Epistemic ‘Othering’ and the Decolonisation of Knowledge

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Abstract

In this article I make the case that epistemic othering constitutes epistemic injustice, which is inscribed in the disciplinary formations of knowledge. As they help us produce our world, these formations, nowadays, preside over a considerable part of university practices and their conditions of privilege and disadvantage. The epistemic injustice within disciplines, so I argue, renders the collective interpretive resources required for epistemic justice structurally prejudiced. Using Fricker’s notions of epistemic injustice and Foucault’s distinction between savoir and connaissance, I suggest a new definitional framework for the decolonisation of knowledge with concomitant possibilities for innovative knowledge practices that view epistemic justice as central to the disruption of the disciplines.

Introduction

‘Undoing colonialism’ is the most straightforward understanding of decolonisation. However, the concept captures immeasurable complexities. For Ritskes it means ‘writing back’ against the ongoing colonialism and colonial mentalities that permeate education, the media, government policies, and ‘common sense’. Further, it refers to ‘everyday acts of resurgence’ which ‘regenerate indigenous knowledges, epistemologies, and ways of life’. It ‘writes back’ but ‘moves forward’; ‘knowledges are always adapting, always creating’. In the university context, decolonisation ‘also means challenging how higher education, research and publishing are complicit in and, in fact, vital to colonial oppression’. In Decolonisation is not a metaphor, Tuck and Yang remind us that what is unsettling about decolonisation is that it brings about ‘the repatriation of indigenous land and life; it is not a metaphor for other things we want to do to improve our societies’. According to them the concept of ‘decolonisation’ is too easily adopted for human rights and social justice purposes, turning it into a metaphor: ‘The metaphorization of decolonization makes possible a set
of evasions, or “settler moves to innocence”, that problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity’.6

The above cautions are apposite. In this article I am trying to avoid any analysis that disrespects the legitimate claims of indigenous and colonised peoples to their land, knowledge and ways of life. Working against evasions and in opposition to ‘moving towards innocence’, my focus is on the complicity of higher education. I am attentive to the challenges of writing the ‘Other’ and writing as ‘Other’. Is it possible at all to write as ‘Other’? or to write the ‘Other’? Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s *Decolonizing Methodologies*8 contains sufficiently powerful warnings in this regard. Therefore, I battle with that which can be contributed without constituting violence-on-top-of-a-violence. At best, or better, and as an act of everyday resurgence, I will settle for a writing that is struggling to write from within the university space against dominant modes of disciplining knowledge and against the social structure of the academy in Africa.

This special issue on *African Identities and the Politics of Space and Othering* is particularly focused on the link between knowledge, power and space. In alignment with this, I pursue, as a first movement in this article, epistemic ‘othering’ as acts and dispositions soaked with the self-reinforcing co-constitution of power/knowledge by which epistemic identities are either affirmed or misrecognised. Epistemic ‘othering’, the consequence of epistemic injustice, emerges from a lack in collective interpretive resources as a structurally anchored prejudice. This anchor is the disciplines, because they help us produce a world where voids in hermeneutical assets are falsely regarded as equally distributed. These formations of knowledge, nowadays, preside over a considerable part of university practices and their conditions of privilege and disadvantage. Thus, the micro-otherings that feature in our research, teaching and learning, and community engagement practices are discipline-bound; they are constituted by the organisation of knowledge and find expression in what we do as knowledge practitioners. Crucially, these ‘otherings’ are legitimised by knowledge and are thus rendered, for the most part, invisible to the academy itself.

The second movement of this article links up with Foucault’s useful distinction within the notion of knowledge. It seems that for Foucault, *connaissance* refers to knowledge as organised in disciplines, scientific fields or areas, whilst *savoir* might be thought of as the meaning-constituting conditions that make an object ‘palatable’ to *connaissance*. Stated differently, *savoir* is general knowledge; *connaissance* is disciplinary knowledge. But, *savoir* is not general as in the sense of being overarching; rather, it is underlying. *Savoir* creates the conditions for an object of knowledge to be taken up by a discipline. For example, *savoir* is that which allowed ‘madness’ to be taken up as an object of study in psychiatry in a given historical period. In the case of indigenous knowledge, the conditions to which *savoir* refers were insufficient for disciplinary formations because of the colonial project of knowledge displacement. In the case of African studies, because of the brutal dislocations of *savoir* across the continent, it could only proceed from a Western base, to which it is still tied today. In other words, it draws knowledge of Africa by African scholars on a Western canvass.

