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Dominic Griffiths

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Decoloniality and the (im)possibility of an African feminist philosophy

Dominic Griffiths 

Wits School of Education, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa
Correspondence: dominic.griffiths@wits.ac.za

This article offers a prolegomenon for an African feminist philosophy. The prompt for this is an interrogation of Oluwole’s claim that an African feminist philosophy cannot develop until identifiable African worldviews that guide the relationship between men and women have been established. She argues that until there is general agreement about the nature of African philosophy itself, African feminist philosophy will remain impoverished. I critique this claim, unpacking Oluwole’s argument, and examine the contested nature of both African and Western philosophy. Drawing from the work of Mignolo and decolonial thinking, I then argue for the possibility of “epistemic disobedience” concerning the emergence of an African feminist philosophy. Engaging with precolonial African examples which disrupt modern normative gender assumptions and looking at the project of decoloniality, I issue a call for an African feminist philosophy unfettered by the falsely universal claims of modernity/coloniality. My call is for an African feminist philosophy from African loci of enunciation, rooted in the epistemes and experiences of African women.

“Most thought-provoking in our thought-provoking time is that we are still not thinking” (Heidegger 1968, 6).

Introduction

This article seeks to critically interrogate Oluwole’s claim (2005) that an African feminist philosophy cannot develop until identifiable African philosophical worldviews and principles that guide the relationship between men and women have been established. Her argument rests on the assumption that, until there is general agreement about the nature of African philosophy itself, African feminist philosophy will remain impoverished. The discussion will develop as follows: first, I will give an overview of Oluwole’s position and describe the current, contested nature of African philosophy. Then I will critique Oluwole’s assumptions about the nature of philosophy itself, by showing the constructed and contextual nature of Western philosophy, as it is currently conceived. The article will then give an overview of the emergence of feminist philosophy and argue that the possibility of an African feminist philosophy is uniquely positioned to emerge as an act of “epistemic disobedience”, given the current decolonial turn. To defend this position, I will do two things: firstly, I will locate examples of this epistemic disobedience in precolonial Africa, citing instances which disrupt our modern, normative gender assumptions. Then, secondly, I will look to the present and the future of an African feminist philosophy, sketching a prolegomenon for its possibility.

The prompt for this interrogation is that while I disagree with aspects of Oluwole’s claim, there is an evident dearth of African feminist philosophy. While there are numerous voices in African feminist sociohistorical disciplines, there is almost nothing when it comes, in Oluwole’s (2005, 96) words, to “philosophy proper”. Indeed, in searching for texts to prescribe to students on African feminist philosophy, the only meaningful piece I could find was Oluwole’s, explaining why there

were none. Her central reason, as mentioned, is that as long as African philosophy itself remains a contested site, attempting to generate a viable African feminist philosophical position cannot emerge. However, the lack of what might be called an “African feminist philosophy” which fits neatly within a branch of “philosophy” is itself a question which this article explores. Indeed, as the argument develops, I will draw from historical examples of African practices concerning gender identity which rupture Western normative assumptions and offer generative possibilities for thinking about an African feminist “philosophy” which is not constrained by Oluwole’s concern with “philosophy proper”. To further defend this position, I will also contest that there is something like “philosophy proper” in Oluwole’s sense of it.

For context, Sophie Oluwole was the first woman in Nigeria to receive a PhD in philosophy in 1984 from the University of Ibadan (Oruka et al. 1997). She was born in 1935 and died in 2018, and was an important figure in African philosophy, invested in revitalising Yoruba philosophy. While the South African context is not the same, given apartheid, the first black female PhD in philosophy, Mpho Tshivhase, received hers in 2018 from the University of Johannesburg (University of Johannesburg 2018). Though this is a very limited sample, it does suggest that professional black, female African philosophers are still especially rare, whether they work on feminism or not. Indeed, in the words of Metz (2011), “[e]xtraordinarily few African women practice professional philosophy, and there is little interest in feminism among the men who principally do”. Du Toit (2008, 413) concurs by writing that “that there is virtually no feminist writing in the African philosophy traditions”. The important point that both these authors make, and which Oluwole reiterates above, is the decided lack of professional feminist philosophy from Africa.

