African expatriates and race in the anthropology of humanitarianism

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Expatriés Africains et Race dans l'Anthropologie de l'Humanitarisme

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Anthropological critiques of humanitarianism in Africa emphasize the workings of power, usually along lines of cultural, class, economic, and political difference. While these critiques often mention race, they engage less explicitly with structural racism and white supremacy as intimately woven into humanitarian professional practice. Such an engagement requires looking at how structures of inequality, white supremacy among them, shape the everyday practices of humanitarianism: from recruitment and hiring practices to reception and expectations by local staff. Drawing on work experience (7 months, 2003–2004) and ethnographic data from post-conflict Sierra Leone (20 months, 2005–2007) and recent in-depth interviews with former colleagues (2012), I focus on African expatriates working in African countries in which they are not 'native' to re-format critical analyses that have emphasized translational or intermediary roles for African elites. I argue that African expatriates navigate multiple levels and scales in their work and operate under conditions in which assessments of their expertise, mobility and professional 'success' are racialized. Ultimately, I suggest that expatriate Africans operate as figures that call into question the metaphors of direction and scale implied in a discussion of studying up in Africa, while they also compel anthropologists to examine how institutions embody and reproduce inequalities.

Keywords: race; white supremacy; humanitarianism; labour; African expatriates

Les critiques anthropologiques de l'humanitarisme en Afrique mettent l'accent sur les rouages du pouvoir, généralement concernant les différences culturelles, économiques, politiques et de classe. Bien que ces critiques mentionnent souvent la race, elles engagent moins explicitement un dialogue sur le racisme structurel et la suprématie blanche comme intimement liés à la pratique humanitaire professionnelle. Un tel engagement exige d'étudier comment les structures d'inégalité, dont la suprématie blanche, façonnent les pratiques quotidiennes de l'humanitarisme: du recrutement et des pratiques d'embauche à la réception et aux attentes du personnel local. En s'appuyant sur une expérience de travail (sept mois, 2003-4) et des données ethnographiques sur le Sierra Leone d'après-conflit (20 mois, 2005-7) ainsi que des entrevues approfondies récentes avec d'anciens collègues (2012), je me concentre sur les expatriés africains travaillant dans des pays africains dont ils ne sont pas « natifs » afin de reformater les analyses critiques qui ont souligné les rôles traductionnelles ou intermédiaires pour les élites africaines. Je soutiens que les expatriés africains naviguent plusieurs niveaux et échelles dans leur travail et opèrent dans des conditions au sein desquelles les évaluations de leur expertise, mobilité et « réussite » professionnelle sont racialisées. Enfin, je suggère que les Africains expatriés fonctionnent comme des figures qui remettent en question les métaphores de direction et d'échelle implicites dans une discussion sur l'étude vers le haut

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en Afrique. Ils obligent également les anthropologues à examiner comment les institutions incarnent et reproduisent les inégalités.

Mots-clefs: la race; la suprématie blanche; l'humanitarisme; le travail; les expatriés africains

Out of our minds: a prelude

About 10 years ago, when I was conducting fieldwork in Freetown, Sierra Leone, I received a phone call from a former colleague working at an NGO in neighbouring Liberia. My colleague, whom I will call Agnes for the sake of this essay, is what some people might think of as a typical expatriate worker in conflict zones: Euro-American, well educated, female, in her mid- to late-20s and soon to be leaving. Frustrated and tired, Agnes recounted her efforts to coordinate the logistics for a large survey research project. She felt that Alain, a black Cameroonian country director and clinician, was her chief obstacle. He refused to provide her with everything she had requested, including additional security measures for her local female staff. In an aside attesting to his character, she expressed shock that, Alain, an African *and* a psychiatrist, had referred to Liberians – a nation of people recovering from a long civil war – as *sauvages.* During a heated argument, Alain diagnosed Agnes with a psychiatric disorder. 'He told me I was possibly psychotic. He said I was crazy,' she exclaimed.

