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## Hacking Through Academentia: Autoethnography, Data and Social Change

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### Abstract

The question of who may produce and own knowledge, under what conditions, is critically discussed in relation to research regulatory regimes and academic managerialism. The nature of researcher position and nature of researcher–researched encounters is discussed. Autoethnography is offered as one way of examining self–other relationships in doing fieldwork. How to negotiate the relationship is examined in the context of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) and the questions of essentialism and paradigm clash. The dominant ideology of data is questioned. Case studies of how (over)regulation excludes unconventional science from its system of rewards illustrates the contradictions imposed by residues of positivism.

Keywords: autoethnography, indigenous knowledge, positivism, data, field research

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## Introduction

This intervention addresses who may produce and own knowledge, and who may disseminate knowledge for social change. My argument reflects my own experience in which I try to balance between data-led, quantitative research on the one hand and critical indigenous qualitative methodologies (CIQM) on the other. Both approaches are institutionally regulated: where positivism fits in easily with regulation, CIQM tests and contests the assumptions and auditing regimes that limit the boundaries of inquiry. In addressing these issues, my exploration addresses the contradictions that emerge via the metaphors of researchers as flies-on-the wall (the objective gaze) or as flies-in-the-soup (the subjective experience).

## Where's the Researcher?

One of the glaring weaknesses of conventional scientific methods is that they totally ignore researcher position, researcher–researched relations, and how encounters are shaped by the dynamic nature of the relationship with those subjected to the scientific gaze. Most methods textbooks assume that the academic enterprise is inexorably rational, coherent, and impartial—the only way of finding out. The inevitability of numerical analysis is often taken for granted. These kinds of approaches assume a supposedly objective all-seeing and supposedly objective fly-on-the-wall. However, socially immersed researchers are more like flies-in-the-soup, swimming around, trying to make sense of the sticky, tactile, enveloping, and more often than not, bewildering field experience.

Conventional methods often lack a sense of history, feeling, and intuition. Data is considered objective, discrete and factual, self-evident and true, rather than being an instrumentalist indicator of bygone positivist, and later, modernist ages. Positivism, proposed by August Comte (1865/2009), projected the existence of a real, referable world separate from human consciousness that can become known via experimental methods, hypothesis testing, with the data so generated being subjected to verification. Positivism claims to be neutral, value free, confirmed by the fly-on-the-wall oversight, that is, free from the subjective bias of the researcher (who is usually in the soup but whose methodology conceals this location). However, data is not axiomatically impartial—someone designed the instruments to find it, organise and code it, and then interpret it.

Conventional science limits the production of certified knowledge to an approved social class that is licensed to work in educational institutions. Further, despite the lessons of post-structuralism and other recent postparadigmatic innovations, conventional science still discredits, even disparages, forms of knowledge generation that break with positivist frameworks. Orthodox approaches also rarely discuss failure, negative results, or admit that “findings” cannot always be found. Order (science) is imposed over disorder (the experiential) and the mess and confusion of quotidian life is concealed because these conditions obscure the clarity of structure.

Ways of knowing are always partial, relational, and in the process of becoming. All of these ways—as methods—centre on the researcher–researched relationship, and how this is negotiated. The gluey metaphor of the fly-in-the-soup best describes the social sciences researcher position. In sociology and anthropology, for example, the methods of autoethnography, self-reflexivity, critical indigenous qualitative methods, and lived research, amongst others, are now gaining respectability as relational ways of knowing—as means of reinserting researchers back into analysis. Positivism, in contrast, conceals researcher presence by claiming absence—the fly-on-the-wall approach.

