

Sociotechnical Scaffolding for a Third Space: The Research Data KE Working Group

By Research Data Kenya Working Group¹

Chapter 6, Dissertation

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[chapter summary]

In 1972, the trio of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Henry Owuor Anyumba and Taban lo Liyong famously proposed abolishing the English Department at the University of Nairobi to make space for literary forms and aesthetics rooted in Kenya rather than outside (Musila 2019; Gikandi and Mwangi 2007). This was part of broader attempts to reorient extroverted systems of African scientific activities (Hountondji 1990). Paradoxically, the civic vibrancy of this earlier period has now been largely eclipsed, despite both putatively democratic governance and Nairobi's recent rise as "Silicon Savannah". Many people (both tech entrepreneurs and people living in the city's massive, under-resourced informal settlements) feel over-researched, without reciprocal benefit. And the halls of the university are quiet as students and lecturers churn out deliverables for external development consultancy projects and strive to publish in academic journals. In this chapter, we describe the budding work of the Research Data Kenya working group, established in 2019, that seeks to recollect the vibrancy of Nairobi's public sphere in the 1960s and 1970s, when there was active and creative visioning of a Pan-African future. Formed out of an interest in exploring the unique challenges and opportunities of sharing ethnographic research data, the working group details its current tactics and learnings to imagine the cascading effects of this work and strategize for the future.

Keywords: research collaboration, archive ethnography, open data, Kenya, sociality of knowledge, global South, decolonial knowledges, qualitative research

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¹ This chapter was written by a sub-group within the Research Data Share Design Team and consisted of, in alphabetical order, by last name: Aurelia Munene, Wangari Ngugi, Angela Okune, Hawi Rapudo, and Wambui Wamunyu.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

Preface

Introduction

Who is involved in this formation?

What is the provocation to the move towards seeking decolonial practices?

Challenge: Articulating an authentic problem space in a development research-saturated space

Challenge: Existing research pedagogy and approaches to education

What motivates this formation? What are our ways of working? Intentionality?

What are the tactics? How are the tactics ideologically driven?

Tactic: Constructing shared meanings and core values

Tactic: Slow and steady

Tactic: Low-Cost

What are the cascading effects of these tactics?

What future is implied?

The challenge of...playing the long-game without organizational structures

Closing Reflections

Preface

[written in first person by Angela Okune]

“I was proud to be a Kenyan today,” one of the panelists confided to me (AO) as we munched on the marinated chicken and soft chapati roll provided for lunch. “Oh interesting, why?” I probed, curious how the day-long workshop on research data archiving that I had organized tied into her sense of national pride. “Because Kenyans are doing good things. It can feel really alone when you are abroad there. There are a lot of deficit narratives. But to hear all the interesting things that people are doing here makes me feel part of a community.” Chiku smiled, her Maasai beaded headpiece jingling slightly as

she took a big sip of fresh mango juice. Abena, who presented on the same panel, also chimed in: “Yes, I never would have considered myself a ‘data’ person but coming together with all of these people to think about how we need to decolonize our knowledge and infrastructures has connected me with interesting people doing really great things here in our own Nairobi.”

The politics of knowledge production have often been reduced to questions of national or racial representation alone. “We need mechanisms to bring in and share work by more African researchers” is a response I have heard to growing, important critique about the lack of representation of African scholars in international academic work. Not to be dismissed, such limited articulations of the problem and solution nonetheless risk reproducing the same over-simplified fetishes and categories themselves, without necessarily undermining the asymmetrical knowledge infrastructures that position certain people and places over others. For example, Francis Nyamnjoh (2019) has explained that while most universities in postcolonial Africa have significantly Africanized their personnel, they have been less successful in Africanizing their curricula, pedagogical structures, and epistemologies. In my dissertation, I have extended this critique beyond the African university to turn the gaze also on the broader research assemblage in Kenya that includes private research firms, libraries and archives, and individual researchers. Building on Nyamnjoh’s critique, this project’s contribution is to think about the ways that sociotechnical knowledge infrastructures including the genres and venues of dominant research publishing, and care and storage of research data have also not been “Africanized” to allow for ownership by research communities located in Nairobi. By understanding how various Nairobi-based actors are caught within and attempting to push back against established research structures, I complicate notions of the politics of knowledge beyond race and nation and instead, focus on the ways that established technical systems; “international” standards and norms; dominant epistemologies; and acceptable languages and genres also reproduce global knowledge asymmetries.

Nairobi researchers do not fit into neat categories. From a young, tattooed Kenyan woman studying for her Certified Public Accountant (CPA) exams and translating research surveys into Swahili at night as a part-time hustle, to an overworked, white German man married to a Kenyan woman with two kids who acts as the go-between for a decentralized management team in New York, London, Beijing, San Francisco, and his Kenyan research team, these researchers are highly attuned to the global politics that structure their contributions to global knowledge production. Most recognize their positions within transnational research assemblages and sense that existing structures marginalize them and their contributions. Building an ethnographic data archive in/with/for Kenya then is not necessarily about enabling Kenyans to enter global conversations or showcasing their work so it becomes internationally recognized. It is as much about connecting “already global local”² players with each other in Nairobi to spur a

² Here, as I describe in more detail in the dissertation introduction, I am referring to the ways that the imperial and local are more co-dependent and co-produced than most acknowledge and the subsequent “already global” local subjectivities that are in play even prior to developmental attempts to make Kenyans legible to Westerners. This

collective imagining about what an ethnographic archive for Kenya's intellectual workers could be. As James Ferguson suggestively posed: "Can we learn to conceive, theoretically and politically, of a "grassroots" that would be not local, communal, and authentic, but worldly, well connected, and opportunistic? Are we ready for social movements that fight not "from below" but "across" using their "foreign policy" to fight struggles not against "the state" but against that hydra-headed transnational apparatus of banks, international agencies, and market institutions through which contemporary capitalist domination functions?" (Ferguson 2006: 107).

In the original conceptualization of my project and even as I conducted my fieldwork in Nairobi in 2019, I had no intent to organize a working group to continue the project goals after fieldwork completion. However, I was open to opportunities as they presented themselves and after spotting on Twitter an open call to organize an event with Book Bunk³ in early 2019 at one of Nairobi's oldest libraries, my good friend and former colleague Leonida (co-author of Chapter 2) and I applied. We were the only researchers selected as part of a year-long schedule of library programs run by artists and creatives. In November 2019, over 50 diverse members of the Nairobi research landscape (described in Chapter 3) gathered under the McMillan Library's soaring arches on a rainy Tuesday to discuss management, access, and responsibilities of open data and collective knowledge production in Kenya. The November 12th panel discussions were rich⁴, the question-and-answer sessions were heated, and we ran out of time before we ran out of topics to cover. The event was designed to create interest in both the Research Data Share platform and a gamut of questions about the kind of knowledge infrastructure needed in Kenya at this stage. It resulted in the formation of the Research Data Kenya (KE) Working Group, which has sustained the dialogue using the Research Data Share (RDS)⁵ site as a virtual workspace.

My broader dissertation looks at ways that Nairobi-based researchers have been attempting to address critiques of research extraction in a city with a long history of extroverted science (see discussion of this history in Chapter 1). Researchers with ties to the country, myself included, are grappling with what it might look like to enact more just, decolonial practices in knowledge production. This chapter describes the Research Data KE working group formation as an example where technical scaffolding (in the form of the RDS ethnographic data archive) and the social relations such scaffolding supports have created new semiotic possibility for articulations of a "third term" (Fortun and Bernstein 1998) for Nairobi research. In Fortun and Bernstein's conceptualization, charting of the "third terms" means attempting to articulate middle positions that reach beyond ossified binaries. Closely aligned with Homi Bhabha (1994)'s concept of the third space, this semiotic opening "is the space of change and creativity; it's where

concept builds on extensive work by those developing Theory from the South such as Raewyn Connell (2011), Jean and John Comaroff (2012), and Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2016) not to mention and other leading postcolonial scholars like Homi Bhabha (1994), and Francis Nyamnjoh (2019).

³ Learn more about Book Bunk's history and work in Chapter 4.

⁴ Proceedings from the event including video footage, distributed materials and photos are available here: <https://www.researchdatashare.org/content/proceedings-archiving-kenyas-past-and-futures>.

⁵ The Research Data Share (RDS) site is an instance of the Platform for Experimental Collaborative Ethnography. The platform serves as open infrastructure for individuals and groups in Kenya interested in archiving and sharing ethnographic data to contribute towards growing a collective knowledge commons.

the interesting problems and questions are; it's where things are unsettled, calling for experimentation; it's where the action is," (Fortun and Bernstein 1998, 274). Like Bhabha, who contended that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in what he called the "Third Space of enunciation" (1994, 37), Fortun and Bernstein suggested thinking in terms of articulations rather than theorizing, as a way to restore questions about the importance of language to the domains of sciences. They write: "to articulate is to give words to, to try to express, describe or invent something that wasn't previously a part of language or thought. If theory is the mental capture and representation of an illuminated world 'out there,' then an articulation is something one speaks rather than sees, that is expressed rather than mirrored. An articulation is something put as adequately as possible into words, rather than something seen in its true nature," (Fortun and Bernstein 1998, 39). This description aligns with what we have attempted here, articulating through our monthly working group calls what it is we want and are doing, and then doubling back, in discussions about and the writing of this chapter, to pay attention to what we have been able to articulate in our search to create a third space that moves away from well-worn binaries of expert/informant, student/teacher, and global/local. I have found this kind of recursive ethnographic practice both epistemologically generative as well as motivating and enriching for a growing (sense of) community.