Was Agnes 'out of her mind' (Fabian 2000)?[1] Alain's ad hoc diagnosis of how Agnes presented herself to others echoed a tendency to pathologize women for disagreeing with powerful figures or expressing unpopular opinions.[2] But it was also a variation on a common refrain from my African colleagues in the development and humanitarian industries who sought to criticize their white colleagues. White folks, for all their apparent success and powerful *juju*, were crazy (Benton 2015). Moreover, for Agnes, Alain's Africanness seemed to be incongruous with his disparaging remarks about Liberians. He had violated and deviated from a presumed racially progressive politics espoused by many humanitarian professionals in at least two ways. First, Alain had used overtly racist language to dehumanize Liberians, presumably people he had a lot in common with – at least from Agnes' point of view. In so doing, he had distanced himself from other Africans by denigrating them and implicitly by identifying as distinctly *unlike* them – rational, sane, and civilized. Second, Alain's diagnosis of Agnes sought to pathologize whiteness and untether it from the rationality, expertise, and intellectual capacity with which it is implicitly associated.

Agnes left her own motives unclear in her account. I could not help but wonder whether she was discomfited by the possibility of being *too much like* Alain: had she done enough to distinguish herself from Alain so that she would not be perceived as disrespectful of Liberians, so that she would not be perceived as an outsider who presumed her own superiority? Is this why she had pushed so hard for protection for female Liberian staff, and why she audibly expressed her shock at his remarks? Was she, perhaps, also unsettled by being disrespected and pathologized by a black African country director in a field largely dominated by white Americans and Europeans – by a person whose professional competency teeters on the brink of incommensurability within a humanitarian racial politics?

Alain's confrontation with Agnes, and the questions it raises, highlights a central preoccupation in this essay: professional humanitarianism's thorny and under-examined relationship with anti-blackness and white supremacy, as read through black African expatriates' experiences and an examination of the institutions where they worked. Here, I use Dylan Rodriguez's definition of white supremacy, which he describes 'as a logic of social organization that produced regimented, institutionalized, and militarized conceptions of hierarchized "human" difference' (2009, 11). I also rely on Fanonian formulations that perceive anti-blackness as a form of

negation, in which the 'opposite of white (human being) is its negation, black (human nothing-ness)' (Gordon 1997; Woods 2013, 126). These formulations posit a global racial hierarchy in which black people are located at the bottom, and serve as a foil against which 'genres of the Human' are assessed (Walcott 2014; Wynter 2003).

Alain's incitements index a perceived double consciousness and all-too-real double bind regarding African expatriates in humanitarian discourse and practice. If they are acknowledged at all, they are recognized as both foreign and native in a circumscribed ontological and epistemo-logical space called 'Africa' (Grovogui 2001; Mudimbe 1994, xi–xii; Pierre 2012). As I show below, African expatriates must actively negotiate the terms of humanitarian intimacy and mobi-lity – where one must both engage with local people and institutions, as they also seek rapid upward mobility by working in different countries every few years. The African expatriate, as a result of his or her nativeness, is expected to be in solidarity with and empathetic to local con-cerns; yet, in line with the professional aspiration to outward and upward mobility, he or she must also be attentive to norms of Euro-American humanitarian professional ethics and comportment. These professional ethics and comportments rest upon espousing a kind of progressive white liberal racial politics that explicitly proclaims the equality in capacity among racial groups, but which also predictably positions black Africans on a lower rung of the humanitarian professional hierarchy. Negotiations about mobility and intimacy accumulate and shift shape through imagin-ings of Africanness (read in terms of blackness) and whiteness.

Drawing on work experience (7 months, 2003–2004) and ethnographic data from post-con-flict Sierra Leone (20 months, 2005–2007) and recent in-depth interviews with former colleagues (2012), I pose some interrelated questions in response to Laura Nader's provocation that anthro-pologists study up: or, as she put it, to 'study the colonizers rather than the colonized, the culture of power rather than the culture of the powerless, the culture of affluence rather than the culture of poverty' (1972, 289).[3] This provocation, taken together with the conflict signified by Alain and Agnes' encounter, compels questions about the hierarchical nature of humanitarian work – not only in terms of North-South relationships, gender and geopolitics (Fassin 2007), but also in terms of race, as analysed through anti-blackness and white supremacy (Goudge 2003; Heron 2007; Kothari 2006). What does it mean to criticize whiteness (and white femininity), as Alain did, when, in the humanitarian encounter, it is also presumed to accompany expertise, intellectual capacity, and bureaucratic efficiency and rationality?

