



Decolonial Philosophy in New Nigerian Poetry and the Aesthetics of Epistemic Resistance

Abstract

This paper argued that a philosophically coherent strand of contemporary Nigerian poetry constitutes a sustained project of epistemic resistance, one that simultaneously diagnoses the structural violence of colonial knowledge systems and enacts, at the level of aesthetic form itself, alternative modes of knowing rooted in African lifeworlds. Drawing on the decolonial frameworks of Walter D. Mignolo, Sylvia Wynter, Achille Mbembe, and Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, the paper read selected work from Niyi Osundare, Romeo Oriogun, and Saddiq Dzukogi as aesthetic sites where the coloniality of knowledge is contested and provisionally dismantled. Through qualitative close reading informed by decolonial critical theory, the paper theorized what it terms "border poetics," an aesthetic disposition that inhabits the fault lines between colonial epistemology and African ways of knowing in order to generate genuinely decolonial imaginaries. It concluded that new Nigerian poetry is not merely a cultural artifact but a philosophically serious intervention in the global politics of knowledge.

Keywords: Decoloniality; Epistemic resistance; New Nigerian poetry; Coloniality of knowledge; Border thinking

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Introduction

In the intellectual tradition that has come to be known as decolonial thought, one of its most tenacious and consequential claims is that the European colonial enterprise was not only a territorial and economic conquest but, just as crucially, an epistemological one, a systematic reorganization of the global hierarchy of knowing such that the forms of knowledge and experience indigenous to colonized peoples were rendered invisible, primitive, or simply

unthinkable within the dominant cognitive frameworks of modernity. Aníbal Quijano's foundational theorization of the "coloniality of power" maps how this hierarchy was racially encoded and institutionally perpetuated even after formal decolonization, establishing a structure of domination that operated through the management of subjectivities and the control of knowledge rather than through the direct coercion of territorial occupation alone (Quijano 533). Walter D. Mignolo's companion concept of the

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"coloniality of knowledge" extends this analysis to the very architecture of intellectual production, tracing what he calls the "geopolitics of knowledge" through which certain sites are designated as the origin of universal theory while others are consigned to the status of raw, unprocessed experience awaiting interpretation from elsewhere (Mignolo, *Local Histories* 17). What remains undertheorized within this otherwise rich body of scholarship, however, is the specific and irreplaceable role that literary aesthetics, and poetry in particular, plays in both registering the violence of this epistemic arrangement and enacting, through its formal procedures and cognitive orientations, something of its undoing.

This paper takes up that theoretical lacuna by examining three bodies of contemporary Nigerian poetry that together constitute what one might term, following Mignolo's conceptual vocabulary, a "border poetics," a mode of poetic practice situated at the "colonial difference," drawing simultaneously on the formal inheritance of the English lyric tradition and on the epistemic resources of Yoruba oral philosophy, Islamic cosmological thought, and other African cognitive frameworks, to produce a practice of "border thinking," a mode of knowing that does not simply invert the colonial hierarchy but dissolves its categorical foundations altogether (Mignolo, *Local Histories* 85). The poets under examination represent three distinct but convergent Nigerian literary formations. Niyi Osundare's career, spanning more than four decades of engagement with Yoruba epistemology and ecological philosophy, marks him

as the preeminent philosophical poet of the second generation of Nigerian writing. Romeo Oriogun, whose collection *Nomad* (2021) won the 2022 Nigeria Prize for Literature, has established himself as the most philosophically restless voice of the new generation. Saddiq Dzukogi, whose *Your Crib, My Qibla* (2021) won the 2022 Derek Walcott Prize for Poetry, and whose most recent collection, *Bakandamiya: An Elegy* (2025), represents one of the most ambitious attempts in contemporary African poetry to recover and theorize a pre-colonial epistemic tradition, completes the constellation of voices this paper addresses.

The central argument is that these three poets engage in a practice of what Sylvia Wynter calls the overturning of the overrepresentation of Man. For Wynter, the colonial project installed a specific, racially marked "genre of the human" at the center of all knowledge production, declaring its perspective to be universally valid while rendering all other forms of being and knowing superfluous or nonexistent (Wynter 260). Contemporary Nigerian poetry is one of the most consequential sites where that overrepresentation is persistently contested, not through discursive refutation alone, but through the making of aesthetic form itself, which carries within its structural, linguistic, and cosmological choices a whole embedded philosophy of what counts as knowledge and who counts as a knowing subject.