Autoethnography—which in our approach self-reflexively examines self–other relations—is being increasingly applied in order to fracture received notions about science, objectivity, and validity,

including in South Africa (Mboti, 2012; Tomaselli, Dyll, & Francis, 2008). As both methodology and genre of writing, autoethnography “displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). As Lauren Dyll-Myklebust and I (in press) explained the term: *auto* = self; *ethnos* = culture; *graphy* = process. The auto/self and ethnos/culture components work together as a process (graphy). As Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner (2000, p. 739) put it:

*Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations.*

Autoethnography thus is part of wider qualitative research and retains the ethnographic objective of “seeking to understand and make sense of complex social worlds of which we are only part (but part nonetheless)” (Atkinson, Coffey, & Delamont, 2003, p. 33). The central tenet of autoethnography, thus, is that researchers recognise themselves in their research practices. My approach here is to examine my own responses of autonomy and resistance as I battle positivism and neoliberal managerialism that denies critical indigenous methodologies that admit the social worlds of which academics are part (Anderson, 2006; Tomaselli, 2012a). This is the backdrop for autoethnography’s analytic subgenre.

Reflexivity guides and problematises our positions as scholars, educators, or administrators within research practices that involve participants. As acts of self-reference where research “bends back on,” refers to, and affects the object/unit/person initiating the study, self-reflexive researchers not only reflect upon their own subjectivities and how these affect research practices, but are additionally mindful of the scholar’s connection to the research situation and influences upon it. In self-reflexivity, researchers “systematically and rigorously reveal their methodology and themselves as the instrument of data generation” (Ruby, 1980, p. 153).

By connecting the personal to the cultural and then to the political, I hope to offer some novel—if incomplete—insights that address the theme of this special issue. No findings are offered; rather, a relational set of ideas are placed on the agenda for further discussion. My examples that elaborate analytical ethnography will be to examine academia itself—of which I have been a “full member” (Anderson, 2006) as a student, lecturer, and professor for nearly 50 years.

## **Academentia**

The nature of the academic institution has changed fundamentally since the end of the Cold War after 1990. The contemporary academy is ruled by an unforgiving audit culture, the tyranny of data generation, and managerialism discursively disguised as “transformation” (Makgoba & Mubangizi, 2010). Few managers think like educators or intellectuals any more. Rather, they “think with data,” impose reporting regimes and endless form filling, and measure academic activity through frameworks called productivity units, like in a factory. Input and output indicators, key performance areas, and other measuring instruments now box academics into predetermined ways of thinking, doing and accounting, and justifying their activities. Where universities claim to permit academic freedom in curricula and research, many actively punish critique by their own employees of their management and administrative practices (see Chetty & Merrett, 2014). The tertiary industry, thus, exhibits a contradictory postpositivist consciousness: it promotes innovative thinking and teaching on the one hand, but increasingly is suppressing dissent by employees of their own institution’s management practices, and is strangling free-flowing research that wants to evade positivist

containment. Community engagements, unless directly generating publications and working for social change whether on or off campus, are often the casualties of these kinds of positivist residues and their surveillance systems, even if they are sensibly intended to ensure that everyone does an equitable day's work and do not expose institutions to legal liability—yet another new factor impacting the academy.

Some in the humanities have resisted this kind of creeping managerialism, promoting *unruly pedagogies*. For Bethlehem and Harris (2012, p. 3), who edited a special issue of *Critical Arts* on this topic, the questions were:

*To what extent is our teaching in the cultural studies classroom predicated on the possible political transformation of teachers, students and the body of knowledge around which we meet? Considered from the vantage point of an ethical turn in cultural studies praxis, to whom are we responsible in the classroom? And beyond it? Is a sentient pedagogy necessarily unruly or disruptive? How might we weigh 'disruption'?*

These kinds of sentient (or experiential) imperatives refuse the suffocating demands of data-as-data, assumed to be “truth” (i.e., scientific). Data regimes, however, remain hegemonic; they cannot be easily tamed as Norman Denzin (2006) hopefully insisted, but their commodifying and stultifying effects can be challenged, as can the orthodox argument that the data or numbers speak for themselves. Data is always subject to the triple frameworks of generation, codification, and interpretation. My own approach, which does sometimes include statistical methods, however, is to draw on dreaded data to make humanistic arguments for policy and planning purposes.