The point here is not whether a psychiatric diagnosis for whiteness (or humanitarian insti-tutions) is appropriate or should be, but rather that we must take seriously localized theorizing on the expatriate subject in terms that locate whiteness within a professional hierarchy and a diag-nostic moral matrix that is, of course, also gendered and classed. In other words, it is time to have more discussions about how professional humanitarianism and development work is organized along racial lines alongside those of nationality, citizenship and class. It is time to ask how moral assessments of white privilege that disturb and disorient white supremacy (even if only for a brief moment) offer another critique of the moral foundations of humanitarianism. This is a call to study up *intersectionally* along axes of power that include discussions about race and racialization, about white supremacy and anti-blackness (Crenshaw 1991; Nash 2008).

In what follows, I briefly review the anthropology of humanitarianism, using Peter Redfield's influential writing about humanitarianism and Médecins Sans Frontières' (MSF) as a case study, to tease out some of the implicit, but under-examined racial dimensions of the organization of humanitarian work. I then describe recruitment modalities and workplace strategies, using the cases of two male African expatriates with whom I worked in Sierra Leone in the early 2000s, and who have since moved on to other jobs in the humanitarian industry in other parts of Africa. These expatriates navigated and negotiated the organizational, interpersonal and individ-ual concerns about both their 'Africanness' and 'foreignness' within a field whose upper echelons

are dominated by white European and American practitioners. Ultimately, I ask how an intersectional analysis of these two individuals' professional and personal trajectories may confuse some of the directional, scalar and hierarchical assumptions embedded in a call to study up and how such trajectories reinsert the question of race into these discussions. Further, this paper is intended to extend conversation with recent literature on humanitarian mobility – or egress – and its associations with privilege *as progress* (Redfield 2013).

The unbearable whiteness of expats: epigraphic and epigrammatic discussions of race

Anthropological critiques of humanitarianism in Africa have traditionally emphasized the workings of power, usually along lines of gendered, cultural, class, economic, and political difference (De Waal 2002; Harrell-Bond 1986, 2002; Malkki 1996; Terry 2002). While some of these critiques might briefly mention race and its role in humanitarian representation and encounters, they engage less explicitly with structural racism and white supremacy or in terms that acknowledge their intimate connection to everyday humanitarian professional practice.[4] When anthropologists have addressed questions of race in professional humanitarian practice, they have done so at the level of discourse, glossing racial hierarchies simply in terms of race *masquerading as cultural difference*, rather than explicitly in terms of racialized practices and identifications (Duffield 1996). I refer to these expressions of race as epigraphic and epigrammatic – as situated in a space peripheral or marginal to the main text, hovering over it in ways that make it easy to deny its centrality and significance. Using a recent, influential work in anthropology of humanitarianism by Peter Redfield as a case study, I address directly this marginalization.

In a widely circulated ethnographic essay, 'The Unbearable Lightness of Expats,' Peter Redfield describes how inequality and hierarchy in the humanitarian NGO, MSF, are reproduced through symbolic, social, and cultural capital associated with mobility (2012). Redfield addresses these hierarchies through idioms of national identity, highlighting MSF's self-conscious recognition of how colonial relationships between Europe and Africa persist in post-colonial sub-Saharan Africa and within the NGO itself. The title of the article, as Redfield notes, is a playful literary reference to Milan Kundera's novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, upon which Redfield hangs his analysis of expatriate mobility and national staff's fixity in and to field offices. Of interest to me is how Redfield's analysis, which focuses on the 'weight' of a floating expat, resists another playful reading of lightness that equates the freedom of cross-border movement with whiteness.

Redfield's work is an analytically nuanced and deeply descriptive account of how MSF constitutes itself as a moral organization through critical reflection, but it is also a coded statement about the global racial hierarchies that his interlocutors implicitly associate with colonialism. This coding is literally and figuratively epigraphic. In one section, notably titled 'the lightness of mobility', the following joke is the epigraph to the section: '"The only problem with MSF is the *muzungus* (white people)" – a joke among national staff in Uganda, related by an ex-patriate.' To say that race is both literally and figuratively epigraphic, then, is to note that it is bracketed, separate from and above the main text. Race is noteworthy but not a central concern. Because this joke about race is attributed to 'national staff in Uganda' but told to Redfield self-referentially by a white expatriate, it is also distancing and exculpatory for the white narrator, who offers the joke as evidence of his solidarity with national staff, his being privy to their inside jokes and putdowns. As Donna Goldstein reminds us, ' … jokes often get their punch by expressing perspectives that would otherwise be inexpressible. Statements made in the process of "only joking" can often provide a window into deeply held and troubling feelings, such as those that deal with race' (1999, 564). Thus, I read the joke as a way for national staff members to express their ambivalence about how humanitarian aid is delivered, and the racial asymmetries governing institutional norms.[5]