In the text that follows, the working group leads not with theoretical interlocutors (of which there are many relevant possibilities), but rather with our own articulations of what we want to see moving forward. We invite others to help us theorize as we go. This dissertation chapter comes last in a triad of chapters, each focusing on a group of research actors in Nairobi striving for more decolonial research practices. Chapter 4 looked at libraries and archives in the city and how some have turned to progressive librarianship as a way to "decolonize without forgetting". Chapter 5 focused on initiatives by research companies foregrounding "context" to enact more ethical research. In this chapter we lay out the rationale for our collaborative formation and what it is the group seeks to hold space for. This group is distinct from those covered in the other two chapters in that it was not a group already in existence which I "studied" but rather one that *emerged* from my study and in which I would consider myself a key participant organizer. This distinction makes a difference because it changed the nature of our relationships. An working group member described during one of our calls⁶ the awkwardness she felt being a researcher from outside of a particular community—no matter that she shared the same nationality as the research participants—and how despite wanting to engage in a deep and authentic way, because of how she joined them "in a very, sometimes very problematic way [where] it's an organization which has sent you there, and then you never quite fit in, then you're out in a few minutes," she was not able to sincerely engage with the community, even as a concerned and allied researcher.⁷ The point here is that having more authentic research relations

⁶ Feb 25, 2021 call; 26:37

(<https://www.researchdatashare.org/content/2021feb26-working-group-writing-meetingaudio-recording>).

⁷ This member also later reflected in the writing of this chapter about how we Nairobi-based researchers contribute to extractive research in other Kenyan counties (and countries, for that matter). Because of Nairobi's position as an urban geographic hub (where offices of research funders are located; the most prestigious universities, etc.) and how

not only requires an understanding of normative research ethics, it also needs the appropriate circumstances under which research connections can spark more organically. Striving to catalyze more organic research connections does not detract from the fact that establishing grounds for such collaborations requires advance preparation and careful cultivation.⁸

In the introductory chapter of the dissertation, I detailed the advance preparations I made for my project. These included installing my own instance of the Platform for Experimental Collaborative Ethnography prior to beginning fieldwork and developing textual devices such as a collaboration agreement and data circulation form. This infrastructure allowed me to access, review, and archive existing data held by research groups during my fieldwork in Nairobi, which were in turn used as an elicitation device to produce new data. Towards the conclusion of the fieldwork, I also organized and co-hosted a public event, as mentioned above, which gave rise to the working group. The proceedings of the event were not only archived on the RDS ethnographic archive, they were also analyzed and publicly annotated with interlocutors.⁹ The technical scaffolding afforded by the RDS platform has enabled the conversation to continue. Members of the working group have used the PECE platform to gather and look at shared “cognizable objects” (Freire 1968) together, both synchronously and asynchronously. The platform itself has also served as a shared object of our attention as the group practiced the technical skills required to navigate its use (including how to upload, annotate artifacts for examples¹⁰) and reflected on that process. Finally, the platform also hosts an organizational archive¹¹ that holds our meeting records, including notes and audio recordings (recorded after verbal consent is received from all attendees).

Since March 2020, group members have identified artifacts--found in traditional media, social media, or captured by members themselves via photographs--and uploaded them towards producing an ethnographic archive of materials reflecting on diverse experiences of COVID-19 in Kenya¹². The work continues in bursts and spurts, but our group holds together through monthly conversations, which go on regardless of what has been done on the technical platform. I always leave the meetings buoyed by thoughtful conversation. I love learning from everyone else’s work and experiences and sharing my own ideas for their thoughts and feedback. It is important to clearly state that to me these are meetings not with “research participants” but with peers and friends with whom I listen and learn from and with whom I also share what I am

those in Nairobi are perceived to know more than people in rural counties, this member noted she had heard local communities question whether they needed someone to come from Nairobi because it is that they do not have good research skills.

⁸ There is a highly relevant special thematic issue that was published in 2019 the Journal of African Cultural Studies looking at global North and global South dynamics in international research and academic collaborations. Contributors included XXX [add details about the article contributions].

⁹ To see the public annotations, scroll to the bottom of this page and click the individual names listed at the bottom: <https://www.researchdatashare.org/content/proceedings-archiving-kenyas-past-and-futures>

¹⁰ Find tutorials I created for the group here: <https://www.researchdatashare.org/content/technical-onboarding-rds-platform/essay>.

¹¹ Link to the organizational archive is here (<https://www.researchdatashare.org/content/research-data-ke-design-group-organizational-archive/essay>).

¹² Find the essay here: <https://www.researchdatashare.org/content/news-and-public-discourse-covid-19-infromabout-kenya>.

learning.¹³ The recordings that we are making are not “data” to be used just for my own project; they are records of our conversations and an attempt to build collective public memory about what we are trying to figure out and how we are getting there. This reflects the difference between thinking about data as relational rather than as property.¹⁴ As relational data, the data produced by our group provides building blocks for us to practice careful listening to each other and ourselves and iterative (self)-observations. The data are not “owned” by anyone but are a collective resource (symbolized by a Creative Commons license¹⁵). Of course, we have differential stakes; for me, working on these questions forms the basis of my everyday work as a full-time doctoral student, while for others, this is not directly tied to their jobs. Even among the other academics involved, this collaborative formation and any outputs we produce may not “count” within their field. With these considerations, I have therefore been more than happy to take on the bulk of the organizing work: ensuring that the audio data is uploaded with proper meta-data; that meeting reminders go out in advance; crafting a tentative agenda; and setting up the Zoom link. Like I learned while collaborating on my orals documents with James Adams in 2018, collaboration as a process is ongoing and can have different valences over time, sometimes tightly coupled and at other periods, more loose (Adams and Okune 2018). I learned from collaborating with James that beyond individual inclinations or institutional structures (which have been the large focus of analyses of collaborations), external factors also affect the outcomes of a collaborative endeavor.¹⁶ In the RDS instance, the context of COVID-19, which began to spread globally just as we held our first meeting in March 2020, may have in fact helped to coalesce this collaborative formation. While there is no way to know, one of the working group contributors mentioned that personally she would likely not have had as much time to dedicate to RDS had she been in Nairobi working her usual job instead of sheltering in place in her hometown.

The standing title of this chapter has been the “deutero” chapter which is in reference to a set of “deutero” questions¹⁷ that Kim Fortun has developed as part of an analytic set thinking across scales and systems (K. Fortun 2009; M. Fortun and Fortun 2019). “Deutero” here refers to

¹³ I call attention to this because, as Kim Fortun has so eloquently described, there is a double bind experienced especially with ethnography conducted over the long term where “[t]he ethnographer knows her subject, in a manner increasingly divorced from it; the very quest for deep understanding and thick description produces an imperialist stance, a double bind,” (2015: 152). I tackle this structural challenge both with my own positioning in the group not as an ethnographer studying the group but as a lead facilitator organizer (for now until that role is taken up by another member of the Design Team) working to maintain, boost, and organize the RDS work.

¹⁴ There’s a lot more that can be said here and a broader literature from feminist STS thinking about relational data (ethics). **[TALK MORE ABOUT THIS HERE AND ADD CITES]**

¹⁵ For most RDS audio recordings, we apply a CC-by-NC-ND license that allows reusers to copy and distribute the material in any medium or format in unadapted form, for noncommercial purposes only, and as long as attribution is given to the creator. Learn more about the different creative commons licenses [here](#).

¹⁶ By external factors, I am referring to things external to the collaborative formation itself such as natural disasters, changes to the political environment, or personal losses. Our experiment in collaborative analysis with James was unfortunately cut short when he had a family emergency.

¹⁷ These questions--meant to be adaptable rather than formulaic--include but are not limited to: “How are people and organizations denoting and worrying about the phenomena you study? What reflective learning capacities are there in this setting and problem domain?” (Fortun, forthcoming).

Gregory Bateson's notion of "deutero learning" (1972) which is concerned with understanding the learning frameworks and assumptions that underpin what one learns and values. Bateson contrasted this kind of learning with rote learning, noting that deutero learning could lead to questioning of fundamental premises and habitual behaviors that are seldom questioned and usually taken as given. In an analysis of Bateson's concept, Tognetti (1999) argued that such questioning could lead to a reframing of the problem in a broader context that might allow participants to view a wider range of factors as affecting their capacity for action. So here, in the final chapter of this dissertation, we write as deutero actors, part of and studying the reflective learning capacities in Nairobi, leveraging what we see as the potential of research data, broadly construed, to serve as a cognizable object of our shared attention through which to further build our own deutero capacities as we reach for a third space. Following Franz Fanon, Achille Mbembe (2015) has argued that disengaging from a Eurocentric knowledge regime does not require substituting an "Afrocentric" one. Rather, it means developing new practices, especially new pedagogies and arrangements that democratize the knowledge institutions. The last 50 years have revealed that a strategy of replacement¹⁸ does not inherently disrupt existing societal power imbalances and status quo. Instead, new ways of constituting and organizing new forms of community appear more promising. In this chapter, we describe how the Research Data KE Working Group has moved together and the present tactics we have landed on towards establishing a research data archive for an "already global local" community in Nairobi.