My own particular use of autoethnography is more analytical (triangulated, verifiable) than evocative—literary, highly personalised, self-referential—(see Rambo, 2005). To these dimensions, sometimes, I add the element of satire. Satire is a literary genre that confronts the absurd with its own absurdity. Satire gets into the contradictions, the cracks, and the foolishness that we all experience, but which conventional science simply brackets out of analysis. Analysis, as the textbooks tell us, must be clean, coherent, and objective. The lived is none of these, however. One of the key sources in my autoethnographic satirical writing about the educational institution is *Malice in Blunderland* (Martin, 1973). Here, Thomas L. Martin discussed the multiplicity of “laws” composed by chief executive officers, deans, and other managers when attempting to understand paradoxes. *Kludgemanship*, for example, is the study of glitches. Murphy's laws about why things go wrong are located here. *Hierarchology* reveals how bureaucracy permeates every aspect of our lives. *The Peter Principle* reveals that managers rise to their maximum level of incompetence, usually resting where they can do the least damage to their employing institutions. *Fuglemanship* is the art of science and leadership, a term for (mis)management. Machiavelli is this category's preeminent personality. As the founder of modern political science he was known for his cunning and duplicity, traits that identify politicians (and many university deans and administrators) everywhere. Lastly, is *academocracy*, the study of the educational bureaucracy. Managerialism is a response to demands for public accountability and administrative justice—we all need to convince Authority that we are all doing our jobs efficiently with equitable workload distributions and regular research outputs. In the edu-factory created by managerialism, productivity triumphs over creativity.

Martin's book was written at a simpler, earlier time when the academy was engaged in education, rather than now when it has become a Fordist conveyor belt run by and for spreadsheet economies audited by bookkeepers and overpaid remote executive officers who know “the cost of everything

but the value of nothing.” This quote comes from Oscar Wilde’s *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1893/1995, p. 32):

*Cecil Graham: What is a cynic?*

*Lord Darlington: A man who knows the price of everything, and the value of nothing.*

*Cecil Graham: And a sentimentalist, my dear Darlington, is a man who sees an absurd value in everything and doesn’t know the market price of any single thing.*

Are we sentimentalists in an ocean full of cynics? I guess so, but the constraint of paying bills turns everyone into a cynic.

Much of my recent magazine and academic writing deals with the irrationalities of institutions (academic or otherwise).<sup>1</sup> Hacking through academentia is an objective of this often cynical but always entertaining engagement. Where the meaning of academocracy is self-evident (Martin, 1973, p. 113), *academentia* could signify collective academic psychosis as the academic enterprise has shifted its primary role from facilitating social change, to primarily that of a massive institutional data-gathering exercise. The autocratic managerialism that has recently replaced faculty-led democracy in many South African universities (and which is common cause in the USA), is a symptom of this condition.

While there is always a need for administrative systems to work with personnel, plant, and data, the mindlessness of data generation for its own sake has now taken on lives of its own in many academic sectors. Academics are increasingly feeling that they function merely as units of data, mere cogs on a conveyer belt going nowhere. Quality suffers as innovation, originality, and sentient pedagogies are suppressed by hierarchical policies and practices that inappropriately impose positivist and biomedical ethical clearance procedures on the humanities and social sciences that deify gatekeepers as the gods-of-entry to doing field research. Ethics committees sometimes refuse investigative research, punish students and supervisors who show initiative, and protect academic institutions, often at the expense of the student, the researched, and civil society (see Tomaselli & Dyll-Myklebust, 2015). Overlaid on this internal surveillance, while working in conjunction with the envisaged, but yet to be implemented, Protection of State Information Act and other censoring bills like the Film and Publications Board Draft Online Regulation Policy, are the suffocating intellectual property rights regimes that valorise public, community, or traditional information, again often at the expense of its historical custodians.

