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A Reflection on the Necessity for an 'Ontological Turn' in African Studies with Reference to the Ecologies of Knowledge Production

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Abstract

We are currently witnessing the increased diversification of the field of academic knowledge production, where more and more forms of knowledge that were kept at the periphery for centuries are claiming recognition at centre stage. This reality has pushed scholars to question the impact and lasting legacies of historical processes of racism and colonialism still embedded in mainstream academic knowledge production. This translates today into a major critic of social science methodologies, which may be seen as "master's tools" serving to reproduce contested coloniality of academic knowledge in most non-Western regions today. In Africa this debate is framed as the knowledge decolonial option and looks particularly at what forms and whose knowledge is legitimised, reproduced, and for what purpose through the current education structure and what socio-political and cultural functions it plays. This is the debate that this paper contributes to. It suggests an ontological turn in order to move from an emphasis on the identities of the producers to focus instead on the knowledge production process itself. The main argument is that there is indeed a timely necessity to advance an ontologically relevant Africanist scholarship that gives a sympathetic theological reading of the African lived experience. As a methodology and scholarly language, ontology constitutes a neutral ground in knowledge production, validation and consumption debates that needs to be taken seriously as it allows scholars to take into account the lived worlds that people inhabit and the correlating ways of being and knowing. The paper highlights particularly the current issues of misreading and misrepresentation as well as the need to avoid reading African realities with external interpretative and explanative lenses.

Keywords: Ontological Turn, coloniality, African, Cosmology

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Introduction

As evidenced by the different versions of academic talks and scholarship on knowledge decolonisation taking place across Africa, the debate on how to deal with the legacy of racism and colonialism still embedded in much of Africanist scholarship has reached a new momentum. This debate concerns particularly the issues of what and whose knowledge is legitimised and reproduced through the current education structure and what socio-political and cultural functions it plays. By listening to the ongoing debates on knowledge decolonialonisation held at different African Universities, it appears clearly that the youth are opposing the structure as well as the agents behind the status quo. Even prominent African scholars are not spared this, as the youth accuse them of being part of and having largely contributed to the valorisation, maintenance and reproduction of the colonial structure that is characteristic of knowledge production today. Hence one often hears comments from students such as "he is a sell-out" or "a docile coco-nut" in reference to some African scholars. As the new "Rhodes Must Fall Conversations" at the University of Cape Town illustrates, African youth are pushing for a kind of academic revolution in terms of education curricula contents. This is to say, rather than simply being critical as most "postcolony" scholars have been doing, these youth are demanding that something concrete be done to change the current state of affairs. How long it will take for such reforms to unfold is more an issue linked to current structures and balances of power in academia, than to the question of whether or not the reforms will take place at all. This is the broader debate this article speaks to. Currently, the debate on knowledge decolonisation has remained focussed on the issues of what should be done about the situation and why as well as the legitimate identity of the producer of African knowledge. The question this debate raises is what do people mean by "African" or "relevant" knowledge and how can we ensure its production? My point is that we need, instead, to rethink the current knowledge production process that has made researchers produce and reproduce contested output. After critically reviewing the current dominant analytical frames characterising Africanist academic knowledge production to put in perspective what should change and why, I draw on the new "ontological turn" in anthropological scholarship to move the knowledge decolonisation debates to the issue of how the shift can be achieved.

'Ontological turn' has become the predominating anthropological theme, finding, and issue since the French philosophical anthropology was introduced at the 2013 Annual Meetings of the American Anthropological Association in Chicago (Kelly,

2014a). However, while social explanations of cultural phenomena and clarification of the 'epistemological turn' have a much longer history and clarity in anthropology, the current 'ontological turn' in anthropology is more a critical event characterised by, among other things, the fact that, although a significant number of anthropologists seem to agree about its importance, they themselves are not yet clear about what this new "turn" means (Kelly, 2014a). As such, the analysis below intends to contribute to the broader discussions on the production of "proper" and relevant Africanist knowledge for the future through a critical reflection on some of the broader issues concerning knowledge production more generally, with special reference to religion and migration in Africanist scholarship. In fact, ethnographic descriptions, like all cultural translations, necessarily involve a certain amount of transformation or, sometimes, even plain disfiguration (Viveiros de Castro et al, 2014: 1).

My main argument is that there is indeed a timely necessity to advance an ontologically relevant Africanist scholarship that gives a sympathetic theological reading of the African lived experience. I do so by drawing on new discussions on the need to avoid reading African realities with external interpretative and explanative lenses. In fact, as I elaborate on below, besides the pitfalls of the dominant interpretative and explanative frameworks that characterise much of social science inquiry, avoiding interpreting or explaining everything using one's own conceptual frames has the potential of allowing scholars to focus more on the proper business of understanding social processes and their contextually defined meanings. To achieve this, we need to first problematise some of the existing dominant ontological and epistemological presuppositions in general.

As I show below, with debates on the diversity of knowledge production in Post-Apartheid South African context, the knowledge decolonisation debate is framed around reified categories. This makes it almost impossible for scholars to discuss the issues of diversity in knowledge production, validation, and consumption outside of identity politics or outside a politics of ontology that itself reinforces the binary divisions of 'us' vs 'them' and 'ours' versus 'theirs'. This is so primarily because this debate is currently formulated according to a politics of decolonisation of knowledge that distinguishes between friends and foes. As I argue below, the ontological language and methodology that I am discussing here needs to be taken beyond the postcolonial "affirmative action" binary logic of identity politics that still divides Africanist scholarship into two camps of insiders and outsiders. Instead, an ontological approach should be adopted that reduces researchers' personal biases to a minimum, whether they are of African descent or not. My argument is that, as a meth-

odology and scholarly language, ontology constitutes a neutral ground in knowledge production, validation and consumption debates that needs to be taken seriously as it allows scholars to take into account the lived worlds people inhabit and the correlating ways of being and knowing. By "neutral ground" I do not presume the reality of a particular ontological status in and of itself, as such a thing as "neutral ground" does not actually exist. However, I conceptualise an ontological approach as a methodological, analytical and sociotechnical device capable of "neutralizing" scholars' ontological distinctions and epistemological privileges, which often interfere and distort much of the existing Africanist scholarship.

In the remainder of this paper, I first elaborate on the necessity for the ontological reading of peoples' different "modes of worlding" (See Descola, 2014). In the second section, I touch on some of the misconceptions that often arise in Africanist scholarship when we approach our data and ignore, misread, or dismiss the deeply religious dimensions that fundamentally shape respondents' perceptions of their lived experiences. In the third section, drawing on the South African examples, I discuss some of the institutional problems that may result due to the lack of ontological insensitivity in African contexts. In the fourth and final section I give an overview of scholarly suggestions and discussion platforms that attempt to remedy to the problem of ontological insensitivity. This is followed by the conclusion.

I.   On the Necessity for an Ontological Reading of Ethnographic Data

> Notions such as nature, culture, society, sovereignty, the state, production, and, yes, even class, race, and gender. All of this patiently constructed grid will have to be, if not wholly discarded—for it expresses a specific anthropology which deserves to be taken into account alongside others—at least demoted from its imperial position. It is time, then, that we take stock of the fact that worlds are differently composed; it is time that we endeavour to understand how they are composed without automatic recourse to our own mode of composition; it is time that we set out to recompose them so as to make them more amenable to a wider variety of inhabitants, human and nonhuman (Descola, 2014: 279).