¹⁸ By replacement, I am referring to the idea that replacing European bureaucrats with African bureaucrats will naturally lead to a break from colonial institutions and logics. Unfortunately, as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Franz Fanon, Mau Mau leaders and many other postcolonial intellectuals have written about, the decolonial experience of the 1960s revealed this assumption to be incorrect.

Introduction



On November 12, 2019, Angela Okune¹⁹ and Leonida Mutuku with support from Trevas Matathia, Syokau Mutonga, and the Book Bunk team hosted an event entitled “Archiving Kenya’s Past and Futures” at McMillan Library in Nairobi’s Central Business District.

The event brought together fifty researchers, archival specialists, open data technologists, and government representatives to think about the intersection between open data technologies, digital humanities and research data practices in Kenya. The aim of bringing such a diverse group together was, as anthropologist Emily Yates-Doerr (2019) has described, to foster a space of exchange and learning where collaborators come from places of difference and practice “careful equivocation” (Yates-Doerr, 2019) to unsettle the binaries often drawn between one object, category or term and another. The importance of facilitating connections across difference and emergent discursive communities crystalized and became increasingly apparent to me over the course of my project.

Scholars have challenged the assumption that an archive is a neutral, immutable, historical repository of information, arguing instead that the archives are a place where important decisions about what documents—and therefore whose history—are made (Arondekar, 2009; Stoler, 2009). In Angela’s opening presentation on November 12th, she reminded attendees that it was not just the contents in the archive that needed careful attention as we sought to decolonize knowledge; the infrastructures themselves also need to be carefully attended to. Knowledge infrastructures here broadly refers to the people, artifacts, institutions, and relations that generate, share, and maintain specific knowledge about human and natural worlds. Approaching

¹⁹ Given the multiple authors in this text, we use the third person tense. If first person tense, we indicate the speaker using initials: Angela Okune is indicated by AO; anyone who wants to remain anonymous is indicated by A; Aurelia Munene by AM; Wangari Ngugi by WN; and Hawi Rapudo by HR.

knowledge infrastructures as “relational” rather than as a “thing stripped from use” ([Star and Ruhleder](#) 1996), we pluralize the term to highlight, as Borgman (2020) notes, that knowledge infrastructures are not one system, but are numerous multi-layered and adaptive systems, each with unique origins and goals, that are always interfacing and interacting. We understand “knowledge infrastructures” to include built material spaces of institutions conducting and caring for academic and non-academic research, as well as technical platforms, and human and social networks that give these institutions vibrancy and life. This may include journal editorial boards, numeric and textual research data, peer review practices, scholarly societies, software systems, metadata standards, and research regulatory bodies. We do not restrict our understanding to solely universities, but also include libraries, archives, data repositories, scholarly publishers, and nonprofit and for-profit research organizations.

Ensuring African voices are found in historical archives and are represented at present-day academic conferences is an important, and unfortunately still not yet fully achieved milestone towards the broader aim of decolonizing knowledge production. But to stop at that goal misses the fact that decolonizing knowledge is also about actively curating, reflecting on, and building the archives we want in the future, including the socio-technical infrastructure on which materials sit. The importance of scholarly archiving is not only to save or preserve records, but to provide grounds for further questions, working with people to take care of the data while also documenting to understand the processes, relations and considerations at play. The point of this kind of an archive is to scaffold a deuterio capacity to think about the world and support a rethinking of habituated ways of understanding the world.

On Style and Writing Process

The subheaders used in this chapter are shared with two other chapters focused on other research formations in Nairobi. This [cross-cutting set of questions](#) draws out the motivations, tactics, and infrastructures underlying the pursuit of decolonial knowledge in Kenya. In order to answer these prompt questions, we turned to the digital record of our previous conversations. Borrowing from a style first attempted in this thought piece ([Okune et al. 2020](#)), with the aim of developing a first draft of the chapter, Angela went back to monthly recorded discussions of the working

group where members had discussed challenges observed with research in Nairobi.²⁰ She transcribed and included quotations from various members shared across several different working group conversations. This first draft was circulated to working group members who had committed to participating in this writing project and after all had a chance to read it, we hosted a discussion session. The edits/changes/points from the discussion were then integrated into a revised version of the chapter before this draft was shared with Angela's dissertation committee for review. The intent is for the content of this dissertation chapter to also find other forms, perhaps as a public manifesto document; a blog post; publication in a scholarly journal; or something else. At the very least, it will also be published on the RDS site together with its various supporting materials.

At times, the text foregrounds less a single analytic voice and instead mirrors the conversational tone of the engagements that the working group has on a monthly basis. By directly and extensively quoting from our conversations, this style seeks to allow the multiple contributors to present their thoughts in their own voice. This approach in writing process and style expands the bounds of an authorial contribution beyond the direct writing of the text, and considers instead conceptual engagement and participatory contribution as valid authorial contributions. This style of writing directly results from both practical and ethical choices. As scholars of the Writing Culture and subsequent generations of anthropologists have discussed at length, to try to write in "one voice" or on behalf of another, even with altruistic intent, can easily turn into a form of epistemic violence (ADD CITES). Recognizing that there is no way out of representational double binds, through this writing style, we attempt to reflect in our writing that which we are also attempting in our group, namely, to recognize and value our differences while also attempting to articulate and build a common goal together. We thank you in advance for the patience and generosity that is inevitably required when engaging with this kind of textual form and hope that you will gain something new in your reading of it. (And we invite you to share those insights back with us through an annotation here!)

²⁰ The full audio recordings, meeting notes, and additional supporting materials are published and available for re-analysis and re-use under a CC by SA 4.0 licence on the RDS site (visit: <https://www.researchdatashare.org/content/research-data-ke-design-group-organizational-archive>). These materials are made openly available to contribute to a digital record of perspectives on knowledge production in/on/by Kenya and to invite others to also lend their analytic perspectives to the issues we raise and contribute towards iterative analysis and ongoing dialogue.

Who is involved in this formation?

The Research Data KE working group members authoring this chapter have experience with different parts of the Nairobi research ecosystem: as students and faculty within Kenyan university systems; founders of non-profit organizations that conduct research; as subjects of research; and research consultants for development aid, multinational firms and international organizations like the UN and World Bank.

- One working group member holds a doctoral degree in Communications and has worked as a member of the teaching faculty in a private university in Nairobi. While she is usually situated in Nairobi, throughout most of 2020 to present, she has been based out of her hometown in a rural town in Kenya.
- Aurelia runs Eider Africa, her own non-profit initiative that provides peer research mentorship opportunities to African graduate students. She is also working with lecturers to transform the teaching and learning of research in universities. She has worked for various international organizations on humanitarian and development research projects. For most of 2020, she called from Nairobi, but she was also based for some time in Kampala, Uganda working on a public health consultancy project.
- Wangari is soon completing her doctorate in Clinical Psychology at a private university in Nairobi. She is a Lead Mentor in the peer mentoring group that Aurelia founded, Eider Africa.
- Hawi has recently completed his master's degree in a social sciences program at a private Kenyan university. He is also the founder of Kijiji Yeetu, a non-profit organization and the Secretary General of the Internet Society, Kenya. Hawi is based in Nairobi.
- Angela is completing her doctorate in sociocultural anthropology at a public university in California, USA. Her ties to Kenya began in 2009 when she conducted research in western Kenya as an undergraduate student. She moved to Nairobi in 2010 where she lived and worked until 2015 when she moved to California to begin her PhD. She moved back to Kenya in 2019 to conduct her doctoral fieldwork and is currently writing up her research while based in the San Francisco area.

In addition to our experiences being trained in the academy,²¹ all of the working group members writing this chapter also have experience working as consultants in Kenya on research projects. For most of us, that translates to using interviews, focus group discussions, and surveys to develop understandings of particular topics (usually determined through a call for proposals issued by an international development agency). We may or may not have been part of the design of the research instrument through which such data was collected.



Figure 1. Screenshot from our February 2021 zoom call. Clockwise from top left: An anonymous member, Angela Okune, Hawi Rapudo, Aurelia Munene, and Wangari Ngugi. During our calls we typically keep our video off to save on the cost of Internet data bundles (as is common practice in Kenya) and because it helps keep the call as clear as possible.