Banking education (Freire, 1993) under such regimes of internal surveillance, measurement, target planning, and cost-effectiveness, results in students coming to class simply to sign a register and learning merely how to write an exam. Cynically, they have learned to play the system, not necessarily learning anything of significance from engaging with it. The idea of changing the world horrifies most of them, especially those studying commerce. These students do see themselves as cogs in a machine, intending to bank the proceeds. The commodification of research since the late 1980s, encouraged, if unintendedly, by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DoHET) publication incentive scheme, further persuades academics to conduct themselves like factory

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<sup>1</sup> See The UKZN Griot (<http://ccms.ukzn.ac.za/publications/ukzn-griot.aspx>) for an elaboration of my satirical autoethnographic method.

technicians—many publish to milk the subsidy rather than to impact their disciplines or to bring about positive social change.<sup>2</sup>

While conveyor-belt publishing encouraged by the DoHET incentive is by now a well-known phenomenon (see, e.g., Thomas & De Bruin, 2015), the same cynical authors who directly benefit from the scheme ironically might point fingers at the excessive profits reaped by multinationals like Elsevier. Rarely do these opportunistic critics see the link between themselves, the commodification of research via DoHET, their complicity in this chain, and the commercial-academic publishing industry.

What of those of us who still strive for the kind of innovation that is punished by our peers as not DoHET or positivistically compliant? These are the contradictions that the *Journal of Educational Research for Social Change* also has to navigate because it is not yet officially “accredited.” That the journal has survived this exclusion, and that South African authors are publishing in it with no expectation of earning for their universities (and themselves, in many cases) a publication incentive, bears testimony to its relevance.

Below, are some other more elaborated examples illustrating this contradiction.

### **Who Decides Who Owns Knowledge?**

The central commodifying thrust of research is largely sourced, argued Norman Denzin (2013), to the effect of positivism, including postpositivism. Postpositivism offers a critique of positivism and is largely conjectural, questioning Karl Popper’s (1934/1992) idea of falsification. Neoliberal management imperatives that continue to draw on positivist assumptions require that public universities become fiscally accountable, that increasingly they must become self-sufficient. In achieving such goals, all data is to be copyrighted and subjected to intellectual property regimes for expropriation, protection, and commercial exploitation. In one case that I successfully contested, this even included folklore and age-old indigenous stories and knowledge passed down from generation to generation (Tomaselli, 2014). In the instant that such stories are written down, the storyteller loses his or her right to retelling the story in the public commons. Is it any wonder that our Kalahari research participants claim the theft of their knowledge by academics, whether or not their proposals were ethically approved. What is ethical for an institution is often seen to be unethical (if legal) by our research hosts.

Now, I turn to two examples on how instrumentalism impacts social change education, research, and innovation.

### **Who Decides What Knowledge Is Legitimate?**

A few years ago, a book that had been already published by a prestigious European academic press was considered by UNISA Press for a South African printing. Notwithstanding the Dutch publisher’s four affirmative evaluations —following a manuscript revision—UNISA Press commissioned another three reviewers of a text that largely applied autoethnography and self-reflexivity and which elaborated the idea of lived research that effectively interfaced indigenous communities with action researchers, development agencies, and other support institutions. Two of the three latter reviewers were utterly disparaging, one suggesting that the edited anthology would be good for the *Cape Argus* tourism section. The South African edition never saw the light of day, though I and my coauthors have now lectured on the book internationally, and it was the only reference cited in a recent South

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<sup>2</sup> This is the impression that I have formed while editing two peer-reviewed journals, and serving on various publishers’ advisory committees.

African tourism policy document. Further, it is being used by a poverty-alleviation, public–private tourism venture in evolving community–lodge partnership models across South Africa (see Tomaselli, 2012a).

Two of the reviewers implicitly insisted that academics must write in an approved academic code to a restricted readership. The assumptions here are: 1) the fewer the readers, the greater the intellectual value; 2) the form of writing is more important than is the social and development impact of the work; and 3) new approaches that break with orthodoxy—whether positivist or postpositivist—even if they have the support of the research participants) should be absolutely discouraged.

In trying to make sense of this experience, UNISA Press and its Senate Publication Commissioning committees, however, then realised the high symbolic value of all those unconventional, largely autoethnographic manuscripts that were accumulating on its shelves. These were penned by luminaries like Ari Sitas (2014), someone designated by the Minister of Higher Education and Training as a champion for the Humanities and Social Science Charter,<sup>3</sup> and Vetkat Regopstaan Kruiper (2014), the late Kalahari artist who with his wife, Belinda and other members of the †Khomani in the Northern Cape, have advised many cohorts of academic researchers from across the world. The much vaunted official paradigm of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) floats between these two symbolic poles, yet scientific convention continues to insist on Comptean-derived approaches and contemporary grand narratives (theories, whether positivist or not) as the only legitimate codes and genres of scientific explanation. In contrast, the †Khomani claim that *they* are the professors and that we—the clueless academics—are *their* students. Why else would we be consulting them? For them, research anticipates social change, whether positive or negative. They do not see themselves as discrete objects in such research but as active, participating in what they assume will be a socially beneficial exercise for them.

