Identity, Positionality and Otherness: A Reflexive Diary from Kampala, Uganda.

Presented by : Vajira Sooriyaarachchi
Development Planning Unit
University College London

Introduction.

The aim of this diary is to situate myself the writer, the amateur researcher and the aspiring development practitioner as the focus of study in an attempt at critical pedagogical reflexivity.

Critical reflexivity engaged herein, must bring into the fore my personal epistemology, my values, beliefs, assumptions and prejudices to be confronted by a solipsistic inquiry into the way(s) in which they have either been 'unsettled' by (Pollner,1991) or prevailed unscathed through my brief stay in Kampala, Uganda in 2019.

As a 25-year-old heterosexual male from a Sri Lankan middle-class family, I will attempt to reflect on my specific identity, positionality, power and knowledge as they both effect, and are affected by my interactions with the *field*.

The diary will be presented in the form of a non-linear series of experiences and interactions. I believe that laying out a specific, concrete theoretical framework at the very beginning of the diary leads to a deductive, loaded and myopic writing as well as reading of it. To avoid this, and maintain a fluid, open, and inductive mindset; and preserve the very personal, aesthetic emotive reasoning that is an inherent part of my reflexive epistemology, I will make consistent references to various theories pertinent to my experiences as I proceed, rather than leading my narrative to fit a predetermined assembly of theories.

A prologue to Uganda: The folly of the presupposed, homogenised otherness of 'Africa'.

As a Sri Lankan, I found the casual generalisation of the ′Third World′ in the popular zeitgeist somewhat irksome. I felt that this stripped of individuality, both myself and the island nation to which I am native.

Despite being irked by said generalisation, for the greater part of my adult life, I had unreflexively and uncritically held a generalised picture of *'Africa'* and *'Africans'*. Even after reading about the diversity of the continent, the homogenised visual image of Africa remained indelibly powerful and deep seeded. I wondered why I had subconsciously allowed myself to deny the cultural, social, economic and geographic diversity and *heterogeneity* (as Mosse, 2005) puts it, of the vast space that is Africa.

As a virgin traveller to Africa, my preparation for Kampala made me reflect consciously of the impact of decades and

decades of *recognitive injuries* (Fraser, 2012) committed unto the image of Africa.

Through notions of *'otherness'* (Staszak 2008) poured casually onto the minds of the impressionable young, from irreverent references in popular culture to sensationalised spectacles of the 'We are the world' generation as well as in the popular narrative of contemporary media. Africa, **we are told**, is that which is always the ample provider of quintessential case studies of failed national projects, always the recipient of white man's charity, always the one in crisis, in hunger, the one who is aided, helped, exploited and rescued. The production, consumption and the normalisation of this homogenised and reductive narrative, according to Abbott, 2006 are "political activities mediated by unequal power relations".

Africanness, therefore becomes a morally and politically charged visual image of a distant other, a benchmark through which relatively developmentally better off, nonetheless troubled southern nations such as my own, pat ourselves on the back for not being on the *'lowermost positions'* what of Power and Sidaway (2004) call the *'hierarchy of developmental order'*.

As uneasy as I am about the assumptions I have admitted to, I believe Patel, 2015 makes a strikingly important observation on reflexive diaries being 'written [and censored] for the instructor'. I believe that reflexive writing should be as equal an effort in honesty, as it is in academic rigour, and the ability to articulate difficult truths, particularly of oneself – makes in my opinion a 'better' practitioner.

One is lead to believe that it would be straightforward to disrupt these ignorant and callous prejudices through learning about Africa for its wealth and national diversity, Its successes and triumphs, its arts and culture, to take Africa, the frozen homogenised entity and shatter it against the terra-firma of pedagogical inquiry to reveal the vast dispersion of its individual people, cultures, nations, tribes and languages.

Patel 2015, again – quite astutely observes that unlearning, is a much more difficult process than learning, positing that; "[...] the field itself and the student's relationship to it may already be constructed in the student's mind in ways that cannot be easily unlearnt during a field trip or through the process of diary writing." Constructing new paradigms of knowledge requires, according to (Fook and Gardner, 2007) the challenging antecedent process of *'understanding and deconstructing'* one's deeply imprinted existing paradigms of prejudice.

The children of others; an experience in casual, latent expressions of power.

We visited a small housing scheme outside Kampala, where the residents, aided by an NGO, boasted an impressively sustainable approach to brick making - these bricks lined their homes.

Out of these homes, emerged a wide-eyed comb of curious younglings. In this small, closely knit peri urban community they appeared to be guarded by the collective presence of elders at relative proximity; and not, as I observed in the UK, in the private, individual clutches of their respective parents. I was reminded that this was often the case in Sri Lanka too - the shared, tacitly agreed upon utility of the communal collective, as opposed to the private role of the individual, whilst is load distributing, economising and extremely reliable - by no means betrays a lack of care or attention towards the young; back where I grew up, parenthood, for better or for worse, was a communal enterprise.