Oluwole’s argument is premised on the fact that the question of African philosophy itself is not, as yet, settled. There are several influential, competing positions on the nature of African philosophy which Oluwole surveys to demonstrate this sense of unsettledness. Firstly, there is *Négritude*, promulgated famously by Césaire¹ and Senghor² from the 1930s, and which is characterised in “intellectual opposition” to Western thought, and instead, the affirmation of an authentic African consciousness and worldview (Oluwole 2005). Secondly, there is ethnophilosophy, which is ethnological in character. This approach to African philosophy was established by Tempels, a Franciscan missionary priest in the Congo, in the famous book *Bantu Philosophy* ([1945] 1959). In this book, he attempts to discern a unique axiomatic, ontological principle, identified as *mntu* which, like *logos* in Western thought, underpins African thinking.

Thirdly, in reaction to ethnophilosophy, there emerged, in the 1950s, an affirmation of “professional philosophy”, implying the use of practices, methodologies and procedures developed by Western philosophy in the African context (Oluwole 2005). Thus, “doing” African philosophy in this sense is understood as writing and thinking about African concepts, problems and theories, but drawing from Western (and other) philosophical tradition where appropriate. Hountondji (1996) and Wiredu (1980) are two central and influential figures here. Lastly, there is the tradition known as Sage philosophy which is an exploration and defence of indigenous African philosophies that are oral in nature, and expressed by African elders who are identified as the “custodians of traditional wisdom” (Oluwole 2005, 100). These may take the form of proverbs, myths and folktales. An important proponent of this approach was Oruka (1990).³ However, given the overwhelming influence of the West on African life, and the issue of orality associated with this approach, it is becoming less apparent in African society. Nonetheless, the claim here is that the precolonial existence of African sagacity clearly suggests that Africans were, and are, capable of philosophical thinking.

These four major trends identified by Oluwole overlap with similar ones identified by Oruka (2003) and Irele (2003), suggesting a broad consensus concerning some of the early established trajectories of African philosophy, and how it might be approached and understood.⁴ A more recent and comprehensive bibliographic survey by Metz (2011) shows numerous other trajectories of

1 For examples, see Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* (2000), see also Diagne (2018).

2 For an overview of Senghor’s work on *Négritude*, see Celarent (2013).

3 For an overview of African sage philosophy, see Masolo (2016).

4 See also Gbadejesin (1997).

African philosophy which follow conventional professional academic categories. Here, Metz (2011) is careful to emphasise that this bibliographic focus is on “academic” African philosophy which contains a “large variety of issues and subdisciplines, of styles and methods, and of languages and traditions” which only emerge from about the 1960s. Metz surveys work, for example, in metaphilosophy, philosophy of mind, epistemology and metaphysics. He also provides a section on feminism, reiterating, from Oluwole, that this is not yet a “well-defined subdiscipline in African philosophy” (Metz 2011). Essentially, Oluwole (2005) argues that African feminist philosophers can only make contributions to African philosophy itself once it is formalised into something more coherent. She argues that sociological and anthropological characterisations of African women are not constitutive of a genuine African feminist philosophy. This line of thinking leads one eventually, and inevitably, to the question that Deleuze and Guattari (1994, 1) suggest can only be “posed in a moment of quiet restlessness, at midnight”, namely “*what is philosophy?*”, or, to use Oluwole’s (2005, 96) phrasing, what is “philosophy proper[?]”.

“Philosophy proper”

Perhaps a fundamental problem with African philosophy is not establishing that it exists, or defining what it is, but rather working with the mistaken assumption that there is a thing like “philosophy proper” in the first place. There is certainly, as Gordon (2008) has argued, a convenient Renaissance invention and appropriation of Ancient Greek philosophy to suit what was an emerging Western humanist narrative that needed to ground itself in a venerable predecessor. This narrative called “Western philosophy” implies that it stretches neatly from the 500 BCE pre-Socratic thinkers like Heraclitus (who along with other pre-Socratic philosophers “invented” philosophy) to 20th century philosophers like Heidegger, and into the present – a seemingly unbroken line of white European, usually single and slightly eccentric men, solely and uniquely possessed of this particular ability.

