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Navigating the landscape of defiant scholarship in and beyond Africa: On archives, bridges and dangers.

A commentary on Patricia Daley and Amber Murrey's 'Defiant scholarship: Dismantling coloniality in contemporary African geographies'.

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I am grateful for being part of the conversation that was sparked by Patricia Daley and Amber Murrey's thoughtful piece on defiant scholarship and dismantling coloniality in contemporary African geographies. Their contribution raises a broad range of questions for human geography, in and beyond the continent, but also beyond the discipline of geography itself. The 'beyond geography' looms large in their contribution since much of the decolonial impetus nurturing their interventions comes from *outside* geography, as my colleague Maano Ramutsindela flagged during the *SJTG* lecture at the 2021 RGS-IBG-meeting preceding this written exchange.

It should not be implied that there have been no impulses from geographers on the continent, as one might read into Daley and Murrey's (2022) intervention. For instance, the eminent Ghanaian geographer Jacob Songsore (2011) has contributed substantially to our understanding of the colonial space economy of Ghana, offering a situated take on 'uneven development'. Black Brazilian geographer Milton Santos, while working at the University of Dar es Salaam in the 1970s, called for a spatially differentiated but globally relational understanding of 'development' that defied the epistemic violence of what he called 'bourgeois geography':

'Underdeveloped space' has a specific character; the priority of importance varies, even if the same forces are involved; because their combinations and results are different. This is something which Western geographers have had great difficulty in understanding. Why should we not then rally expertise from the underdeveloped countries themselves: to develop theories which would make sense to them both as geographers and as citizens? At the moment, 'official' geography operates as though the West had a monopoly of ideas (Santos, 1974: 4).

Many other contemporaries and colleagues, often working outside the discipline (but nonetheless on topics of geographical relevance) continue to practise

geographically situated forms of defiant scholarship across the continent. We should remember the various attempts of defiant scholars such as Samir Amin, Mahmood Mamdani, Issa Shivji, Firoze Manji, Sam Moyo, Ruth First, Marjorie Mbilinyi, Sylvia Tamale, Dzodzi Tsikata and Amina Mama to carve out and secure spaces of defiant scholarship—the Third World Forum and CODESRIA (Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa) in Dakar, the Agrarian South Summer School in Harare or the journal *Feminist Africa* being prime examples. To this blend of defiant scholarship, you can add publishers such as *Daraja Press* or *Mkuki na Nyota*, which have become mainstays for critical scholarship from Africa.

The COVID-19 pandemic has facilitated the formation of new and vibrant intellectual spaces of defiant South-South dialogue. The *Dialogue Series* of the Agrarian South Network (Agrarian South Network, 2020), the Sam Moyo African Institute of Agrarian Studies and the critical journal *Agrarian South* are further impressive examples for this vibrancy. While pre-COVID-19 collaborations facilitated these South-South connections, as, for instance, condensed in the excellent book by Jha *et al.* (2020), the era of e-conferencing allows for new articulations of defiant scholarship across space. This is, of course, not to deny the systemic challenges to realizing defiant scholarship in a post-structural adjustment landscape, and under what can be repressive political conditions (Wuyts, 2008; Mamdani, 2007; Watts, 2018), but it is a reminder that there is an archive as well as an existing, lively landscape of defiant scholarship in Africa, against which we can contextualize Daley and Murrey's intervention.

Not all the scholars and initiatives named above ground their work in the literatures that Daley and Murrey mobilize. While Walter Rodney as a militant writer and Pan-Africanist is certainly a connecting figure here (e.g., Rodney, 1972), those with a more Marxist grounding seem to be more sceptical of work that walks in the Latin American decolonial tradition of Walter Mignolo or Anibal Quijano. Even African decolonial scholars get little credit and citation in what is left of Marxist circles across the Social Sciences and Humanities in Africa. For instance, few works published in one of the leading defiant journals on Africa, the *Review of African Political Economy*, engage with the thinking of decolonial scholar Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni or feminist scholars like Amina Mama and Sylvia Tamale. The same names are virtually absent in the critical political economy journal *Agrarian South*.