These two movements allow me to argue with Ndlovu-Gatsheni9 that ‘the worst[†] form of colonization […] on the continent is the epistemological one (colonization of imagination and the mind) that is hidden in institutions and discourses that govern the modern globe’. This resulted in the thinness of an authentic African knowledge project. The vast knowledges on the continent are those of displaced *savoirs*, which in the case of work on indigenous knowledge systems and
African philosophy have reconstituted their value, integrity and dignity, yet they are still crowded out by Western formations of connaissance. This presents two complex challenges. On the one hand, African knowledges are only taken up in prefigured, assimilationist forms. On the other, the impregnable nature of connaissance tolerates only that which follows the existing rules of knowledge formation within the disciplines themselves. These challenges and the displacement of savoir set up the lack of interpretive resources across the disciplines as structurally anchored. What Fricker identifies as epistemic injustice is part of the genetic codes of the disciplines. Displaced, invaded, conquered and invasive knowledges are all touched by this, making the decolonisation of knowledge a near impossible task because the very terms for decolonisation are prefigured in the colonising knowledge project. To this end, and to identify productive practices, this logic should be employed as a measure for claims made in relation to the decolonisation of knowledge.

Finally, this article suggests a new definitional framework for the decolonisation of knowledge with concomitant possibilities for innovative knowledge practices that view epistemic justice as central to the disruption of the disciplines. In this sense I am trying to offer an interpretive scheme that may give political form to practices that can counter the micro-expressions of epistemic ‘othering’, the kind we see daily within the functioning of higher education.

Knowledge and Epistemic ‘Othering’

Knowledges have become laws, and as such have rooted the authority of the disciplines in a powerful matrix of affective, material, socio-cultural and epistemic interests. Epistemic geographies linked to disciplines, nowadays, house communities of practice which assign and distribute worth according to their own regimes of truth. These distributive forms follow the networks and architectures of the disciplines which steer the identities and process the social, economic and cultural capital of both academics and students.

The modes and techniques that are expressed via disciplinary practices imprint and reinforce epistemic practices that are historically inscribed into the logic of disciplines and academic behaviours. One of these epistemic products is hermeneutical injustice, which Fricker defines as the ‘injustice of having some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource’ (original italics). Given the Eurocentric nature and practices of the disciplines in African higher education, it is plausible to argue that what is systematically obscured by the ‘structural prejudice in the collective interpretive resource’ is that which is designated ‘African’. The designation here is not that which is African, or Africa. Rather, following Mbembe I refer to that which is designated ‘African’ in relation to a discourse that presents African as that which is ‘incomplete, mutilated, and unfinished’.

Such a designation of ‘African’ has set up ‘othering’ as a conceptual and practical category which is traceable throughout modern history and philosophy. Some of these historical injunctions portray themselves as crude racism in, for instance, Hegel and Kant. Nevertheless, following Jensen, it would be a mistake to equate ‘othering’ with ‘racism’ or related forms of discrimination: ‘othering concerns the consequences of racism, sexism, class (or a combination hereof) in terms
of symbolic degradation as well as the processes of identity formation related to this degradation. ‘Othering’ is a central and productive notion in the broader postcolonial conceptual architecture and is pivotal to the arguments I am developing in this article. However, I have to assert my questioning stance in relation to generic postcolonial interpretive frameworks because of their attempt at moving-away-but-moving-towards centres of Western power, and their tendency to forget that their ‘referent in the real world is a form of political, economic, and discursive oppression whose name, first and last, is colonialism’ (original italics). There is no space here to formulate this point with any sophistication. I can simply alert myself to that which undergirds Acheraïou’s call for the ‘decolonisation of postcolonial discourses’.

At the heart of this article is the power/knowledge constitutive interconnectedness of which Foucault so elegantly wrote. There is no need to repeat his argument in this article. Rather, I want to extend Fricker’s argument by suggesting that what is systematically obscured by the ‘structural prejudice in the collective interpretive resource’ is that which is designated ‘African’. However, this should not be read as being equivalent to discrimination relating to unequal access to opportunities. Instead, I want to propose something akin to Zanele Muholi’s question: ‘What don’t you see when you look at me?’ Thus, what is systematically obscured is located outside of our interpretive horizons.