But philosophy in the West is also a far more complex and contested activity. So contested is the Western philosophical tradition currently that committed adherents of contemporary analytic philosophy would be hard-pressed to describe committed adherents of contemporary Continental philosophy as “doing” philosophy at all, and vice-versa.⁵ Nonetheless, in spite of Gordon’s valid criticism, it is evident that when I use the term “Western philosophical tradition”, I am referring to a fairly homogenised and coherent understanding of a body of ideas, and the thinkers associated with them, that emerged in Ancient Greece and have come to define the discipline. Furthermore, the Western philosophical tradition consists, arguably, of two interrelated dimensions: one is of certain re-occurring, fundamental questions that generate and sustain the various branches of Western philosophy, such as “What is the nature of truth?”, which gives us metaphysics, “What is the nature of beauty?”, which gives us aesthetics and so on. The second, which is part of this questioning, leads, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari (1994, 2), to “fabricating concepts”. An important 20th century example is Heidegger (2006, 21, 26) raising anew “the question of the meaning of Being” and from this questioning developing the concept of “Dasein”, a way of describing a particular understanding of human existence. “Doing” philosophy in this sense, “philosophy proper” is asking certain kinds of questions and creating concepts that help answer them within an established, historical tradition.

While it might appear that this historical tradition unfolds naturally (some might go so far as to argue teleologically), Braun (quoted in Graness 2019, 36) maintains that the canon-forming process is the result of deliberate selection of texts (compilations and encyclopaedias for example) which become “constitutive realities”. This supports similar claims by Gordon (2008) that “Western philosophy” is an appropriation of texts melded together to suit a particular kind of emerging modern European identity. For Braun (quoted in Graness 2019, 36), philosophy texts, and the idea of a “tradition” which they belong to, are created and sustained by the “weight of inertia” that attaches itself to certain texts because of the way philosophy is defined and understood at a particular time in history. Hence, this deliberate selection, particularly from the eighteenth century until recently, has resulted in philosophy canon formation that has largely been exclusionary, with a tendency to ignore “non-Western concepts, schools, traditions and authors” (Braun 2019, 37). The principal

5 For recent work on this debate, see Owen (2016) and Donahue and Ochoa Espejo (2016).

reason for this is that the emergence of Enlightenment thinking created a definition of philosophy as “scientific, rational reasoning carried out by an individual” (Graness 2019, 39). This Enlightenment bias is clearly reflected in, for example, Husserl ([1936] 1978), who claimed that Ancient Greece philosophy “represented a new form of humanity” because, while other philosophies were clouded with religious-mythical underpinnings, what was unique to the Ancient Greeks (and what was taken up from the Renaissance onwards) was “the ‘theoretical attitude’, a form of life dedicated simply to truth, to truth as the highest value” (Young 2018, 106). Thus, because philosophy “proper” can only be carried out by the reasoning individual, the first evidence of this can be traced back to Thales of Miletus (Graness 2019). The claim of direct authorship, and Thales’ own claim that his arguments were based on reason alone to realise truth, are both central in establishing the assertion that philosophy, understood as “scientific, rational reasoning carried out by an individual” emerged for the first time in Ancient Greece. Arguably, it is this sense of an established authorship and it enabling the generation of a history of ideas, and the lack thereof in the African context, that Oluwole laments, and this leads her to the claim she makes.

In contrast to this, African philosophy is still developing formal philosophical questions and concepts in a historical space of fewer than 100 years, which, as discussed, is still contested. However, framing it this way suggests a dialogical pattern of thinking about philosophical problems, a central problem being the question of African philosophy itself (even the use of the term “African” is problematic⁶), and inventing concepts and ideas to answers these questions. It might be that there are not, as Oluwole claims, established African philosophical worldviews, but clearly philosophy is being done. As I have said earlier, and a point which Gordon (2008) reiterates, philosophy is centred around particular, fundamental questions about the nature of reality that are reflective, abstract and guided by reason. Historical context has shaped which question particularly is seen as important, for example the nature of justice, the existence of God, the idea of the Good and so on. In the 20th century, philosophical anthropology came to the fore, focusing on the question “What does it mean to be a human being?” (Gordon 2008, 13). This question had enormous implications for Heidegger, and existentialists such as Camus and Sartre, who were thinking about the nature of human existence in a post-Nietzschean, disenchanted space. Similarly, we see the question resonant in the work of Fanon (1961, 143) who argues that genuine postcolonial liberation requires a new “concept of man, a concept about the future of mankind”. As Gordon (2008, 13) points out, this question is germane for those “beings whose humanity has been called into question or challenged”. To be deprived of one’s humanity has meant being treated like property, or as subhuman. Evidently, the driving force of this question underpins the rise of feminisms in the 20th century and the assertion that the female is a fully human being, and not property, or a disenfranchised inferior of the male race.