In our February 2021 call, nearly a year after we had first begun meeting monthly, we discussed why each of us had first been interested in joining the group and why we continued to attend. Wangari identified herself as a “naturally curious person” who found the open-endedness of qualitative research refreshing as compared to her highly structured quantitative research within a psychology lab at the University. “The curiosity of designing something that occurs to me as we don't know, the end, we just are creating as you go...that's like, super exciting. It's not anything I'm used to, I work in a quantitative science lab where I run computer experiments on

²¹ Other than Angela who schooled in the US, all members have been educated in Kenyan public and private schools. Aurelia received a master's degree from a university in the Netherlands.

memory and language, everything is predictable, I follow protocol, I read a manualized protocol. ... and so this [Research Data KE working group] is the complete opposite of that. I haven't met most of you in person. ... It's really interesting to be amongst strangers online, doing all these new things together.”

A member of the working group initially joined because “I know you [Angela], I know Leo, and I know some of the work that you've done, and I find you interesting and good people to work with. By the way, that's one of my research philosophies these days, that I must work with people that I find interesting and good to work with. And so when I joined and then you know, Aurelia is there and Aurelia is someone I know, she's another one interesting and good person to work with. I was like, alright, this is a group I'd like to be part of.”

We learned during a subsequent call that this member of the working group has been part of previous research “collaborations” with heavily paternalistic hierarchies of knowledge and extractive practices both of the researched communities and also within the Kenyan research team. She shared with us the bitter taste that resulted from such a project and why, as a result, she has since felt even more strongly about finding people who share an ethos of care with regards to research in all of her subsequent collaborations: “my experience of research has been that there's some... for lack of a better word, predatory collaborations that are out there. And you just have to be very wise about who you partner with.” “What continues to be interesting to me is to talk about qualitative research in a mainly quantitative environment...and to explore new aspects of qualitative work through the PECE platform.”

Hawi explained how he joined the group: “I happened to pass by Facebook and I found that Book Bunk was hosting a session. I did not know anybody in this group. So I said, let me go and attend. Given that I have a background in civil society organizations, I said, let me join, why can't I join. I joined the first Zoom, the second Zoom... and this is very important to me because I have been struggling in terms of how to engage in research work, especially research which is more traditional. ... What made me like the group further...the personal...we are able to express ourselves within the group. I've learned a lot from this group. I've learned the skills of trying to express and putting out your point the way you like it, and that is the real key issue that has come out very clearly. ... This group is quite instrumental in terms of trying to see the people of different diversity, trying to communicate what they want to communicate. And I'm looking forward to learning more.”

Aurelia chimed in: “I knew I was working with people either I have worked with before or people that at least we share ideas. I also joined ... because of the convenience of working online and using online differently. To do research...to ask questions, to annotate... It made sense to work online so I could participate. ... Part of the main reason... it’s part of the ongoing work that I feel I have been doing. The other day, my friend told me she’s a scholar activist. And I was like, okay, what’s that? So she told me you know, ‘questioning a lot the systems and trying to see, how can we have more equitable systems.’ So I was like, Okay, I think I kinda do that work.

She continued: “So I kinda feel this is part of the work I have been doing or trying to do without having a name to it, of really questioning the systems that I feel really push us African researchers out to the margins all the time. You try to bring in your voice. But because you don’t have money, you don’t have a platform that can even elevate your voice, you’re always on the margin. And being on the margin, you’re always assumed you don’t know. So someone speaks on your behalf. So this place was really an opportunity for me to speak, at the center, ... Like to really feel I have a safe place where I don’t feel like there’s someone auditing my ideas. And annotate as I wish, look for materials. And also these zoom calls, we talk so freely. And that is really important, I think for us who are in spaces where the powers are so powerful that sometimes you either give up or you just follow. So this, this is part of that large work that I’m trying to do even with the [Eider Africa] journal clubs, I think the bigger picture for me is to really support African researchers to feel they have a place, but also continually working towards making those spaces with them so that they can be able to, also tell their story. So these are very empowering, and also the connections with broader ideas of what other researchers who are doing similar work are thinking, I think that’s great. ... So I think that type of engagement is for me what has brought me here. And I think what will keep me here.”

Angela spoke last: “Maybe I can also share...I think you all know why I’m passionate about it. ... But the reason I keep going is that I believe that this work is super important. I mean, we opened [the Feb 2021 meeting] by talking about the ...emotions of following Kenyan politics and like this feeling of like being powerless...and I feel like research work seems so disconnected often from what’s happening every day and I think there needs to be a better way for social research to feel tapped into and able to...somebody said, the complexity...like to feel like there’s a better way we can really start to analyze the [complex] things going on around us on an everyday basis. And start to give us that analytic perspective so we can start to interpret and understand

really what's going on at a deeper level here. I think so many Kenyans already have such a keen analytic eye and like, are so critical in so many ways. And yet, when you look at the level of research, somehow, suddenly there's this like imposition of Western norms, or, you know, publishing journal standards, and suddenly, ... it suddenly becomes so formal, it becomes so external, that it feels also so disconnected again, right? So for me, it's like, how can we rethink the way research work relates to the world around us. And, and for me, it ended up being through data, you know...data very broadly speaking, and so, so...I think part of what I imagine is an interruption of the status quo, or trying to interject something to shift the dynamics, to change the dynamics, to unsettle some of what feels already determined. ...

[B]ecause there's so much research work and so much intellectual labor that goes on, can we find a way to, to really channel that in, in a way that can be energizing. ...A group like this is so exciting, because it's like, it's one thing to talk about it at the kind of theory level ...But then to actually put it in practice is often just a whole other ballgame. And so I think, as a working group, with an emphasis on the working, how do we actually then actualize many of these big desires that we have, or the goals that we have, like, how do we actually now start to do it? What does that even mean? What does that look like to say decolonizing knowledge practices or, or what have you, like, what does that look like? So I find that also interesting. And I think for me, that's also why PECE is exciting. It's not the answer, and it's definitely not perfect, at all, no technology is. But I think it gives us something to work with as like a placeholder, if you will, to think with and to learn by doing.”

A member of the working group responded: “I think everything is actually related. Why do our politics not work? Why does our research not work? Why is it that we have such boring, disconnected research studies? And yet, when we interact amongst ourselves, we know how to analyze matters... There's a box in which we are put. And we are put in those boxes by the power structures, so to speak. But when we break free of the power structures and think through things for ourselves, it's different.

“And I was just thinking about even this whole discussion about BBI [the national government’s “Building Bridges Initiative” attempt to change the national constitution]²². Right

²² Discussions about BBI have dominated Kenyan politics and news since late 2019. The BBI proposal would expand the executive in what its proponents have billed as an attempt to curb cycles of election-related violence in Kenya by creating 70 new constituencies, returning the role of cabinet ministers to elected members of parliament, and creating new powerful posts: a prime minister, two deputies and an official leader of the parliamentary opposition. Critics argue that adopting the reforms would burden a country already struggling with debt and push up

now, the BBI discussion is being reduced to, do you support, the yes side or the no side? What if you don't support either side? You're just critically questioning what is this thing? Why must it be done now? ... No one is even talking about the vaccine. Here we are losing 2 billion [Kenyan Shillings] a day.²³ But we just want to talk about, 'are you yes [in favor of BBI], or are you no [not in favor of BBI]'. So ... there are only certain kinds of answers. But a space like this [Research Data Share KE group], if we think about it, is actually a dangerous space. Because we are saying no, I'm not either this or that. I'm actually my own person, I am independent... So whether we are talking research, or whether we are talking politics, I think we are actually doing the same thing. You're coming against the typical status quo... To think independently is not bad. You actually want more people thinking independently. Because you get better ideas in the process because everyone has an equal say in contributing.”

What is the provocation to the move towards seeking decolonial practices?

“When you participate in so many researches and you don't know what is happening [as a result] and it's not changing the environment that we are in, you feel like wasted. You keep on asking questions, but this data will go where???? The one who takes data will never come back to us like okay, we took this and these are the results. So you feel wasted,” a Kibera resident and member of our wider Research Data KE working group, Nicera Wanjiru explained to Angela during a discussion held on October 29, 2019.²⁴ These sentiments are shared by many who have participated in research projects in Kenya and their critique of feeling “over-researched” has become largely common knowledge by many working in research in Kenya. These sentiments were a motivating factor for Angela’s project and was the opening provocation for the November 2019 event at McMillan library,²⁵ laying the grounds for the discussion on open data and research

the parliament’s already exorbitant wage bill while creating more opportunities for patronage and corruption. Throughout 2020, the current president Kenyatta and his former political rival, now turned ally, Odinga toured the country rallying support for the initiative in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. Critics see the initiative as a move for Kenyatta, who is not allowed to seek a third presidential term in 2022, to stay in power. In June 2021, the Kenyan High Court ruled that the [BBI proposal was unconstitutional](#). As of [June 24, 2021](#), the ruling is now being appealed.

²³ See <https://citizentv.co.ke/news/president-kenyatta-says-over-ksh-2-billion-is-stolen-from-govt-daily-4563455/> for context.

²⁴ Full transcript of the discussion can be found [here](#) as part of an essay on experiences of being “over-researched.”

²⁵ Find the slideshow presentation that was used [here](#).

responsibilities. This concern--that research feels largely extractive rather than regenerative--resonated with those who joined the Research Data KE working group.

