

Practices in scholarly publishing: making sense of rejection

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Abstract

In South Africa, criticisms of peer review often hinge on allegations of racism, anti-African attitudes, and viewpoint discrimination. This article discusses the issue of peer-review, and examines these allegations in terms of claims of Western conceptual gatekeeping. Cautions are offered on allegations of exceptionalism, as are some strategies on dealing with the process of peer review.

Keywords: Africa, censorship, peer review, publication, racism, viewpoint discrimination

Academic writing can become a sordid drama. Professors feel oppressed by half-done manuscripts, complain about cruel rejections from journals, scramble breathlessly to submit grant proposals (Silva 2007: 7)

Complaints often arise at South African meetings about ‘discrimination in publishing’. These hinge on the perceived lack of racial and gender representation and the use of peer review as censorship (Sithole 2008). In South Africa, popular common sense presumes that racism is present wherever demographic proportionality is absent (Jeffrey 2000: 30). The proportions are constituted by residual apartheid categories: white, African, Indian, coloured.¹

In questioning hemispherical dominance, Pearl Sithole (2009: back cover) writes: that ‘Far from maintaining equality between reviewer and reviewed, the peer review process is dominated by scholars allied to Western models of knowledge production, who use their “gateway” positions to marginalise and discourage African schools of thought’. Sithole further claims that local or indigenous knowledge is (negatively/derisively) equated with ‘subjective’ analysis, and that objectivity is an often inappropriate/unsuited Western export that defines who gets published (ibid: 12). ‘Viewpoint discrimination’ and asymmetrical representation on international editorial boards of scholars based in developing countries are additional concerns (Chima 2012). In Psychology, for instance, 96 per cent of psychological examples are sourced from countries that constitute only 12 per cent of the global population (see Henrich, Heine and

Norenzayan 2010: 3), who not only quantify this viewpoint discrimination, but furthermore ‘other’ their own research community as WEIRD (Western, Education, Industrialised and Rich Democracies). The 12 per cent findings are then often inappropriately generalised across the species as a whole (see, e.g., Tomaselli and Mboti 2013).

This article thus deals with two interrelated themes: the first is of a technical nature, with attendant advice that authors need to consider within the context of South African academic publishing. The second deals with paradigmatic, ontological and ideological issues that result in what V.W.O. Quine (1969) calls the ‘indeterminacy of radical translation’, the purportedly different grounds for practice through which interpreters make sense of their ontologically and linguistically different, often incompatible, worlds. Discrimination is perceived within both realms by aggrieved authors. Space does not permit detailed comment on all Sithole’s points. They are, however, pervasive for many scholars who identify themselves as ‘black’ South Africans.

Sithole’s (2008) book reproduces three examples of unrevised, rejected articles. Appended to each are the referee reports and brief author–editor correspondence. Readers are expected to make up their own minds on the data (articles) and evidence (reports) thus presented, along with her introduction and conclusion. Other scholars, however, allege outright conspiracies. Research Africa (2011) reports: ‘There is a mafia control of publishing houses,’ the Limpopo University research director told delegates at a session on socially responsive Africa-centred research. Senior academics ‘hog’ journals, the biochemist said. Sometimes, the bias came down to influence: ‘Some people publishing in the journals are also in the editorial board and don’t permit entry into these journals. This makes it difficult for young researchers to publish.’ However, he added that ‘international publishers often dismiss manuscripts from African scholars as being unrelated to current academic debates. They say they don’t conform to Western norms and expectations.’²

How accurate are these exceptionalist claims, as reported? Are editors, editorial boards and publishing houses really co-conspirators when it comes to who is included or excluded?