Thus, what the above discussion highlights to some extent is the uncritical naivety of Oluwole’s assumptions about the history of Western philosophy itself. The idea of “philosophy proper” and the philosophical “canon” are, in fact, Enlightenment constructs to suit a particular emerging narrative of Western modernity. This same narrative, which supposedly promoted humanism and individual freedom, is also deeply complicit in the colonisation and subjugation of much of the world. Thus, the historical trajectory and nature of “philosophy proper” is not neutral or natural, but shaped by the same ideals of scientific truth, control and objectivity which arguably promote the values of a dominant class and provide the impetus for this class to maintain and justify their domination.

Feminist philosophy

Given the question of an African feminist philosophy and the trajectory sketched above, what does feminist philosophy look like, and what does it do? For McAfee (2018), there are three dimensions to it. Firstly, feminist philosophy engages with, and intervenes in how “longstanding basic philosophical problems are understood... introducing new concepts and perspectives that have transformed philosophy itself” (McAfee 2018). Secondly, feminist philosophy renders “previously

6 I do not address this point in detail, but the use of the term “Africa” itself is arguably a homogenising and reductive generalisation, though there is much lively debate concerning this. See, for example, Gordon (2008), Mudimbe (1988), Higgs (2012), Metz (2015) and Janz (2017).

un-problematized topics, such as the body, class and work, disability, the family, reproduction, the self, sex work, human trafficking, and sexuality” philosophical (ibid.). And thirdly, feminist philosophy brings a “feminist lens to issues of science, globalization, human rights, popular culture, and race and racism” (ibid.). Its central concern is both “an intellectual commitment and a political movement that seeks justice for women and the end of sexism in all forms” (ibid.). Historically, feminist philosophy as a formal branch of philosophy emerged in the 1970s. Certainly, there are important historical predecessors such as de Beauvoir, Firestone, Wollstonecraft and Condorcet, but it was the philosophical training and expertise of individuals that was applied to issues raised by the women’s liberations movement in the 1960s and 1970s that generated and established this sub-discipline of philosophy. This meant that the different philosophical traditions were, in turn, appropriated into “doing” feminist philosophy. So, for example, there is Continental feminism (Hansen 2018), analytic feminism (Garry 2018) and pragmatic feminism (Whipps and Lake 2017). There is also an entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* for Latin American feminism (Rivera Berruz 2018). There is no entry for African feminism, and it strikes me that this is an entry-in-waiting, a definitional lacuna and, indeed, the problem is one of definition.

If we return to Oluwole now, considering this discussion, the situation is as follows. Western feminist philosophy arose as a branch of philosophy because already established and existing philosophical traditions were appropriated into exploring feminist concerns and questions because of the social and historical context. This implies that “doing” African feminist “philosophy proper” requires the emergence of a new generation of philosophy scholars whose interests align with feminist issues in the African context, and thus who shift their particular philosophical terrain into this area of thought. However, if we accept Oluwole’s preceding claim that African philosophy is itself still contested, then African feminist philosophy still remains *an impossibility*. To illustrate this, we can consider the Continental tradition of philosophy as an example. The feminist project in this tradition is characterised by *deconstructive* (critical) projects and *reconstructive* projects (Hansen 2018). The point here is the use of the word “constructive”, the implication being that, always already, feminist philosophy is reactionary and responding to what is established and assumed to be normative. For example, Irigaray’s (1985) critique of Freudian psychoanalysis and its “patriarchal imagination and unconscious” (Hansen 2018), Butler’s (1990) work on gender identity assumptions and the performativity of gender, and Young’s (2005) phenomenological work on embodiment. Affirming this reactionary position, Marcuse (1998, 166) writes that the feminist movement “originates and operates within patriarchal civilization” and thus must initially be shaped by “the actual status of women in the male-dominated civilization”. De Beauvoir ([1949] 2010, 26) makes the point of assumed normativity and how it implicitly shapes humanity simply and powerfully:

Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being...She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other.

To what extent this seemingly universal claim implicates African identity is a significant question to consider, and it has implications for how we think about an African feminist philosophy. For example, Oyewumi (2002, 5) argues that in Yoruba culture the family is non-gendered and “kinship categories encode seniority not gender”. While this claim has been described as “disturbingly naïve and politically dangerous” (Bakare-Yusuf 2004, 69), the underlying point suggests that African epistemologies will not necessarily align with what are Western foundations of feminist concepts, such as what de Beauvoir articulates.⁷ While de Beauvoir may assume she speaks for a universal conception of female identity, Butler (1990, 3) rightly points out that this assumption can be seen to “colonize and appropriate non-Western cultures to support highly Western notions of oppression”. The point here is that a constructivist approach to an African feminist philosophy that follows the

⁷ Nzeqwu (2004, 562) makes a similar claim regarding Igbo culture, arguing that gender identity is more flexible than the Western “ideology of masculinity” which de Beauvoir expresses so uncompromisingly.

same pattern as Western feminist philosophy could reinforce Western patriarchal and colonial biases which do not necessarily genuinely reflect the African lifeworld.