I have made these points because they remind us that even among scholars from Africa, it is contested what credible, effective and comprehensive (choose as you like) defiance is about. I also make this point in the form of a generative critique. Its omission in Daley and Murrey's intervention is an opportunity. Taken up in this commentary, it hopefully moves the debate forward. The larger discussion on defiant scholarship and decoloniality can only benefit from engaging more with the various forms of defiant scholarship that African scholars have shaped, something that the editorial collective of the radical geography journal *Antipode* has tried to nurture over the past months (*Antipode Online*, 2021).

A second important point made in the intervention of Daley and Murrey is the call to build stronger bridges between defiant scholarship on and from Africa and the vibrant field of black geographies, with its grounding in the Black Radical Tradition and its key focus on the spatial, structural, cognitive bodily legacies that shape racialized lifeworlds and the geography of privilege, opportunities, suffering and (premature) death in the settler-colonial 'New World'. The connections have remained very weak so far, even though promising forays have been made (Al-Bulushi, 2020; Aguiar *et al.*, 2021). Not strictly speaking a geographical piece of work but nevertheless a

strong example of a contact zone between defiant scholarship from the Caribbean and from Africa is the latest piece by Jamaican economist Michael Witter (Witter, 2021).

Historically, even more can be excavated. For instance, Rodney's piece on the plantation as the first 'major institution' (Rodney *et al.*, 1983: 1) of German colonialism in what has later come to be known as Tanzania, clearly informed by the time he spent at the University of Dar es Salaam, could be placed more centrally in the field of black geographies and debates on the plantation (McKittrick, 2013; Hawthorne, 2019; Ouma & Premchander, 2022). Correspondingly key works rooted in the Black Radical Tradition can be inspirations for a more transatlantic form of defiant scholarship. Take the work of black US scholar-activist James Boggs (1970), who early on posed the Pan-African question of 'What kind of economic system do we envisage, not as a question for abstract discussion, but as the foundation on which we can mobilize the black masses to struggle, with the perspective that their future is at stake?' (Boggs, 1970: 27); or take the field of stratification economics, shaped by black US economists and recently taken up in the work of the Ghanaian political economist Franklin Obeng-Odoom (2020; see Ouma, 2021 for a review).

Debates on intersectionality or racial regimes of property offer further potential contact zones between disruptive black thought from North America and defiant scholarship from and on Africa. It is not surprising that resistance to such a project comes from those comfortably writing from historically accumulated positions of power, discursive authority and disciplinary gatekeeping. This is what the well-known 'Africanist' Christopher Clapham recently had to say about the need for a Black Atlantic that allows for knowledge flows into both directions, as Daley and Murrey call for:

I remain deeply sceptical as to whether there is any significant connection at an intellectual level between the study of Africa on the one hand, and that of peoples of African origin within the USA (and other areas of large-scale historical African slavery such as Brazil and the Caribbean) on the other. The sheer brutality of the dislocation that slavery imposed, and the massive differences between the societies from which Africans had been wrenched, and those into which they were then forcibly incorporated, were such as to destroy any meaningful connections between the two that could then be resuscitated at an academic level in the modern era. Nor are there significant similarities between the ways in which politics or the economy operate in independent African states, and the politics and economics of race in the USA, or in other states outside the continent with large African diasporas (Clapham, 2020: 146).

Going back as far as to the work of Guyanese Pan-African historian Walter Rodney and Senegalese historian Cheikh Anta Diop (for the case of Rodney, see Hirji, 2017), the attempt of white positioned scholars to derail defiant scholarship on Africa by Africans and by those in the Diaspora, to doubt its relevance, objectivity and accuracy, or to simply invisibilize it, has a long tradition (for a particularly egregious recent example, see Basedau, 2020). I know such sentiments from my own experience in the German 'African studies' community, which also includes my own university. Indeed, there are many white-positioned colleagues who doubt that what matters to black scholars and people in the US, and by extension in the Caribbean, could and should be of relevance for their dearly beloved field of 'African Studies'. One would probably expect this of white-positioned 'Africanists' who do not want to move out of the comfort zone and see scholarship based in the Black Radical Tradition as a threat to the geometries of power so favourable to their careers.