Notwithstanding the rejection of the manuscript, I was consequently employed by UNISA Press along with Alan Weinberg, a luminary (A-rated National Research Foundation scholar) in early English literature and literary criticism, to kick-start what its commissioning editor named the Flame Series. Reward sometimes indeed comes from failure. The series was launched during the March 2015 UNISA Research and Innovation Week, “Transformation in Higher Education: It’s Not Just a South African Problem.” The books that launched the series were written by an academic, poet, sociologist, musician, actor, labour activist (Sitas, 2014), a development consultant (Soni, 2014), and Kalahari artist, Vetkat Kruiper (2014) and his wife, Belinda, who is an organic intellectual in her own right (Kruiper, 2004; Tomaselli, 2006). Each arose out of totally different circumstances, class and ethnic determinations, cultural and social experiences, and places, though each independently met the series’ criteria of developing new expressive pathways, new ways of making sense, involving new kinds of interactive explanation. These works exemplify original, creative, and analytical materials, transcending conventional boundaries and categories. Each is self-reflexive, each revealing something about self–other relations, each offering primary material, analysis, and poesis. Further, each develops different forms of address.

Two of the four Flame Series authors have interacted with me over long periods. I learned much, in my younger days, from Ari Sitas’ unforgiving critique of structuralism, indeed, his rejection of my own

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<sup>3</sup> See

<http://www.dhet.gov.za/Humanities%20and%20Social%20Sciences/Report%20on%20the%20Charter%20for%20Humanities%20and%20Social%20Sciences.pdf>



early materialist semiotic-based cultural studies paradigm, while I took confidence in Vetkat and Belinda's affirmation of it, even as I was edging towards Sitas' own highly textured culturalist-humanist position (see e.g., Sitas, 1986). At the book launch, Sitas performed his book—poetry, music, sketches, involving a variety of international characters who had become intrinsic to his own voyage of discovery as he encountered so many fascinating others, dramatically narrated through a reconstruction of the lens developed by a well-known early English writer, Jules Verne. Belinda Kruiper, in discussing her late husband's sacred art, reminded the degreed delegates that cultural and social knowledge comes from experiential interactions with ordinary folks who have to manage the often destabilising effects left by researchers, journalists, film makers, and development agents long after they have gone.

Evocative autoethnographers (Anderson, 2006) such as those who presented that evening do not necessarily document the negotiation of research relations with participants, nor add a theoretical line of thinking. Their goal, rather, is to provide a captivating description of subjective experiences in order to create an emotional resonance with the reader (or audience). This autoethnographic subgenre thus requires considerable narrative and expressive skills, typified in well-crafted first person writing in the form of prose, poetry, and performance, and in handwriting, sketches, and painting (see Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2005). In short, they aim to change the world by writing from the heart (Pelias, 2004), a comment often echoed by Belinda Kruiper when interacting with students. The objective thus is to: 1) lead the reader to be emotionally moved and to a sympathetic understanding of a certain event or social cause and 2) encourage the reader to commit to a certain line of action—as is demonstrated in some forms of autoethnographic participatory action research (Anderson, 2006). In our IKS project, our objective is to enable participatory research that includes our informants as cocreators and copublishers of knowledge—and to thereby animate livelihood opportunities for them where this is possible (see, e.g., Kruiper, 2014; Lange et al., 2014; Lange, Jansen, Fisher, Tomaselli, & Morris, 2013).

