

STS ACROSS BORDERS: STS IN "AFRICA"

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This blog post outlines the challenges, motivations, and inspirations for the collaborators putting together the forthcoming STS Across Borders exhibit entitled **STS in "Africa" in Formation**. Angela Okune and Aadita Chaudhury are PhD students in their third and second year of their programs at the University of California, Irvine Anthropology and York University STS, respectively.

Categorizing "Africa"

AO: The curation of an exhibit on critical studies of science and technology in Africa required us to grapple with trying to define "Africa" and "STS". As we were putting together the exhibit, we received feedback regarding the framing of STS in Africa – that Africa in and of itself is a racist colonial construct. While this critique is valid and situated in the histories of Eurocentric narratives around Africa, the category of "Africa" is also difficult to avoid, even while conducting decolonial work. This category operates at the nation-state level and has particular material realities that people experience, whether legal or political or otherwise. So while it is necessary to acknowledge that "Africa" is a particular colonial construction with a well-documented history, we must also acknowledge that it has and continues to have material and geopolitical effects. To foreground that we recognize and are grappling with the problematics of the category "Africa," we decided to include



the term in scare-quotes. We also decided to include the phrase “in formation” to make sure to convey its dynamic nature and ongoing growth. We are also contending with the problematics of what counts as “STS” as well, so ideally we would have also put that in scare-quotes too! (but there was also the level of aesthetics that we had to contend with, so be it).

AC: There have been some really interesting, prescient things that were said about the African continent even from colonial perspectives, that further illustrate the complexity of imagining a singular vision of Africa. There is a notion that Africa is always going to be misunderstood by outsiders. It is ironic that we have to use this imagined category of Africa in order to paradoxically decolonize our thinking about Africa or what we call Africa. We are fighting against this pervasive idea in popular culture that treats Africa as a monolithic country instead of a very diverse continent.

AO: But also simultaneously we need a category to talk about the contemporary sentiments of Pan-Africanism that are also continuing to take greater hold with many young people in our generation. So the challenge remains: how to talk about the idea that there is something that unites Africans and shared experiences while also still acknowledging the diversity of the continent?

Categorizing “STS”

AC: One of the aims of the exhibit is also to destabilize the broader understanding of what STS means across the world, and to normalize different modes of knowledge production that we might not readily recognize as STS work that is valid and legible to Western or a “global North” gaze. With this exhibit, we are trying to problematize scale since part of the STS Across Border’s intervention through the exhibit structure is to highlight that STS is not one particular thing that travels around the world in the same way. The idea is to show that “STS” lives and works in flux in so many different ways and so many different contexts. “STS” means so many different things. So through the diverse STS AB exhibits, we can hopefully better understand the multiplicity of what “STS” signifies in different geographic and otherwise spaces.

AO: Definitely. I have been working on another exhibit about a research group that I helped to start in Kenya called [iHub Research](#). We will have our own exhibit within the STS across Borders initiative. And that research center wasn’t an academic center since we weren’t attached to a university (though we worked with universities). It also wasn’t purely for-profit research per se since we sought to do work that would be helpful for the broader Kenyan tech community (including work for policy, NGOs, etc. etc.). So it was kind of hard to pin down what kind of work we were doing.

Sometimes we were critical of tech, sometimes we were in support of tech. We did data science and we also did ethnographic studies. We looked at farmers using mobile phones and we looked at how engineers were tinkering and making hardware products. We didn't realize that some of the work we were doing was considered "STS" until an American Ph.D. student came was like, "there's a name for what you guys do, it's called STS." We didn't know that that was the framing that we could fit under or we didn't know that was a field we could be contributing to. That story just goes to further highlight how challenging it is to even try to put together something called "STS in Africa." If we start from an assumption that this work is not already being self-identified as STS, a whole world opens up! Of course it is important to be critical of a narrative of discovery and really conscientious of this tendency. The work requires acknowledging our collective ignorance and seeing this process less of a process of discovery and more of a process of bringing together in one frame what is already there and trying to cross past niche disciplinary boundaries.

The time to do such work was one of the biggest challenges for us because it takes time to do such community identifying and network building. It is much harder and time consuming than "just" a literature review (which we know is hard enough as is!). We started with the assumption that there is so much that is going on in different communities and spaces on the continent who are extending critical questions of science and technology but they just may not self-identify as "STS" per say or even as "science" and "technology." So we tried to find ways of including this work by having an online Google form to crowdsource for respondents, looking outside of the STS circles, emailing the various listservs and networks we know and are part of, using social media, etc. But at the end of the day, given that we are both full-time students preparing for our comprehensive exams, teaching and taking classes, and currently based outside of the continent, I (AO) am afraid we were only able to capture just a drop in the bucket of all the cool work going on. I (AO) hope that at least we have opened up the conversation that people can now come back to and start to build off of. When I (AO) volunteered to take on this exhibit, I (AO) circulated a call for collaborators to help author it with me via email, on the 4S website and via listservs, but alas we are all busy and so eventually only two of us worked on this exhibit on a day-to-day basis. But I (AO) am hopeful that now that this is a thing in the world that people can interact with and hopefully better understand the use case for, they will be jazzed to join and become contributors and exhibitors as well and then this can start to snowball.

The **infraStrucTureS** platform

The **infraStrucTureS** platform, an instance of the **Platform for Experimental Collaborative Ethnography** (PECE), is a really exciting online infrastructure on which to be building this exhibit



because it enables so many scales of inquiry. We leveraged what in PECE terms is called a “structured analytic,” a **set of ten questions** designed by the PECE design group and team at UCI to unsettle and unpack our traditional modes of thinking about particular fields/problem spaces/phenomenon. The idea behind this light structuring is not to try to compare contexts with a universalizing gaze but rather to try to shake out what the discursive gaps and risks are (Fortun 2012) within the very diverse contexts within which these “STS” formations are emerging. This kind of analysis allows for “kaleidoscopic” ways of viewing the content and formations in a multiplicity of ways. Not only can this be done on the online platform but in Sydney, we will see this materially performed since the exhibits will be rearranged on the second day and displayed according to the analytic questions (on the first day, they will be by original exhibit creation).

Next Steps

This exhibit is a starting point for what we hope will be a living work-in-progress that will keep growing and changing. If the exhibit can spur discussions on some of the issues we have mentioned and also highlight work that has been done, that would be a fruitful start.

In addition to problematizing scale, one other intent of the initiative is also to build community. By bringing together a diverse group of works into one frame, the intent is not to say that this is the canon or that these are the only people that are doing the work. Definitely not. But rather to say check out all of this interesting work going on in these different disciplines, part of the world, etc. etc. Again, this is just a start. What is exciting about using the PECE platform for this initiative is that it is not a written “annual review” type of genre that is inherently quite static in form; the online platform is something that people can and should keep contributing to. So for 4S 2019, we hope that the STS in Africa exhibit will be taken up by others and added to and published again! You can think of it like a second volume of a book that keeps growing (with different authors). So we hope this first attempt will be well-received and critiqued and continue to live, grow and be a facilitating space for discourse and debate.