Other decolonial, epistemic possibilities

So, where does this leave us? To accept Oluwole's argument is to accept a dominant, traditional approach to doing philosophy "proper", albeit as a deliberate historical construct. African feminist philosophy must wait until what will likely be men decide what constitutes African philosophy and only then, as a reactionary response, will it realise its own articulation.⁸ However, given that African philosophy itself remains contested, that successive attempts to define African philosophy have been problematic and unresolved (Janz 2009), what opens is an unthought possibility, the possibility of "epistemic disobedience" (Mignolo 2009) towards the patriarchal, masculine nature of philosophy, and the reactive nature of feminist philosophy. As Mignolo (2009, 4) writes, supporting claims Graness has made above, we can no longer just assume that any discipline occupies some transparent, disincorporated space. Rather, the task of decolonial (and decolonial feminist) thinking is the "unveiling of epistemic silences". It is not enough to change the content of the conversation, but rather it "is of the essence to change the *terms* of the conversation" (Mignolo 2009, 4; emphasis in original). Changing the terms means a deliberate shift in the "geography of reason", towards the enactment of a "geopolitics of knowledge" and the "delinking from the web of imperial knowledge" (Mignolo 2009, 15, 20). Does such an event of epistemic disobedience and intellectual rebellion offer itself to the lacuna that is *the possibility* of an African feminist philosophy in the thinking of decoloniality now?

Shifting the geography of reason implies a fundamental rupture of deep-seated and often uninterrogated assumptions about knowledge creation and epistemological criteria. Here Mamdani (2019, 26) reminds us that

[c]olonialism brought not only theory from the Western academy, but also the assumption that theory is produced in the West and the aim of the academy outside the West is limited to applying theory. Its implication was radical: If the making of theory was a truly creative act in the West, its application in the colonies became the reverse, a turnkey project that did no more than operationalise theory... The unfortunate outcome of such an endeavour is to produce high-cost caricatures, yet another group of mimic men and women for a new era. The alternative is to rethink our aspirations, not just to import theory from outside as another developmental initiative, but to aim differently and not just higher: to theorise our own reality.

The call to "theorise our own reality" offers African feminist philosophy a distinctive opportunity and possibility. Instead of the kind of passivity which Oluwole implies is the normal way that African feminism philosophy should unfold, this article wants to propose something altogether more radical in the spirit of the decolonial turn proposed by Maldonado Torres (2008), namely a creative act of epistemic disobedience: the thinking and creation of an African feminist philosophy which is neither a "caricature" or a "turnkey project" of Western theory, nor even a critical, reactive response to African philosophy itself. Rather, as Mamdani so elegantly puts it, this philosophy needs to "aim differently", not merely to "import theory", but to offer a genuine attempt to theorise a lived reality that reflects those participants of it.

Regarding the issue of caricature, Mudimbe (1988, 10) concurs with Mamdani, writing that

Western interpreters as well as African analysts have been using categories and conceptual systems which depend on a Western epistemological order. Even in the most explicitly "Afrocentric" descriptions, models of analysis explicitly or implicitly, knowingly or unknowingly, refer to the same order.

Mudimbe (1988, 10) raises the question of whether this Western epistemological dependency implies that "African traditional systems of thought are unthinkable" and constrained by a "non-African

8 This is a position supported by Matolino (2018).

epistemological locus". The answer directs us back to Mignolo (2009, 4) and the claim that decolonial thinking is the "unveiling of epistemic silences" and "affirming the epistemic rights of the...devalued". Thus, what is urgently required is an ontological and epistemological articulation of African female identity that is able to speak for, of and from the African woman, and not only as a response to African (male) philosophy. Epistemic disobedience requires a deliberate rupture with an epistemological locus which is not rooted in the lifeworld of those for whom it is meant to speak for. For Santos (2018), as for Mignolo, this knowing is grounded in praxis. Santos (2018, 1) writes that the production and validation of this knowledge is "anchored in the experiences of resistance of all those social groups that have systematically suffered injustice, oppression, and destruction caused by capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy". For Santos, these social groups, despite their variety and location, are united in the common struggle against these globalised Western forces, and in the knowledges brought forth in this struggle. It is this way of thinking about knowledge creation that offers an epistemic possibility for an African feminism that is rooted, not in the imitation of a cerebral, disembodied tradition, but in a philosophy that speaks truth to power. Thus Mignolo (2009, 4) calls for a "radical reframing of the original formal apparatus of enunciation".