Evocative texts often include performativity as an epistemological procedure. Performance ethnography and performative writing show emotion and “create texts that unfold in the intersubjective space of individual and community and that embrace tactics for both *knowing* and *showing* [emphasis added]” (Holman Jones, 2005, p. 767; also see Jackson, 1998; Tomaselli, Dyll-Myklebust, & van Grootheest, 2013). Performativity refers to how, “through our writing and our talk, we enact the worlds we study. They instruct our readers about this world and how we see it” (Denzin, 2006, p. 422).

The Flame Series initiative also partly arises out of the 1990s when I was a member of the National Research Foundation's (NRF's) “Unlocking the Future” Focus Area panel. Chaired by a geologist, we multidisciplinary members had little idea of what we were doing even as South Africa was unlocking itself from apartheid. We came up with criteria to encourage best-practice research into the unknown, the different, and the previously precluded. Most grants were secured by hard scientists. The work done was not, however, in vain because a current NRF competitive grant is called Blue Skies.<sup>4</sup> The NRF description uses terms like *novel*, willingness to take *calculated investment risks* and *curiosity-driven*. The objectives of the perhaps ironically named “Blue Skies Funding *Instrument* [emphasis added]” are to:

- provide space and time for research to push the frontiers of knowledge and to encourage imagination through scientific and scholarly endeavours;
- support and sustain communities of critical and free thinkers;

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.nrf.ac.za/sites/default/files/documents/Blue%20Skies%202013.pdf>



- promote and encourage diversity in research for reimagining disciplines or academies;
- bring about new and unpredictable scientific / technological / scholarly discoveries / interpretations / understandings / knowledges.

Having participated in a Blue Skies evaluation panel in 2014, I took heart that my copanellists shared my position about the need for academics to take conceptual and methodological risks, to challenge received assumptions, and to explore new theoretical dimensions. Successful humanities and social science applicants—who had fundamental social and paradigm change on their minds—were much more visible in this later initiative. The conventionally written proposals applying tried and tested methods got short shrift, while the risk takers were rewarded.

The only certainty that remains in the digital age is the certainty of uncertainty and that of instantaneous multidimensional hypermediated change—even as positivist managerialism shapes the way that this change is administered in the many massed, mega universities now dominating the South African edu-scape. Yet, most methodology modules retain the same old dead positivist data. The new series of methods handbooks issued by Taylor & Francis, Blackwell, Sage and so on, that do revitalise older methods and that do explore new methodological territories (e.g., Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008; Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013), are rejected by DoHET for accreditation purposes. In the face of imaginative rethinking indicated in these growing numbers of groundbreaking handbooks, administrators and some of our peers cling to positivism even as old absolutes are disappearing. Selection categories remain path dependent.

My second example relates to *Engraved Landscape* (Lange et al., 2013) that I coedited with colleagues from the Universities of Cape Town (UCT), Pretoria (UP) and the McGregor Museum. UKZN declined to recommend it for the DoHET publication incentive, despite the fact that chapters were written by academics (along with comments and interviews with our †Khomani coresearchers).

The UKZN assessment, in contrast to the other two globally ranked universities, reacted negatively to “a popular slant” that could not “be equated with a book from a scholarly press.” Notwithstanding previous books from this small press being approved by UP and UCT, or in light of an upcoming review in *The South African Journal of Science*, an appeal for publication subsidy accreditation was disallowed. My (unsuccessful) argument was that form (i.e., design, genre, style, appearance) should not be confused with content. Part of the IKS paradigm is to present complicated scientific methods and theory in ways that can be appreciated alike by both specialist and nonspecialist readers, practitioners, and research cohorts (again, in this case, the †Khomani). Like with the Flame Series, the captivating design of *Engraved Landscape* animates its content and enhances the book's readability. Design does not vitiate its (post-structuralist) “science”—however defined (see Pretorius, in press).

The accessibility of the science (a participatory approach) is enhanced through design (which itself can be also conventionally considered a science). Additionally, our method is unique and cannot be negatively declared popular simply because we have applied theories of readability to the book's design, or because it departs from conventional scientific approaches. If IKS is to be acknowledged as a bona fide academic activity, then this kind of presentation must be also taken seriously as an innovative bona fide research exercise—even if it is deemed by positivistic or even postpositivistic criteria to have failed. The inclusion of Afrikaans and Nama are the research statements of our †Khomani informants who were methodologically integrated as coresearchers, as is common in works drawing on critical indigenous methodologies (see Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008).