Literature Review

The concept of epistemic violence, introduced into postcolonial critical discourse primarily through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's reading of the

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British colonial reorganization of the Indian sati tradition, designates the systematic suppression and delegitimization of non-Western knowledge systems through which the colonial subject is constituted not as a knowing subject but as an object of knowledge. What the decolonial scholars building on Quijano and Mignolo have added to this insight is its structural dimension, namely that epistemic violence is not an accident or a side effect of colonialism but its necessary epistemological precondition, the cognitive infrastructure without which territorial conquest and resource extraction could not have been rationalized as a civilizing mission. Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, in his landmark study *Epistemic Freedom in Africa*, argues with exemplary clarity that "epistemic freedom is foundational in the broader decolonisation struggle because it enables the emergence of critical decolonial consciousness," and that the suppression of such freedom is the condition that makes continued coloniality possible long after the formal end of colonial rule (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2). The structures of knowledge, what counts as theory, which languages carry philosophical authority, and which cosmologies are treated as metaphysics rather than mythology, continue to encode the original colonial violence even within institutions that understand themselves as postcolonial or liberal.

In the Nigerian literary-historical context, this persistence of epistemic coloniality has a dimension that is crucial to understanding the stakes of the poetry examined here. The first generation of Nigerian writers in English operated, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o would later diagnose in his foundational

polemic *Decolonising the Mind*, within a colonial linguistic dispensation that shaped even their anti-colonial imagination, encoding within the very texture of their prose and poetry the epistemological assumptions of the metropolitan literary traditions from which their craft descended (Ngũgĩ 3). Subsequent generations of Nigerian poets, of whom Osundare is the most philosophically self-conscious representative, pressed the critical maneuver further, introducing into the English text the syntactic structures, oral performance conventions, and cosmological frameworks of indigenous African traditions, making the poem perform according to epistemological logics that are not those of the Western lyric tradition it appears to inhabit.

What makes this project properly philosophical is its engagement with the deepest stratum of what Mignolo calls the "colonial matrix of power," the level at which the very criteria of valid knowledge are determined prior to any particular empirical or theoretical claim (Mignolo, *Local Histories* 17). To write poetry that operates according to a different epistemological dispensation, one in which the earth is addressed as a knowing subject, the qibla of Islamic prayer organizes the speaker's orientation to grief, or a Bori spirit narrates five hundred years of cultural transformation, is to enact what Wynter calls a "new science of the human," one that insists on the epistemic legitimacy of other ways of being in and understanding the world (Wynter 316). Achille Mbembe, in *Out of the Dark Night*, argues that the "will to community" animating the most serious African cultural production is fundamentally a will to construct new forms of knowing

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and being in common (Mbembe 3), and that poetry is one of the primary media through which this will is enacted, because it can simultaneously make a philosophical claim and embody it in sensory, rhythmic, and cosmological form, making the claim felt rather than merely understood.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative methodology situated in decolonial critical theory and close reading. The analytical framework draws on the modernity/coloniality/decoloniality research program, as elaborated by Mignolo, Quijano, Wynter, and Ndlovu-Gatsheni, to read poetry not as mere cultural expression but as a site of philosophical knowledge production. Close reading is understood not as a formalist exercise detached from history and politics but as a mode of critical attention to the ways in which poetic form, diction, cosmological reference, and linguistic structure carry epistemological arguments. The primary texts are read as theoretical objects in their own right rather than as illustrations of arguments produced elsewhere, a gesture that refuses the assumption that theory belongs only to metropolitan universities. The selection of texts is purposive, focusing on poets whose work most clearly enacts the framework of border poetics.

Findings

Niyi Osundare's body of work represents one of the most philosophically sustained and historically self-conscious engagements with the project of epistemic decolonization in the African literary tradition. Over more than four decades,

from *Songs from the Marketplace* (1983) through *Village Voices* (1984), *The Eye of the Earth* (1986), and into his most recent collection, *Green: Sighs of Our Ailing Planet* (2022), Osundare has developed a poetic philosophy in which the Yoruba worldview functions not as cultural decoration or nostalgic retrieval but as a genuine epistemological resource, a way of knowing the natural and social world that the poetry proposes as philosophically serious, cognitively adequate, and politically necessary on its own terms.

