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ARTISTIC RESEARCH AS AFRICAN EPISTEMOLOGY

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Can artistic research be understood as an African epistemology? Through a mapping of the field of African epistemology together with the key notions of artistic research, this paper argues for the decolonising potential of artistic research in Africa.

Since the first democratic elections took place in South Africa in 1994, signalling the end of apartheid and the beginning of a postcolonial democracy, issues of transformation, redress, and restitution have become ubiquitous in the country's political and social discourse. These issues were afforded a greater sense of urgency with the 2015 and 2016 student protest movements when attention became focused especially on lack of transformation within the higher education sector. The so-called "Fallist" movements accused universities of being un-transformative; of fostering a culture of exclusion, especially of disadvantaged Black youth; of maintaining an "ivory tower" mentality of elitism and superiority; and of continuing to uphold curricula that favour content heavily indebted to colonial heritage and generated from the Global North, while excluding African subject matter and indigenous knowledge.

The term "decolonisation" soon became a pervasive paradigm for these contexts, not only as it applies to curriculum transformation or university management structures but also more broadly in connection to concepts of knowledge. Concomitant to discussions of decolonisation has been articulations of the geopolitics that influence the global economy of knowledge and the positioning within that construct of countries of the so-called Global South, which includes the African continent. The juxtapositioning of core versus periphery, metropole as opposed to margin, and Global North compared to Global South have become intrinsic to arguments for decolonisation of knowledge. These discussions exceed South African contexts and can be seen to resound broadly in Global South geo-localities.

Fundamental to a project of decolonisation is a critical evaluation of the core and periphery collocation, according to which knowledge generated from countries of the Global South is too easily viewed as subservient to knowledge propounded by the institutions of the metropole, considered since pre-colonial times as the centre of intellectual authority. Raewyn Connell, author of *Southern Theory* and a respected scholar in the decoloniality field, states the following in an address to the University of Johannesburg during their 2016 discussions series "Decolonisation of Knowledge,"

> Modern universities and their staff and students exist in a global economy of knowledge, with a definite geography of production and circulation … This economy has a hegemonic centre, the knowledge institutions of the global North … This complex of institutions, as well as producing floods of new knowledge is the centre of intellectual authority in the mainstream economy. Universities in other regions generally follow US/European definitions of disciplines and research methods, and practices of publication and recognition. It is not surprising that their teaching curricula have been largely built on models from Northern universities.[1]

This paper proceeds from the premise that in order to participate productively in decolonising practices of knowledge production in the Global South, we should take seriously the project of repositioning ourselves in terms of the types of knowledge we produce and engage. This means a re-calibration of the knowledge formations we consider to be of primary significance—a resistance, in other words, to the hegemonic positioning of knowledge formations inherited from the Global North. But it also should serve as encouragement to examine rigorously those knowledges generated from our own continent and country, even the broader spectrum of geo-localities grouped together as the Global South, and to engage these knowledge formations actively in our intellectual endeavours.

In this paper, I want to explore the extent to which artistic research can play a significant role in a project of decolonising knowledge. Artistic research proposes a resistance to traditional separations in western philosophy of practical and theoretical

knowledge, proposing rather that these knowledges are mutually influential, equally significant, and deeply interconnected. This, as well as the focus of artistic researchers on tacit, embodied, and subjective knowledge seems relatable to several fundamentals of African philosophy, as I hope to show in this presentation. Artistic research has also thus far been primarily considered in terms of its origins within European education politics, and not yet as a knowledge formation closely related to African philosophy, in spite of the many resonances between these knowledge formations. Artistic research is commonly viewed as an endeavour developed in the Global North, specifically in Western Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States. I will posit that, despite the conventional history of artistic research's origins and its current location in the academic context of the Global North, African scholars may productively approach artistic research as an African epistemology and, in so doing, pose a challenge to the hegemonic centre to which Connell refers.[2]

My engagement with African epistemology in this paper is by necessity superficial and not by any means encompassing of the very broad scope of opinions, positions, theories, existing texts, and interpretations of African thought, of which there is ever more accessible evidence available in the form of books, academic papers, and articles. I am also very cognizant of the risk involved in referring to "African philosophy" broadly, and not distinguishing between the many divergent strands of thinking that characterise different parts of Africa and the many diverse cultures that constitute the continent. I am guided in these early stages of the research by several published texts in the form of books, journal articles, and conference papers that refer to "African philosophy" seemingly to distinguish this epistemology clearly from "western" philosophy (which is, itself, quite a generalisation). I hope that further research into this topic will yield interesting conclusions regarding the term "African philosophy."

This paper is the first step in a much larger project, which includes a broad-spectrum exploration of African philosophies and systematic engagement with the multitude of philosophical strands that are interwoven under the broad theme "African epistemology." The connections to artistic research I make in this paper are based on the early findings made thus far, which support the notion that the knowledge formations commonly argued to be most appropriate to artistic research strongly resonate with aspects fundamental to much of African thinking. The interconnectedness of practical and theoretical ways of knowing that artistic researchers strongly argue for is a concept innate to much of African epistemology; tacit, embodied, subjective, and experiential knowledge, all knowledge formations strongly supported in artistic research, seem to be ubiquitous to many strands of African philosophy. This paper proceeds with some thoughts on the philosophical positions that inform artistic research, while making suggestions for how this philosophy may be seen to connect to African epistemologies. The remainder of the paper argues for artistic research as a tool for decolonising knowledge within higher education on the African continent.