“One of the biggest discomforts is the [research] feedback process,” Hawi mentioned. “The beneficiaries of research have always questioned the feedback process. And that's where the biggest problem lies: how do we connect research to people's needs.” Aurelia chimes in based on her experience as a development research consultant attuned to the unequal grounds of international research “collaborations”:²⁶ “For me the disconnection I have felt is in how I go to communities to do research [as an externally paid, “local” Kenyan research consultant]. First of all, research that they [research participants] did not know about, problems they did not even know they had, and how I sit uncomfortably with them, trying to promote an agenda...and now they've already figured out that you could be here just because you're earning money [as a research consultant hired to do the work]. And not really because you're interested. Yet I am interested in contributing positively to the community.

“And that disconnection has always been very uncomfortable to me. How am I going to communities to change them and I'm from...wherever I am... anyway, like I want to be part of them, but I'm not part of them because how I have joined them is in a very, sometimes very problematic way. It's an organization which has sent you there, and then you never quite fit in, then you're out in a few minutes. In a few hours, you've done an FGD [Focus Group Discussion]. And so that disconnection for me has been very uncomfortable. Of course, I don't know how to resolve it. But I kind of feel like by being in this space, we are talking about some of those ways that research has really created divides rather than unite. And that's an ongoing discussion we should continue having.”

In our conversations, we discussed two core aspects of the research landscape in Nairobi that we want to interrupt as Research Data KE. We mention them first briefly before detailing them in more depth in the following subsections. First, we have observed and experienced first-hand the challenge of articulating what feels like an authentic problem in a hyper-saturated discursive research and development space. Postcolonial scholar De Sousa Santos (2014) asserted that the global processes of knowledge production have historically been shaped and solidified by a set of privileged, powerful, and exclusive actors and institutions. These powerful actors dictate the direction of research through their capital and supporting infrastructure

²⁶ Feb 25, 2021 call; 26:37.

including open access publication platforms and impact audit mechanisms. This has led to both over-saturation of research on particular topics and people, as well as incomplete and narrow understandings of the world. David Hess has referred to “undone science” where there are “areas of research ... left unfunded, incomplete, or generally ignored but that social movements or civil society organizations often identify as worthy of more research” (Frickel et al. 2010: 444). We see a need for new ways of being able to articulate the still “undone” research.

Second, we find that existing approaches to research pedagogy in Kenya still operate using what critical pedagogy scholar Paulo Freire termed the “banking model” where students are imagined as containers to be filled with knowledge. In this kind of banking model, Freire noted the individual learner is interpellated as a spectator, not a “re-creator” (1968: 75). In such a banking model, the hierarchy between teacher and student is dehumanizing and perpetuates oppression. Instead, Freire articulated that “liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it.” Fostering this kind of consciousness requires a pedagogical approach where “student-teachers” are no longer docile listeners but interpellated as “critical co-investigators,” (1968: 81). We see great potential in using the RDS space to serve as a catalyst for supporting more critical research pedagogy and disrupting existing ways of teaching and practicing research.

Challenge: Articulating an authentic problem space in a development research-saturated space

In his work on scientific objectivity, Peter Galison described how in the 1800s, Samuel Coleridge first popularized the English term “objectivity” in its modern sense as knowledge not dependent on human whims and desires. This work was important in introducing the idea that the human will would need to be repressed in order for “true” knowledge to emerge from nature. Notions about this ascetic scientist subject continue to undergird many contemporary understandings about proper scientific method. As social scientists, we are still taught to wait and let the relevant issues from “the field” emerge so that a researcher’s own biased conceptualizations are not imposed on a project in advance. However, social scientists of science have documented the ways in which research value is always semiotically produced. As Kim Fortun articulated, “one thus must be wary of what seems of organic or essential interest, aware that what a researcher sees—as important [or] as problematic—is always overdetermined,” (2015: 155). As long-time

participant observers of the Kenyan research ecosystem, we have noted how the funding of research in Kenya overdetermines the research domains and project topics considered to be of critical interest. This appears true across global contexts (CITES to the study of the NSF; Hess; etc.) but we find that in Kenya's postcolonial and "structurally adjusted" context where the majority of financial research support comes from external sources,²⁷ an externally-set funding agenda further exacerbates the conditions of an over-determined research space where specific issues are seen as most pressing and others are under-studied.²⁸ David Hess has referred to "undone science" where there are "areas of research ... left unfunded, incomplete, or generally ignored but that social movements or civil society organizations often identify as worthy of more research" (Frickel et al. 2010: 444). We see a need for new ways of being able to explore, articulate, and conduct the "undone science" (Hess XXXX) considered necessary by endogenous actors in Nairobi rather than waiting for or trying to appeal to donor-led Calls for Proposals²⁹ ("CFPs").³⁰

The ability to articulate an endogenous research agenda is hampered by the fact that nearly every term with potential has been taken up and over-burdened with donor baggage. "Capacity", "community", "collaboration"... labeling these terms "buzzwords" (Kothari ADD CITE) only begins to describe how overused they feel. This is part of the challenge of doing research in a context with such a heavy development influence. As soon as a seemingly new and fresh concept emerges, donor agencies latch on, drafting their next calls for proposals and drafting guidelines and budgets (cite work on the bureaucracy of the development machine). "Adaptation", "resilience", "innovation" ... But if one is to secure funding for research--the

²⁷ I WISH WE COULD FIND DATA TO GIVE A QUANTITATIVE SENSE OF THIS. Can we find donor funding data? There's a report from UKAID (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5ef4acb5d3bf7f7145b21a22/NA_report_Kenya_Dec_2019_Heart.pdf) that has some info. Will look for other sources, hopefully get some local ones.

²⁸ This does not appear to be unique to Kenya alone but given that we are most familiar with the Kenyan context, we share from this perspective and look forward to learning from others whether or not our experience resonates with them as well. Hebe Vessuri has written about the South American experience and the ways that donor funding dominate the scientific research agenda as well.

²⁹ Known as "CFPs", a call for proposals is one mechanism through which funders solicit research project proposals. The research conceptual framework and overarching literature are usually included in the call and applicants are expected to submit research proposals that align with those stated framing parameters.

³⁰ This is where a strong national government investment in local research could be significant for changing the dynamics of research funding in the country. Unfortunately, despite the establishment of the National Research Fund in 2015 (?), the national government's support of research work, especially of social science and humanities work, is slim to none. Any funding distributed is usually directed to those working in the STEM field.

world over--one needs to play the buzzword game. You need to sprinkle your research proposal with the right language if you are to obtain the requisite funding to further your research. My iHub Research colleagues and I (AO) jokingly used to keep a growing list on a whiteboard of the buzzwords to insert into our grant proposals. But the double bind of recognizing the over-used analytic frames and needing to be proficient and prolific in them to secure a research grant not only inevitably shaped the project's analytic scope and purpose, it also, eventually, seemed to lead to heavily cynical researchers. In Nairobi's heavily developmental landscape, the loud piper's song (and the need to tune one's research to match in order to get funding) feels like it has made it particularly hard for local researchers to articulate what feels like an authentic research agenda.

In September 2020, members of the writing group had a discussion with Kim Fortun to talk about Gregory Bateson's notion of deuterio learning and double bind and how it might apply to our group's work.³¹ During the call, she asked us: "what kind of data infrastructure and data availability would actually produce that kind of change in Nairobi, where you have parents mobilized as education activists, or people mobilized for transportation infrastructure, where you actually have a citizenry that's asking something..." (2020, 45:48). Angela noted on the call that the idea of helping to promote an engaged citizenry has been part of the narrative about why open data is important for improved governance. But the promise of a citizenry activated by open data to take action and hold the government to account does not appear to have transpired in quite the way that donors and community open data advocates had hoped.

Responding to Kim's prompt about what could help bring a more engaged public, Angela mentioned: "[that was] the orienting ideal that started a lot of the open data movement push. ... an active citizenry that will hold the government to account, you know, using information that they now have access to, that used to be behind closed walls, but now people can access and then they get energized, and then they want to hold [leaders] accountable. But then that never really played out. And then it became a tired kind of narrative that was then used to get donor money. And then you know, open data for 'better governance' and for 'transparency' and 'accountability', like those are all key buzzwords, you know, that ended up being just used on both ends from those who apply for funding, and then the funders who give them out, like in

³¹ Find the full transcript of the discussion here (<https://www.researchdatashare.org/content/2020sept24-writing-meetingtranscript>).

their calls for proposals, you know, it just became kind of ... the next thing that then got funded," (2020, 52:06). Fortun called out this double bind, noting that it's *not* that more transparency and a mobilized citizenry are *not* needed. But even that has been locked into a certain frame so it has become a kind of cynical endeavor. Those kinds of contradictions require researchers in Nairobi to creatively imagine if and how data infrastructure can help support collaborative thinking together within such a paradoxical space.