If one puts Muholi’s question within Lyotard’s differend, then Fricker’s argument attains deeper meaning and consequences. Lyotard suggests that ‘the plaintiff becomes a victim when no presentation is possible of the wrong he or she says he or she has suffered’. For instance, given the formation of the disciplines, is it not possible that epistemological colonisation has no presentation of the wrong being committed? The ‘other’ is so obscured that in the justice that she seeks, she becomes a victim. The silence of the witnesses is obtained, and so also the deafness of the judges. In the differend something asks to be put ‘into phrases, and suffers from the wrong’ because of this failure. The regimes and genres through which the ‘other’, as colonised subject, experiences the ‘wrong’ are incapable of being presented by the phrases by which the hermeneutic injustices became formed within the disciplines. This incapacity which sets up a dispute is the differend where the wrong and the wronged are not cognisable. In response to Fricker’s hermeneutical injustice and structured prejudice which frame a wrong being done in one’s capacity as a knower, we can now argue that it is not only a lack of interpretive sources from which epistemic injustice and epistemic ‘othering’ stem; they also stem from the non-cognition of the wrong and the wronged which results because of a lack of phrases for presentation and thus a lack of acknowledgement. Etymologically speaking, to be incognisant is to lack the capacity to make something perceptible to the senses; or to not be capable to reason about something. Stated differently, to be incognisant suggests a lack of phrases of presentation. In this case, it means a lack of the phrases of presentation of that which is designated ‘African’.

Incognisability puts forth an ontological question; an ‘othering’ prior to acknowledgement. If this logic is upheld, epistemic ‘othering’ can be regarded as both a precursor and a consequence of discrimination; or, to use Honneth’s words, it is a precursor and consequence of the ‘social dynamics of disrespect’. The identity formation that accompanies the symbolic degradation of ‘othering’ has an ontological flavour, one is now able to argue. This allows us to cut through certain assertions, as Césaire has done, by putting in relief ‘the racism inherent in the claims to benevolence.
and rationality advanced by colonial apologists’ – ‘benefactors of mankind’, as he ironically calls them – ‘who use universalising humanist rhetoric to promote social hierarchies and the violence necessary to maintain them’.26

If we follow Fricker, the patterns of inclusion and exclusion that today find expression in teaching, learning and research across the higher education spectrum in South Africa and Africa are substantively problematised. It is not simply the result of access versus non-access. Neither is it just a matter of student academic support, or simply a function of teaching and learning regimes or institutional cultures. Rather, so I suggest, it has to do with the disciplines as the infrastructure of science, whose rules of knowledge formation, organisation and legitimisation and their concomitant academic practices and dispositions place that which is designated ‘African’ outside the scope of its own interpretive horizons – within the sphere of incognisability. The argument for the de-authorisation and disruption of the ‘disciplines’ resides in the disciplines’ unyielding codes within which the very project of knowledge formations hermetically seals its own capacity and propensity for epistemic injustice. Such de-authorisations may be inventive knowledge movements that anchor the obligation of higher education to advance epistemic justice.

Foucault’s distinction between savoir and connaissance shows us how crucial, demanding and difficult this process will be. Correspondingly, we may procure, via Foucault, a ‘frame’ for distinguishing between depthless and superficial knowledge transmutations, and ‘real-existing’ forms and possibilities of ‘knowledge disruption’. A further implication of Foucault’s distinction is the mandatory condition of savoir for knowledge ‘disruption’ which basically suggests, as Harding27 argues, that modern sciences are European ethnosciences in their cultural situatedness. Against this, it is the inseparability of the knowledge and power that sciences generate that tends to persuade and commit scientists to make broader epistemological claims,28 even if such claims generate their own lattice of injustices. Engendered by the interplays between the rise of modern sciences and the colonial expansion of Europe,29 these claims produced global patterns of ‘knowledge’ and ‘ignorance’ which are followed by Western distributions of disciplinary practices according to ‘already advantageous position[s] in social [global] hierarchies’.30

If we understand, as Eze31 urges us to do, that colonialism is ‘the indescribable crisis disproportionately suffered and endured by the African peoples in their tragic encounter with the European world’ between the 1400s and up to the 1990s (to include Apartheid South Africa), then the rise of modern sciences is most certainly implicated in these injustices and their contemporary reproductive technologies. Epistemic injustice is the particular concern of this article. But it has wider social, economic and political application, as Nabudere32 reminds us, in alignment with his reading of Foucault that ‘the “order of knowledge” thus became a necessity at the direction of modern society and the epistemological scientific field of knowledge became the servant of the system of the new powers that had constituted themselves on its foundation’.