While most Africanist ethnographic studies are indeed concerned with human differences and the uniqueness of perspectives, I argue that there is a justified necessity to bring ontological sensitivity to the centre of the analytical framing that currently

inform this scholarship. The current Africanist scholarship is largely influenced by the interpretative and cognitive traditions of modern social science inquiry. However, for reasons given below, I argue that while analysing ethnographic data, our social scientific problem cannot be that of accounting for why respondents might think differently or get wrong, what we know to be true (explaining, interpreting, placing respondents statements into perspective) (See also Paleček and Risjord, undated: 1 for similar point). But, as Martin Holbraad (2010) argues, rather than attempting to "make sense" of a given ethnography, with all that it entails, in terms of the risk of misrepresenting the Other, we should instead aim to use ethnographic data to rethink our own analytical concepts (p184). By placing ourselves in opposition to interpretive or cognitive social science, the ontologist scholarship seeks to avoid the limiting or reductionist academic attitude that claims to be able "to make sense" of everything simply through imposing conceptual and analytical frameworks on what respondents know of their own lived realities (See Holbraad 2010: 184; Paleček and Risjord, undated: 1).

In fact, most research conducted in Africa or with Africans in Diaspora continue to adopt culturalist interpretative or cognitive perspectives. According to the culturalist interpretative way of thinking, cultures are simply clusters of different beliefs about, or ways of conceptualizing, a single material world (Paleček and Risjord, undated: 3). And from the cognitive culturalist perspective, human conceptual differences are conceptualised to be simply alternative belief sets. Hence scholars are expected to use representations as the vehicle for explaining away why is it that people see the world differently, and why, sometimes, they get the world wrong – the so-called Cartesian worry (See Holbraad, 2010: 182). As Holbraad (2010) argues, the danger in adopting an explanative or interpretative approach to ethnography lies in the fact that it presupposes that we know what our respondents are talking about and just do not know what they are saying. The ontological approach does not privilege epistemology or the study of other people's representations of what we know to be the one and real world, acknowledging rather the existence of multiple worlds (Venkatesan, 2010: 154). To reject interpretation as well as representationalism, is to acknowledge the fact that, as researchers, when we do not understand what people are saying, it might not because they get wrong what we know. We should instead admit that we might not know what people are talking about altogether (See Holbraad, 2010: 184; Paleček and Risjord,undated).

Drawing for example, again on Holbraad's (2010) work, when the Nuer people of Sudan say that they believe that twins are birds, the ethnographic challenge has been

(and still is) to link such a proposition to other beliefs and provide a translational gloss, and eventually, explain how such an obvious falsehood could be maintained in the face of contrary evidence (Paleček and Risjord, undated: 9). Hence, every time the problem of alterity takes the form of a disagreement – a cross-cultural disagreement, if you like – its anthropological or sociological solution has consisted in explaining the grounds of such a divergence of views (Holbraad, 2010). Scholars are thus expected to explain why should the Nuer (or any natives for that matter) think that twins are birds (or whatever)? The answer to this question is always ready: Is it because thinking in this way serves some purpose for them (functionalism)? Is it because of the way their brains work (cognitivism)? Is it maybe because such a view makes sense in the context of other views that they hold (interpretivism)? Or are they just being metaphorical in some way (symbolism)? (See Holbraad, 2010: 183). The radical character of the ontological approach is due to the fact that it undermines the dominant premise of all such questions. It denies us the assumption that when the Nuer say that twins are birds we even know what they are talking about in the first place (Holbraad, 2010: 183). If we remove the epistemological privilege that the dominant premise provides, one can imagine the multiple relevant questions that we can come up with in relation to the Nuer proposition.

This is why, in their push for an ontological anthropology (or social science more broadly), Henare et al. (2006) invite us to take the cultural differences or disagreements we encounter in our field 'seriously' and avoid seeking to explain or contextualize everything according to our own conceptual repertoires (Venkatesan, 2010: 154). As Holbraad (2010) adds, to entertain such a possibility requires a degree of humility because to admit the possibility that our respondents might have been talking or acting in ways that we might have been unable to understand presupposes admitting that our repertoire of concepts might be in some way inadequate to the task at hand. However, not adopting an ontological approach, the researcher locks themselves into 'a culturalist perspective whose take on alterity seems downright presumptuous. In fact, by casting all difference as disagreement, culturalists imagine for themselves unlimited powers of comprehension' (Holbraad, 2010). As a result, however new, unusual and analytically challenging in terms of explanation, interpretation, ethnographic data must by some miracle always be at least amenable to a straightforward description in terms that the scholar understands (Holbraad, 2010: 184). In line with the above point, the ontologist's task cannot be that of 'accounting for why ethnographic data are as they are, but rather to understand what they are – instead of explanation or interpretation, what is called for is conceptualization'

(Holbraad, 2010: 184). It is in this sense that ontology methodology can open wide for us the entry and lead to 'insight into the enigmatic nature of social life' (Sykes, 2010: 171). What makes the ontological approach to alterity not only quite different from the culturalist one, but also rather better, is that it gets us out of the absurd position of thinking that what makes ethnographic subjects most interesting and worthy of quoting is when "they get stuff wrong" (Holbraad, 2010). Rather, the fact that the people we study may say or do things that to us appear as "wrong" should just indicate that we have reached the limits of our own conceptual repertoire (Holbraad, 2010; Paleček and Risjord, undated). This applies even when our best descriptions of what others think is something as blatantly "absurd" or "wrong" as 'twins are birds'. We instead need to take the 'twins are birds' as a reason to suspect that there might be something wrong with our ability to describe what others are saying, rather than with what they are actually saying, about which we a fortiori would know nothing other than the certainty of our own misunderstanding (Holbraad, 2010; Venkatesan, 2010; Paleček and Risjord, undated).

From an African perspective, I use the concept of 'ontology' in the sense used by Robert Thornton to mean:

> 'the sense of what is real and what is empirically knowable or given to the technologies of healing, including trance, dreams, divination, intuition, smell, 'feeling', and direct empirical experience, for instance, of textures, colours, 'heats', 'coldness' and other properties of physical substances.

As Thornton explains

> In the Western ontology, trance, dreams and intuition, would not be classified together with smell and other 'physical' sensations. The knowledge of the senses, of course, was the guarantee of 'reality' for philosophers from Aristotle to René Descartes and Ernst Mach, and such sensory knowledge, however much extended by microscopes, cyclotrons, or photography, is still the basis for empirical knowledge. For sangomas, however, what is smelt, or dreamed, or encountered in trance is also real, and therefore empirically knowable. In this sense, they possess a different ontology' (Thornton, forthcoming: 9).