Challenge: Existing research pedagogy and approaches to education

The Research Data Share KE group has discussed at length the entrenched hierarchies in the research process (the all-knowing supervisor who determines the speed and the nature of postgraduate student work) as well as biases in research structures and norms. Quantitative research, for example, is considered more “weighty” and “scientific” compared to qualitative research. Theoretical constructs developed in American and European centers--entrenched through research texts and resources--are applied to Kenyan research contexts. Combined, these practices result in a presumption of the superiority of particular knowledge systems and sources, and little value is placed on the heterogeneity of populations, nuance in experience, or diversity of perspective. Analysts of the Kenyan university system, which was established by and for the British settler colonialists³², have long grappled with questions of relevance and application of knowledge ([Okune, 2018](#)). Africans in the 1930s rejected a British plan to substitute a “purely literary” British education for one that was supposedly more adapted to local context and environment ([Whitehead, 2005](#)). Such a British “adaptation” argument was seen as a ploy to keep control over Africans and slow the process of socioeconomic change on the continent. Under colonial rule, the administration used racial categories to say that Africans did not need training in complex thinking and that Africans only needed technical education to train them for work (Njoya, 2018). Racist theories of the time claimed that African brains stopped developing after reaching teenage years (Campbell, 2008). Discussions around decolonizing the university in the 1960s grappled directly with this colonial legacy, how to reorganize the university to center African knowledges and more closely reflect the experiences of and for African students. The time and space allowed for these important discussions of restructuring was, however,

³² The Royal Technical College in Nairobi, which would eventually become the University of Nairobi, was opened by Princess Margaret in 1956 (see video footage of the visit [here](#)). The first students were exclusively from white colonial settler families. The college was opened the same year that Kenyan freedom fighter Field Marshall Dedan Kimathi was captured (Gikandi and Mwangi 2007: xv).

short-lived. In the 1980s, Structural Adjustment Programmes imposed by Bretton Woods institutions³³ resulted in the Government reducing its per capita expenditure on various social services including education. Previously state-subsidized university education came under a cost sharing plan that made the cost of education increasingly unaffordable for students from poor backgrounds. Kenyan scholars have detailed some of the cascading effects of the introduction of cost-sharing plans, especially the increased phenomenon of university students' involvement in income generating activities (IGAs) on campus (Kamau 2005; Muyia 1996).

After Kenya's independence in 1963, less than ten years after the official opening of the first college in Nairobi, a concern about employment became the dominant narrative about the value of a university education.³⁴ As Njoya noted: “[t]he humanistic subjects were now [described as] irrelevant in Africa not because we are black, but because they will not get us employed,”³⁵ (2018). This trend would only strengthen in subsequent decades.

To better understand contemporary perspectives of researchers in Nairobi, in October and November 2020, the working group circulated a survey amongst researchers in Kenya.³⁶ Of the twenty respondents, most participants were students attending Kenyan universities. As we read

³³ The first adjustment policies were between 1980-84 and a second period of adjustment was between 1985 - 1991. For more details and the ramifications on the education sector in Kenya, see Muasya (2012).

³⁴ In a World Bank's 1974 Education Sector Policy Paper, it was argued that educational content in developing countries was “dysfunctional” because it was “more theoretical and abstract and less practical” (World Bank 1974). Such rhetoric paved the way for the Bank to restrict government borrowing for secondary education investments solely towards physical infrastructure such as metal and woodshops for boys, and materials for domestic science for girls as these subjects were thought to be more “practical” (Heyneman 2003). This echoes colonial ideas about the need for a more “Africanized” curriculum that is practical in nature and aims to develop a “stable peasantry” (Ball 1983). As late as the 1990s, the World Bank (1988, 1994b, 1994a) suggested that Africa had no need for universities because the return on investment was too low and unjustifiable. The Bank argued that Africa would be better served by investing in primary education and vocational education, and it was assumed that training African students in universities abroad would be cheaper, more cost effective and beneficial. Malawian historian Paul Zeleza (2007, 2016) noted that more recent World Bank publications and pronouncements suggest a radical rethinking of the anti-university orientation of the 1990s. While the World Bank today appears to be placing importance on developing Africa's higher education system (2016, 2017), the strong market-instrumentalist logic permeating its approach undermines any notion of higher education as a public and intellectual good. This disintegration of the idea of education as a public good enables outside interests to lay claim to filling the perceived skills gap left by Kenyan universities through private trainings sponsored by groups like the World Bank, academic private publishers like Springer and Elsevier, or foreign humanitarian organizations.

³⁵ See this 2017 news article for statements by Deputy President and likely 2022 presidential candidate William Ruto that is illustrative of this point:
<https://nation.africa/kenya/news/education/we-need-skilled-workers-to-prosper-dp-ruto-says-382376>.

³⁶ The working group drafted survey questions together then created a digital typeform survey which we sent the electronic link to participants of the Nov. 12, 2019 meeting and also circulated within our own research circles including students of the Eider Africa journal club.

the survey responses, we quickly noticed that the majority of these students/researchers were self-funded (16 of the 20 respondents). Only one person received funding from a Kenyan government agency. In discussions about this, we noted the incredible pressure and stress--both financial and emotional--that this puts on a student. In addition to struggling to pay their way through postgraduate study programs, not to mention using personal funds to cover research costs, these students also lead fragmented, stressed lives trying to raise funds to cover their everyday expenses and personal obligations. This experience of “hustling” even while within the university³⁷ appears to be true of both students and lecturers. In other discussions, we have identified that overburdened lecturers supervise a large number of students and so students are unable to receive the mentorship they seek. Nevertheless, it is not helpful to point blame at the individual lecturers since lecturers themselves are often campus-hopping from one temporary position to the next in order to generate enough income to survive. Lecturers also struggle with the time and support to conduct their own research.

Selected responses from RDS Survey (Nov 2020) *(full results available on the [RDS portal](#))*

How would you describe research in Nairobi?

- “Intensive, academic, uncoordinated, limited policy execution”
- “Complex, Competitive, Isolating, Interesting Dynamics”
- “Raw”
- “Cumbersome due to bureaucracy, limited research funding”
- “Ad hoc basis”
- “Closed; research data is really done and 'kept' with gatekeepers.”
- “Some sites are over studied, some mobilizers often act as gate keepers, social science studies encounter template responses, it's expensive as people expect to be paid 'transport reimbursement' etc”
- “Inaccessible, for the elite”
- “Expensive”
- “Tedious”
- “Exciting”
- “Slow”

What would you like to see happen as a result of opening up research data in the next ten years?

- “Interrogation of processes at a deeper level.”
- “Meaningful collaboration”

³⁷ There has been significant literature on the phenomenon of “hustling” within the context of African entrepreneurship, especially tech entrepreneurship where

- “Better informed society”
- “Qualitative research topics as emergent issues from existing data to be worked on rather than data duplication.”
- “Better use of data by policy makers, higher quality of university graduates”
- “Improved health and social capital in Kenya”

Do you have any specific ideas of things that you would like to see done by Nairobi research communit(ies)?

- “citizen data sessions, smart citizen projects, nairobi metropolitan data share campaign”
- “collaborative events”; “forums”; “annual conference”
- “more research collaboration”
- “open centres”; “maybe co-laboratories where ideas across all fields of studies can be shared”
- “be more inclusive, actually use data collected, stop corruption”
- “Informal goat eating parties”
- “Project: profiling data findings”

Source: Research Data Share Survey, public results available [here](#).

There have been several attempts at revising the Kenyan education curriculum, most recently in 2017-2019. However, as critical education scholar Wandia Njoya has explained, the aim of such reforms has not been to fix a broken education system but rather to better establish a neoliberal “university-to-workplace” pipeline of workers. In a transcribed interview published by the journal *Ufahamu* (2018), Njoya noted: “the new curriculum is designed to train workers without broad-based thinking and creative skills, despite government officials claiming the contrary. There is widespread privatization of social services ... These areas are being sold over to foreign capital, which will definitely need workers, but not citizens who ask critical questions about their nation's sovereignty in the use of resources. So the government wants to put in place an education system that suppresses intellectual growth of the Kenyan people,” (2018).

She further explained the “reforms” as being a result of pressure on government to “act” and to fulfill a sense of donor-aid promoted “efficiency” (and profit from tenders and donor aid that may accrue): “[there is] contempt for public discussion, in the name of discussions delaying action, [which] is part of the neoliberal, anti-African contempt for African involvement in African decisions. As Issa Shivji has reminded us, Western donors have been engaged in an ideological onslaught against African reflection for decades, in the name of Africans being so desperate, that dialogue is a luxury. That ideology has been used by the Kenyan state to silence

public discussions and public dissent. Any time citizens raise questions, there is a backlash in the form of "you are questioning but doing nothing concrete," or on social media, we are called 'keyboard warriors,' and asked what our solution is," (2018). As RDS, we pick up from this point later in this chapter when we describe our tactic of "slow and steady". This tactic is a direct response to the usual performance of output-oriented "efficiency" that dominates most research work in Kenya and which we see as being to the detriment of deep dialogue and extended discussions.

What motivates this formation? What are our ways of working? Intentionality?

"Upon termination of the Agreement, or any other termination of Consultant's services for the Contractor, all records, drawings, notebooks, research questionnaires, reports, data, and other documents both in soft and hard copies pertaining to any Confidential Information of the Client, whether prepared by Consultant or others, and any material, specimens, equipment, tools or other devices owned by the Contractor then in Consultant's possession, and all copies of any documents, shall be returned to the Client, except Consultant may keep one copy of all documents for his or her files (which copy shall be subject to the confidentiality and non-use requirements set out in this Agreement)."

