, music, story-telling and restorative justice – defying, it seems, the disciplinary insistence on having a singular interest and mining that to produce a career with depth. The process of trying to reach new knowledge opened up opportunities to learn from a wide range of interdisciplinary sources. However, it also produced another dilemma.

If I wanted research funding from the 'transformed' national scientific council, I needed to demonstrate that I had worked on a set of coherent research subjects and that my work had evolved answers to a set of intellectually valuable and socially meaningful issues. I am not sure still whether my 'engagement' in the lives of those I spoke with during research was obvious, as I had to assert this in an account of my research trajectory so that I could obtain a national research rating. The scientific council (the National Research Foundation) takes its cue from a natural sciences approach to the assessment of knowledge and knowledge production. In this, it collects 'objective' reviewer reports to assess the quality of the researcher's contribution to knowledge production. It also quantifies the citations of the researcher and interprets these to constitute the impact of the researcher nationally and globally. That a researcher has written about the feasibility of restorative justice for people dispossessed by 200 years of slavery and colonialism (Boswell 2014) is lost. Thus, a fourth obstacle to epistemic change in the research process is the increasing estimation of the natural sciences and the penetration of the discourse of science in global research assessment rubrics. Researchers are ranked,

knowledge is ranked, and universities are ranked to indicate the value of the knowledge being produced by their academics. However, from what I experienced in 25 years of research in the South, the value of the knowledge that one produces depends very much on what country one lives in and at which institution one is employed. Thus, in South Africa, if one is not employed at what is described as a historically white university, one will have less access to global pools of funding and ultimately opportunities to share the knowledge one has obtained. Plus, historically black universities still do not enjoy the national and international research status that attracts the attention of global funding bodies. This is a major obstacle to knowledge production especially in the social sciences, which are already disadvantaged by a science-focused global funding pattern.

The second part of the question to be answered is whether inequalities are intensifying or not. It would seem, unfortunately, that they are, in the context of publication and in the research process. In terms of publication, many authors from the global South (especially Africa), do not even attempt to submit work to high-ranking journals in the discipline. The theory conga is well entrenched, and scholars from Africa who have difficulty getting access to online journals will hardly have the chance to keep up with the latest debates in the discipline.

At this stage of my career, I am in a position to work with global partners on a diversity of research projects. However, being in the South means that I am often only appointed as a research partner. The Principal Investigator (PI) is always in the global North. One must wait for the PI and their institution to approve a project for it to be considered along with other project submissions. The research partner almost always has a smaller research budget, replicating the same colonial relations that existed before. This inequality constrains knowledge production as it privileges the knowledge leadership of the Euro-American PI, and creates an impression that researchers in the global South are not capable of leading multilateral projects.

It was these inequalities and exiles that moved me to consider a career in academic leadership. In 2015, I became a Dean of Arts at a historically merged university. That is, a university that has both a technical college and a university proper. The situation has produced another challenge, one in which my time is affected by the rhythms and requirements of senior management. Even so, from this vantage point I have the power to help others 'produce' knowledge. I can share my knowledge and theories of contemporary society, and financially support academics to advance the process of knowledge production in the South. However, I cannot stop them from reifying Euro-American ideologies and approaches to knowledge-making, as they are also, in a way, 'caught' in a web of knowledge production that is dominated by Euro-American publishers, theoreticians and authors. But in my work, here in the South, I can transform management understanding of social science knowledge and its important contribution to social justice and equality. This is a difficult task because many South African universities are swept up in increasingly hegemonic epistemologies and value systems. For instance, more universities are now requiring a close audit of the knowledge production process (how many people will you interview? Why? What is a statistically significant sample? How will you determine that a population is not vulnerable?), including the quantification of knowledge. Thus, those publishing in higher-impact-factor journals attract more accolades than those publishing on critical social issues in national or regional journals.

Earlier, I referred to the disruptions caused by sticky molasses, fine ash and malaria in the place where I grew up. Despite the weight of oppressions, the South holds immense possibilities for knowledge production and epistemic change precisely because the research landscape holds so many contradictions. In South Africa, there are extremely wealthy people and there is economic recession. There is political instability, and poor funding for higher education, and there have recently been student protests, but also democratization and strong calls for decolonization. In my case and despite various challenges, I still wrote about everything I wanted to, even in a very difficult environment. Being aware of the politics of knowledge production (I was a student, lecturer, researcher and a journal co-editor before I became a dean) helped a great deal. I am now comfortable with the fact that my theoretical analyses have not always cited the latest authors and that my

work may not reach the most esteemed scholars in the discipline. That is just fine, because the people that did read my work, and those I met during research, acknowledge that I did in fact help others to understand their circumstances.

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