Conspiracies and allegations

Let me start my interrogation of the allegedly ‘unequal’ ground (Sithole 2008). From the ‘North-West’, Andrew Causey, an American anthropologist, playfully argues about guest editing a theme issue for *Critical Arts: South-North Cultural and Media Studies*:

In writing an introduction I see that one of the things I had not fully conceptualized is the ‘South–North relationship’. I don’t really know how to handle this (in the group we are all North American authors dealing with research in the southern part of Asia that is still in the northern hemisphere). Would it be interesting sometime to actually take on this notion of ‘South’ and ‘North’? Does it really come down to something so mundane and prosaic as being above or below the equator? Could there be a fruitful discussion amongst interested parties to wonder aloud, and together, if there are characteristics of more interest than geography and politics that seem to separate the two? As I mentioned to one of the authors ‘If by “south” we mean “friendly, engaged, communal, playful, relaxed” and if by “north” we mean “repressed, anti-social, conservative, reserved, suspicious”, then of course our papers are entirely “southern”...’ I am being naughty here, but you may catch my drift. I had a look at the full run of *Critical Arts* and noticed that only in 1997 did Michael Chapman problematize this issue. Perhaps at this moment in the history of humans, when things seem to be unraveling at record speed, it would be interesting to face this full on. (pers. comm., 16 November 2011)

Causey is correct, the metaphorical use of hemispherical position does need problematisation and, indeed, framed the International Association for Media and Communication Research conference, held in Durban in July 2012:

The term ‘Global South’ refers to countries, territories and communities that have been excluded from the mainstream of economic, social and communication development. In much of the discourse around global geo-politics, these countries and communities are still regarded as the recipients of economic and technical largesse from more developed sources. In this conference, we wish to interrogate this position, and to emphasise the *communicative empowerment* and the *positive potential of media and communication in and from the ‘Global South’*.

In choosing the theme ‘South–North Conversations’, then, the conference organisers acknowledge that the ‘South’ has something to say to the ‘North’, and vice versa, and further that the ‘North’ has something to gain from its relationships with the ‘South’. The concept of ‘conversations’, indicates peer-to-peer equality and dialogue, and a more optimistic vision of global engagement.

While the term ‘South’ may conjure up images of under-development, it has long been recognized that within global geopolitics, all countries, all institutions and all communities experience varying stages of under-development, with some sectors or groups being marginalised on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, economic

status, age or health stigma. An important challenge to conference participants is to identify the purported attributes of the 'South' in each particular location or field of study. What do the marginalised and the disempowered within your sphere of research have to say to the powerful or to their own peers? (Teer-Tomaselli 2012)³

Against this metaphorical 'divide', the argument below draws on my own experience of editing and publishing both books and journals since the mid-1970s, as an author in many languages in translation, and as an editorial board member of over 20 journals across the world, including many published from within Africa itself. The bulleted format used below is intended to clarify things and to assure new authors that we old authors are subjected to similar conditions. While sympathising with emergent scholars trying to start a publishing career, I do not concur that editorial boards *a priori* conspire with regard to inclusion/exclusion (see also Silva 2007; Wessels 2007). Other factors – those of ontology, convention and ideology – are usually at work. These centre on the issue of power and who gets to make meaning. This contestation is grounded in Cartesian certainty:

Descartes's work can be understood as the progenitor of a whole series of attempts to overcome certain pervasive dilemmas, even dichotomies, which evolved out of the ferment of the Renaissance, the Reformation, the spread of secular literacy... These pervasive dilemmas involve the ways in which power no longer emanated from a hereditary centre controlled by a limited class or caste of literate people. Extending the empowerment of the capacity to record one's own experience makes it possible to compare records, and to judge them. The real dilemma of the post-Cartesian era is that of reconciling the authority vested in those who dispose of the benefits of the world's people encounter and experience in their lives, with the authority of the experience and intelligibility of carrying-on in ways which contradict or marginalise this authority. Cartesian certainty is one way of validating the latter, while also trying to place limits on just what kinds of experience in everyday life qualify as grounds for judging encountered authority negatively. (Shepperson, 19 October 1997)⁴

Hereditary centres tend to assign African-based (or other such local) knowledge as 'different', as area studies, even as marginal. Local knowledge is often insufficiently leveraged by, and lacks integration into, global theoretical discussion. This knowledge is thus impeded from actively de-stabilising conventional 'Northern' hegemonic thought, de-familiarising what is taken for granted, and revitalising ossified paradigms rooted in positivism (see also Wright 2004). My own work using self-reflexivity, autoethnography and critical indigenous methods

(see Denzin et al. 2008), for example, sometimes attracts peer criticism because the research teams cast a critical eye as much on their own research practices and researcher positions as they do on the actual research outcomes (see Biesele and Hitchcock 2008; and my reply, 2013). My team and I thus share with Sithole something of an indeterminate conceptual space, but for different reasons and under different conditions.