Form as a kind of performativity is crystallised in *Engraved Landscape* and the Flame Series in multimedia formats which offer dramatic narratives, performative poetics, personal histories, and diarised analyses. While this kind of approach is not always useful or necessary, my argument is that it should be at least acknowledged as a kind of post-data post-structural genus.

### **IKS and Performative Rhetoric: I Hear Your Criticisms**

Now, while I am keenly aware that performative rhetoric can beguilingly wrap essentialist belief in the impression of scientific or other kinds of logic, we do need to open spaces for a dialogue between contending ontological positions. In South Africa, IKS is presented both as ideology and as practical poverty-alleviation strategy.<sup>5</sup> Either way, IKS aims to restore local specificity in the face of universalising and standardising or censoring knowledge across the world. A key claim is that many consider cultural alienation to have contributed to poverty, famine, disease, inequitable distribution of resources, and to a natural order deficit that has separated previously self-sustainable communities from the environment that previously supported them. The question, for this approach, is how to restore legitimacy, recognition, and respect in recovering self-responsibly, self-agency, and initiative with reference to what had worked in precolonial times and leveraging this repressed experience for the future (see United Nations University for Peace, 2015).

A problem with IKS is that much of it is rhetorical, performative, exhortatory, and mystificatory; as performed at African renaissance conferences it is call-and-response oratory at its best. Essentialising IKS discourses hail the academy with a mixture of rhetorical proofs and claims to the individuated self-referential, immediate interpretant of feeling (the central idea, the idea to which the sign gives rise) that can be generalised as communally referenced—embodied solely in the incarnate self, then extended to us, people who think, speak and who look like me, legitimised in the exclusionary discourses of “African values,” *ubuntu* [communitarianism], and African tradition (see Blankenberg, 1999). In Charles Sanders Peirce’s (1931–1935) terms, the final immediate interpretant (that which the community of scholars will agree is the common opinion) is reached through largely emotional appeals about the repressive hegemony of IKS’s alter ego, Eurocentricism and the need for its total displacement. IKS discourse is of course itself discursively constructed; it does not exist in and of itself.

It may be argued that IKS requires different systems of verification, but remaining issues are: 1) how to validate the “results” emanating from IKS and share them for the greater good, especially where traditional medicine is concerned; and as William Ellis (2014) argued, 2) how does the researcher valorise the evidence of experience in a nonessentialist manner? (see Berry & Clair, 2011); and most crucially, 3) how does one deal with a self-referential prelapsarian-type discourse (Eden before the Fall; *ubuntu*) that exists entirely within its own authority—one that assumes a priori “purity,” which does not permit critique and which cannot be faulted because of its claimed indigenous status. A reckless indigenisation of theory that ignores critique, often results in ethnically or ideologically exclusive discourses that hail genocide, no matter the society, mode of production, or educational level (see Tomaselli, 2012b, p. 30<sup>6</sup>). Given the salutary experiences of Nazism and apartheid, this is one key reason why Western scholars are suspicious of schemas that suppress critique, dialectical reasoning, and debate and that fail to disaggregate between belief and behaviour.

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<sup>5</sup> This was the clear message from most of the papers presented at the “Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Environmental Ethics: Implications for Peace-Building and Sustainable Development” conference held at the University of KwaZulu-Natal 28–30 April, 2015. Partners included University of Rwanda, University for Peace, National Research Foundation, and the South African Department of Science and Technology.

<sup>6</sup> My thanks to William Ellis for this last particular insight: Lecture, 29 June 2011, cited from Tomaselli (2014). Also see Ellis (2014).

The difference between autoethnography and IKS is helped by Anderson's (2006) distinction between *analytical* and *evocative*. The former examines and leverages—in my and my Durban colleagues' own approach—the relationship between self and other to devise new interactive encounters and ways of doing, theoretically knowing and writing; the dynamical interpretant in Peirce's terms. This analytical approach to autoethnography lends itself to a degree to triangulation and verification, if not abstraction.