The starting point for this epistemic disobedience is with the concept of "woman" itself, and the Western epistemological binary which structures it. As Mudimbe points out, using conceptual tools that are grounded in a Western epistemological order replicates a way of thinking that is still underpinned by certain fundamental presuppositions and categories. This could result in the kind of mimicry thinking which Mamdani cautions us against.⁹ Whereas, we have in the work of Oyewumi (1997) and Nzegwu (2004), for example, attempts to articulate an understanding of womanhood which operates in a different epistemological order to the Western, patriarchal one that de Beauvoir articulates above. Thus, beginning with these concrete African examples allows possibilities and ways of thinking to emerge that are not already grounded in and shaped by a Western epistemological order. I will briefly elaborate on these now, but before I do so, a few caveats. Firstly, the mention and use of Oyewumi's work provoked a surprising and unexpectedly strong, negative reaction from West African female scholars when this piece was originally presented. The implication was that Oyewumi's work was not an accurate reflection at all of the general treatment of women in Yoruba culture, or in Nigeria. Although her book *The Invention of Women* (1997) received praise initially, it has also come under significant criticism, with many scholars disputing the "empirical veracity of her claims" (Coetzee 2017, 2). Indeed, the work of Coetzee (2017) helpfully surveys numerous scholars who have criticised the empirical, theoretical and ideological assumptions of Oyewumi's work, doing much to discredit it. However, as Coetzee (2017, 3) notes, if we accept that part of the baggage of Western colonial modernity is a distinct idea of gender, then it is arguably plausible to suggest that this construct was imposed "on an 'ungendered' Yoruba society", which is Oyewumi's central claim. Indeed, Lugones (2010, 748) affirms this position, citing a number of authors who argue that "gender is a colonial imposition". Oyewumi (1997, ix) makes her claim as strong and explicit as possible: "the fundamental category of 'woman' – which is foundational in Western gender discourses – simply did not exist in Yorubaland prior to its sustained contact with the West". Thus, for Oyewumi (1997, 31), gender, determined by biology, is a "fundamental organizing principle in Western societies", whereas for Yoruba society prior to colonisation, the "social categories 'men' and 'women' were non-existent". Instead, seniority, defined by relative age, was the basis for societal structure and hierarchy, and this arrangement is embedded in the Yoruba language. Oyewumi goes on to analyse complex etymological meanings and somatic behaviour in Yoruba culture to show that gender is based on a cultural, not biological understanding. Furthermore, unlike the biological determinism of Western society, seniority is "highly relational and situational" (Oyewumi 1997, 42). Relationships determine one's standing, and this can shift depending on whose presence one is in. Thus, Oyewumi's fundamental position, succinctly expressed by du Toit and Coetzee (2017, 340), is that in "precolonial Yoruba society, sexuate difference is...construed

⁹ For example, in the piece by Xaba (2019), there is an uninterrogated assumption that the experience of patriarchy, oppression and embodiment for the African female is the equivalent of her Western counterpart.

in a non-oppositional and non-dichotomous way in which man is not defined in opposition to his negative, woman”.

Similar insights are conveyed by Nzegwu (2004) concerning Igbo culture. While in Igbo culture different terms are used to distinguish males and females, these distinctions do not convey or imply that females “are psychologically passive beings who are or ought to be submissive and subordinate to men” (Nzegwu 2004, 562). Rather, these are initial generic terms since one’s individual social identity still needs to be developed. Even when gender identity is developed, Nzegwu (2004, 563) states that this identity is still flexible and fluid, “tied to social roles and functions that demand deliberative rationality from females”. Given that Igbo females have various social roles, there is not one gender identity which defines them. For example, Nzegwu (2004, 564) writes that females “can be both wives and husbands at the same time. Some can actually marry their own wife or wives (with no sexual relationship involved), and they can do so even when they are in a conjugal marital relationship with a male”. This example illustrates that concepts such as “wife”, “husband” and the notion of “marriage” operate within a different ontological order in Igbo culture to that of the Western mindset. As with Yoruba culture, hierarchies are based on seniority and are thus relational and fluid – “there is no absolute female identity outside of relational ties” (Nzegwu 2004, 564).