Henk Borgdorff, in his 2012 doctoral dissertation on artistic research, states the following:

> In artistic research, thinking and doing are enmeshed … It is an endeavour in which the artistic and academic are united … It is an undertaking in which artistic practices contribute as *research* to what we know and understand, and in which academia opens its mind to forms of knowledge and understanding that are entwined with artistic practices.[3]

Here, Borgdorff highlights the challenge posed by artistic research philosophy to the separation in western thought of theoretical and practical knowledge—thinking and

doing. In artistic research, thinking and doing function collectively and are viewed as intrinsically connected and mutually influential. This paradigm resists the separation of "thinking" and "doing," which has been a feature of western thought since antiquity, with Plato, Aristotle, and later René Descartes and Immanuel Kant all insisting on a separation between theoretical and practical knowledge, the *episteme* and *phronesis* of Aristotle's thinking, the Cartesian *cogito, ergo sum*. This paradigm feeds into other separations generally endorsed in western philosophy: of experiential knowledge as opposed to reasoned analysis, of subjectivity in relation to objectivity, and of body-mind dualism.

In contrast, several African philosophers have argued that such separations are not endemic to fundamentals of African thinking and that most African concepts of knowledge are, rather, predicated on notions of holism and unity. Ghanaian scholar Kwasi Wiredu, for example, explicitly rejects Cartesian dualism. Referring to linguistic properties of the Akan language he contends, if we take the contrast of the material and the spiritual and apply it to the concept of mind in the Akan language "one can straightaway rule out any prospect of a Cartesian dualism of body and mind."[4] Another opinion is registered by Anselm Kole Jimoh who states:

> While we may accuse Western philosophy of intellectual dogmatism that permits a dualism of the subject and object, and Asian philosophy of monism in attempting to deny the reality of the material, African philosophy tries to avoid the embarrassment of both concepts by seeing a central position for the ego (subject) in the cosmic scheme. In this way, subjectivism and objectivism do not constitute a problem for African philosophy.[5]

He strengthens this point by referring to Ernest Ruch and K. C. Anyawu:

> Knowledge, therefore, comes from the cooperation of all human faculties and experiences. [The African] sees, feels, imagines, reasons or thinks and intuits all at the same time. Only through this method does the African claim to have the knowledge of the other. So, the method through which the African arrives at trustworthy knowledge of reality … is an intuitive and personal experience.[6]

These statements resonate with Borgdorff's in that an African concept of knowledge is suggested to be generated through multiple, integrated avenues: practical, theoretical, philosophical, experiential. Jimoh continues to posit that:

> Subjectivism and objectivism do not constitute a problem for African epistemology. They are both subsumed in the unity of existence. In this unity, the subject gets to know the object. African philosophy does not demarcate between the epistemic subject and the epistemic object … they are joined together such that the subject experiences the object in a sensuous, emotive, abstractive understanding, rather than through abstraction alone, as is the case in Western epistemology.[7]

This account finds resonance with another statement by Borgdorff,

> Artistic research takes leave of the rigid opposition of subject and object of research, of fact and value, of action and interpretation. It is precisely this type of methodology—which allows for the intertwinement of researcher and researched, object and objective, and practice and theory—that seems the most suitable framework for conducting artistic research.[8]

In dealing with specific questions of epistemology and artistic research, several European scholars have argued convincingly that artistic research engages tacit, embodied, and implicit knowledges, generated from artistic experience, rather than favouring empirical enquiry. This again connects with African epistemological positions. In the anthology *African Philosophy: New and Traditional Perspectives*, Lee Brown states:

> A fundamental tenet of traditional African culture is that there is more to reality and the realm of experience than that which is readily accessible through empirical enquiry, and that one can acquire understanding of phenomena by appealing to experiences whose characterizations are not empirically confirmable but are nonetheless warrantably assertible.[9]

A similar argument, and one that is often drawn on in artistic research debates, was made during the 1950s by scientist and philosopher Michael Polanyi who, in his book *Personal Knowledge* stresses the hidden, implicit, and tacit aspects of knowledge. Polanyi posits that knowledge is generated through an exchange, a relationship between the personal and the universal, the knower or subject and the object of knowledge.[10] Artistic research supports this idea that knowledge is, first and foremost, apprehended by personal acts of discovery—it will, therefore, never be entirely objective, nor can it be separated from personal experience. This position challenges existing intellectual frameworks that favour scientific methods and empirical data above experiential knowledge. European artistic researchers Kathleen Coessens, Darla Crispin, and Anne Douglas provide an articulation of how tacit, experiential knowledge functions in artistic research,