In Africanist scholarship, an ontological approach is particularly important because of the "enlightened" silent dehumanising undertone description contained in much of the "established" big narratives. As Eduardo Viveiros de Castro observes, "the language of ontology is important for one specific and, let's say, tactical reason. It acts as a counter- measure to a derealizing trick frequently played against the native's thinking, which turns this thought into a kind of sustained phantasy, by reducing it

to the dimensions of a form of knowledge or representation, that is to an 'epistemology' or a 'worldview'" (Viveiros de Castro, 2003: 18 in Candea, 2010: 177). This is a de-centering practice that has cast and kept African forms of knowledge and knowledge production at the periphery. As I stated above, the problematic consequence of such a critical attitude is that rather than concluding that any contradiction to our pre-conceived "scientific truths" encountered in the field necessitates a special localised theorising to be fully comprehended, we go the usual easy way by trying to explain drawing on the main theoretical frameworks such social stress, colonialism, or capitalism that often lead to total misreadings (See Thornton's forthcoming pertinent critic of missionaries and the Commaroff's misreading of Tswana). In this sense, an ontological approach, as Karen Sykes (2010) puts it, 'promises to help us not to mistakenly use scientific project as a creative process for the search for the soul of the researcher's own society, when seeking to understand how others invent a cultural response to lived phenomena' (p171). This is to say, if the new 'ontological turn' is not seriously considered in African studies more generally, not only will people's lived realities continue to be described as anomalous or 'absurdity' (Holbraad, 2010) as is often the case, but also different misconceptions characterising African scholarship will persist (See also Thornton, forthcoming).

As Candea (2010) argues, the 'ontological turn' is 'the way out of the epistemological angst of the 1980s, of those who would 'write culture' and thereby, it is claimed, reduce it to mere signification' (p173). In summary, the French philosophical anthropologists advocating the ontological approach, problematize the fundamentals of dualist thinking and particularly the set of dominant assumptions about what kinds of things exist. As I showed earlier, for the dualists, there exists one world, whose main property is to be single and uniform. But there exist just many different representations of that unique world. The main character of representations is to be plural and multifarious depending on the group of individuals holding them. According to ontologists, thinking that way is of course a 'dualist' position, related to a whole field of interlinking dualities: body and mind, practice and theory, experience and reflection, signified and signifier, structure and agency, and so on (Holbraad, 2010: 181-182). While the dualist position often claims to leave room for "disagreement" and may sound at first comfortably liberal, it is in reality far from that when we look at the existing state of the art of academic knowledge production (Holbraad, 2010: 184). In fact, as Holbraad (2010) contends in relation to anthropology,

> Though anthropologists have made a name for themselves by arguing against the a priori validity of particular versions of such dualities, I for one know of no theoretical position in anthropology that departs from the basic assumption that the differences in which anthropologists are interested ('alterity') are differences in the way people 'see the world' – no position, that is, other than the ontological one (p181-182).

Adding that:

> The formidable power of the 'one nature many cultures' formula is, like a road-roller's wheel, owed partly to its circular shape. Much as for the psychoanalyst, patients' attacks on psychoanalysis merely demonstrate the purchase of ideas like 'transference' or 'repression', so for the culturalist, any suggestion that alterity might be something other than a function of cultural representations is itself just another cultural representation' (Holbraad, 2010: 182).

The "cultural representation" argument plays essentially the function of dismissing any critic that invites us to seek to understand and explain alterity outside or beyond scholars' analytical frameworks. The alternative, as a number of anthropologists and philosophers have been arguing for some time, must be instead to reckon with the possibility that alterity is a function of the existence of different worlds per se (See Descola, 2014; Holbraad, 2010). On this view, when the Nuer say that twins are birds, the problem is not that they see twins differently from those of us who think twins are human siblings, but rather admit the possibility that the Nuer may in fact be talking about different dimensions or ontology of twins. The interesting difference, in other words, is not representational (read 'cultural') but ontological: what counts as a twin when the Nuer talk about twins as being birds? This may be different from what for a twin is when one talks about a twin as being human, that is, having a certain kind of DNA and so on (Holbraad, 2010: 183).

Parting ways with interpretation and representationalism is thus the fundamental step towards Africanist knowledge production for its own sake.

II.   African Cosmology, Lived Realities and Existing Academic Misconceptions and Misrepresentations

To grasp how African ontologies shape people's perceptions and lived experiences, we need to understand the dominant cosmological frame that shapes the conception of what exists and the different possible of existence.

a. Indigenous African Cosmology and Philosophical Ontology

Cosmology is a conception of the nature of the universe and its operations, and of the place of human beings and other creatures within that universe (Bowie, 2006; Tempels, 1959; Bourdillon, 1990). All world communities have cosmologies, that is, stories, myths, or theories that explain the origin and nature of the universe, as well as the ways in which different peoples in different cultures understand the world of their experience (Matthews cited in Bowie, 2006). These cosmologies have the special function of orientating human beings to their universe. They serve to orient a community to its world, in the sense that they define, for the communities in question, the place of humankind in the cosmic scheme of things and such cosmic orientation tells members of the community, in the broadest possible terms, who they are and where they stand in relation to the rest of creation (Bowie, 2006; Masaka and Chemhuru, 2011).

Looking at the spiritual and religious inclinations on the African continent, one can say that African people have remained fundamentally *Homo Religiosus* (Eliade, 1959). This is only so, I argue, due to the resilience of the primal African cosmological worldview that has infused and appropriated, over centuries, not only Christianity, Islam, and other forms of religious expression, but also produced multiple forms of syncretic religious manifestations on the continent. In fact, in reference to the variety in the nature of different localised indigenous knowledge systems, what the large majority of Africans have in common, whatever their externally confessed religious beliefs and life style, is their cosmological worldview (See Mbiti, 1975 for a similar point). Contrary to the Western philosophical and religious conceptual paradigms that distinguish Durkeimian sacred and profane domains of cultural and religious belief and practice, the African primal cosmological view that continues to varying degrees to infuse the understanding of life realities on the continent, does not hold a dualist (material and spiritual) worldview. Instead, it holds a unity of cosmos (Motshekga, 2007; Thornton, forthcoming; Tempels, 1959). This is to say God, the ancestors and other spiritual beings, although invisible to the common of the uninitiated, are not believed to inhabit a separate universe, but the same universe as the humans, but simply exist in a different ontological state. These ontologically "immaterial" beings are believed to exist in a spiritually and physically imbricated world. As John Mbiti (1990 [1969]) observes,

> … for African people, this is a religious universe. Nature in the broadest sense of the word is not an empty impersonal object or phenomenon: it is filled with religious significance – God is seen in and behind these objects and phenomena: they are His creation, they

manifest Him; they symbolize His being and presence…. The invisible world presses hard upon the visible: one speaks to the other, and Africans 'see' that invisible universe when they look at, hear or feel the visible and tangible world (p56-57).

To understand the essence of this African cosmology and how it orients people today, one needs to first grasp the mythical essence of the name "Africa" itself. The indigenous name of Afuraitkait, meaning "higher" or "celestial" land (See Akhan, undated) that the Greeks turned into Afuraka and which was later translated to the English Africa, originally meant 'The land of my God' (Motshekga, 2007: 5). Thus, etymologically, to say that a person was an "African" meant that they were a son or daughter of God (Motshekga, 2007: 5). This is what explains the fact that for millennia, before experiencing the slave trade and colonialism and through these historical and contemporary processes, coming into contact with other cultural and religious belief systems, Africans considered themselves to be divine people by birth (Motshekga, 2007: 5). The continental sharing of this primal mythical cosmological understanding is why in local dialects "Africans" are also known as: Velanga (Nguni), Bakaranga (Shona), Vhakalanga (Shona), Ba Kara (Uganda/Tanzania), BaKhalaka (Sotho), etc. (See Motshekga, 2007).