Given my own positionality, I am not able to critique the veracity of these claims. Given Coetzee’s (2017) detailed work, it is evident that other scholars have done this. Whether, as Coetzee charitably suggests, it is plausible to argue that the concept of gender was imposed on Yoruba (and thus Igbo) culture by colonisers, or whether Oyewumi and Nzegwu are overstating their positions, what remains is a powerful, thought-provoking, African epistemological and ontological example of human relationality, which does not conform to Western normative assumptions.

Another interesting example, not as radical perhaps as the claims above, concerns the Akan people of Ghana and the notion of the “queen mother”. Some anthropologists argue that in precolonial West Africa matriarchal political power and authority were common (see Farrar 1997). Indeed, the notion of the *matriarchate* is “older in Africa than anywhere else in the world” (Farrar 1997, 580). However, other scholars reject this, arguing that the idea of matrilineality is confused with matriarchy (see Farrar 1997). Farrar (1997, 583), however, in his careful study among the Northern Akan, argues that the various female titles, which collectively can be referred to as the “queen mother”, embodied “very real political power” in precolonial times. A female ruler could, under certain conditions, “assume full control of central authority; she could become the ‘king’, the *omanhene*” (Farrar 1997, 583). Furthermore, Akan political hierarchy itself had a female and male counterpart for every office, and in precolonial society “women did not normally come under the authority of men” (Farrar 1997, 588). Farrar also shares a telling anecdote from the work of Rattray (quoted in Farrar 1997, 591), who had worked among the Akan for a while until he realised the importance of female political authority in their society. When Rattray asked the elders why he had remained ignorant of this, their response was that “[t]he white man never asked us this; you have dealings with and recognize only the men; we supposed the European considered women of no account, and we know you do not recognize them as we have always done”.

A prolegomenon for an African feminist philosophy

The above examples serve to illustrate and create epistemological shifts and openings in thinking about the nature of gender identity in precolonial Africa. They also allow, in the sense conveyed by the epigraph from Heidegger, a confrontation with the normative and offer examples which can help question and rupture the pervasive gender biases coloniality has, arguably, enforced on Africa. The question that remains, however, is the question of the present and the future of an African feminist philosophy. It is evident that such a philosophy must be rooted in praxis, in an enunciation that emerges from the melding of embodiment and thought, what Lugones (2010, 746) so eloquently calls “historicized, incarnate intersubjectivity”. Du Toit and Coetzee (2017, 334) confirm this, arguing for a philosophy that develops from the “lived experiences and material situations” of African feminist thinkers. However, they further suggest that this must be a broader, interactive conversation with the “metaphysical and ontological approaches that have developed within African philosophy” (ibid.). However, given the illuminating force of the decolonial turn proposed by the

likes of Mignolo and Santos, and the ongoing danger of the turnkey imitative thinking raised by Mudimbe and Mamdani, such a conversation must be approached with caution. Indeed, what I want to propose, considering the reactionary and constructive nature of feminist philosophy generally, is a more radical philosophical initiative that does not fall into this repetitive, traditional stance, one characterised always by an unequal recognition of response. Instead, I argue for the possibility of the thinking of an African feminist philosophy that does not root itself in the canonical Western tradition of philosophy, or even contemporary African philosophy for that matter, given its own ongoing contestation. To support this claim, I draw on the notion of “delinking” developed in the work of Mignolo (2007). Essentially, delinking is a “decolonial epistemic shift [that] brings to the foreground other epistemologies, other principles of knowledge and understanding and, consequently, other economy, other politics, other ethics” (Mignolo 2007, 453). This is what powerful, non-Western examples of African femininity that I sketch above offer us. In seeking out and foregrounding other ways of knowing, other ways of imagining and understandings ourselves emerge.

Thus, for Mignolo, the fundamental claim is that if knowledge is itself colonised and the first task is to decolonise it. Here, he follows the work of Quijano (1992), who proposes a twofold approach to understanding the “coloniality of power”. One is *analytic*, in that the notion of coloniality allows one to recognise and reconstitute “silenced histories, repressed subjectivities, and subalternised knowledges and languages” (Mignolo 2007, 451). The other is *programmatic* in that the work of decoloniality is a delinking which, as described above, foregrounds other marginalised epistemologies. Here Mignolo (2007, 453) gestures towards what he calls a “geo- and body politics of knowledge” which rejects claims of “universality” (implying modernity) in favour of locality, meaning a geopolitics and body politics which is rooted in where, and from whom, it comes. This position leads Mignolo (2007, 452–453; emphasis in original) to make, somewhat paradoxically, the claims for “*pluriversality as a universal project*”.

