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"My Flight Arrives at 5 am, Can You Pick Me Up?": The Gatekeeping Burden of the African Academic

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, there has been increased awareness and discourse around the inequalities which structure North–South academic collaboration. The purpose of this discussion is to look at the other side of this dynamic: the gatekeeping burden of African scholars in facilitating Northern fieldwork within the African continent. We argue that this burden further exacerbates inherent inequalities within North–South relationships. By way of conclusion, we offer a number of practical steps that Northern researchers can take when engaging African academics which will contribute to more ethical collaboration, and a more positive and lasting impact within African institutions.

KEYWORDS

gatekeeping; Africa; fieldwork; research

Introduction

On 1 September 2020, the editor of the *Journal of African Cultural Studies* on the *JACS* Twitter profile (@AfricaJacs) posed to followers an unfamiliar scenario,

> Imagine this: a young woman, a Tanzanian researcher, arriving in the UK for a 2 month long fieldwork, to write the definitive study on the sexual practices of academics in North Oxford. Demanding access, expecting intimacy, being invited into homes. Welcomed.

The satire is obviously thinly veiled, as few academics from the Global South, and Africa in particular, enjoy opportunities for fieldwork within Northern communities, or get opportunities to establish expertise on Northern subjects or within Northern contexts. Meanwhile numerous Northern academics prominently make careers out of their "African" expertise, often to the exclusion of their African colleagues, while the continent seasonally abounds with Northern researchers on their summer sabbaticals: scholars, graduate students, study abroad programmes, all treating the lived realities of 1.2 billion individuals as part of their personal and career development. The unidirectional nature of this exchange speaks to the lingering colonialism and racism inherent within global academia, a topic that has drawn considerably scholarly attention within recent years (see for example Arday and Mirza 2018; Bhattacharya, Jiang, and Canagarajah 2019; Cash-Gibson

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et al. 2018; Chakravartty et al. 2018; Collyer 2016; Connell 2014; Green 2019; Kalinga 2019; Mose 2019; Musila 2019; Omanga and Mainye 2019; Posada and Chen 2018; Roh 2016; Thomson, Salazar, and Ecklund 2020), yet which nonetheless continues to structure the systems that African academics must navigate.

The *JACS* tweet was widely shared across a number of social media platforms, with most followers and retweeters unable to imagine such reciprocity. This online conversation had stemmed from discussions following Morten Bøås's virtual lecture on "Fieldwork in Violent and Dangerous Places", and the *JACS* comment continued a discussion that had been hosted in a *JACS* special issue[1] on "ethical collaborations" (Coetzee 2019). The response had posited why the "dangerous/insecure" field is always assumed to be a Global South space. Why is "the field" in the North, not considered in the same light? @AfricaJACS (01/09/2020) continued, "We have all read the acknowledgments and expressions of gratitude for generosity, hospitality and kindness experienced by scholars in 'the field'. How welcome are African scholars who arrive in Europe or the USA? What hospitality is extended?" This is where the Twitter conversation ended, yet it hints at the dynamics that structure North–South academic flows, the other side of the coin from our hypothetical Tanzanian researcher. Although the African academic may be denied the opportunity to establish expertise in the North, she is, nonetheless, when she is at her home institution, bombarded by quotidian requests and demands to recognise and facilitate the development of expertise by her Northern colleagues.

In this piece, we examine our roles as white, Africa-based gatekeepers, reflect on the burden of gatekeeping and its importance to the global structure of North–South "cooperation" and highlight the simple, as well as more complex ways in which partnerships can and must change if the academic success of the African academic is to become a genuine feature of global development. We, the authors, have a unique perspective: as researchers and educators in Malawi and South Africa who have spent most of our careers in the Global South, we both pass as Northern, and are afforded all of the privilege that comes with being white in Africa, but are simultaneously burdened with the unpaid labour and gatekeeping that comes with being "local". We cannot, and will not, attempt to describe the demands put on our Black African colleagues, but can only assume that it is far more than what we have experienced during our comparatively short, insulated time working in research partnerships. Nonetheless, we hope a brief account of some of our experiences will open up a larger discussion among academics from across the African continent, while encouraging reflection, and ultimately change, among those who have benefited from the unequal "partnerships" of the past.

It is time to talk about the gatekeeping burden of the African academic.