However, the story is more complex, as Daley and Murrey poke at, but never explore in detail. Building on Nigerian political scientist Claude Ake, they rightly

acknowledge that the 'dominant education model in Africa is informed by desires to have an elite that subscribes to ideologies of capitalism' and the existence of 'ever flexible but also sedimented forms of coloniality' (Daley & Murrey, 2022: 167). As they also note, radical intellectual reorientations have often been sabotaged by conservative forces on the continent, and, one should add, sometimes even by progressive and anti-imperial regimes (Hirji, 2014). Thus, 'coloniality as a complex matrix of knowledge, power, and being', (Ndolvu-Gatsheni, 2015: 490) can be effective to an extent that radically decolonial manoeuvres may be themselves perceived as imports from Latin America, the US or Europe.

I know colleagues in Kenya or Tanzania who would doubt the need to incorporate race and racialization, key prisms of black geographies scholars, into a critical analysis of the world surrounding them. Literary scholar Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, a giant of defiant scholarship in Africa, spent more than half of his life outside Kenya and his writings about the coloniality of English, the material and cognitive legacies of British settler-colonialism and the role of white supremacy past and present, have never substantially fused the country's public discourse and higher education at large. This would have been important though for struggles for material and cognitive justice in the country, but what wa Thiong'o terms the cultural bomb of settler colonialism has maintained a strong grip on politics, education and public discourse (wa Thiong'o, 1986)

Against this backdrop, it is probably not surprising that one of the most trenchant criticisms of settler colonialism and its racial legacy in Kenya has been written by Grace Musila, a Kenyan scholar who has spent a great deal of her intellectual career in South Africa, a country where it is even harder than in Kenya to deny the legacies of white supremacy (Musila, 2015). Another example is Aminzade's book *Race, Nation, and Citizenship in Post-colonial Africa: The Case of Tanzania*. When it was published in 2013, a colleague in Tanzania told me that no Tanzanian would have dared publish this type of book because it complicated the post-colonial history of the country by bringing in 'race' as a substantial category, using it to make sense of racialized patterns of ownership, accumulation and politics. In the largely male-dominated, Marxist circles of defiant scholarship in Tanzania, both gender and race were seen as divisive in the struggle against imperialism and capitalism, even though feminist scholars fought their ways into the Marxist brotherhood (Bujra, 2017). How is one to square these tensions with Daley and Murrey's framing of defiance as a decolonial practice that is 'relational and place-based' (Daley & Murrey, 2022: 166), when relations and place-based epistemic practices do not smoothly align with certain preconceptions of defiant scholarship?

Lastly, I wonder about the dangers of being defiant. Scholars in the Global South who have practised more radical and overt forms of defiance have always been at risk. The assassination of the guerrilla intellectual Walter Rodney in 1980 in Guyana, the murder of Guinea-Bissauan and Capverdian scholar-politician Amílcar Cabral in 1973, or the CIA-backed coup against scholar-president Kwame Nkrumah in 1966, whose book on *Neo-colonialism as the Last stage of Imperialism* (Nkrumah, 1965) and persistent call for Pan-Africanism posed a serious threat to a world order where white supremacy had its firm place, are examples of this. Today's defiant scholars often face domestic oppression and constraints. A prominent example is radical feminist Stella Nyanzi, who has demonstrated against the violent rule of President Museveni of Uganda. A critique of patriarchy lies at the core of her protests. Like many other defiant scholars, she had to endure severe consequences, including physical violence, imprisonment and exile.

Some defiant scholars have moved abroad and continue to write from the Global North about what happens at home. Others again, are defiant in their own ways, as much as higher-education systems that have been hollowed out by several rounds of structural adjustments permit them to do so. The expansion of higher education via both state-upgrades of public universities' satellite campuses or polytechnics into full universities (without adequate financial support to staff and research capacities), as well as via private universities mainly interested in profit (Katundu, 2020), has further narrowed the space for defiant scholarship.

As much as I appreciate the intervention of Daley and Murrey, I would have loved to read more about the dangers, limits and contradictions of defiant scholarship. I am saying this because as an African-diaspora scholar working in Germany, being committed to defiant scholarship, danger to my person is something I also must reckon with. Decolonial scholarship has become a target of the so-called New Right, and forces to rehabilitate German colonialism have gained steam. Concerns about identity politics and cancel culture have galvanized voices from several different political camps; as soon as we locate anxiety over whiteness at the centre of this, these unlikely alliances should come as no surprise.

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