It is important to note here that my examination of Redfield's work is not to single him out as a *unique* offender in social science critiques of humanitarianism, but rather to point out the evasive ways that race, anti-blackness and white supremacy are often addressed in anthropological analyses of power in the field of humanitarianism, if they are addressed at all (Crewe and Fernando 2006).[6] While Redfield's discussion of race is decentred in his essay – in the form of the epigraphic joke or as phantasm – this is not how my black African colleagues, others sensitive to racial inequalities, and I always experienced these institutions. Sometimes racism felt inescapably hard-wired to the system; at other times, experiences with racism were 'simply' a feature of raw interpersonal interactions. And still at other times, race seemed to not be a factor at all, as other forms of identity and structure came to the fore. The challenge of understanding how racism functions in humanitarian institutions reflects a seeming paradox outlined by Troy Duster, who describes race and whiteness in terms of their 'morphing properties'. He writes:

> Race, like H_2O, can take many forms, but unlike H_2O, it can transform itself in a nanosecond. It takes time for ice to boil or for vapor to condense and freeze, but race can be simultaneously Janus-faced and multi-face(et)ed – and also produce a singularly dominant social hierarchy. Indeed, if we make the fundamental mistake of reifying any one of those states as more real than another, we will lose basic insights into the nature and character of racial stratification … (Duster 2001, 115)

So it can be true that the subtle but intractable manifestations of white supremacy organize these institutions – that is race is structuring and structured through institutional human resources policies and practices – while at other times, racism appears to fade into the background, to become epigraphic to interactions, as Redfield implies by his placement of race in his essay. Black African expatriate subjects are present but not always explicitly visible in these accounts.

The logics of recruitment within these organizations, for example, reproduce and legitimize globalized racial hierarchies. Progressive NGOs like MSF try to address inequality by self-critique, going as far as calling efforts to hire people from low- and middle-income countries 'decolonizing' the organization (Redfield 2012, 360). Yet despite these efforts, inequalities persist and consistently resist their own undoing. While working for a well-known humanitarian organization in Sierra Leone, I saw the rural field office team of which I was a part, transition from a Western European, American, and Canadian expat staff, to a largely East African and former Eastern bloc one over a seven-month period. Operations transitioned to 'local' in the post-conflict period, as part of an organization's commitment to build 'local capacity' and 'community ownership'. Interestingly, this transition also appeared to accompany the scale back in emergency funding and services for the NGO. Expatriates from other African countries, some of whom had acquired North American or European citizenship or educational credentials, were brought in to take over. The white expatriates who moved were promoted to higher level appointments within the same organization (either at headquarters based in Europe or the US or within the central office in-country), moved to another organization in the current country or to the NGOs office in another country, or moved on to a similar or better position in another country or emergency setting.[7]

After a string of white, mostly young, male country directors in a five-month period, our NGO finally received its first African country director, whom I will call James. His arrival was met with enthusiasm from many of the organization's employees. White expatriate staff members, some of whom were visiting from headquarters during James' first few weeks in-country, commented frequently about his competency. In hiring James, they had met head-on the critique that longstanding practice of not hiring candidates from the Global South was rooted in assumptions that applicants from poor countries did not have the aptitude to lead complex institutions, manage diverse groups of people, and advance organizational missions. When James visited our field office to introduce himself, the field staff – majority Sierra Leonean – seemed very excited.

Some openly congratulated and welcomed him, with one staff member going so far as to say, 'We are so proud to finally have someone like you here.' The enthusiasm would soon wane as James began to crack down on expatriate staff expenditures, monitor fuel use at the field office level, and investigate graft and corruption within the organization.

Navigating blackness between solidarity and hatred

During a recent conversation, I reminisced about James' arrival in Sierra Leone with a mutual friend, Edward, and told him about the warm welcome he received in the field. Edward said it was common for local/national staff to assume solidarity with African expatriates when they first came to the field:

> They say, 'Okay, this is a fellow African. He might be more sympathetic with us much more than Europeans or Americans for some reasons.' They think that even with you coming there, you are someone who has gone through a situation like the one they're in. Therefore they are expecting you to be in solidarity or sympathetic with them.