Gatekeepers and Gateways

Within a research context, a "gatekeeper" is an individual or institution who, in Hay's (2000, 114) words, controls "opportunities to interact with others in the chosen research site". Gatekeepers "keep the gate" by deciding or influencing what information or resources reach the researcher (Kalina and Scott 2019; Lewin 1947). The phenomenon of gatekeepers as barriers in research has been broadly covered within foundational methodological literature (Clark 2011; Emmel et al. 2007; Limb and Dwyer 2001; McFadyen and Rankin 2017; Singh and Wassenaar 2016), including within more recent

reflections on situated, empirical research conducted in African contexts (Andoh-Arthur et al. 2018; Brandt and Josefsson 2017; Kalina and Scott 2019; Koen, Wassenaar, and Mamotte 2017; Pascucci 2017). Moreover, in addition to lamentations over the ways in which local gatekeepers can serve as barriers to access, much thought and reflection have gone into the ways in which gatekeepers can serve as "gateways" to the field, as facilitators, fixers, or translators, who assist in providing access and can help interpret cultural/political issues while contributing to the acceptance of the researcher by their subjects (Campbell et al. 2006; Kalina and Scott 2019; Koch 2013; Turner 2013). In many of these cases, "local" universities, and fellow colleagues in academia who are situated in these institutions, are rightly highlighted as important gatekeepers for foreign researchers. Nonetheless, these reflections are often problematic. First, with a few notable exceptions (for instance, Mutua and Swadener's excellent series of reflections on cross-cultural knowledge production, 2011) these discussions, particularly those on African research settings, have tended to be embedded within coloniality, focusing on the experiences of Western researchers operating in Eurocentric, formalised spaces, and operating through Western principles of governance and power (Kalina and Scott 2019). Second, although a growing number of authors have acknowledged the importance of managing gatekeeper relationships throughout the research process (see for example Hart 2004; Kalina and Scott 2019), the voices and concerns of the gatekeepers remain surprisingly absent. Methodological guidance for non-African researchers in African contexts centres on maximising output from limited time and resources (while of course maintaining ethical standards). To this end, gatekeepers are invaluable time-savers and human resources, enabling both student and more advanced-career research projects within timeframes and on budgets which may otherwise be unfeasible, had the visiting researcher been left to fend for themselves. African academics facilitate an immense amount of research for others, yet within the methodological literature, where is the concern for the gatekeepers' limited time and resources? Moreover, how do these relationships relate to and perpetuate existing inequalities between North and South?

This silence within the methodological literature is even more unfortunate because over the past decade there has been a growing consciousness about the ways in which the structures in which we as academics must participate actively privilege white people (Arday and Mirza 2018; Bhattacharya, Jiang, and Canagarajah 2019; Chakravartty et al. 2018; Roh 2016; Thomson, Salazar, and Ecklund 2020) and in particular, men (Eagly 2020; Huang et al. 2020; Leahey 2007; Weisshaar 2017; Wellmon and Piper 2017), while benefiting the Global North at the expense of the Global South (Cash-Gibson et al. 2018; Collyer 2016; Connell 2014; Posada and Chen 2018). For instance, this link has been made explicitly clear in regards to Open Access publishing, which has been found to exacerbate academic inequalities (Bosman and Kramer 2018; Tennant et al. 2016), but has also been observed in relation to job security (Croom 2017; Durodoye et al. 2020) and access to research funding (Beck and Halloin 2017; Skupien and Rüffin 2020; Zhou et al. 2018). Northern academics (particularly those who are white and cis-male) benefit from profound structural inequalities which facilitate their careers and enable their work, often at the expense of their Southern colleagues. Northern academics benefit from inequalities in their relationship vis à vis Southern academics, yet rarely, if ever, host or gatekeep for their African colleagues, or compensate them for the opportunity and financial costs associated with the unpaid labour that allowed the Northern academic to publish and advance.

Considering these inequalities, why do Southern academics continue to "keep the gate" for academics from the North, and what do these quotidian interactions look like on the ground? Furthermore, what can Northern academics do to lessen the gatekeeping burden on Southern academics while fostering innovative, inclusive scholarship?