In order to ‘think’ productive possibilities for the decolonisation of knowledge, I am putting forward a tentative intellectual and practical proposition. I want to shift away from standard arguments that see knowledge disruptions mainly as content, organisation or packaging matters. I also reject simplified arguments on knowledge inclusivity and epistemological pluralism, because they do not have an associated political ‘ethics’. Further, like Teffo,33 I do not invalidate Western epistemologies; they are housed in their own ethnosciences and are, in their own right, productive
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and dynamic. I am also sceptical about arguments that want to ‘insert’ an ‘African’ voice into an assimilative Western epistemological network. ‘African studies’, our best possible option, have shown how troublesome this strategy can be. Some of these challenges are well-articulated and formulated by Michaela Krenčeyová in ‘Who is allowed to speak about Africa?’ another article in this special edition. In essence, I want to propose that the ‘decolonisation of knowledge’ is viewed as the collective processes by which disciplinary practices are successful in working against the inscribed epistemic injustices of all knowledge formations. At the core of my proposal is a speculative conviction that by adopting this view we will be able to avoid the pitfalls of the trends referred to above, and at the same time, offer productive ‘real-existing’ options for ‘decolonising knowledge’: options with rational political form. However, as I propose this definitional framework, I do so against the frameworks encapsulated in the feminist work of Nnaemeka, who revisits the ‘processes of theory making and knowledge construction in an environment of unequal power relations and cultural difference’. I also do so in reference to the feminist scholarly contributions of Oyèwùmí, who convincingly argues that the questions about gender and difference in Yorùbá society are framed by the ‘West’s domination of both the constitution of the academy/scholarship and the socio-political and economic world spheres’. The works of both these scholars present crucial movements towards epistemic justice via feminist injunctions. It is this very trajectory that this article is trying to follow.

The University and its Knowledge Formations

More so than any other social and intellectual arrangement, the disciplines permeate the life of the university. Academics and students are streamed; professional, academic and student identities are constructed; scientific authorities are established and maintained; social statuses are affirmed; social spaces are mapped out; recognitions, rewards and sanctions are distributed; and epistemic injustices are legitimated. A series of classes, textbooks, study guides, tutorials, practicals, conversations, seminars, journals, conferences and assessment regimes, each charted according to the status of the disciplines within the university space, animate the university. Ritual behaviours, symbolic expressions, ceremonial practices, triumphal architectures and artefacts add to this picture of the university as an institution steeped in the self-referential logics produced within the disciplines. Lenoir suggests a useful definition for disciplines.

Disciplines are the institutional mechanism for regulating the market relations between consumers and the producers of knowledge [...] disciplines are political structures that mediate crucially between the political economy and the production of knowledge. Disciplines are dynamic structures of assembling, channelling, and replicating the social and technical practices essential to the functioning of the political economy and the system of power relations that actualize it. (original emphasis)

This is an industrious definition of disciplines, taking into account the ‘archaeological’ and ‘genealogical’ studies of Foucault and their focus on the linkages between disciplinary power, truth and knowledge as expressed within discourse. Lenoir also brings into play the Bourdieuan
insights that relate to how a set of credentials ‘helps define the contemporary social order’, an order constituted in part by disciplinary and other academic practices by which it establishes a field of power in which the specific issue ‘at stake is the monopoly of scientific authorities, defined inseparably as technical capacity and social power, or, to put it another way, the monopoly of scientific competence’. 

Needless to say, the disciplining of knowledge, though particularly associated with the advancement of the scientific method, has long histories that are constitutively tied to the history of universities. Such histories map the production spaces and locations of epistemologies and the intellectual, economic and social dominance that ensues from it. Charles Van Doren captures this well in History of Knowledge in an inclusive account that geographically spans the globe and historically extends to the ‘ancient empires’. The mistake made by Van Doren, although common, is to present ‘coming into epistemic being’ as dependent on ‘discovery’ by the cognitive faculties of the Western observer. Despite this fundamental weakness, Van Doren’s account confirms that the focus of the early universities was on religion, theology and studies in grammar, dialectic and rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, music, astronomy, law and medicine. From the European middle-ages to the Renaissance, universities shifted from a purely theological orientation to include the scholastic enterprise of philosophy.