The academy and its practices (like peer-review) are grounded in norms stemming from earlier European conventions. The medium articulates the relations of its origin. Nevertheless, many publications have been conceived by such a ‘rebuttal of the north’. In this light, Sithole’s claims are just one of many contesting conventional knowledge and hegemony (Tavener-Smith 2012).

Causey, whose research is conducted in Indonesia, has commented from a ‘Northern’ vantage point, arguing that

methods actually ARE something, something that is NOT the same as ideology. Now, some of our marxist colleagues might consider historical materialism to be a research method rather than a theory or ideology, saying that the actual ‘method’ of historical materialism is its ability ‘to provide the most important perspective students can have’. But from my perspective, that’s a skewed ‘why’ rather than a useful ‘how’. I understand that ideology can be embedded: assumptions and ideologies are built into all the different methods, sometimes insidiously. But that doesn’t take away from their use in gathering data, data that can still be critically analyzed and honestly presented... (Causey 2012)

Usually, if a paper is rejected, it’s because of a lack of a coherent methodological application, as determined by the reviewers. From the ‘South’, here are some of my own experiences of rejection. These are offered as illustration of conditions under which **all** authors work (see also Silva 2007). At the start of my career in the late 1970s I sent an article to the *SA Journal of Science*. It enunciated an Einsteinian space-time approach to semiological film theory. It was rejected, the editor told me and my supervisor, because it was *not* experimental, but philosophical. In other words, it lacked replicable ‘method’. Nowadays, this journal publishes commentaries, interventions and editorials, philosophy, and even biographies. My timing was possibly off by 35 years. The film article was subsequently accepted by a humanities publication edited by my supervisor. The moment his term expired, however, the paper was opportunistically rejected by the new editor, because, as she told me: ‘It was full of holes.’

Repeated requests for reviewer reports were ignored. Clearly, I had become a pawn between the outgoing and incoming editors.

In the early 1980s, an article on cybernetics and semiotics was returned to me for revision by a new South African communication journal. Its editor indicated that acceptance was premised on my citing a senior local scholar. On acceding, the paper was published. Fifteen years later I withdrew a special issue I had co-edited for this title. The journal took over two years to review articles, mainly because it imposed impossible conditions on the guest editors (and themselves) in its instrumentalist attempt to ensure 'scientific objectivity'. On withdrawing, we placed most of the papers individually in other local and international journals, within a very short time period.

In 2009, I co-authored an article with Mark Nielsen (2009), submitted to *Nature*, the top-ranked international journal. It took *Nature* just three hours to reject the paper. No reports were issued, but the early paper is still on the *Nature* Proceedings website and had garnered five votes/citations as of 2 April 2013.⁵ Having been burned, we got burned again, this time by the second-ranked *Science*, which took all of five hours to send us a rejection note. Again, no transparency, no reports, no explanation was offered. A third title, *Psychological Science*, responded three months after submission. (The norm in the humanities and social sciences is six months.) What differentiated this journal from the first two was its comprehensive reviewer and editor engagement of our article. (In some ways this discussion was more productive than the article, as published.) Unlike the alienation from our labour that we experienced with *Nature* and *Science*, the article was significantly improved by the way that *Psychological Science* engaged with us.