> The need for new or changed paradigms follows from a recognition of the empirical, theoretical, methodological, epistemic and ontological limits of existing intellectual frameworks and their relation to the world … The artistic researcher acquires his or her own personal knowledge, constructed over time by way of social and cultural, embodied and cognitive experiences, only part of which is immediately expressible.[11]

Kenyan philosopher, D. A. Masolo, makes a comparable statement in his book *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*. Speaking to the issue of cognition in African thought, he searches for a middle ground between foundationalist and pluralist positions, where the former privileges formal, rational procedure as the most important cognitive factor, and the latter favours diversity of human experience and systems of representation,

> The position which states that our sense of the world and of personhood varies according to varieties of experience takes a middle ground between the foundationalists and the pluralists by arguing that what are called products of the rational mind are not really conflictual with what are oppositionally referred to as the disorderly life of the body and the emotions. Rather, this third position argues, such products carry equal weight as they both are modes of thinking which illustrate the variant modalities of experience. This position avoids the Cartesian dichotomy which posits the cogito ("pure" reason) as separate from, opposed to, and more reliable than bodily experiences (sensory perception).[12]

Masolo's position, which resists Cartesian dualism, connects convincingly to Borgdorff, Coessens, and other artistic researchers' statements on the same topic.

This preliminary engagement with the broad scope of both current artistic research and some tenets of African philosophy should at least provoke interest in the many identifiable connections between the two: the reliance on tacit, embodied, experiential knowledge; the resistance to Cartesian dualism; and the integration of subject and object positions. Although the research for this paper is still in its early development phase, I believe there is already enough evidence available to make convincing arguments for the potential of artistic research to be approached as an African epistemology. In my closing arguments, I want to shift the focus from philosophical aspects back to the political motivation for this project and briefly explore the question whether artistic research, when approached as African epistemology, can contribute to decolonisation of knowledge.

The imperative for decolonisation of knowledge institutions is no longer debatable. Yet, universities face several extremely complex and intricate challenges in such an endeavour. Connell argues strongly that, in spite of these challenges, there are important reasons why decolonisation must remain a priority for all educational institutions of the Global South. She highlights these reasons for her position,

> The first reason is practical need. Our students will need a wider range of competencies to engage with the world they are moving into. Among them are competence in alternative universalisms and other knowledge formations that already exist in the world. The second is a question of justice, imperial power and the global economy of knowledge marginalized, and often disrupted, knowledge formations among colonized peoples, helping to create the inequalities of the contemporary world. Revaluing and resourcing indigenous knowledges and alternative universalisms is a constructive response.[13]

Artistic research seeks to develop new knowledge formations that depart from traditional western ways of knowing: as artistic researchers build new competencies as knowledge creators by engaging their personal practice and subjective experience as primary factors in the generation of knowledge, they simultaneously actively resist the hegemonic knowledge definitions and formations imposed from the metropole. In this sense, artistic research can play an important role in decolonising knowledge, in Africa and other countries of the Global South. Artistic research can speak to Connell's second question as well: by looking to knowledge formations already fundamental to African philosophy and foregrounding them in artistic research endeavours, a "revaluing and resourcing" of indigenous knowledge, to use Connell's words, can take place, answering the call for justice that underpins decoloniality arguments.

The word "decolonisation" suggests, in its structure perhaps, the removal of something—doing away with or subtracting colonisation from, in this case, knowledge. I want to argue, however, that there is another way to approach this term; that is, to look at decolonisation as a philosophy of addition, a philosophy of more. It can be viewed as an invitation to search for new forms of knowledge and concomitantly new ways of doing research, of generating knowledge, especially in formerly colonised countries like our own and others on the African continent.

In the Global North, artistic research has attempted to do exactly that—to develop knowledge formations that resist traditional western constructs, such as separating practical and theoretical knowledge or favouring empirical rather than tacit or embodied knowledge. What I am suggesting here is that this challenge is already encapsulated within the fundamentals of much of African philosophy and epistemology. African philosophy, although until recently too often ignored, under-researched, and under-utilised in the knowledge institutions of the metropole, is already inherently

supportive of much of the thinking that drives artistic research in the knowledge institutions of Europe, the United Kingdom, and Australia. The imperative for an artistic researcher working in Africa is perhaps then to look to knowledge formations particular to our own immediate surroundings, to draw on the richness of African philosophy, and in this way decolonise knowledge: philosophically, politically, and practically.

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Notes

1 Connell, 'Decolonising Knowledge, Democratising Curriculum', 1.

2 Connell, 'Decolonising Knowledge, Democratising Curriculum'.

3 Borgdorff, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, 2–3; emphasis in original.

4 Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, 125.

5 Jimoh, 'An African Theory of Knowledge', 126.

6 Ruch and Anyanwu, *African Philosophy*, 94.

7 Jimoh, 'An African Theory of Knowledge', 126.

8 Borgdorff, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, 69.

9 Brown, 'Understanding and Ontology in Traditional African Thought', 159.

10 Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*.

11 Coessens, Crispin, and Douglas, *The Artistic Turn*, 13; 69.

12 Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*, 248.

13 Connell, 'Decolonising Knowledge, Democratising Curriculum', 8.

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