This belief in the earthly divine nature and ontological being is, I argue, at the root of why Africans did not develop congregational ways of worshipping God; a fact which the missionaries and scholars later instrumentally used to justify that Africans had no religion for racist and political reasons. In the indigenous context, the 'congregation' 'consists only of interested observers, and is in no way considered to be a sacred mass of worshippers with a common sacred focus or object, and recipient of blessings deriving from their joint participation in a 'religious' act' (Thornton, forthcoming: 8). This primal indigenous religious belief system is what most African still subscribe to and use to frame their understanding of lived realities in general. As I argue below, for any social science enquiry to overlook or actively dismiss the fundamental religious character and socio-cultural determinant meanings that shape individuals as well as communities in how they conceive, perceive and live their lives across the continent is highly problematic. It involves not only removing any ethnographic data from their original contextual and explanatory frameworks, but also submitting the accounts to a purely culturalist-materialist analysis, which becomes simply arbitrary – researchers take decisions that serve their own purposes. These decisions, which constitute the mainstream practice in academia today, can however lead to a total misreading of what people say (See also Nyamjoh, 2012; Thornton, forthcoming).

One needs to notice that for Africans a great part of what is generally called African Religion, is actually amenable to basic empirical knowledge (See Tempels, 1959). The early missionary decision to cast any form of indigenous knowledge in the domain of "superstition" and later "religion", has had the consequence of relegating sets of complex empirical knowledge to simple issues of metaphysics. As a result, in contemporary Africanist scholarship we again see indigenous knowledge being reduced to issues of 'beliefs', of simple 'epistemology' due to the persistence of culturalist perspectives. In religious studies, scholars studying indigenous knowledge systems under the rubric of "African Religion" continue to debate whether or not Africans have knowledge of God. One example of detractive misconception and denialism about whether Africans have knowledge of a Supreme God or not has just been the object of James Cox (2014) new book entitled 'The Invention of God in Indigenous Societies'. In this volume James Cox resurrects an old Western misconception that certainly most Africanist scholars considered long put to rest. The book seems to give credit to a scholarship that exemplified just how much the value of African perspectives was denied and destroyed by purpose or ignorance. Cox negates the existence of a conception of God as a Supreme Being in Africa (and many other non-Western contexts) prior to the introduction of this notion by missionaries. For Cox, even eminent African scholars such as John Mbiti and others, who argued against the derogatory misconceptions and misrepresentations of early colonialists and anthropologists, did so only as a result of the influence of the Christian missionary education that they had received. No need to recall here the early Western scholars entering Africa, who were preoccupied by the necessity to categorise whatever they saw, put themselves at the top of human existence, and denied people humanity depending on whether they were considered to have written religion (civilisation) or not. The racist claim that natives did not worship God needs to be understood in line with the exclusive moral order and utilitarian colonial political consequences that such a thesis sought to justify. Missionaries themselves did not have one position on this issue. In some cases, such as Zimbabwe, it even brought disagreement on whether to use Mwari instead of Yave as the name of God in order not to confuse the natives (Cox, 2014: 67). Even the moment of admitting that the Shona name Mwari for God could be used as the name of the Supreme Being differed between the Protestant missionaries who started using it as early as 1898 and Catholics missionaries who adopted it in 1960 (Cox, 2014: 67). But it is misleading to suggest that while Catholics and Protestant missionaries were struggling on how to name God for the natives for Christian evangelical purposes, the natives had no clear knowledge of their world,

and it was the external "missionary saviours" that came to educate them about their own indigenous cosmology.

Influenced by work of Placid Tempels' 'Bantu Philosophy' (1952[1959]) and other religious scholars such as Eliade (1959), scholars started timidly suspecting that they could have just misunderstood the forms of religious expressions on the continent. However, in the broader contemporary business of political colonialism and intellectual coloniality, scholars went on inventing, for Western audiences' consumption, typologies. In the process, they created new ethnic and "tribal" indigenous groups that, in some cases, Africans themselves did not even suspect were being established for them. In this context and with colonial efforts, every Africanist scholar strived to become a "discoverer" of something new. The word 'Muntu' which simply means 'human' whatever their origin or skin colour, became limited only to people having that word in their vernacular language. In this "tribalisation project", scholars endeavoured to also tribalise African indigenous religious beliefs and knowledge systems. Every scholar studying a particular people was thus, curiously, able to discover a "religion" and a "god" unique to that people. The fact that in the large majority of cases people across the continent could have been talking about the same spiritual realities but just in different languages and socio-political spaces and time was rarely questioned. What scholars in fact should have done is to study processes of diffusion of a single religion as it is differently expressed based on local socio-cultural specificities. Instead, they invented "religions" and "gods" everywhere. The extreme of this scholarly aberration is the attempt of claiming that there is 'Luba Religion', 'Shona Religion'', "Sotho Religion'', "Xhosa Religion'', etc. Unfortunately this has now consecrated in academia. Everyone, who has interviewed traditional healers in Southern Africa knows that they are a highly mobile group of people; some are initiated by people belonging to other ethnic groups and countries. To argue, for example, that the custodians of indigenous religion (Sangomas or healers) from Southern Africa who travel up to Uganda and other parts of the African continent in search of knowledge to improve their healing crafts, believe that they are dealing not just with different local ancestral spirits but equally with different local Gods would be a gross misconception. This misconception turns into ridiculous aberration when even the people who split as lately as the Zulu of South Africa and the Ndebele of Zimbabwe in late 19th century are somehow given each their separate "religions". Thus we have books on the 'Zulu religion' and on the 'Ndebele Religion'. We are not even told why we cannot maybe have, let's say, just the "Nguni Religion", which would include numerous ethnic groups from South Africa, Zimbabwe and Swaziland. If a

significant number of Southern African people (Zulu, Ndebele, Xhosa, Swazi, etc.) are in fact Ngunis, why is there not a "Nguni Religion"?

The problem lies in the fact that the ethnologist or anthropologist is still trained to develop much localised knowledge often called "specialisation". They are required to learn the language and study a particular people "inside out" and escape to give account. Contrasting such localised knowledge with the broader context is rarely part of the exercise. While scholars are allowed to overlook the ramifications of their "discoveries" and contrast them with other forms of knowledge from elsewhere on the continent, they are expected to interpret them and explain them according to what their audience understands. In this sense, the academic community is not in a different position than that of the 16th to late 19th Europeans who were waiting and consuming imaginative accounts from anthropologists and explorers.

However, what we often overlook are the remnants of colonial provincialisation efforts that are hidden behind these multiple "religions", and tied not to strands of thought and their evolution and theological currents based on their custodians, but to ethnicity. To make my point clear, if any scholar would venture to go to parts of Africa and start placating localised diffused strands of Abrahamic religions to ethnicity as, let's say, 'Zulu Pentecostalism', 'Yoruba Christianity', 'Bashi Islam', etc., they would sound ridiculous. However, when scholars do the same thing in relation to African indigenous religion, they create standards but also the hyperinflation of localised "religions", which James Cox now again endeavours to restore to their "local Gods". This is so only because, as other religious studies scholars before him, James Cox continues to distinguish "major" religion with written traditions in terms of theological developments that they can follow and those with oral tradition in terms of ethnic and linguistic groups practicing them (See Ter Haar, 2000 for a similar point). This is very problematic at best. This same "tribalisation project" is also evident in the language scholars use to refer to cases of Africans, who, either based on cultural heritage or scientific evidence, claim to be Black Jews (e.g. the Igbos in Nigeria; the Luba in DRC, the Lemba in Zimbabwe, etc.). Their religious expressions are treated in academia not as versions of Judaism as the people themselves would contend, but again attached to ethnicity in the use of the non-religious category of "Hebrewism" in referring to these people.