Evocative autoethnography, equally an ethical practice, pursues a different kind of immediate interpretant, though largely self-referential, methodically excavating layers of meaning embedded in lived conditions and experiences of the individual storyteller, that are not generalisable and that do not problematise the researcher–researched relationship. Neither autoethnographic approach exists within its own authority. In contrast to IKS, autoethnography demands critique, by both the self and the other, and makes no claims to representing groups, classes, nations, or continents. It does not exclude anyone who is not like the autoethnographer.

Where rhetorical forms of IKS are basically a quality of feeling, existing within its own discursive authority, it is constructed as speaking for everyone claiming indigeneity. The question is how can IKS be absorbed into the academy as other ways of knowing? A new imaginery is required for this task.

## A New Imaginery

The post-Cold War Western neoliberal conjuncture has reshaped academia as a new site for commodity relations. This is what I mean by academentia framed by data and hierarchology alone. Properly done, postmodernism offers a critique of modernism. However, to be socially relevant, postmodernism (indeed, all paradigms) need to recover position, rights and justice. Educational institutions must recover critique, the hegemony of data and numerical methods needs to be ruptured and rethought, and universities should enable unruly pedagogies. A new unruly paradigm would be relevant, proactive, and acquisitive. This imaginery would:

- Be all-inclusive, democratising, useful, generating employable (critical) graduates. It will return authority (with a small *a*) to the citizenry (the aca-democracy) rather than reside solely in textuality, authority bureaucracy, hierarchology, or fuglemanship.
- Engage with critical and indigenous methodologies and invest analysis with new, diverse, pluralistic, ways of doing and making sense.

Critically examine commodification of the educational enterprise, and question power relations, as a means of equipping graduates with expertise to successfully manoeuvre within institutions for career purposes, while also to help ethically orient them in the context of social change imperatives. This practice would take into account the plurality of ontologies and identities that now jostle for legitimation and power in a postmodern pluralistic world where an antidiversity trend has nevertheless begun to emerge.

As I argued with regard to the Academy of Science for South Africa (ASSAf) Panel on the Future of the Humanities (see Consensus Panel, 2011) on which I served, what is to be protected is not Eurocentricism or Afrocentricism nor abstract notions of civilisation and hegemony of the canonical text (often argued to be the repository of civilisation, or social theory that claims universal application). Rather, the new imaginery requires that instead of defending paradigm fundamentalism and Western civilisation (and its philosophy made possible by the Enlightenment), that we rather critically engage this corpus and build a more inclusive polysemic dynamic humanities that responds

to the myriad contexts in which the diversity of multicultural generations now find themselves. Looking ahead, Denzin (2013) asked us to:

*Imagine a world without data, a world without method, a world not run by auditors and postpositivists. A world where no one counts data and data no longer count. Imagine a world where research is no longer a dirty word (Smith, 2012, p. 1), a world without coding schemes, a world without computer software programs to analyze qualitative data, a world where utopian dreams are paramount, and we all work for new politics of possibility (Madison, 2010). Just imagine. (p. 354)*

Social change is often used as a slogan for more of the same. That same is underpinned by the ideology of data (equated to truth) when it works in the service of repressive hegemonic interests. However, does positivism really make us demented though it might be blinding? In many ways, the processes of data gathering do separate subject from object, alienating the experiential (fly in the soup) from the observed (fly on the wall). That's why so many development projects fail; the supposed beneficiaries and their interpretants are ignored or discredited in the process.

While I don't share the call for the death of data, the ways in which data are used are often antidemocratic, but I do conclude that we need to study data as manifestations of ideology. While meanings are indeed always in motion, some meanings have to be prevented from resulting in genocide. The data reveals ever more starkly about inequality across the world but this is largely meaningless unless one has actually experienced poverty, dependency and helplessness, and resistance in a sustained way. It is from the experience, the auto, that solutions can be best found.

That's why autoethnography can open doors to different ways of making sense. Where IKS seems to draw on an imagined and generalised cultural, almost Jungian unconscious, autoethnography is a practice, a way of bringing issues, memories, and experiences to the surface—in the search for explanations and solutions.

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