The first issue to be raised in relation to this global history of the university is that the knowledge generation process failed to inscribe an epistemic justice. Rather, it is epistemic injustice that became embedded within the academy and the disciplines, legitimated by its self-referentiality. Its codes and genres set up **differends** with those which reside outside its interpretive landscape. The lack of interpretive sources is designed; ‘othering’ is premeditated. The second point is that though African higher education has an extensive and long history, the university and its knowledge formations on the continent are steered by a disciplinary model which has been developed in the West, according to Mamdani. Likewise, Ndlovu-Gatsheni suggests ‘that the African academies and universities have remained a conduit of the inculcation of Western knowledge, values, ways of knowing and worldviews that are often taught as universal values and scientific knowledge’ that continues the decentering of pre-existing African knowledge systems and creates epistemological mimicry and intellectual dependency. The **savoir** is decentred and African **connaissance** (discipline) is impossible to form. That which emerges as ‘new’ knowledge formations can scarcely be regarded as African, or as disciplines. The epistemological mimicry that accompanies these
developments can only reflect a self that is incapable of cognising an ‘other’. ‘Othering’, it seems, is so deeply ingrained as to be prior to cognisability; it precedes acknowledgement and ontology. At this nexus we have to assert upfront that the displacement of savoir, on which the coming into being of authentic African knowledge formations are dependent, drives at one option. That is the de-authorisation and disruption of the disciplines so that daily acts of resurgence can be unburdened; epistemic justice divested; and an African ontology imprinted.

Epistemic Injustice, Savoir and Connaissance

The line of reasoning thus far suggests that a predetermined picture of African higher education is inscribed into the disciplining of knowledges. It is accurate to talk about external epistemological influences and more accurate to think of this as continual internal epistemological [re]constitutions and displacements, again in relation to Fricker’s notion of epistemic justice. Fricker herself does not venture into the implications of her work for the disciplines. However, one can easily link the structural prejudice of interpretive resources, at least on the level of formalised knowledges, to the disciplining of knowledge. Taking her experiences from within feminism, Fricker argues that ‘the powerful have an unfair advantage in structuring collective social understandings’ as an epistemic benefit, which in turn is a function of material processes that structure practices in ways that distribute epistemological advantages differentially. These interlinked movements contribute to the ‘constitutive construction of social identity’. The ontological-epistemological interplay here is unmistaken; so is the interplay between materiality, epistemic forms and epistemic ‘othering’. Epistemic injustice now transpires to be an ontological misrecognition; an ‘othering’ prior to acknowledgement.

If one takes social understanding as being formed by structures, which in turn are constituted to the advantage of the ‘powerful’, Fricker’s logic can be made more useful by joining it up with Foucault’s savoir and connaissance. Foucault argues that ‘[k]nowledge (savoir) is not an epistemological site that disappears in the science (connaissance) that supersedes it; [the science] does not […] dissipate […] the knowledge that surround[s] it’. However, in the case of our continent, the science, the discipline and the connaissance of which Foucault speaks have their knowledge (savoir) sites somewhere else, displacing the savoir of the contexts onto which they were superimposed. A displaced savoir surrounds Western disciplines on the continent. More accurately, a foreign connaissance has displaced an indigenous savoir. These arguments propose that the structural prejudice of interpretive resources is a result of the disciplining of knowledge, at least within the spaces of higher education. They further suggest that initiatives for countering ‘othering’ via disciplinary research and scholarly undertakings can only take place as acts that de-authorise the discipline so as to disclose the genetic codes of ‘othering’ within knowledge formation processes. If not, it will simply reproduce the ‘othering’ it is trying to challenge.

There are further implications. The Western disciplinary modes of knowledge production and organisation that have permeated African higher education not only displace the possibility of an inclusive or alternative connaissance, they crucially also dislocate implicit knowledges, savoirs. Thus, the decolonisation of knowledges, from an African perspective, is imprisoned in a double
bind; both the conditions (*savoir*) of knowledge reformulation and its expression as disciplines (*connaissance*) are de-contextualised, forever so, it seems. The inferences are staggering. Not only can the knowledge decolonisation project not call on the *savoir* of its geographical and historical contexts; the tools with which the decolonisation project needs to be instituted are formulated by the very same *connaissance* which it has as its target. The reproduction of the disciplines in their own images is the only possible outcome; a point which explains the inertia and sterility of knowledge decolonisation efforts over the past few decades.

It is clear that the modelling of higher education in Africa on a Western disciplinary basis did not simply result in an ‘import’. It also provides for the mechanisms that produce the conditions for its own normativity, operating as a legitimate, colonising knowledge enterprise and affirmed by standard disciplinary practices and academic behaviours. Harding’s references to ‘conceptual practices of power’ and ‘predatory conceptual frameworks’ in relation to epistemological analysis link up well with the logic of these legitimisation processes. The ‘site of the rules’ from where alternatives may originate is no longer a historically constituted space. Rather, it has been ‘artificially’ simulated by our own academic practices related to *connaissance*; dislocated from *savoir*. This site nowadays only exists as a colonising act in its ‘non-existence’. Its absence is an act of epistemic colonisation.