To be sure, if 'African Studies' was simply concerned with understanding how cosmology informs ontology as a way of being and knowing on the continent, "African Studies" should include all disciplines of science and endeavour to understand these scientific disciplines as theories of an imbricated whole. But instead even in Africa,

African Studies departments only include disciplines from the social sciences and humanities.

b. African Etiology of Evil and the Academic "Witchcraft Fetish"

The other misconception that continues to distort African studies concerns theories on the African etiology of evil in contemporary scholarship. In this section I illustrate the use, misuse and conflation of the notion of "witchcraft" by mainstream Africanist scholarship as a canon for interpreting and explaining most beliefs and narratives. I term this reductionist practice the "Evans-Prichard's fetish" not just because Evans-Pritchard is the most cited authority on "witchcraft" in Africa (See Parkin, 1985; Pocock, 1985), but as an invitation to think about "witchcraft" in the sense Bruno Latour uses – Marx's concept of fetish. Karl Marx describes the fetish as an illusion that has not yet been exposed for what it is: a mask that graces power (White, 2013).

In fact, one of the pervasive aspects of the African fundamental belief system is its etiology of evil, particularly the belief that certain people, due to their spiritual positioning, have the ability to domesticate and can, through spiritual malpractice, harness and direct "evil" at will (Parkin, 1985; Pocock, 1985). This implies that the occurrence of evil or misfortune is not generally believed to be something that just happens, and is intead something that has a 'direction' and a 'director' (Shoko and Burk, 2010: 112). In some circumstances however, it is the non-observance of traditions or the non-performance of appropriate religious rituals that are believed to trigger evil in unruly ways and thus rack havoc (Pocock, 1985; Parkin, 1985). Hence, learning how to negotiate evil becomes a prominent concern. This is the common sense pattern of thinking that most Africans of indigenous extractions subscribe to, especially on matters that relate to the bad, but also pertains to good events (Shoko and Burk, 2010: 112). Naturally, Africans prefer to predict, prevent and avert evil, and if that is not possible they like to explain and understand it and place it within a certain order and manageable context (Shoko and Burk, 2010: 112). The resilience of this fundamental and pervasive belief system continues to structure not just people's perception of themselves, and their behaviour towards others, but also their relations to the state and all other phenomena. This experiential ontological reality explains that it is only by situating behaviour and discourse within this broader cosmological framework that we can grasp the meaning attached to different phenomena locally, including urbanization and migration processes.

However, there is a recurrent misconception or reductionist consensus of African fundamental religious belief. Any account of African lived realities alluding to the etiology of evil, or that is different to what scholars define as clearly Christian or religious, is often qualified and explained, not according to African cosmology and indigenous religion in their varied and broadest sense, but as being shaped by pervasive "witchcraft" beliefs . I would like to illustrate my point with an interview account drawn from one of my projects on ritual practices of eco-spiritualism among Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa:

> …What I can say is that people believe *Muhacha* is our passport from God… I think *Muhacha* is naturally holy because we know that even our ancestors used to go under that tree to ask for rain or food during drought times. But one can also travel with the *Muhacha* tree leaf! The prophets can give you the leaf to cross the border if you don't have a passport. They can just pray for you and tell you that: 'this is your passport. With this leaf no one touches you or ask you anything.' And if you believe it that is what will happen! Many people in my country will tell you that 'if I want to go to South Africa I can just go through without a passport with this leaf.'[…] No, I don't think anyone can go overseas with the leaf without a passport, to England for example (big laugh)… People use it to go to nearby countries where one can get just… we are here talking about boarding an airplane, not just walking, unless maybe you are using a ship, maybe… maybe you can use it to talk to those people who do the shipping, maybe your prayers can be heard and help you to reach that country. ..Yes, there are a lot of people using it. They will tell you that I went to this church and they gave me this leaf and that is what I used to cross the border. Some are saying that 'the prophets told me that I must drop one at the Zimbabwean side and the other one at the South African side. Then I just passed. If I see the police I just put my hand in the pocket and hold it.' And another one will tell you that if you go to this church they will make a cross with *Muhacha* tree for you and make you wear it, then you are holy and you can go and you will succeed abroad… The prophets know that you are coming here to look for a job. So they will give you one for crossing the border and another one for looking for a job… A friend of mine even told me that one day the police stopped her at the border as she was passing and asked: 'where is your passport?' She just showed them the leaf and said: 'Here it is!'… They all started laughing and they let her go (big laugh). I can't say how common it is because I know that most of the people come here with passports. It is only the few who can't manage a passport so they end up looking for the prophets or other people to help them get the leaves… (Interview with Rosy, 16 January 2013, cited in Kankonde, in progress).

To a Cartesian dualist thinking according to a Straussian 'logic of the concrete',[1] the above interview account will likely be just one perfect illustrative example of absurd

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1   Lévi-Strauss calls "logique du concret," a person's 'ability of the mind to establish relations of correspondence and opposition between salient features of our perceived environment' (See Descola, 2014: 272).

phantasy thinking developed by 'savage minds' living under intensive social stress. The ontologist who does not know what Rosy is talking about will not only admit the possibility of inhabiting differently the world (Descola, 2014) as well as that living in a different world, but also abstain from any external conceptual imposition and seek instead to conceptualise what the respondent is saying according to their own cultural system. The existing academic standard position thus operates just as a censorship mechanism of respondents' accounts and assumes that the researcher and their "target audience" are in a position to understand what such account is all about. This, the researcher and the audience imagine to know what takes place even before even the interview occurs – thanks to major "social theory" meta narratives. Hence the "all-knowing" and "all-understanding" scholar continues to look down on the people studied. This is the process through which alternative Africanist knowledge has emerged; created and sustained by the colonialist image of the "expert" whose account was to be legitimated even when the people he studied contested his/her knowledge. The fact that the above interview account may seem fantastic to the researcher simply due to the limit of their conceptions would thus be treated as inconsequential. How much has actually changed in the "postcolonial" knowledge production and validation process? Not very much. It is this state of affairs that is explained by the religion and migration scholar Gerda Heck, in an academic exchange with Philip de Boeck on the theme of 'de-colonizing Research' (available on Youtube). She reflexively questions why, when a respondent has told her that they have experienced a miracle, she is expected to write about it as if the miracle did not happen and it was just an illusion? The issues of how a non-dualist account can be translated into a dualist logic and what the analytical and representational implications of such a transposition are, is not part of discussions. Hence even the thinking frameworks of respondents are never discussed. Scholars seem instead more eager to unreflexively reproduce a kind of academic exotic sensationalism. In this line, even phenomena that fall into the category of the most basic empirical reality are construed and described as belonging to explanation from the domain of magic or fear of the occult.