In 2011 an international journal rejected an entire theme issue I had co-edited with Causey because, stated the editorial assistant with whom we were dealing, the journal's reviewer, while accepting half the articles, had rejected the other half 'because they fell between two literatures', a potentiality stated in the call for papers previously accepted by this journal itself. That all papers had already been reviewed and revised under our close editorship, was ignored. No opportunity for revision or reorganisation was afforded us. The editorial assistant of this left-wing journal (which is published by a mega multinational) mislaid correspondence that might have allowed us to continue the dialogue. My long-term position on the board of the journal cut no ice with the assistant, who persisted in referring to a very vague and inadequate report to legitimise the refusal.

Many other examples could be cited, including one involving a local journal claiming to promote the idea of indigenous knowledge – to pursue questions that allege conspiracy, or

mafia-like behaviour, or prejudice. My intuition, however, suggests that inefficiency, myopia and inexperience are more likely explanations. What is of greater import here, I think, is that the issue actually concerns different academic and intellectual conventions.

Reviewing is Anglo-American?

The abovementioned instances are meant to contextualise the broader author experience at the personal level – the one that Sithole and Research Africa drive home. Though similarly denied publication in one or other journal, for whatever reason, claims of ‘old boys’ clubs’ or mafia-like conspiracies are diversionary. Making sense of these often require knowledge of how things are done at the micro level of publishing and peer-reviewing across publishing cultures and different scholarly conventions.

The report below offers the perspective of a French guest editor (who is **not** the owner of the publishing house) of one particular English-language journal dealing with African studies. She had translated articles from French into English and handled the peer-review process:

I sometimes sense resentment, in particular with some authors who might be junior staff and inexperienced.⁶ I attribute misgivings and hurt pride to the lack of experience with refereed journals... exacerbated by other factors. I am not hinting at colonisation, but when positive discrimination is applied (as is the case with the awarding to Africans of inadequate degrees by overseas universities), African authors tend to write opinion rather than argument.⁷ Problems of grammar, referencing, checking names and dates, is a recurring issue. This may be a case of French *laissez-faire education*.⁸ My English-speaking African colleagues are much more disciplined. The African world is a bigger mixed bag than the Anglo-American world, and the refereeing process is specifically Anglo-American.

Whether or not Anglo-American procedures are more rigorous than those applied by French-language journals, early career authors especially articulate intense feelings of victimhood. The most common complaints relate to

- *anonymity* of reviewing: rejection or corrections required by editor and reviewers are sometimes claimed to be an anti-African conspiracy. [*Reviewers do not*

normally know the name or residence of an author unless this is revealed in the article itself.]

- *arrogant tone of reviewers. [In our experience, at Critical Arts, some of the most ferocious referees are African. Reviewers are busy people who resent having to comment on careless research and poorly written work.]*

Further, authors sometimes find reviews

- *confusing: authors need skills to interpret referee reports and implement the revisions required. [Authors should put their shoes on the feet of the reviewers. They should accept advice from (anonymous) colleagues, even if they are not considered peers or deem their responses ‘cruel’.]*
- *lacking in direction: [Authors often want their half-digested ideas certified in print, rather than debated in the process of getting into print.]*

More generally, for editors, are the issues of

- *essentialism*, which that offers a self-referential discourse that exists entirely within its own authority, one that *a priori* ‘does not permit critique, and cannot be faulted, questioned or debated because of its claimed ‘indigenous’, ‘cultural’ or ‘nationalist’ status. Eurocentric academia is only too well aware of the genocidal dangers of essentialism (Nazism, fascism, apartheid, ethnic cleansing, etc.);
- *entitlement*, indicated in the author expectation of immediate publication, irrespective of peer-reviewing procedures, production schedules and the time required to manage these;
- *poor title selection*, indicated by authors not doing their homework on appropriate journal choice.

Allegations of discrimination often mask a disbelieving author’s response to one or more of the above points. Rejection rates vary from journal to journal, by between 20 and 90 per cent. Nearly everyone thus experiences rejection, and as Paul Silva (2007: 99) observes: ‘Researchers who publish a lot of articles receive a lot of rejections.’ If you are rejected, you are in the majority!’ Indeed, ‘[y]ou will write better when you expect rejection, because you

will mute the need to avoid failure' (ibid.). Even seasoned authors – the mafia that supposedly impede access – are sometimes themselves bewildered at the way they are treated by reviewers, editors, editorial assistants and publishing houses.