A further insight from Foucault is that the hold of ideology over science is articulated where science is articulated upon knowledge. If ideology is registered at the very point where science is articulated upon knowledge (*savoir* and *connaissance*), present and future forms of inclusion and exclusion are etched into the epistemological bases of the sciences. Thus Fricker may focus on social dominations and relations of power, but, especially in the space of higher education, the logical consequences of her argument bring us to the doorsteps of the disciplines. Foucault would suggest the possibility of the disciplines being the prime generators of the structurally prejudiced interpretive resources from which hermeneutical epistemic injustice is sourced. What the disciplines and their knowledge systems annex includes the implicit knowledges in circulation. It thus extends the fertility of ‘othering’ outside the borders of, but in relation to, formalised knowledges.

**African Studies and Epistemic ‘Othering’**

The history and remonstrations of African studies in the African higher education landscape provide for pointful empirical considerations in relation to the Fricker-Foucault analyses which are instructive for established, new and emerging disciplines. Zeleza argues that ‘African studies [since the 1950s] and African universities have undergone many twists and turns as both have expanded from their rather modest beginnings. Today, both are vast enterprises encompassing thousands of colleges and supporting institutions’. However, over the past decades the primacy of knowledge production in African studies has shifted to the North, ‘especially the United States, where by the 1970s the field was firmly anchored in area studies’.Zeze goes further to provide a consummate account of the productive influences of postcolonial studies on African studies. However, he is equally scathing in his critique of postcolonial studies.
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The erasures of revolution, nation, class, history, and reality, even if they may have started as critiques, turn the ‘posts’ into legitimating ideologies of contemporary global configurations of power and production. Insofar as capitalism is not as fragmented as it is often assumed to be, the ‘posts’ bolster the capitalist order itself by becoming a part of the ideological apparatus that sustains the inability of exploited nations and social classes – splintered in their various cultural identities – to mobilize counterhegemonically.60

In similar vein, Gikandi argues that postcolonial theory has lost its focus on the ‘structural’61 as the interplay between the politics, economics and social of which Zeleza speaks in the above passage. Instead, an emphasis on ‘culture’ protrudes from postcolonial theory. Thus, with Gikandi, Zeleza argues that postcolonial and poststructuralist intellectual developments have been limitedly useful in providing analytical schemes for engaging with the postcolony. More importantly, he suggests that ‘colonising complicities’ are at the heart of these intellectual movements. They are therefore incapable of setting up a sustainable, decolonising, academic-political project. This critique of postcolonial studies requires serious consideration, which cannot be pursued here. The upshot of this is a gloomy assessment:

[T]he African response, too, even in its militant Afrocentric forms, has largely consisted of investing Africa with the imagined positive attributes of Europe, rather than dismantling the very foundations of this colonizing epistemological order. Can African studies escape – even transcend – the Eurocentric coding, the seductions and sanctions of writing Africa by analogy?62

Foucault would suggest that the ‘episteme’ has already encoded African studies in a Eurocentric way. That is, ‘the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possibly formalized systems’,63 which is the ‘episteme’, carves out a discursive formation consisting of rules of existence, maintenance and modification. The import of an ‘episteme’ as part of the colonial project thus resulted in the [de-] and [un]coding of savoir. Africa could henceforth only be written by analogy, as the compilation by Falola and Jennings,64 which ironically calls for making ‘African studies more African’, suggests. Zeleza has shown that the example of African studies, tasked to be ‘African’ in the first place but then choosing to be ‘Western’ in the first-first place, is applicable across the disciplines in our universities.

George Sefa Dei captures our dilemma as ‘[c]olonial tropes and “technologies of representation”, the normalizing gaze of the colonizer, disciplining around the borders and boundaries of what constitutes “valid knowledge” and how such knowledges should be produced, interrogated, validated and disseminated’.65 He suggests that this is much more than surveillance: ‘These significant acts and practices both reveal and constitute fundamental contestations about power, representation, and how we come to claim the authenticity of voice and experience’.66 Here, Dei is close to Foucault, who may have anticipated that de-disciplining would be almost impossible without the reconstitution of savoir. Foucault worked from the basis that this non-formal savoir may have a system; something that scholars of African knowledge systems are well aware of. It is in fact their starting point. This returns us to the initial argument that the colonising displacement of savoir, whose analyses have always come second after interpretations that consider the importation of
connaissance, presents a totally new battleground that is yet to be explored in projects that relate to the decolonisation of knowledge.