Planes, Trains, and Automobiles

In the age of the internet, most travellers have grown accustomed to arranging their own accommodation and transport, for both business and pleasure, as our hypothetical Tanzanian researcher would likely be expected to do when venturing forth to England. Innumerable hotel booking websites, Airbnb, taxi and car hire services are widely available, and have made international travel significantly more accessible. These are not resources that just exist in the North. Africa is as connected to the internet and there are numerous online resources that exist to facilitate travel to and within the continent. Nevertheless, in our experience, African academics still bear immense responsibility for arranging and managing the travel of visiting Northern colleagues and scholars. Still, all too often, visiting Northern scholars inform us of their arrival date and time and expect that the necessary arrangements for their travel and accommodation will be made: a dynamic that smacks of a lingering coloniality. In this regard, the ubiquitous "airport pick-up" is telling – many visitors still expect a personal pick-up, despite the availability of taxi services (and the inconvenience to the host), because they feel "unsafe" or unable to navigate their new surroundings, despite having based their careers on being "experts" on the continent.[2] Over the past few years, we have lost, collectively, hundreds of hours, travelling to and from the airport to fetch Northern colleagues, who have expected that sacrifice from us. We do it because we often want to, are polite when we don't want to, and we want to manage our relationships professionally and have projects of mutual interest succeed. Yet, how likely would it be for the Oxford professor to spend the day fetching our hypothetical Tanzanian at Heathrow? Or, is it more likely that she would be instructed to use public transport? This dynamic also bleeds over into accommodation, and the unpaid labour of arranging housing for, or even personally hosting, visiting researchers, and remains a quotidian expectation for the African academic. How would our Tanzanian researcher be viewed (or judged) when asking her local (tenured) contact to please find her a room, not too expensive, within walking distance, and maybe could he send through some photos for her to check?

The transport burden rarely ends at pick-up, however. Within African countries, long-term transport options (aside from public transport) remain limited, and the visiting researcher, unaccustomed to driving on a different side of the road than they are used to, or unwilling to negotiate the traffic, may want to have a personal driver and car. For their safety (and that of everyone around them), this is a good idea, and asking for help in finding one is a reasonable request. However, more often than we would like to believe, that driver *is* the African academic. The benefits of spending time together in a vehicle are innumerable: often these low-stress, informal windows of time are the catalyst for deeper understanding and insightful breakthroughs. However, they occur at a cost. For instance, we can recall a young colleague spending nearly two weeks driving visitors around rural Malawi, in his own vehicle (petrol was paid by the passengers) because the project had a "limited budget". Given the dynamics that structure North–South

partnerships, with academics from the North often controlling the purse strings, it can be hard for late-career, let alone junior, researchers, to say "no" or establish proper boundaries in the face of such requests (even when family life or mental health suffers). These are simple, but too-common examples that should not only be noted for the annoyance that they cause, but as illustrations of the deeply ingrained, lop-sided power dynamics that, purposefully or not, are exploited at the expense of the time, health, and financial security of African researchers.

Meetings, Meetings, Meetings

As facilitators for Northern fieldwork within Southern contexts, the time commitments, though often egregious, do carry some benefit in social capital, and can, to an extent, be considered part of the job. We do genuinely want to help, and to extend courtesy and hospitality to guests. However, the central gatekeeping role we serve, through which Northern researchers access key stakeholders in Southern contexts, holds no such benefits; in fact, it is a drain on our limited social capital and may have long-term consequences that are expensive (in time, more social capital, or actual cash) to repay. The extraordinary time commitment needed to plan, facilitate, and sit through the list of meetings and introductions (sometimes only requested a few days before arrival), can be exhausting for both the gatekeeper and the stakeholders being accessed, especially regarding projects with no (or poorly articulated) benefits to the local parties.

Often, the assumption is that numerous meetings with important people (some academic, some state or traditional leaders, all very busy) will be arranged so that the visitor can meet and learn. Imagine one constructed but oft repeated scene:

> Visiting researcher: "Tell me what you do."
>
> The hastily assembled group of government officials and academics share furtive glances, wondering who will take the bait. A long silence ensues, but thankfully, a senior faculty member summarizes his well-versed version of the institute's vision and mission statements.
>
> The visiting researcher dutifully takes notes and asks polite questions about the year the institute was founded and how many undergraduate students are enrolled. Still, he offers no clues about what it is he hopes to achieve with this meeting or what, if any benefits he intends to bestow on the lucky group assembled.
>
> "How about you?" he asks, turning to a young government employee, who is furiously trying to resolve a trash-collection crisis on her phone hidden under the table. She looks up, trying to hide her distraction and frustration at the clearly one-sided nature of the meeting:
>
> "Well, I'm responsible for the collection, transport, and disposal of all solid waste in the city, along with the billing, data management, and community sensitization," she replies, smiling broadly, and then quickly checking her phone again to see if the truck operator managed to put out the fire that is raging in one of the collection containers at a local market.
>
> "Fascinating. I noticed a few trash fires on the way in the from the airport. I guess you really have your work cut out for you," the visiting researcher replies, feeling pleased with himself for how immersed in the local issues he is.

Awkward laughter ensues, though it gives the host the perfect opportunity to intervene and whisk the visiting researcher off on a tour of the languishing facilities, which will

undoubtedly not benefit from the proposed research, though the photos taken of the dangling lightbulbs and broken fume hood will no doubt be used as evidence for why the proposal should, at all costs, be funded.