As editor and publisher of *Critical Arts* since 1980, and founder and co-editor of *Journal of African Cinemas* in 2009, I am aware of the challenges junior academics face in getting published. Acknowledging that African authors do face hurdles over which they need to jump, *Critical Arts* has developed the following policies:

- We work with our authors if a paper is deemed publishable, but requires revision. [*Authors don't always appreciate this support because they see publication as a product and a right rather than as a process. Revision is sometimes considered an insult rather than an outcome. This is akin to a cricket batsman complaining when bowled out from a wicket-taking ball.*]
- Our editors and reviewers engage arguments, rather than just applying an instrumentalist check-list evaluation that forgets what the author is attempting to do. [*Be honoured that one or more senior scholars took the trouble to read your article. If accepted, it may be that the referees will be the only people to have read it in depth, the readership of academic journals being very low at the best of times.*]
- We understand that young authors need to build their careers and exposure. [*One of our journal's top-read 2009 articles was authored by a young, emergent scholar based at a South African university of technology. Another with but one article to his name, was also 'top read'. It is how one writes, and how one links into global issues, that makes the difference. Overly descriptive articles on parochial issues that ignore global readership are the ones rejected by international journals "as being unrelated to current academic debates" (see Research Africa, 2011). Publishability is more often than not a question of scholarly collective reader interest, not solely author interest.*]
- *Critical Arts* takes risks. Editors will sometimes re-assess negative reviews if it is thought that the article in question will create debate or at least feed into ongoing discussion. Editors see the whole picture where reviewers may be responding to a specific submission. [*This flouting of due procedure is considered unscientific but unethical by some editors who argue that their gatekeeping role is simply to audit review reports, thereby abrogating their own discretion. In these cases, editorial*

decisions are made on the basis of ranked technical criteria that may have little or nothing to do with the potential disciplinary impact of the article under review. This is how bad papers actually do get published, following which the author (and editor) may have to defend him/herself against published criticism].

- Interlocking editorial boards: The boards of the two journals I edit are constituted on the basis of gender and ethnic balance, age and experience, geographical location, disciplinary representation and expertise, and in the case of *Journal of African Cinemas*, language also. By this diversity we aim to respond intelligently to what might be termed unconventional' approaches that problematize issues of identity in approaching an object of study. The world's top scholars who serve on these boards volunteer their time, expertise and knowledge in evaluating articles submitted and published by the very constituency that claims to be excluded. Yet, the favour is often not returned, when emergent scholars refuse to evaluate articles sent to them (in some cases demanding payment, or lacking in confidence; or they simply don't respond to invitations). These potential authors eschew apprenticeship and experience in the practice of peer-reviewed publishing. They also thus exclude themselves from invitations to join editorial boards but ironically expect those boards to work with them.
- Finally, some journal editors are just plain incompetent, and unable to manage their on operations. It is these journals that lose manuscripts, lack communication with authors, are unable to find appropriate reviewers, and who lack any sense of urgency, regular publication or responsibility to submitting authors.

Not every submission will be accepted. Here's the rub. The neoliberal audit culture that is marketising the academy now obsessed with measuring productivity units requires from authors all kinds of indices regarding journals in which they are published (impact factors and citation indices, downloads and even acceptance: rejection ratios. The latter is the most insidious, as the quality of a journal is now measured by in terms of the (usually one-time) rejection rate, rather than in terms of the quality and impact of what is published, which may include extensive discussions between editors and authors. A journal with a 90% rejection rate is considered tops – even if that rejection percentage is simply because it attracts more excellent submissions than it is able to publish. This kind of index of 'quality' has negative effects on

those journals that do work closely with their authors over multiple submissions in order to promote a learning process, rather than just a product display outcome.