Returning to Fricker’s definition of hermeneutical injustice as ‘the injustice of having some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource’ (original italics), it should be obvious how an ‘interpretive lack’ can be related back to disciplinary practices. Would a lacuna in interpretive resources not indicate an inequality in the distribution of hermeneutical sources in this particular instance? Where does such lacuna come from? Are interpretive lacuna not functions of knowledge and epistemological choices with forms of distribution that follow the patterns of injustice in society? How do we foreground the two hybrid virtues of testimonial and hermeneutical justice as part of virtue epistemology? Fricker believes ‘that the only way to fully understand the normative demands made on us in epistemic life is by changing the philosophical gaze so that we see through to the negative space that is epistemic injustice’. In line with this, Zeleza suggests that we need to examine ‘systematically the philosophical foundations of African universities’ if we want to make headway with the decolonisation of knowledge to ‘advance the long-standing agendas of African universities for their own epistemic and institutional decolonisation’.

Fricker’s ‘epistemic injustice’ now emerges not simply as ruptures or rips in the fabric of epistemological justices, but as a permanent condition of the injustices of the disciplines themselves – not only in relation to the Eurocentric disposition of the disciplines on the African continent, but also in relation to how the disciplines came into being within their own geographical and historical contexts. There are two different ways to approach this point. First, one could ask: How, in the first place, are our collective interpretive sources constituted? We could suggest that this is achieved through a variety of socialisation and learning processes. More pertinently, for the purposes of our argument on higher education, the disciplines are key generators of our collective interpretive sources, and their lacuna. The feminist examples used by Fricker come into being not only because of gender discrimination in broader society, but also as forms of androcentric knowledges across the disciplines. For all the infinite number of times that our collective hermeneutical sources will be rendered structurally prejudiced, we would be able to link such epistemological lacuna to forms of disciplinary practices. Second, the gaps in collective interpretive resources are infinite; this is the shifting nature of knowledge anyway. However, they are held together by already existing collective interpretive resources, and it is the choices, contexts and conditions by which they came into being that have inscribed epistemic injustice. The central question available to us thus is: Can we make better justice-oriented epistemological choices? African studies, as the leading source of knowledge formation to counter epistemic ‘othering’, will be well served in foregrounding this question.

Conclusion

What is regarded as legitimate academic knowledges have specified credentialising authorities by which truth and validity are established and by which ‘othering’ is generated. It follows then that all disciplinary practices are ‘directed towards the acquisition of scientific authority (prestige, recognition, fame, etc.)’ and draw their legitimacy from ‘the relative strength of the groups whose
interests they express'. Hence there is no ‘epistemic judge’, and ideological strategies act upon epistemological positions each and every moment that science acts upon knowledge, Foucault would argue. The academic finds his or her position to be an interplay between ideological strategies and epistemological positions, constituting and perpetuating the ‘inscribed’ epistemic injustice of the disciplines of which they are ‘disciplined-discipled authorities’ or agents. At issue here, in my attempt to steer away from standard arguments that see knowledge disruptions mainly as content, organisation or packaging matters, is the fact that it is a form not of ‘justice’, but rather of epistemic injustice that always-already forms the academic authorities; the subjects and interests of the disciplines; and the adjudicatory modes by which the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are determined. The historical construction of that and those which are designated ‘African’ within the disciplines regulates its present unfavourable epistemic and academic co-ordinates.

This epistemological logic is the mechanism by which hermeneutic injustice appears academically and morally defensible collateral embedded within the very logic of the disciplines. In tandem with this epistemological logic, an intellectual and financial economy took shape which merged social and academic practices into a unified system of scholarly behaviours. ‘Epistemic injustice’ became a standard, economically viable, academic disposition complete with strategies for moral disengagement, from which basis ‘othering’ took on productive forms.

Most certainly, savoir, as the site of those rules of formations that make possible the objects and concepts of knowledge, operates in its own absence to make unattainable any effort that may remotely be associated with the decolonisation of knowledge. To this end indigenous knowledge systems and African knowledges need to be unburdened if we are to make any headway. If not, the very conditions that make contextualised knowledges possible will remain displaced; the African academic can only ‘redraw’ on the template of the disciplines. Africa can only be written by analogy, thereby being reduced to a projection which sets up the logical structure for collective ‘othering’.