Once upon a time, maybe 70 years ago, these types of dragnet, catch-all meetings could be justified; when the question of how and where to start a collaboration between two sides were genuinely unknown. Both Malawi and South Africa had their first multi-party elections in 1994, and the question of how government functioned was legitimate. However today, the open-call meeting request issued by a visiting Northern academic is merely a reflection of privilege and complacency. The helicopter visit for a week of meetings degrades the host's social capital, contributing to burnout, and an increasingly negative perception of the host and her institution.

Being Better: Pathways to Ethical Collaborations

We are likely a long ways away from achieving the kind of structural equality that would allow the Tanzanian scholar of English sexual practices to ever be more than hypothetical. However, not only are African academics denied academic pathways outside their own borders, their very expertise is constantly contested and questioned (for example, many centres for African Studies outside the continent enjoy better reputations and funding than universities on the actual continent) and indeed, it has become part of the African institution's role to foster that expertise in non-African researchers, at the expense of the actual African institution. As a result, academia can be a less secure, and less rewarding career for African academics (Makaya 2017; Ntisa, Dhurup, and Joubert 2016), while research, on Africa, written by African authors, is underrepresented in internationally recognised journals and at top international conferences (Collyer 2016; Kwanya 2020; North, Hastie, and Hoyer 2020). Rather than a vehicle for ethical collaboration, North–South relationships have deteriorated to what Coetzee (2019, 1), has characterised as hot spots of contestation, disillusionment and complaint.[3] Although there are a multitude of factors that contribute to this gap between North and South, the gatekeeping burden is substantial, benefiting one at the expense of the other. Moreover, although academics in the North may also on occasion be saddled with a gatekeeping role, for African academics, it is unidirectional – they are always the gatekeepers, and rarely the burden.

@AfricaJACS's hypothetical Tanzanian researcher remains so.

However, for African academics and African institutions, the only thing worse than persistent gatekeeper duties is when Northern academics fail to acknowledge their labour as gatekeepers altogether. To some of these visiting researchers, African universities exist merely as institutions of convenience: a space of nostalgia and access to free wifi; a convenient base for when in town or arranging research activities. For many from the North, African universities do not receive the same reverence and admiration that they would expect the Southern academic to give their hallowed halls back home in the North. Rather they are a box to tick: another stop on their busy schedules while in the "field". Meanwhile, African academics are experts on the very topics being investigated. How many opportunities for mutual growth have been lost, and how much repetition of thought and practice could have been avoided, if that expertise was more regularly acknowledged?

One particularly relevant component of the Black Lives Matter movement has been the (not nearly widespread enough) acknowledgement that it is *not* the responsibility of Black people to educate white people about racism: the information is there, freely available, and therefore, in this instance, the onus is on Northern academics to educate themselves and not again to expect unpaid teaching and emotional investments from the people whose struggle we (that is white people) are trying to support. Some will certainly argue that we the authors (two white people) should not be writing about the experience of the gatekeeping burden within Africa. However, it is precisely why we must do this: it is our responsibility to speak directly to our white colleagues and not assume that this physical and emotional labour will be borne, yet again, by our Black African colleagues, yet again. Similarly, we must be clear here: the onus is not on the African academic to set out terms and conditions of engagement to the Northern visitor, but rather the latter's responsibility to hold themselves to a higher standard and to recognise the overt and implicit ways in which they have been using their privilege to take advantage of the Southern gatekeeper.

So how can we do this better? We believe in manners, hospitality, and building strong relationships through shared experience and cultural exchange. We also believe in the power of the internet. The resources are generally available to facilitate most African travel: please think twice before saddling a potential collaborator with your own responsibilities. Next, network building is essential and free meals are nice, but what would be nicer are meetings that start with: "This is who I am, and this is what I can do for you"; "I have lined up several appointments for myself, but I'd like to debrief with you over dinner tonight, if you have an hour to spare"; "I know your time is valuable, so let's agree on a set an hourly rate beforehand"; "I researched the local rates at Avis and would like to pay you the same for driving us to the field site. I can't drive a stick shift and would love to spend the time with you discussing the proposal". The timetables and teaching systems on the continent rarely align with those of Europe and North America; teaching, supervising, and attending to the daily details of academia rarely figure into the plans of the visitor. The Covid-19 pandemic was the first time that most universities had to shift their academic calendar. Where we work, protests, student strikes, faculty strikes, transport strikes, elections, road blockages, natural disasters, building fires, etc. are not uncommon and mean that the academic calendar is always in flux. Always ask about the state of the timetable and never assume it follows the Eurocentric, agrarian-based timetable of yore. More than just acknowledging that time is valuable, one must demonstrate it through action, not words.