Early anthropological and colonial theories on "witchcraft" have been critiqued for equating the African cosmological worldview and etiology of evil with "traditional" thought and "irrational" behaviour (Sabar, 2010). But still, to the disagreement of many from the African continent, the early derogatory associations of all that is African with irrationality have been supplanted in academia by the shared "modernist" view that "witchcraft" signs and practices crystallize the experiences of

the "modern" African world (Sabar, 2010; Ashforth, 2001; Comaroff and Comaroff, 1993). The argument often advanced is that 'modernity has injected African post-colonial "witchcraft" discourses with a new dynamic, which reflects the ability of "witchcraft" beliefs to adapt to the modern nation-state and to new types of entre-preneurship' (Sabar, 2010: 111). In line with this, Diana Ciekawy and Peter Geschiere claim that 'Understanding witchcraft is an essential element in any attempt to com-prehend people's mundane realities and thoughts…. In everyday life in Africa and elsewhere it is a discourse about action and the urgent necessity to handle these dan-gerous but hidden forces' (1988: 3, cited in Sabar, 2010: 130). In the work of Adam Ashforth, while obviously concerned with explaining people's existential anxieties, it is, in the final analysis, the entire African etiology of evil and theology, reduced to the simple issue of "spiritual insecurity" (See Ashforth, 2011, 2010, 2005, 2002, 2001). Because of the distinguished status of many modernist Africanist scholars, it is today an academic trendy to use "witchcraft" even when it is not a framework one other-wise uses. The complex set of primal indigenous religious beliefs is thus over sim-plifyed. As a result, young Africanist scholars seem to see "witchcraft" everywhere and they try to explain everything in terms of beliefs in "witchcraft". In many cases, even when scholars acknowledge that "witchcraft" was neither the object nor the analytical framework of their study, they use the "witchcraft fetish" to do the job and go on (thinking analogically and assuming we all know what they mean when they refer to "witchcraft") to talk about totally disconnected things and submit cultur-ally informed accounts to essentially culturalist-materialist analysis. Bruno Latour's critic of anti-fetishists' scholarly practice and belief in the exclusive scientific nature and status of their own forms of knowing becomes particularly relevant here. As he puts it:

> You are always right! When naive believers are clinging forcefully to their objects, claim-ing that they are made to do things because of their gods, their poetry, their cherished objects, you can turn all of those attachments into so many fetishes and humiliate all the believers by showing that it is nothing but their own projection, that you, yes you alone, can see. But as soon as naive believers are thus inflated by some belief in their own impor-tance, in their own projective capacity, you strike them by a second uppercut and humili-ate them again, this time by showing that, whatever they think, their behavior is entirely determined by the action of powerful causalities coming from objective reality they don't see, but that you, yes you, the never sleeping critic, alone can see. Isn't this fabulous? Isn't it really worth going to graduate school to study critique? (In White, 2013: 670).

But as Louise White (2000, 2002) reminds us, we need to 'be subtle and specific … about Africans' concepts of evil and the invisible world' and try to find 'subtle and

crucial distinctions between witches and others' (2002). The persisting misunderstanding here is due to the assumption of a pervasive consensus amongst scholars about what we mean when we talk about or use the term "witchcraft" while actually often talking pass each other. What is often clear in the literature is the confusion by foreign academics as well as natives (who have appropriated the use of the concept of 'witchcraft' – whatever that means) in speaking about the instrumental deployment of a politics of demonization in African urban contexts, which often leads to the false accusation and victimisation of children and the elderly. But as the anthropologist Robert Thornton (forthcoming) stresses, what Westerners call "witchcraft" is different from what the Africans understand by that concept. The point Thornton is making is not new. The Africans have always said it. But the fact that Thornton feels the need to emphasise that point today and call for what he terms *a sociologically relevant theorising of "witchcraft"* shows just how mainstream Africanist scholars have been disregarding what the Africans have to say against the "witchcraft fetish".

In fact, reducing or explaining complex indigenous beliefs with "witchcraft" has simply become an easy way-out that allows scholars to avoid getting into the difficult endeavour of understanding the intricacies and consequences of the people's modes of knowing (Descola, 2014); the concept of "witchcraft" thereby becomes amenable to serving any conceptual purpose one wants to use it for. It thus becomes a simple tool of strategic 'orientalisation' (See Said, 1978). There are serious works that seek to understand the basic "anthropology of evil" by or from the perspective of Africans themselves. I am here referring precisely to a certain strand of scholarly work that misuses "witchcraft beliefs" and suggests that they explain most of the contemporary urban and political phenomena on the continent. To paraphrase Shaheed Tayob's comment, this self-indulging caricaturist twisting and misuse of the concept of "witchcraft", ignoring its local African meaning to serve a denigrating purpose under the pretext that "Africans themselves use it also", turns this scholarship itself, in the final analysis, into a form of "witchcraft" (Shaheed Tayob, personal communication, 6 February 2015).

Academic knowledge production on a people or individuals cannot consist of sets of researchers' ways of reading the beliefs and people we study, or conclusions drawn from our own pre-conceived analytical frames and sold as "authoritative" scientific knowledge. By adopting an ontological approach, I join others (Nyamjoh, 2012; Mbembe, 2007; Thornton, forthcoming) to formally reject the representationalism that characterises contemporary African studies. In other words, I argue, one has to approach and study African lived realities as social facts from an African ontological

standpoint. Furthermore, this perspective should be expanded to social science disciplines concerned with African studies. This is important because, as Achille Mbembe (2007) argues, "in order to enter the 'living space' of Africans and to understand it, one has to use their own terms, explanations, dreams, and images, and avoid falling into the trap of interpreting these according to Western concepts using an external judgmental view." This is to say, if the new 'ontological turn' is not seriously considered, not only African ways of seeing and living their life will continue being sometimes described as an 'absurdity' to be explained according to what scholars believe and claim to know to be the right way of Being, knowing and thinking. The danger also lies in turning Africanist scholarship itself, into a set of westernised ways of reading African beliefs and lived realities rather than a scholarship that gives accounts of people's realities for what they are and mean according to the people studied in local contexts. And if we admit that not just anthropology, but also social science in general, with its analytical constructs and concepts, is embedded in the Euro-American tradition of which the current dominant academic "perspectivism" (See Latour, 2009) is a product. Due to the fact that no value-free social science exists (Baumann, 2006), we can appreciate the Cartesian dualist "cosmological totalitarianism" (See Carrithers, 2010: 159) at play when an ontological perspective is not adopted.