This observation encouraged me to reflect further on the social dynamics of individualism versus collectivism, and by extension – the degree to which poverty, 'southernness' and dispossession can become enablers of homogenised, collective

2

identities. (Jetten, Postmes, McAuliffe, 2002) It appeared to me that the less power one seems to have, the less one's individuality, uniqueness and 'privateness' tended to matter to the casual observer.

It was clear from the shack that housed arts and crafts for sale, and the ease with which the children familiarised themselves with my group, that the presence of foreigners, or visitors in sizeable packs was both routine and useful to the commune.

I felt ill at ease, by the sense of entitlement with which some of the members of my group felt at liberty to touch, embrace, and photograph the children. I couldn't help but question if this level of familiarity with a relative stranger's children would be regarded as appropriate behaviour back in London.

I tried to justify, and I assume my colleagues did too, to a certain extent by the extremely friendly nature of the community that they **did not mind** this; which in the spirit of the moment, did not take into account the power laden relationship between us and the community, which had rendered the community a subaltern - a subaltern – as Spivak reminds us, that cannot articulate its displeasure.

Was the *consent by quietude (if it were consent at all)* of the communal parenthood a tacit, subconscious, submission to our power? The power we deploy merely by being there? The power we dispatch in shillings for their arts and crafts? The power we bring in a brightly dressed, slightly tanned, heavily accessorised flaunting of our relative wealth and privilege?

Our collective **gaze** (Foucault 1963) , of which the *power* some of our group appeared blind to, penetrated through the comfort of ubiquitously worn ray bans onto this community's most intimate realities, their private quarters, families and children – and despite boasting to myself that I would, on the account of being from the global south – somehow be an exemplary advocate of reflexivity and humility had in fact, acquired my own racialised gaze.

Whiteness, Blackness and the quandary of Identity.

As a South Asian, Whiteness and Blackness (Abbott 2006) were never conscious, passionate emotive concerns of my life. Brownness came in many shades, of which the lighter few were aspirational to the Sri Lankan post-colonial identity.

As my academic life evolved, the personal identity I had evolved alongside it was one of contradiction; Academically, I observed and critiqued the whiteness that surrounded me, and refused to acknowledge that I would submit my individuality to the white threads of the societal and institutional fabrics of both post-colonial Colombo and London. My lifestyle, however – was an aspirational simulacrum of the whiteness that surrounded me.

I was struck by the sudden realisation of this contradiction in Kampala, where I felt that in my micro interactions, conversations, consumeristic complaints and behaviour, I had capitulated my individual southern, non-white identity to a group induced, institutionally influenced, mimetic, acquired whiteness.

The quintessential moment at which I captured this feeling was when I focused my camera, unsubtly and impulsively at a saleswoman in the Ntinda market. Firstly, I had seen tourists routinely do this in Sri Lanka, and found it a slight bit rude and vexing. Secondly, a woman selling bananas at a market was not a scene that I should've come upon as a *discovery*. For a very long period of my life, visiting markets of exactly this nature, this colour pallet and infrastructure was a part of my Sunday routine. What was I trying to capture? I wondered – a portrayal of 'similarity' or 'difference'? (Patel, 2015).

3

It began to dawn on me that I had betrayed my presumed identity of similarity (Patel, 2015), (or in a strange, inexplicable and possibly patronising way '*southern-solidarity*') with which I came to Kampala for an identity of a privileged other, of acquired whiteness; a student from a reputed university in the UK who was free to simply fly away from the 'field'. I felt that a tremendous amount of the Northern development practitioners' power in a southern intervention lies, not only in their parachuting into, and engagement with the field, but in their ability to remove themselves from the field with relative ease, leaving behind the fruits of their intervention.

I had also, following this experience, begun to be more conscious of the use of my camera as I felt (much strongly than I used to) that in the context of my stay in Uganda, my photography was a power laden political expression. (which of course is what gives photographs their currency in DPU's competition.)

The camera, I felt – could be weaponised in the most tremendous fashion. It could purloin from an unsuspecting individual, a moment of their life frozen in time only to be interpreted, used and speculated upon at the disposal of a complete stranger. In a figurative sense, the lens at the end of its barrel is indeed, politically charged – looking through it, amplifies the subject's otherness by the very criteria of photoworthyness the beholder is pursuing.

Calculated, premeditated othering, therefore becomes a necessary prerequisite to developmental photography. I came to Uganda with the enthusiastic idea of capturing moments from the field, and this made me hypersensitive to visual cues of otherness.

Otherness as perpetual enigma

During the afternoon meetings at the hotel, students were encouraged to reflect on their experiences; those who spoke, spoke of their 'othering' of Ugandans and of Kampala. A phrase that is etched in my mind is '*I was* **guilty** *of othering*'.