Finally, to our readers from the North who have stuck with us this far, your reputation, your time, and the resources at your command can contribute immensely to your African colleagues' careers, their students' academic success, and the African academy as a whole. To start, Macharia (2015) has written a short guide for researchers visiting Africa, with which we recommend you engage. To his credit, he assumes that his audience knows how to do the rather obvious things he suggests: "Prepare", "Don't act like a tourist", "Respect us as intellectual equals", etc. We fear however, that if you need to read that list, you may not know how to actualise those ideas. So, by way of addition and elaboration, we propose a further 10 concrete actions you can take that will leave lasting impacts and contribute to academic excellence within African institutions:

(1) Given that it is always difficult to find people who are both willing to do reviews and return them on time, volunteer to be an external examiner for Master's and PhD theses (and waive the fee if there is one). In our experience, external examiners are drawn from a small pool of external, degree-holding (and therefore limited) contacts of the university or department, which have not been updated in some time (i.e. they tend to be older scholars). Taking on this work (and assuming you do a good job) saves the department money, gives the student a different perspective, and gives you, the reviewer, a chance to see what type of work is happening and to identify the next superstar graduate student.
(2) Getting a good pair of eyes to go through a manuscript before submission can make the difference between a decision of revision or rejection, and we all know how horrible it is to reformat and resubmit a paper. Volunteer to help proof/give feedback on a researcher's paper (that is not your own). We know that publishing is racist but necessary for career advancement; but an extra paper on the CV of an African academic could lead to fellowships, promotions, and funding (i.e. financial independence).
(3) Volunteer to moderate exams. For example, the University of Malawi pays around $400 for external moderation and has to moderate each exam. Volunteer external moderation would save a department a non-trivial amount of money, which could be used to fund research, software, conferences, etc. It is also an excellent exercise for graduate students to understand more about global systems of pedagogy.
(4) Co-author papers with Southern academics; and not just the ones who performed the gatekeeping labour for you (though that is a start). Adding names to papers without adequate contribution is wrong, but creating opportunities for contribution is sorely needed.
(5) Read, cite, and assign your students the work of your African colleagues. Students are likely to be more familiar with the highly cited Africa-related work of non-Africans than they are of nationals' work, which causes a vicious cycle of citations leading to downloads leading to citations, and so forth. Excellent African journals like the *Malawi Medical Journal*[4] (with mostly Malawian-authored contributions), *Transformation* or the *South African Journal of Science* are journals which include more diverse voices, but may be less well known outside the continent yet are worth seeking out.
(6) Teach a short course, a night course, or a summer-school course. Anything from a 1 hour workshop on CV and interview skills, to a 1-day intensive Excel course, to a week-long field course on water-sampling and analysis is valuable, builds a CV, and encourages others to follow suit.
(7) Help develop and/or review courses. If you have been in this job for a while you have 25 years of assignments, reading materials and slides: share them. Even better, spend a few weeks at the end of your visit to go over them with the junior faculty members who could make use of them.
(8) Facilitate African students to study at your university. Consider launching a campaign for exchange student parity: one student goes to the continent, one student comes to where you are (if you are in the Global North).
(9) Bring faculty to do sabbaticals at your university. The opportunity to work on papers and proposals, in the absence of teaching (and gatekeeping) is irreplaceable:

networking with future collaborators, new inspiration from departmental presentations and cultural immersion are bonuses.

(10) If this list feels overwhelming, pick a graduate student and focus on her. Be a mentor and set her up for success.

These suggestions are not meant to be performed out of pity or philanthropy, but are proposed as ways to level the highly unequal playing field; to begin chipping away at systemic racism in academia; or in the most callous sense, consider it payback for the unpaid labour, time, and gatekeeping that you have enjoyed. Northern and Southern academics are both operating with the same metrics of success; securing funding, publishing, and graduating students are important milestones for an academic, no matter where their institution is located. Yet, by serving as your gatekeeper the African academic is spending their precious time contributing to your success. How are you contributing to theirs?

Notes

1. We encourage you to check out the entire issue here: https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/cjac20/current
2. Or, in addition, in the case of the authors, simply by virtue of an unspoken sense of imagined community based on being white in Africa.
3. This characterisation was made on reflection from a panel that was convened at the biennial conference of the African Studies Association of the UK (ASAUK) held in September 2018 at the University of Birmingham in the UK (http://www.asauk.net/asauk-2018-conference-11-13-september-university-of-birmingham/).
4. Full disclosure: one of the authors, Elizabeth Tilley, was an associate editor until October 2020.

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