The expectation of solidarity and shared outlook seemed to mirror Agnes' complaint about Alain's failure to show solidarity and affiliation with Liberians in the beginning of this essay. Yet, the assumption of African solidarity is also rooted in a sense of shared experience of being subordinate to whites professionally, to their institutional cultures and to their personal and individual professional agendas. Thus, their expectations of African leaders exceeded those of Agnes' in the sense that they explicitly articulated this shared experience with respect to subordination more generally, and to whiteness, in particular. This is not only expressed in Edward's statements, but also in the buzz around James' appointment as country director in the office and among my other African expatriate friends.

  The waning enthusiasm around James' appointment indicates that individual personalities eventually become as important as collective identifications, or sense of community, even as they are shaped by collective understandings of personal and professional duties. As my friend Godfrey notes about his work in Sudan:

> I remember the first time I came here in 2008. We had issues. The first time I went to meet the government ministry people they were very snobbish. They were. In fact, when you're black, it's even worse. We thought, and maybe we're wrong, that they have more respect for the whites more than they had for the blacks. But at the end of the day, it boils down to the individual. After about two, three, four meetings, the ministry of information, the ministry of social welfare, the ministry of sports, the ministry of youth and culture, whom I deal with on a regular basis [respected me and my expertise].

  In cases where black professionals are subjected to scrutiny from the start, emphasizing that individual personalities eventually win out over interpersonal prejudice is itself a diversion from examining structural dimensions of racism. It also suggests that ideas about black inferiority precede professional encounters. Being black in a context in which white expertise is presumed, rather than proven, as Godfrey's account suggests, can be a professional disadvantage. Black experts are often in the place of proving their expertise; the white expert's whiteness is often sufficient proof for hers.

  One might point to Godfrey's experiences of anti-blackness in Sudan as a part of the national political, social and cultural landscape – an inevitability of professional work in the country. The situation does reveal the central tension of identity politics in 'Arab' Africa, and the 'growth of Arab cultural and racial supremacy … ' in the region (see also Pierre 2013; Sharkey 2007). Yet, this interpretation does not disarticulate national anti-blackness from global hierarchies

associating whiteness and international expertise. Rather, it reflects the global – if not universal – reach of ideas of black inferiority that prefigures black expatriates' reception in various places. This is true whether the local population identifies with them racially or not.

Edward, like Godfrey, felt that assumed intimate knowledge and shared experience had its pitfalls. The way he described it, shared experience of Africanness also confers special localized knowledge that can quickly transform feelings of solidarity to those of suspicion and distrust:

> … You know all the shortcuts. For instance, [let's say] I want to enforce accountability and fight corruption. Then I will be in a better position to fight it, because I know all the tricks better than a person who is maybe a non-African.

Edward then told me about an informal sting operation he launched to uncover and fight misuse of company resources.

> You remember the shuttle system we used to operate? The driver from mile 91 would come to Kono, and I got a tip from someone that if he wasn't transporting staff, he would [sell seats] to private passengers. So one time, I drove the car alone. I went outside Kono town, and I parked on the side of the road. [When he approached town,] I followed this guy, who had packed the whole project vehicle with private passengers. The guy headed straight to the car park. I trailed behind him so he couldn't see me [and parked at the car park]. By the time they started off-loading, I had already arrived and surprised him. I had the camera and took some pictures. [Besides the driver], guess who else I found? I found the transport officer and the security officer all waiting to collect the money from the passengers! I later found out that it was a syndicate they called the Kumkum. Lord knows what that means. But it was a syndicate between those guys, the warehouse guy, the transport, the security, and then the driver. So you can imagine what happened. Of course, they explained their actions, and then they started hating me.

Taken together, Godfrey's and Edward's accounts highlight the shifting meanings and uses of Africanness among humanitarian workers. At one end of the spectrum, the shared condition of Africanness may form the basis for solidarity, rooted in an implicit subordinate status to white expatriates. At the other, one's blackness, regardless of nationality, may prefigure ideas about one's competencies and abilities. Both polar positions underscore the pernicious role of race, and the privileges associated with whiteness in these professional spaces – even as the former serves to undermine or oppose it.