Nevertheless, our authors will have engaged in an intensive learning experience via an evaluation process that may be arduous, challenging but always instructive. If an article is accepted by *Critical Arts*, to use this example, the writer will join an illustrious complement of authors amongst whom are included two Nobel Laureates, luminaries in the field, and emergent authors who will one day replace these. The reputation of new authors will grow by association with the journal's previous authors.

Though academic publishing follows a different business model to commercial magazines, being highly subsidised by the taxpayer, the issue of markets/readers remains important. Publication of poorly written papers that have no particular focus will injure the journal that publishes them. Good writing remains key to exposure, viability and access.

In conclusion

This paper has approached the issue of peer reviewing, editing and publication via an autoethnographic method, and concluded with a discussion of some of the political economic issues facing South African-based authors who are negotiating a variety of contradictory policies governing instrumentalist-led research regimes. The point of this chapter is that rejection for technical reasons in light of the examples discussed above should not be conflated with deeper epistemological issues. The early reference above to Cartesian dominance and hereditary centres is now explored further in the chapter that follows.

Notes

¹ This absurdity occurred in an audit conducted by the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAF) of local journals in 2005. One question asked for the 'race' of authors, providing these four (post)-apartheid-derived categories only. *Critical Arts* responded that it does not inquire into the DNA profiles of its authors. *Critical Arts'* authors and editors then excluded by this parochial categorisation included: an albino, an Australian Aboriginal, Arabians, Palestinians and an Indonesian, Chinese, African Americans, Khoisan, a Sami, Caribbean's, and any other blacks or 'Indians' (including Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, and Sri Lankans, *not* of South African extraction). Indeed, as was revealed by a number of North African authors who had emigrated to North America, they only realised that they were

‘black’ or African when told so by their adoptive hosts in the “North-West” (see Wright 2002, 2003 theme issues).

² <http://www.research-africa.net/#/news/397756/2011/12/1144593/?article=1144463>
Rachmand Howard’s comment at the Southern African-Nordic Centre third Bi-Annual International Conference in Johannesburg. He was referring to an article in the *Sunday Times*. (pers. com., 26 January 2012).

³ IAMCR General Call for Proposals URL: <http://iamcr.org/iamcr2012icocfp>

⁴ Taken from Shepperson’s unpublished “Thinking Aloud” notes that I collated after his death, from which a special issue of *Critical Arts* 22(2)2008 was edited on the topic, “Peirce, Logic and Mining Safety.”

⁵ Authors submitting to *Nature* were offered until 3 April 2012 the option of simultaneously posting on *Nature Proceedings*, a non-peer-reviewed open access repository. A previous draft remains available even after the revised version might have been published elsewhere. See <http://precedings.nature.com/about> Like many high-ranking generalist outlets (e.g., *Science*, *Current Biology*, *Psychological Science*), submission to *Nature* does not automatically guarantee peer-review. The manuscript is assigned to an editor who assesses whether or not it will pass the review process and be of ‘sufficient interest’ to the journal’s broad readership. Our paper failed these two considerations. But another editor may have approved a paper outlining the hydro-deoxy oscillations in the plasma core of a partially blind Hispanic slug-fish. How it is decided whether or not a paper is potentially appealing enough is not at all clear.

⁶ Similar opinions were expressed by early career academics at the ANFASA Discrimination in Scholarly Publishing Workshop, Cape Town, 23 March 2012. Some editors at the UNISA Editors’ Workshop, 26-27 March, 2012, told of similar allegations regarding their journals.

⁷ On one recent PhD examined by me (Tomaselli), the other African expatriate examiner, based in the North, questioned my critical assessment, observing that my evaluation would “hurt the student’s feelings”. My response that I examine my own students with the same rigour, and that I encourage rigorous conceptual dissent, went unanswered. Negative discrimination exists when Africans are rewarded for inferior research and publication just because they are Africans.

⁸ This was my (Tomaselli’s) experience also when I guest edited an issue of the French-language *CinéAction*. The publisher-editor and I disagreed on the need for consistent factual accuracy.

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