

Decolonizing the Decolonizer: Epistemic Liberation in 21st Century Africanist Scholarship  
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In September 2019, the social media was ignited when news broke that Musiliu Akinsanya, aka MC Oluomo, the current Chairman of the Lagos State Branch of the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW) was invited to give a talk at the University of Lagos. To many, MC Oluomo, a street thug and a political tout did not deserve to be invited to one of the strongholds of “normative” elite power in Nigeria. He doesn’t have a place in the university ecosystem where professors and highly educated people dictate the tempo of “conventional” intellectualism. To many, MC Oluomo’s character epitomizes the common spectacle of “curated chaos” that characterizes everyday life in the inner city of Lagos. The role of the NURTW in election violence and compromise of democratic ideals disqualifies him for talking on campus, where core principles of fairness and justice are instilled in the heart of young people. The University community, many believed, must not be turned into the “street” -- the real and imaginative locale that crowned MC Oluomo the King of Violence and an assortment of unregulated indecency.

Days after the digital acrimony started, the University of Lagos did the rightful by clearing the air on the circumstances under which MC Oluomo was invited to campus. Not only did they establish that the event was a Colloquium titled, “Transport Efficiency: Employing Lagos Terrain Alternatives” organized by the National Association of Geography Students, the university argued that “experts and relevant stakeholders with considerable knowledge and experience on transportation...are carefully selected and invited to come and share their thoughts with our students.” The goal of the Colloquium, Unilag emphasized, “is to produce students that are locally relevant and globally competitive.” Unilag’s response to the MC Oluomo campus invitation controversy is brilliant and succinct. It is an appropriate response from any institution committed to the best ideals in knowledge dissemination. Yet, it wasn’t enough to persuade the public that MC Oluomo doesn’t have a place on campus. Even within the university system, very few people thought he deserve to share the high table with professors and university administrators.

Yet, did Unilag students invite MC Oluomo because they thought he had something meaningful to contribute or because they wanted to extract socio-economic privileges from him? For years, the whole idea of integrating the "Town and the Gown" has functioned to provide a university platform for rich people to perform class, power, and elitism—not to broaden the scope of knowledge by integrating “unusual” non-academic perspectives and voices into formal academic curriculum. The MC Oluomo Unilag invitation saga further solidifies my conviction that thinking about the politics of knowledge, agency, and access to ideas should be an unending discussion. When we talk about African perspectives in knowledge production, whose perspective do we really mean? To many scholars, including the critics MC Oluomo’s Unilag invitation, not all African perspectives matter. Even when some perspectives are mined for academic purposes, some scholars and researchers still think that some perspectives do not matter. I reflect heavily on the circumstances under which MC Oluomo, who has granted interviews to newspapers and writers from across the world in the comfort of his office—the motor park—was not eligible to speak on campus. In determining which perspective is important, for what purpose, and the space it should be heard, scholars, commentators, and writers advertently and inadvertently promote the prejudice of exclusion that deprive Africans of their own agency as subjects of historical analysis. As the fight for positioning Africans at the center of their own experience continues, scholars have introduced new regimes of sorting narratives to meet prejudiced perspective. Hence, the decolonizer must be decolonized if the full benefits of decolonization must be realized.

Let us return briefly to the MC Oluomo's campus invitation saga. Violence of myriad forms cannot be dissociated from motor park governance, which is a microcosm of bigger urban, state, and nationwide control of space and patronage politics; yet violence is just one out of the entire infrastructure of the street and public park culture. For instance, the NURTW is the largest trade union supporter of Yoruba popular culture. From the colonial era when the traveling theatre culture, Apala and Sakara ruled the Yoruba cultural forms, public bus drivers, owners and operators not only invested in art as patrons, they are the co-creators of lyrics, slangs, fashion, and modes of being that reverberates in Fuji culture. It is an open secret that Yoruba Nollywood was able to compete with "mainstream" Nollywood because the so-called park boys invested heavily in leading actors and actresses who were equally their friends and lovers. In engaging the role of the NURTW in popular culture, I'm not attempting a "Beautification of Area Boy," to borrow the title of one of Wole Soyinka's literary works. Rather, I'm in search of untapped knowledge in uncommon places and from "unconventional" people. Whether writing about "immoral" women who sold sex, the use of guns for non-violent activities or giving the right agency to animals in history, I have always been interested in ideas, peoples, and agents who rarely make history or are rarely studied because they are "different."

Why scholars and commentators didn't see MC Oluomo and his compatriots in the NURTW beyond being messengers of violence is another reason to contest a mode of knowledge that privileges a form of narrative over another. My research on Fuji, a voyage that has challenged everything I thought I knew about how to conduct research, calls for a methodology that is generative and not belonging to any convention in the books. It would be hard to convince many that I felt safe at Foko in the circle of dozens of "street" boys and girls who openly used drugs while watching Taye Currency play to usher in the annual Egungun festival in Ibadan. I will choose the temporary discomfort of inhaling weed at Taye Currency's show over a lifetime of ignorance of the enormous knowledge domiciled in Fuji history and culture. My discomfort of listening to a highly sexualized lyric—"Coded--Ale ni won ma un fine, irole ni won ma nwe" which energized an already energized Taye Currency mixed-gender crowd was soothed by the prospect of learning how a community that collectively observed Ramadan a month ago would throw a big party to welcome the annual Egungun festival. Today, there is no single academic book on Fuji, not because there is no knowledge in Fuji, but because of the prejudice about what constitutes knowledge and the identity of the carriers—that is the subjects and objects.

Each time we ignore some narratives because we think they belong to people of "questionable" character, we reinforce the very crises of inequality of voices that colonial institutions propagated. As it turns out, many of our 21st century scholars are not only entrapped by colonial shackles of prejudiced "knowledge," they personify every element of it in their bias for "normative" narratives from "rightful," "legitimate," and "well-behaved" people. When we talk about decolonization, what comes to mind is colonialism or the obvious material and symbolic ruins of imperial domination. While colonialism would remain an important reference for any discourse of decolonization, it is not the entirety of it.

In today's lecture, I provide a short history of decolonization, within the framework of interdisciplinarity. I will then explain how I have used interdisciplinarity to engage with decolonization paradigms. This discussion is an intellectual autobiography that explains my own understanding of decolonization of knowledge in the 21st century and the role that interdisciplinarity has played in the process. I note that by opening my mind to uncommon mode of knowledge, obscure sources, and rare narratives, and by learning the language, vocabulary and methodology of fields

outside my core-competence, I'm able to remain productive and prolific, while also engaging the ties that bind knowledge. In contesting the over-compartmentalization of knowledge, which prevents scholars from seeing researchable themes in things, peoples, and communities, I argue that...