What was their notion of othering? I wondered, is it simply viewing or treating someone as different from and alien to oneself? or does it involve the Gramscian othering of the *subaltern native?* Does it always necessarily lead to exclusion and displacement?

Is *othering* as simplistic as finding Kampala different to London? Or would the term othering more aptly describe finding Kampala different to London, whilst politically and culturally charging those differences by holding one superior to the other in a hierarchy predetermined by the powerful? (Abbott 2006)

I overheard a colleague typify her experience of Uganda as "Blues skies and happy people" (Taken verbatim). 'Life here has a gentle, peaceful pace' is what I found myself writing in my journal. Whilst driving away from the centre of Kampala, another colleague casually asked the friendly driver if he felt that *real Kampala* is being gradually taken over by glass and concrete.

Our true positionality, or the most concealed prejudices and forms of othering, surface in our hapless attempts to be polite than in moments of outright rudeness (Zizek, 2017). In a post-colonial context of global capitalism, where 'resources are usurped from the peripheries' to cater to the comforts of the core (Biel, 2015); The romanticization of the unequal lived reality of the periphery, by those who reside at the core seemed to me to be lacking in empathy and self-scrutiny.

I was also left to wonder how the changing nature of a city's-built environment, made it any less **authentic.** This appeared to me to

be a very forced instance of othering, where one believes that the *true identity* of Kampala is best preserved as the one they have presumed, and glass and concrete – the flesh and bones of the modern paradigmatic city, whilst being perceived as an elemental component of the urban make up in London or New York, is an outlandish invasion upon Kampala – as if somehow, they do not belong there.

I wondered, equally – If I was the one '*othering*', by assuming that a city cannot be modern without being defined by a certain homogenised, paradigmatic architecture. I asked myself, inspired by Karen Levy (2012) as to why Kampala's urban visioning must emulate northern paradigmatism. The subtle, cultural nuances of authenticity and modernity as it applies to the developmental aspirations of the Ugandan people, like many cultural subtleties, were probably lost on both of us.

Conclusion

My experiences in Kampala, and the retrospective reflexion thereof, has enabled me to better understand the ongoing quagmire of my own post-colonial identity and how it relates to the way I position myself around power and privilege.

Kampala has been a heuristic lesson on the complex subtleties of othering. I have observed the ways in which my long-held convictions of my own positionality, fall apart under the scrutiny of reflexion. There is no standard form in which othering presents itself, so that one can capture it in gestation. I have learned that continuous, iterative reflexivity is incredibly useful in preventing the normalisation of otherness in research as well as life.

My epistemology, as it pertains to notions about Africa – has become more self-aware of its gaps and crevices. I believe that in order mitigate the recreation of pre-existing power laden knowledge (Abbott 2006), I may need to embark upon a journey to decolonize of my academic aspirations.

That being said, to provide a comprehensive, granular analysis on how my epistemology, positionality, and values were impacted by my stay in Kampala would be an almost impossible task, as unlike a lecture, the memories of a journey will continue to shape the traveller for life.

Bibiliography

Abbott, D. (2006) 'Disrupting the "whiteness" of fieldwork in geography', *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 27(3), pp. 326–341.

Patel, K. (2015) 'Teaching and learning in the tropics: an epistemic exploration of "the field" in a development studies field trip', *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*. Routledge, 39(4), pp. 584–594.

Spivak, G. C. (1983) 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory*.

Gillian, R. (2006) 'Situating knowledges: positionality, reflexivities and other tactics', *Progress in Human Geography*, 21(3), pp. 305–320

Mosse, D. 2005. Cultivating Development: An Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice, London: Pluto Press.

Fook, J., and Gardner, F. (2007). Practicing critical reflection: A resource handbook. London: Open University Press.

Power, M., & Sidaway, J. (2004). The degeneration of tropical geography. Annals of the Association of American Geographers, 94, 585–601 (May 2002).

Fraser, N. (2012) 'Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition, and Participation', in *Culture and Economy after the Cultural Turn Culture and economy after the cultural turn*.

Pollner, M. (1991). Left of ethnomethodology: The rise and decline of radical reflexivity. American Sociological Review, 56, 370-380.

Staszak, J.-F. (2008) 'Other/otherness encyclopedia', Publié dans International Encyclopedia of Human Geography, 2008, Elsevier pp. 1–7.

Faucault, M (1963), *Birth of the Clinic*, pp. 128-133

Jetten, J., Postmes, T. and McAuliffe, B. J. (2002) '"We're all individuals": Group norms of individualism and collectivism, levels of identification and identity threat', *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 32(2), pp. 189–207.

Biel, R. (2015) 'The Interplay between Social and Environmental Degradation in the Development of the International Political Economy*', *Journal of World-Systems Research*.

Zizek, S. (2017) The Courage of Hopelessness: Chronicles of a Year of Acting Dangerously