This is an example of a Kenyan research consultancy contract. In short, it says that the work done by the researcher is not in fact the researcher's to keep or talk about. This is a concrete example of scientific extroversion (Hountondji 1992), a concept that this dissertation refers to severally to characterize the research apparatus in Kenya. This is also a concrete example illustrating imperialist logics at work in existing knowledge infrastructure in Nairobi that our Research Data Share KE group is working against. In building a public knowledge commons established on sharing and re-use, we see ourselves as directly attempting to subvert a competitive intellectual property regime where research is viewed as individual property.³⁸

In the transdisciplinary literature on research collaboration, communication and [deliberation](#) (Aellah et al. 2016) has been mentioned as important to thinking about successful interpersonal relationships and collaborative work. However, there has been little attention paid

³⁸ We did not have the time to explore this in depth here, but suggest there are important intersections to explore between Black Studies and Cheryl Harris' work on "Whiteness as Property" and how research has come to be regarded as property.

to the underlying technical and data infrastructures needed to facilitate collaboration at many different stages (e.g. see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#)). While a handful of technology platforms exist to work on ethnographic data, most of these are either for individual or team use (e.g. N-Vivo, AtlasTI, MaxQDA) or are focused on presentation or annotation of results rather than collaborative analysis (e.g. USC's [Scalar](#); MIT's [PubPub](#) and [Humanities Commons](#)). Thus, a key feature and way of working for the working group has been through the technical infrastructure that has served as both the object of our attention as well as provided the scaffolding for collaboratively analyzing found and created artifacts. We have begun to describe this work as building a digital archive³⁹ that continually provides material, inspiration, support, and community for the kinds of critique that researchers committed to decolonizing existing structures of knowledge and/or society would like to make. This is an archive to help build not only diverse, inspiring, convincing and analytically strong lines of thought, but strong communities of/with allies that cut across sectors, nation-states, generation, class and all of the other, usual categorical boundaries. In our discussions, we have come to identify that such an archive requires:

time and space	space to “figure things out” where all are respected and seen to have important contributions to make. Here titles, positions, accolades, previous outputs and accomplishments are backgrounded because they do not necessarily help us to be present in the here and now and can unhelpfully promote a culture of deference to particular individuals or dominant epistemologies. Instead, all are encouraged to share. A culture of nurturing support has been strongly established, and because of these strong bonds, members of the Research Data Share KE group appear comfortable respectfully disagreeing with each other as well.
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³⁹ The term data repository is similar if not functionally interchangeable with our use of the term “archive” here. But we use archive to indicate both the more textual and media dominant forms of data that we engage with; to draw upon and contribute to the growing literatures around critical archive studies; and also because we find that there is more analytic opening around the term which does not carry as much of an assumption of “depositing” and allows for a more lively engagement around it over time.

Experimental governance structures	Decentralized but still collaborative. Figuring out how and who governs the RDS site (and how) is ongoing work. When we had our first non-Kenyan applicant who wanted to join the working group, we had to quickly discuss the kind of inclusion/exclusion criteria we were using for our group. We determined that “Working Group members are expected to be interested in learning from/about Kenya and its research data and its sociocultural systems. Members do not necessarily need to have experience having lived or worked in Kenya to participate.”
Ongoing reflexive practices	We find it important to constantly pay attention to the margins we inevitably create with our own actions. What mechanisms can we put into play to keep ourselves and each other accountable? Constant paying attention to the power structures we are all caught in not to just seek a way out of it, nor to become comfortable in our own complicity, but to stay with the discomfort and to constantly question why we do the research we do.

When asked "[w]hat do you worry about related to open data in Kenya... Tell me a little bit about what would be a disappointing result, 10 years from now with open data," a member of the working group noted: "I think [it] would be a disappointment....if further down the road, we don't do much with open data...My fear is that there will be no ripple effect. We'll be stuck at, let's get the budget information. And we don't see the bigger picture," (2020, 12:06). In other words, if data just remains archived, but doesn't activate people to use that information to take action, that would be disappointing.

Towards this goal, beyond the RDS technical platform, we are also trying to test out new ways of working together and new kinds of collaborative relations (that are not based on donor-funding or a clear sense of “what is in it for me”). We come as peers with equal voice despite our differences and various life positions (gender, nationality, educational attainment, field of training, and so on). We use first names to refer to each other and speak informally. We

try to be mindful of not taking up too much space so that others can also chime in. We usually do not use video for a variety of reasons including Internet bandwidth, Zoom fatigue, and practical purposes.

At least six months into the formation of our working group, during one of our monthly Working Group discussions (recording [here](#); transcript [here](#)), we focused on new articulations of the problem space of Nairobi open (research) data. During the call, the group agreed that while there's already collaborative knowledge production underway in Nairobi, it's often collaborative knowledge production within constricting and usually predefined terms such as within donor-driven projects where you know in advance what you're producing. This tends to reduce research to a rote exercise and performance rather than a generative, exploratory investigation. Nairobi, considered by many to be hyper-saturated with certain kinds of research, is also saturated with postcolonial thick data⁴⁰ (Murphy 2017). Our call for new research data practices and infrastructures then is not necessarily a call for more data⁴¹, but should be understood as a call for being creative with data in ways that will produce new forms of knowledge and practices that attend to changing conditions. Building data capacity is then not just about increased technical capacity to fill a dearth in available datasets, but also about building skills around determining how and which data are leveraged to make a point/take action. This kind of capacity promises to help continually refresh researcher's tactics to understanding and addressing changing local and global conditions.

What are the tactics? How are the tactics ideologically driven?

The first call of the Research Data KE working group took place on March 19, 2020⁴², as cities around the world began to shelter in place with the global spread of COVID-19. During that first call we decided to hold monthly virtual meetings on the second Thursday of every month at 7 AM PST / 5 PM EAT. We continue to hold this meeting and have augmented it with a second “writing” meeting during which time we have been working on writing this chapter. Holding

⁴⁰ Michelle Murphy (2017) uses the term “thick data” to describe the dense enumeration practices in the twentieth century. They argue that postcolonial thick data is entangled with the history of twenty-first-century big data as well as settler colonial practices of counting and audit more generally that have been used against Indigenous people for generations.

⁴¹ There is an unevenness to the data collected that has led to heavy data saturation around particular topics and regions as well as “data deserts” or “missing data” (Onuoha 2016) in other areas.

⁴² The audio recording from the call, recorded and shared with verbal consent from all participants, can be found [here](#).

these steady monthly calls has been an important way to maintain our collective over time. On the first call we also decided to set-up a Whatsapp group⁴³ as well as an email listserv⁴⁴ to keep communications ongoing.

Tactic: Constructing shared meanings and core values

To thinkers in the school of pragmatic philosophy of science, a “community of inquiry” is formed when people engage in a collaborative process of conceptual or empirical inquiry to identify shared problems and to develop agreeable solutions. One of the leading pragmatists, John Dewey, held that communication is particularly important because it serves as a process through which “a universe of shared meanings” is constructed that brings about an “enhancement of the immediate quality of experience for those who participate in it,” (Neubert 2009: 23). Based on our experiences organizing various communities, we have found that when there is a quick influx of new people, the grounding principles that originally brought the founding group together can be forgotten or quickly dissipate. So, building off of the experience of Aurelia and Wangari who work on running Eider Africa’s Journal Clubs and developed a handbook of their values that all new members review, we agreed that an explicit articulation of our values was important. The writing of this chapter and the conversations that informed it were part of our attempt to articulate these values. In our March 2021 call where we explicitly focused on this, Hawi mentioned that the monthly dialogues were an important tactic of the group. It provided a space where people felt free to express their views and even uncertain musings (“I don’t know exactly but I’m just talking aloud”). As Hawi nicely put it: “We believe that whatever someone is saying, there's value in it,” (2021).

A member of the working group has also articulated⁴⁵ that “this group is interesting, because it goes against the norms we have, where we have hierarchy, top-down, you know, the supervisors who know everything telling us, you know wannabe researchers, things. There's none of that here. We come as peers. And we come as peers who can learn from one another, it doesn't matter, at this point, that maybe some of us have a doctorate, some of us are in the process of getting a doctorate, or not at all, that's irrelevant. What's relevant is, what can we learn from one another, and everyone has an equal voice.”

⁴³ The whatsapp group currently has 14 members.

⁴⁴ The email listserv currently has 19 members.

⁴⁵ February 25, 2021 call, 20:49.

A member of the working group continued: “The other interesting thing that I'm hearing, even from our discussion, is this idea of when we break free from the norms, we find our own thing. And our own thing makes sense. I love talking research, generally. But here, it's very enjoyable, because everyone else likes to talk about it. And to think about it, even though we don't know everything about it. So that freedom, and that equality, I think allows us then to grow further.”