Arguably, African feminist philosophy is ideally placed to delink from the already contested tradition of African philosophy that, if we consider Oluwole’s argument and my critique, will only constrain it. Instead, Mignolo’s (2007, 497) theory of the “pluriversal” offers what he calls the possibility of “border thinking”. This is the thinking of futures and possible worlds that are not already dictated by global, first-world forces, neoliberal agendas and totalising narratives about the nature and project of modern rationality. The notion of the “pluriversal” contains two dimensions in that it speaks to both the recognition of the plurality and diversity of local human experience, but also the unavoidable shared commonality of the modern/colonial world. Indeed, the first moment of delinking is to reject the universalising claims of modern reason. To quote Mignolo (2007, 499; emphasis in original), “border thinking becomes the necessary critical *method* for the political and ethical project of filling in the gaps and revealing the imperial complicity between the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality”. This “complicity” of thought is exactly what Mudimbe diagnoses in the state of African philosophy itself – the reliance on Western conceptual and empirical categories that constrain the emergence of a genuine African philosophy, that make it “unthinkable”. It is arguably this same fate that awaits Africa feminist philosophy if this standard trajectory continues.

However, if we engage in “border thinking”, using Quijano’s (1992) twofold coloniality/decoloniality approach, then a more originary thinking becomes possible, one that can critically recognise and analyse the modern/colonial influence, and also navigate beyond it towards the programmatic. This navigation can retrace and rediscover precolonial African identities, such as those I discuss above, which offer ontological and epistemological openings not constrained by the logic of modernity/coloniality. These can help reconceptualise where and how this philosophy develops now. Furthermore, du Toit and Coetzee (2017) suggest a number of avenues from which fruitful, relevant and exploratory feminist philosophical work can emerge. One example is artistic expression – there are many very talented feminist writers in Africa generating works in many genres that explore the female/feminist perspective of African being.¹⁰ Another is the work of African legal scholars who use a feminist lens to interpret legal frameworks, customary law and

10 For example, a recent important contribution to this is Botha’s *African Somaesthetics: Cultures, Feminisms, Politics* (2021).

culture practices. A third can emerge from exploring African moral theory, and a fourth through engaging with the work of other postcolonial theorists from different continents and contexts. An interesting example of the overlap of the third and fourth avenues is explored by Graness (2018), who discusses African ecofeminism, referring to Wangari Maathai, a Kenyan Nobel Peace prize winner, and Indian eco-activist, Vandana Shiva. What grounds these positions, and others still unthought, is their “loci of enunciation”, a central decolonial concept developed by Mignolo (1999; 2002; 2009), succinctly captured in the phrase “I am where I think” (Mignolo 1999, 235). The locus of enunciation is *from where I speak* and affirms the fundamental assertion of the geo- and body politics of knowledge. Thus, what Mignolo (1999, 236) argues, which is profoundly inimical to the Western philosophical tradition, is that epistemology is embedded in a “politics of location” and is not a universal, totalising and contextually neutral feature of human existence. Tamale (2020, 43) echoes this position, writing that

if African women are to successfully challenge their subordination and oppression, they need to carefully and rigorously develop home-grown conceptualizations that capture the specific political economies and cultural realities encountered, as well as their traditional worldviews.

In conclusion, this article argues against a conception of African feminist philosophy that is merely a “turnkey” project, imitative of its predecessors and emerging, in time, as a conventional branch of African philosophy. Instead, it proposes a more radical, decolonial possibility that transcends “normative” assumptions about the nature of philosophy by, firstly, showing the constructed, contextual nature of the discipline itself and, secondly, exploring epistemic possibilities that rupture colonial assumptions about African identity. Here, the work of decoloniality offers rich, alternative ways of imagining how an African feminist philosophy could emerge. Using the twofold decolonial approach of the analytic and the programmatic, African feminist philosophy must negotiate through the rejection of the Western modernism/coloniality episteme, while situating itself in its own episteme, reckoning with patriarchal, discriminatory African worldviews. Thus, this article serves as a prolegomenon because, in the spirit of the “locus of enunciation” I acknowledge that my white, male allyship is from where I speak and that the work I hope to see done is not mine to do.

ORCID iD

Dominic Griffiths – <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6773-7184>

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