Blackness and the barriers to egress

Many of the African expatriates I met came to Sierra Leone through the UN system. UN staffing, like most bureaucratic institutions, is a hierarchical ranking system. 'P-level' (professional) jobs are the most coveted international positions because they are permanent and provide excellent compensation in the form of salary and benefits. In addition to P-level positions, there are the lower-ranked FS (field staff) and NPO (national professional) positions, which are linked to country of origin. P-level professionals tended to be expatriates; NP-level professionals are citizens of the nation where the work takes place; FS-level field staff consists of people who do the grassroots and local fieldwork of implementing UN projects. UNVs are located at the bottom of this hierarchy. They are 'volunteer' positions that are minimally remunerated, and are intended to be a stepping stone to professional positions for young or entry-level professionals.

The UNV programme was the means by which many African expats in the UN system that I knew in Sierra Leone moved out of the NGO markets in their home countries to expatriate-type positions. In his interview, Godfrey, a West African communications specialist, described in great detail how the UN system is organized and how these rankings are often associated with country

of origin. He also described the difficulty of his work as a UNV, the lowest rung in the UN ladder. Even when he was doing what he recognized to be high-level, professional work – work that a P-level person would have been paid handsomely for – he felt that he was ignored in meetings and treated like an inferior. After working as a UNV for an extended period, he eventually was hired at the P-level in post-conflict Sudan/Chad, a post he obtained, he says, with excellent references from his work in Sierra Leone and a lot of luck. But even as he achieved his goal of landing a P-level position, he described some of the changes he had observed within the professional ranks of the UN following the global financial crisis in 2008:

> There's a tsunami going on in the UN. They are doing a whole lot of changes. Why? America is broke. The Western world doesn't have money to fund anything anymore. So they're trying to see how they can now reduce the size of peacekeeping missions, reduce the expenses. They introduced FCRB clearance, whatever that means. Now you have to go through an exam process. After passing the exam, you have to go through an interview. After passing the interview, you are on the roster. Then if there is a vacancy in your job group, then you are likely to be hired. That is the rule. But the sad news is that this rule has been broken with reckless abandon.
>
> We – those of us from the developing world – are always discussing, it now seems this standard was introduced to weed out people who are not from the West. Because 90% who have been recruited are either from America or Western Europe. The rest of us can hardly pass this exam. Why? It's so infuriating when you see an Italian who can barely speak English passing an English exam. And you begin to wonder, *Which language did this guy use to write his exam that he has passed and rostered that I cannot pass?*
>
> And like some of us used to say, it is only the American and the British who cannot make it in America that comes to Africa and comes to work for the UN. I am not sure this is true, though, we say this to console ourselves when we really feel bad, we say this to console ourselves when we see the injustice that is going on, when we see the level of marginalization that is going on. We say things like that to make ourselves feel happy.

Godfrey's words of self-consolation that also disassociate whiteness from expertise ('we say things like that to … feel happy') cast light on the not-so-subtle workings of race in humanitarian institutions. Recent anthropological critiques of humanitarianism have drawn attention to structures of inequality and difference, while skirting around issues of race and white supremacy. Godfrey's experiences, like Edward's, reveal how processes of racialization matter for the people who occupy positions reserved for international actors within the humanitarian industry. These expatriates navigated and negotiated the organizational, interpersonal, and individual concerns about both their 'Africanness' and 'foreignness' in a field whose upper echelons are dominated by white European and American practitioners.

Epilogue: on studying up

When my interlocutors question the tendency to associate all things good and rational with whiteness, they also prompt us to ask: when humanitarian values, norms and practices are dissociated from whiteness and its privilege, and attached to black and brown professionals and elites (and their privilege), in what directions are we studying? And more broadly, where does an ethnographer look or situate oneself when the institutions in question endure, but the people who embody and enact institutional agendas are in various states of flux and motion – upward and outward?

The brief vignettes I presented confuse commonsense notions of direction, hierarchy and scale that orient an ethnographic study of outwardly mobile humanitarian institutions and their tribes. Ethnographies of these institutions in Africa have often obscured the doubled role of the African expatriate and the baggage of race – often choosing to focus on the role of local/national professionals as elites, intermediaries, 'middles', and translators (Hunt 1999; Lawrance, Osborn,

and Roberts 2006). These accounts often suggest a fixed spatial and hierarchical organization of their work and of their social positioning relative to and within global fields of power.