Tactic: Slow and steady

When the problem space is so heavily (over-)determined by external agents with multiple motives that there is no time and space available to “figure things out.” Donor-funded projects usually range from three-six months long, one year if lucky, and within that time, the grant recipient is usually expected to deliver a long list of outputs and outcomes. There is little time to slow down and no time to do activities and engagements that are beyond the scope of the project. Funders range in their level of flexibility, interest in micro-management, and availability of non-financial resources. But irregardless, once funder money is received, it is expected that something must be delivered and something must be done (otherwise, most contracts stipulate that you are supposed to give the money back). In comparison, by not (yet) having any funding sources, we are not chasing to keep up / make good on any external promises. “Organic means it takes more time, it is not neat and tidy. Sometimes it looks like it is not moving. Sometimes it may even look like it is moving backwards. But that is the value. You are doing the work of figuring it out. And because there is work being put in, it is longer lasting in the long-term. The long-term is what is of value. So hopefully we are doing something valuable even in these seemingly random conversations. They are part of building something. Building an understanding, building a sense of, actually, what are we doing, why are we doing it, why does it matter. Those are important questions to keep asking ourselves.” A member has called these “therapy sessions,” where we are practicing anti-imperial knowledge making by valuing process over product or output. We have imagined outputs and products as milestones or stop points in the journey rather than the end in and of itself.

In describing what we are after as “slow and steady,” we would not want to be misunderstood as calling for a return to some idealized framing of good thinking as intrinsically slow and egalitarian. What we are proposing is that in our specific cases, a commitment to

engagement over a longer time-period is both realistic given our various schedules and commitments and focuses on the strengthening of relations over time rather than the making of outputs. We argue this shift in the usual priorities of getting a research output out quickly, can help craft the conditions needed to create a distinct timespace for dialogue and discussion. In short, we go slow because we need the timespace to figure out what the space needs to be.

Tactic: Low-Cost and Focused on Listening

Without funding to cover our time, technical platform costs, or activities, we must, by necessity, keep things low cost (since everything is covered out of our own pockets). The small, normative habit of keeping our videos off during working group calls illustrates at a very practical level this tactic. But while acknowledging the real funding constraints that we work within, we simultaneously do not want to over-attribute our actions to cost-saving measures (a narrative that unfortunately is often over-emphasized with regards to practices in African contexts). So it is also important to highlight the multiple reasons that members keep their video off. As one working group member says, staying off video helps her better listen to discussions on virtual platforms. “I tend to be off video in many of my Zoom activities not just for technical reasons but also because I find it less of a strain to listen to people, as opposed to both listening and looking at people on a screen. In our RDS group, I feel so comfortable talking to each of you that it sounds like a long phone call where I just focus on what is being said.” This is an important reminder that initiatives to open up new discursive spaces should always reflexively think about the modalities of participation and the resulting qualities of the relationship being enacted.

What are the cascading effects of these tactics?

By mindfully constructing shared meanings and core values, working slowly and steadily and at low cost, as RDS we aim to care for and maintain good relations--with fellow researchers, our interlocutors, those who support our work, and the communities with whom we do research. Thinking of research as a practice of care (for ourselves and others) at which we have to work diligently daily, it is an aspiration that the tactics we use help establish a space for the emergence

of new thought where researchers are comfortable experimenting and developing more authentic queries.⁴⁶

What future is implied?

Playing the long-game without organizational structures

“I think the challenges that we have faced in the platform being Nairobi-based researchers, we are very time-poor, there are a lot of demands that are really stretched researchers in this space. And therefore, we are not able to really upload a lot as we wish, we are also relearning new ways of defining data, new of defining data production. And this is very unsettling sometimes because it really challenges what you have held dear for a long time,” Aurelia has explained. “As Nairobi-based researchers, we are always busy hopping from one consultancy to the next so we are not able to reflect or document or speak about new ways of doing this work. We are just recreating more research. Personally, I wish I could document the subtle ways we are challenging how we learn and engaging with knowledge in the Eider journal clubs, for example, but I never seem to have the time.” This “time poverty” as she so aptly described, is a looming challenge. How do we ensure initiatives like the Research Data KE working group lasts longer than a few months? How to keep people motivated to participate without institutional funding in a landscape where “time is money” and exploitation of people’s time and labor is already rife? How do we retain the “organic-ness” of our group, but put in place particular structures that keep it going. What kinds of “light structures” do we want/need?

As we discussed beginning an event calendar and a few activities that would make it easier for new members to begin to get involved, we ran up against the challenge of over-committing and over-organizing. The ensuing discussion highlighted a challenging balance between wanting to keep the engagement and involvement as low-stress as possible (again,

⁴⁶ I (HR) would add that there is importance in noting the informality of the RDS research discussions that helps move research beyond conservative academic principles that tend to lock the minds of young and aspiring scholars in urban centers like Nairobi as well as lock *out* young minds from rural parts of the country. There are a great number of people who have little opportunities to complete or join academic centers of excellence such as universities and influence social transformation processes in their communities. We need to pay attention to the ways that what could be highly original research ideas coming from poor communities who may not even read or write in English or Kiswahili are being excluded through existing academic institutions and systems.

without feeling like you are committing to new “deliverables” and tasks), while still fostering a lively space that continues to hold value for members with a sense of overall movement.

Closing Reflections

The very act of reflecting on what we were going to write together and coming into this articulation has been important. RDS has helped us begin to create or define a third space where:

- binary concepts (e.g. global/local, supervisor/student, etc) are diminished;
- fluidity rather than rigidity of research approaches, structures, relationships is encouraged and nourished;
- authentic rather than “buzzword” collaboration, peer-to-peer learning, and research-as-therapy are experienced;
- value is experienced not just from quantitative “outputs” (e.g. completed projects, funding raised, etc), but also from qualitative engagement (time spent understanding and reflecting on a phenomenon, talking to understand and hear one another rather than to produce a fixed “output,” etc);
- research is treated as a respectful process, sensitive to the contexts in which it is undertaken, and mindful of all participating in it.

This writing project in some ways has also been a light structure to hold us together, an “output” that is self-developed and self-designed. In such an environment where research is so heavily driven by funding regimes, when there is nothing that can be offered on that front, such initiatives can slide down the priority list over time. Thus, continually recalling what exactly we are trying to do together is important. What holds such a group together and what are we holding space for?

A member of the working group said in our December 2020 call: “You can’t wait for people to be ready to think like you. You just quietly do what you can do. Even if it’s just among us. It’s still work that is valuable. It doesn’t have to be highly visible for it to be valued. If those governments decide it is valuable, good for them. But in the meantime, let’s keep doing what we are doing.” Key discussions are needed to move forward in thinking about how to revise scholarly knowledge infrastructures towards the futures we desire. For example, how do we think about fairly crediting and attributing the various inputs and contributions made across the

research process without playing into an audit culture, aiming to unseat rather than re-entrench a property model of work.

Table 1. Research Data KE Charting of the Third Terms (July 2021 version 1)

	Reaching for Articulations of RDS (Middle) Third Terms (see Fortun and Bernstein 1998 for more)	
global	translocal	local
Supervisor	Peer-to-peer learning/doing	Student
Positivism	Fluid research-as-therapy approaches rather than rigid, “objective” methodologies	Constructivism
“Research Impact”	Value is understood as qualitative engagement (time spent understanding and reflecting on a phenomenon, talking to understand and listening to one another rather than to produce a fixed output	Quantitative outputs and outcomes (e.g. completed projects, funding raised, etc.)
North-South partnerships (e.g. EU-Africa Horizon 2020 Grants)	Focus on authentic relationships rather than 'buzzword' collaborations	South-South partnerships (e.g. China - Africa grants)
Research as end product product, e.g. completed study/thesis	Research as a respectful process, sensitive to the contexts in which it is undertaken, and mindful of all participating in it	Research as impersonal series of activities designed to generate ‘knowledge’
Intellectual Property	Relational data	Worries of plagiarism and stealing of ideas

Denouncing the use of reductive broad terms like “The West,” famed postcolonial author of “Orientalism” (1978), Edward Said called instead for “concentrat[ing] on the slow working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other, and live together in far more interesting ways than any abridged or inauthentic mode of under-standing can allow,” (xxiii). But

for that kind of engagement, he recognized: “we need time and patient and skeptical inquiry, supported by faith in communities of interpretation that are difficult to sustain in a world demanding instead action and reaction,” (xxiii).

In one of the last lectures he delivered, the eminent Black political theorist, Cedric Robinson stated: “If we are to move the Black Radical Tradition forward, it is imperative that we understand that it is not utopian. Rather it is about questing for freedom. It is about the necessity of recognizing the importance of struggle regardless of outcomes. Nor does it begin and end intellectually. We must look beyond the straightjackets of race to understand common histories in order to make common cause,” (Johnson and Lubin, 2017: 16). In this chapter, we have sought to describe what we--as a heterogenous group of researchers with stakes in Kenya--have organized towards building a collective public knowledge commons. This work is slow, complex and messy, but we have found comfort in the sharing of experiences and cathartic release in what we have begun to jokingly call our “therapy sessions.” We continue to work *pole pole* (slowly) towards building a digital data archive for and by Nairobians that supports the growth of critical thinkers and a commons shared by robust institutions generating public knowledge.