III.　Power, Ontological Insensitivity, and the Mass Production of Intellectual Hybrids in African Academic Institutions

In this section I largely borrow from the work by the University of Cape Town anthropology professor Francis Nyamjoh. In the previous section, drawing on the new 'ontological turn' discussions, I have attempted to bring into Africanist scholarship concerned more generally with the "Other", some of the misconception issues that explain today not only why particularly 'anthropology remains unpopular among many African intellectuals' (Nyamnjoh, 2012: 63), but also the symbolic violence embedded in contemporary academic praxis. In line with this observation and in reference to the situation of African anthropologists and the condition for their admission and recognition to what he calls the global "Anthropology tribe", Francis Nyamjoh's metaphorical point deserves a lengthy citation:

'Ethnographic representations of Africa are often blindly crafted and served as delicacies without rigorous, systematic dialogue with the Africans in question. Even as we are

interested in knowledge as co-production (Schumaker, 2001; Tilley, 2011), our reflex is to minimise that co-production with key local intermediaries (be these informants, research assistants, "native" anthropologists, scholars from other disciplines, or ethnographers who are not perceived as anthropologists) by either completely ignoring their voices (even as we claim that only those directly concerned with the beliefs and practices we seek to understand can speak in a practical way on their own behalf), contributions and perspectives (especially when these are counter to our representations as trained and professional anthropologists from the "outside"), or reducing these to a footnote or a list of names and chance occurrences in the "Acknowledgements" section (Bank, 2008; Collins and Gallinat, 2010a: 4 and Englund, 2011a) (p67) […] A thorough and elaborate regime of domestication is set in place to ensure acceptability and predictability of research and opinions that guarantees that few, if any, elephants (read indigenous Africans) are admitted who have not demonstrated their capacity to conform to and reproduce the status quo, even as they might from time to time appear to be critical. If the boundary police and inhabitants of the anthropological mainland opt to keep the elephant outside of their conference rooms, editorial boards and classrooms, or to simply ignore the elephant's own self-definition and self-articulation, it is not so much that they are able to debate whether the elephant is what they individually claim it is – rather, the exclusion depends on whose claim of what the elephant is carries the day, depending on the competing hierarchies of credibility at play'.(2012: 77)

And reflecting on his own international academic recognition and positionality he adds:

If and when I attend conferences, my presence is a challenge to members of the tribe who refuse to embrace difference even as they have made the study of difference their stock in trade. Some hope to adopt and adapt me (the only language of relationship they understand), domesticate me to embrace their perspectives so they can show me off as a trophy, as a "Hottentot Venus" or "El Negro" (Parsons, 2002; Crais and Scully, 2009) of anthropology, with aspirations or ambitions of using me as a clearing agent for importing and legitimating their thinking in and on Africa […] I am schooled to be critical of fellow black elephants, while endorsing the mediocrity or glossing over the excesses of the anthropology tribe. In my zeal and determination to prove that I am not inferior to those who study and classify the elephants of the world, I must betray whatever achievements I grew up acknowledging in Africa and by Africans […] Why does the dominant understanding of cosmopolitanism almost always entail me taking up the ways of the anthropology tribe, and hardly the outsider anthropologist embracing the ways of Africans? What use is visibility or recognition that comes at the expense of my dignity and relevance to those with whom I share a common ancestry and humanity? Even if more African elephants were to assume a presence, what legitimacy would be accorded their version of who, what, how and why they are, given the overt or muted hostility to "native", "self", "auto" and "home" ethnography?' (Nyamjoh, 2012: 78).

In South Africa, in academia as well as in mainstream media, the debate on the production and validation of ontologically relevant knowledge is often tied and framed according to the local historical context. In fact, the transformation of universities is one of the recurrent topics in the media (See e.g. City Press, 3 August 2014 and 6 January 2015). The UCT's sociology scholar Xolela Mangcu, recently denounced what he calls "academic whitewash,":

> 'Our departments of history, politics, philosophy, arts and anthropology do not have full black professors, which raises the question of whose historical, political, philosophical or artistic perspectives are offered, and in whose cultural and linguistic idioms. It is one thing to have a graduating class that looks diverse, and quite another to make sure that class has had exposure to the full range of experiences and perspectives that comprise our social world […] It is important for all our students to know that Europeans are not the only people who have thought and written about the social world' (City Press, 6 January 2015).

Beyond South Africa, Africanist academics in general are also not isolated, and are instead part of the global academic political economy system that sustains itself through publication peer review systems, academic associative membership, recognition and respectability. Coming from non-dualist cultural systems, Africans often feel the pressure to conform to the dominant dualist ontological thinking stream (Nyamjoh, 2012). In this context, and mainly as a consequence of the power dynamics at play in the global as well as Africanist academic fora in order, Africans across the continent and even beyond try to gain peer acceptance and respectability; they often feel pressure to write and speak in ways that they sometimes experience as a violent denial of themselves, their beliefs and the communities to which they belong. This is experienced as a form of subservient cultural betrayal (See Nyamjoh, 2012). In African studies Institutes, across the continent and beyond, critical materials written by Africans rarely make it up to the "reading lists" (See e.g. Xolela Mangcu's comment in City Press article cited above). As Gurminder Bhambra (2015) has shown in her recent blogpost, the politics of side-lining critical scholarship by Africans on the continent or the Diaspora is not only a globally normalised practice, but there are also academics who are, for various reasons, ready to defend the status quo. While some people can disagree with Francis Nyanjoh's and Gurminder Bhambra points, we should suspect the fact that many Africans in different branches of the social sciences and humanities, may only be passively learning "theories" that they do not necessarily agree with, simply because they need to have a degree certificate to move on with their lives. Academic training thus becomes just something to do, because society expects one to have a degree. In this sense much of the time spent learning

becomes a waste because people learn things that they know, they will never apply in real life. We should thus not expect much of social science academic "knowledge" to ever have transformative effects in the sense of contributing to the development of the Continent. The structural power issues and the absence of ontological sensitivity in African scholarship, resulting from the global institutional context (and many other factors obviously), are having very negative intellectual hybridisation and self-segregating impacts locally as a result of current academic training. Hence Kharnita Mohamed, in commenting on the South African situation (in a comment that is valid for the entire continent), observed that:

> 'Black and coloured students tend to study horizontally, usually within their natal communities (which is fascinating as something strange seems to happen, they start to disassociate from their natal communities, what are universities doing to produce this kind of effect? (Kharnita Mohamed, comments, 2 September 2012, quoted in Nyamjoh, 2012: 72).

Researchers writing on an 'ontological turn' from the African or other postcolonial contexts and stand point need to be aware of the inherent potential and possibility of their scholarship being misread or misinterpreted as though they were also reproducing and essentialising the 'us' and 'them' dichotomy. As I stated earlier, the issue of ontological perspective and methodology need not to be tied to ratios of 'us' versus 'them' binary discourse. The truth is, that within any cultural system, people have different ontologies that are shaped by the intersection of the subjective and the social with the lived experience at a particular time and place. However, although ontological language and methodology promise to provide us with a more neutral ground, ontology sensitive Africanist researchers should remain aware of the fact that they too run the constant risk of simply trying to replace the criticised misrepresenting categories and concepts with other equally essentialising native ones. This would also be problematic. There is indeed a significant meta-contrast between a Western or Euro-American ontology and the plurality of non-Western ontologies out there (Candea, 2010: 178). However, even what is meant by terms such as "modern" or "western" may, in the final analysis, prove to be simply rhetorical in substance. As Tim Ingold notes on the terms 'Western' and 'modern':

> Every time I find myself using them, I bite my lip in frustration, and wish that I could avoid it. The objections to the concepts are well known: that in most anthropological accounts, they serve as a largely implicit foil against which to contrast a 'native point of view'; that much of the philosophical ammunition for the critique of so-called Western or modern thought comes straight out of the Western tradition itself . . . that once we

get to know people well – even the inhabitants of nominally western countries – not one of them turns out to be a full-blooded westerner . . . and that the Western tradition of thought, closely examined, is as various, multivocal, historically changeable and contest-riven as any other (2000: 63 in Candea, 2010: 178).