As the editors of this special issue note, studying up is best determined in reference to emic perceptions of power (Wendland and Peters, this issue). For these professionals and others like them, they occupy a space 'above' the communities where they work because they have access to and control of the resources of humanitarian organizations at their disposal. This is particularly true in complex humanitarian emergencies where infrastructure, local, and national governance, and social services are often eroded by civil conflict and natural disasters. Yet, even with this form of privilege in the communities where they work, expatriate workers like Godfrey, Edward and James experience racism that shapes their upward and outward movement within and between humanitarian and supranational institutions. Thus, understanding the mechanisms of power and drivers of inequality in humanitarian spaces requires attending to race and its institutionalization; it also requires thinking about how race and racialization matter on the continent (Pierre 2012).

African expatriates working in African countries in which they are not native navigate multiple levels and scales in their work and operate under conditions in which their expertise, mobility, and professional success are linked simultaneously to their Africanness and foreignness. Expatriate Africans operate as figures that call into question the metaphors of direction and scale implied in a discussion of studying up and translation in Africa – especially when they are also analysts of their condition, and who see ideas about race as partly shaping these conditions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. Johannes Fabian's account of ethnographic writing is notable in its attempts to destabilize anthropological self-representations as rational, civilized actors collecting objective data about the subjects of anthropological inquiry. Rather, he shows how

   > there is overwhelming indirect evidence that European travelers seldom meet their hosts in a state of what we would expect of scientific explorers: clear minded and self-controlled. More often than not they too were 'out of their minds' with extreme fatigue, fear, delusions of grandeur, and feelings ranging from anger to contempt. Much of the time they were in the thralls of 'fever' and other tropical diseases, under the influence of opiates, high doses of quinine, arsenic and other ingredients from the expedition's medicine chest. (2000, 3)

2. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggestions related to analyses of white femininity, particularly as it relates to Agnes' desire to protect her local female colleagues.
3. Because I also must identify an 'up' to study and a position from which to study it, it may be helpful for readers to know that I identify as black, American and female.

4. Notable exceptions include Razack 1995. There is also an anthropological literature of humanitarianism that is rooted in affective, bureaucratic practices in the Global North, allowing for a more expansive notion of humanitarianism beyond professional work focused on alleviating suffering during complex emergencies like wars and natural disasters. These critiques, despite the significance of race in the research sites, also underplay racial analysis, relegating race to a category of representation alongside gender in terms of victimhood and saviourism (Abu-Lughod 2002; Fadlalla 2008; Ticktin 2007).

5. In the same essay, another racially tinged joke serves as a section title: 'In my former life I was an unshaven, cigarette-smoking Frenchman.' It is a quote from a former MSF volunteer whom Redfield identifies as an Asian American woman. This joke is accompanied by little exegesis of its meaning beyond the stereotypes about how a typical MSF worker looks, behaves and comports himself in the field. The stereotype of who works for MSF persists – white, European and male – even as its 'local'/national workforce is considerably larger than its international staff and consists of many women (Pierre 2012, 361).

6. Indeed, others have discussed how anthropology – and particularly Africanist anthropology – continues to function as a white space (Brodkin, Morgen, and Hutchinson 2011; Brodkin 2014; Nyamnjoh 2012; Osha 2013). White Africanist anthropologists, in particular, have recently eschewed or downplayed racial analysis, while benefiting from structural benefits of whiteness in their field sites, in production of anthropological knowledge, and in hierarchical academic institutions (Harrison 2008, 2012; Ntarangwi 2010; Nyamnjoh 2004; Zeleza 1997).

7. When our field manager left, and was replaced by an east African expatriate, one of my friends, a UN volunteer from East Africa, asked me where the white expatriate had gone. I answered that the manager, a northern European, had since moved up to second-in-command in the office in the capital. My friend replied derisively in Krio, Sierra Leone's lingua franca, 'Huh. *Dat pikin*?' which meant, 'That kid?' Although my northern European colleague was a bit older than I, he was younger than my East African friend and probably had as much experience. In deriding the relative 'youth' of the promoted manager, my friend highlighted the frequency with which western NGOs had passed over older, more experienced managers to hire a young, white expatriate whose youth and white foreign-ness were perceived to be his or her primary assets.

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