If, as I have argued earlier, in the university context, decolonisation ‘means challenging how higher education, research and publishing are complicit in and, in fact, vital to colonial oppression’, then we have to counter the set of evasions, or ‘settler moves to innocence’, that problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and ‘rescue settler futurity’. To this end this article focuses on the complicity of the disciplines and the complicity of the higher education sector.

I have tried to pursue the following argument. First, I formulated epistemic ‘othering’ in line with Fricker’s notion of epistemic injustice as acts and dispositions soaked in the self-reinforcing co-constitution of power/knowledge by which epistemic identities are either affirmed or mis-recognised. The lack of collective interpretive resources is not simply a deficiency of individuals or individual academics. Rather, it is structurally anchored within the disciplines, and to a large extent invisible to the academy itself. The disciplines acquire the ‘silence of the witnesses […], and so also the deafness of the judges’, and in this differend, the ‘other’ as colonised is incapable of presentation and recognition within the regimes and genres of the disciplines. I thus do not simply argue for grasping a ‘lack’; rather, I am showing how this misrecognition puts forth an ontological question: an ‘othering’ prior to acknowledgement.

Second, I used Foucault’s distinction between savoir and connaissance to argue that the decolonisation of knowledges, from an African perspective, is imprisoned in a double bind; both the
conditions (savoir) of knowledge reformulations and their expression as disciplines (connaissance) are de-contextualised – forever so, it seems. The inertia and sterility of knowledge decolonisation efforts over the past few decades are caused by this double bind. Within this interpretive scheme, I developed a critique of African studies and the philosophical foundations of the African university to align my argument with Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s claim that ‘the worst form of colonization […] on the continent is the epistemological one (colonization of imagination and the mind) that is hidden in institutions and discourses that govern the modern globe’. Epistemic justice and injustice are inscribed in displaced, invaded, conquered and invasive knowledges. This is what makes the decolonisation of knowledge a near impossible task, because the very terms for decolonisation are prefigured in the colonising counterhegemonic knowledge project.

In conclusion, Foucault’s analysis via savoir-connaissance and Fricker’s conception of epistemic injustice, coupled with Zeleza’s analysis of African higher education and African studies, draw the contours of a new epistemological battleground; that of an absent savoir that functions as a powerful epistemic and colonising force. I would suggest that no project on the ‘decolonisation of knowledge’ will be able to succeed if it does not have the academic resources and political courage to enter this battleground. Only if we view the ‘decolonisation of knowledge’ as the collective processes by which disciplinary practices are successful in working against the inscribed epistemic injustices of all knowledge formations can we claim for ourselves a commitment towards epistemic justice without delay.

Notes and References

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
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22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid, p.53.
38 Zeleza, P.T. (ed.), 2007. The Study of Africa. Volume 2: Global and Transnational Engagements. Dakar: Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa. On page 1 a distinction is made between disciplines and area studies: ‘In the academies of Euro-America, I would like to submit the argument between the interdiscipline of area studies, in which African studies is located, and the disciplines of the academic departments is essentially about the territoriality and temporality of knowledge and knowledge production: universality is claimed for the disciplines and contextuality for the area studies.’
43 Ibid, pp.20–21.
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48 Ibid, p.38.
51 Ibid.
54 Harding, S., 1997, pp.60–64.
55 Indigenous knowledge systems projects are the exceptions, but have limited influence on the disciplines itself.
56 Foucault, M., 2013, p.204.
58 Ibid, p.117.
59 Ibid, p.129: ‘We are now much more aware of the role of colonial discourse as an incarnation and instrument of power. We better understand the discursive processes through which ideas and images of the colonized and colonizer were created, how the very notion of ‘Africa’ was invented—as Mudimbe has demonstrated in his magisterial tomes, The Invention of Africa (1988) and The Idea of Africa (1994)—through the conceptual registers of the new academic disciplines and the disciplining ideologies of missionary Christianity and the institutions of colonial education. We see how hierarchies of difference and African alterity were produced and reproduced through the temporal, spatial, and social teleologies and epistemic violence of Eurocentric history, geography, anthropology, linguistics, and philosophy. We see now how power was located, acted out, and fought over in specific institutions and contexts by various social groups and projects.’
60 Ibid, p.130.
66 Ibid.
69 Ibid, p.177.
70 Zeleza, P.T., 2009, p.133.
73 Ibid, p.264.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.