Tim Ingold's anxiety shows just how much the distinction between the 'Western' and the 'modern' should not be taken literally. This observation shows us also that we need to keep interrogating as what we mean by "African" and "Western", without again essentialising "African ontology". My point is that we need to avoid reducing the debate to issues of the identities of those producing knowledge. The 'ontological turn' in this sense liberates us in actual fact from thinking in terms of a 'people' or a group, but the ontology of our specific research subjects as shaped by the fact of their being and experiencing their lived world at the time of the research. This is what Latour calls the study of "actants" (See also Kelly, 2014b). What I try to show here is that the issue of ontological sensitivity in our research actually touches the core of academic knowledge production integrity. As such, this paper is a contribution to earlier calls that academic knowledge production be ontologically rethought everywhere.

IV.   Is There Any Possible Way Out?

After thinking about all the pitfalls of the interpretative and explanative social scientific inquiry tradition, the question that comes to mind is this: is there a possible way out? In other words, what is then the solution that would guarantee the production of proper or relevant 'knowledge for the future' in Africanist scholarship? This is still an open field to think about. Currently, there are mainly two ways through which scholars are attempting to remedy the situation by thinking through the structure of the knowledge production process. On the structural level there are currently different academic organisations and platforms that discuss the necessity to take others and their real differences seriously. These organisations seek almost to give, in academia, the fundamental basic accommodation of diversity of knowledge systems and knowledge production processes, almost the kind of status that would invoke similar attitudes and responses that notions such as those of 'bio-diversity' or "world heritage protection" invoke.

   In Africa, one of the active platforms, the Africa Decolonial Research Network (ADERN), which is based in the Department of Development Studies at the Uni-

versity of South Africa in Pretoria focuses on the decolonialisation of knowledge and power in Africa and the global South. To members of this project, 'decolonizing knowledge and power is a task and a process of liberation from assumed principles of knowledge and understanding of how the world is and should be, as well as from forms of organizing the economy and political authority.' We can add new platforms such as the "Rhodes Must Fall Conversation" as well as initiative such as the University Decolonisation debates at Wits, to name a few.

In Europe there are research projects and academic reflection platforms such as the 'De-colonizing Research' initiative, organised by the Global Prayers Congress at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, where academics, artists, and practitioners are regularly invited to talk about their production of knowledge and insights, shedding light on questions of representation, points of view, approaches, and methodologies of research. The most prolific platform dedicated to training scholars from around the world on issues of coloniality is the "Decolonizing Knowledge and Power: Postcolonial Studies, Decolonial Horizons", which is part of a larger intellectual and political initiative generally referred to as the "modernity/(de)coloniality research project." The project questions basic assumptions engrained in the idea of modernity, progress, and development in order to encourage thinking and living in search of non-Eurocentric and non-corporate social and human values (www.dialogoglobal.com/barcelona/index.php.). As their website information shows, there is a direct correlation between knowledge and coloniality and subjectivity formation (the ideology of truth, the figure of the expert, identity formation, and the role of the media bringing together the dominant philosophy of knowledge in the formations of subjectivity). The international Summer School that the group organised in May 2015 in Madrid, Spain, for example, aimed at enlarging the analysis and investigation of the hidden agenda of modernity (that is, coloniality) to the sphere of knowledge, power and being. Scholars were invited to examine: who is producing knowledge? What institutions and disciplines legitimize it? What is knowledge for and who benefits from it? How is our social existence colonized and how can we think about the decolonization of being? What power hierarchies constitute the cartography of power of the global political-economy we live in, and how can we go about decolonizing the world? This "knowledge coloniality awareness" needs to be situated within the broader legacy of "postcolony" critical scholarship tradition.

One of the possible avenues is suggested by Francis Nyamjoh (2012) is reflexivity. But as Nyamjoh cautions us, reflexivity should be understood as a process and as something deserving more than simple token mention in the prefaces, introductions

and methodology sections of books and journal articles. Researchers are not expected to take leave for reflexivity once they have taken leave of their field (Nyamjoh, 2012: 66). The understanding and practice of reflexivity Francis Nyamjoh is talking about, in fact embodies Pierre Bourdieu's point that 'Reflexivity takes on its full efficacy only when it is embodied in collectives which have so much incorporated it that they practise it as a reflex' (Bourdieu, 2004: 114, cited in Nyamjoh, 2012: 67). Although in making this point Nyamjoh is addressing particularly anthropologists, I believe his suggestion is valid for Africanist scholarship in general. As he puts it:

> Knowing is a lifelong commitment to reflexivity, dialogue and accommodation. This calls for a renegotiation of the field, the game and the rules – not by whims and caprices, but by reflective. In recognition of creative diversity, therefore, anthropologists studying Africa should seek to reflect it in the conceptualisation and implementation of their research projects, as well as in how they provide for co-production, à la René Devisch (2011), and collaboration with "native" and "at-home" anthropologists and across disciplines. Such co-production calls for team work over and above professional collaboration, along with multi- and transdisciplinary endeavours, to include the very people we study in the conceptualisation and implementation of the research process. It is not to be confined to or conflated with co-publication (Nyamjoh, 2012: 81).

In addition to Nyamjoh's suggestion, I argue that in order to change the current Africanist institutional mind-set and academic habitus on the Continent, what is needed is a proper education policy designed to advance an ontologically sensitive knowledge production process, and to give scholars who would like to do so, the basis from which to argue their case. This is important given the power differential I alluded to earlier. And for education policy purpose, we need to keep in mind James Ferguson's comment on Nyamjoh's (2012) work when he says:

> It's a suggestion we made back in Locations, but we didn't do much to follow it up, and I think it's especially important in southern Africa, where the call to have more engagement between a still mostly white anthropology and "African voices" tends to be countered with the view that there just aren't very many Africans with sufficiently high-level anthropological training. But as you point out, the people with the most interesting and sophisticated interpretations of their own societies may very well not have Ph.D.s in anthropology (imagine that!). The solution is surely to broaden the pool of people who count as social and cultural analysts (James Ferguson, comments, 31 August 2012, cited in Nyamjoh, 2012: 85).

Conclusion

In this paper, I drew from mainly recent anthropology scholarship to discuss the implications of ontologically relevant analytical thinking frames on Africanist knowledge production. While the interpretative and explanatory academic traditions still have defenders, as researchers we need to seriously think about what is it that we are actually doing to the accounts people give us and the socio-political implications of our academic outputs when our analysis is done without regarding the ontological referential frames of the people we study. When we apply an interpretative or explanatory frame of reference from outside of the socio-cultural and religious context we study, we need to be clear and distinguish such produced knowledge from the knowledge produced by studies that simply seek to understand the different ways that other people, including those that might seem to belong to our own ontological thinking, think about the research questions we are trying to answer. This final point makes me ask, for example, the question of what would "African" "Congolese" or "Zulu" studies be if the thrust of conceptual frames used to elucidate them are simply external impositions on the original conceptual frames of reference? In distinguishing and valorising the many answers people from different cultures have, as individuals or as collectives, to our research questions, we (not just anthropologists as Karen Sykes (2010: 171) argues, but social scientists in general) will 'make academia a world safe for difference'. To conclude with Holbraad (2010), I want to argue that 'the key tenet of an ontological approach in anthropology, as opposed to a culturalist one in the broadest sense, is that in it anthropological analysis becomes a question not of applying analytical concepts to ethnographic data, but rather of allowing ethnographic data to act as levers – big Archimedean ones!' (p180). This is the new frontier in African academic diversity debates.

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