Central to this philosophy is what one might call a "border poetics of ecology," a mode of engaging with the natural world that refuses the Cartesian subject/object binary, insisting instead on the Yoruba understanding of knowledge as emergent from attentive, reciprocal participation in a community of knowing that includes the non-human world on equal terms. In *The Eye of the Earth* in particular, the natural world is spoken to and spoken by; rivers possess memory; the earth is addressed as an elder whose knowledge encompasses and precedes that of the individual human speaker. This is not personification in the decorative literary sense familiar from the Western tradition but an epistemological claim about the distributed character of knowledge and the conditions of its production, a claim that reflects the philosophical assumptions of Yoruba cosmology regarding the continuity of being across the categories that Western thought designates as "human" and "natural," "animate" and "inanimate," "knowing" and "known."

The philosophical weight of this position is made most explicit in *Green: Sighs of Our Ailing Planet*, which a 2023

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study published in the *International Journal of Science and Research Archive* analyzes as a text that "mobilizes the linguistic resources of transitivity, metaphor, and lexical connotation to articulate an urgent ideological critique of environmental destruction, neocolonial exploitation, and epistemic injustice," engaging "Yoruba cosmology and indigenous aesthetics" to "disrupt Western anthropocentrism" in ways that go beyond mere thematic protest to constitute a formal and cognitive challenge to the epistemological assumptions embedded in dominant environmental discourse (Ogunsiji and Ogungbemi). When the earth speaks in the collection, the address is not a rhetorical device but the enactment of a cognitive relationship in which the earth is a speaking, knowing subject whose utterances constitute a claim on the human listener that bypasses any framework that would reduce her to an object of concern. The earth issues its own imperative from within its own epistemic authority.

Osundare's deployment of Yoruba linguistic structures, oral performance conventions, and incantatory rhythms within his predominantly English-language texts constitutes a parallel epistemological intervention at the level of form. The introduction of Yoruba cosmological concepts without translation or explanatory glossing asserts the cognitive adequacy of Yoruba poetics to carry philosophical meaning without conversion into the idioms of the metropolitan tradition. In this respect, Osundare practices precisely what Ndlovu-Gatsheni identifies as the most fundamental requirement of epistemic decolonization, not the negation of

Western epistemology as such, but the affirmation of African epistemologies on their own terms, insisting on their validity as modes of engaging the world rather than as cultural survivals awaiting translation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 14).

Discussion

Where Osundare's epistemic project is anchored in the philosophical resources of Yoruba tradition and articulated through a poetics of ecological address, the work of Romeo Oriogun and Sadiq Dzukogi engages a different but equally consequential dimension of the decolonial problematic, namely the reconstruction of African subjectivity and historical consciousness in the aftermath of layered, compounding violences. The judges of the 2022 Nigeria Prize for Literature, awarding the prize to Oriogun's *Nomad*, noted that its sixty-seven poems "were held together by a travel motif, marshalled in each poem with equal intensity, and linked to the African past, including the Middle Passage, and the African future," and that the collection stood out as "the most technically accomplished, rendering the topical subject of migration in a language laced with lyrical figurations." This judicial commendation is apt but requires philosophical deepening, for the travel motif of *Nomad* is not merely thematic but epistemological, and the formal achievement of the collection is inseparable from its cognitive achievement.

Oriogun's nomadism, as it manifests throughout the collection, is best understood as an epistemological condition rather than a biographical circumstance. Writing as the first openly

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queer Nigerian poet to win the Nigeria Prize for Literature, Oriogun occupies a position of simultaneous disqualification from multiple communities of epistemic authority. This position is precisely what Mignolo theorizes as the locus of subaltern knowledge, the site from which it becomes possible to "think from the colonial difference" rather than within the epistemological categories that the colonial matrix of power has established as universal (Mignolo, *Local Histories* 85). *Nomad's* philosophical achievement lies in its refusal to resolve this position of multiple displacement into a stable identity; instead, it inhabits the condition of permanent dislocation as a source of distinctive epistemic access. The self that moves through Oriogun's poems is not a bounded, rational Cartesian subject but a traveling, relational consciousness whose knowledge is always partial, perspectival, and implicated in the histories of movement, dispossession, and desire that colonial modernity set in motion. This resonates with Wynter's insistence that the acknowledgment of situatedness is the condition of rigorous rather than ideologically mystified thought (Wynter 316).

Saddiq Dzukogi's *Your Crib, My Qibla*, which won the 2022 Derek Walcott Prize for Poetry and was a co-winner of the 2021 Julie Suk Award, operates in a different philosophical register but with comparable epistemic ambition. The collection, which grew from Dzukogi's experience of the near-loss of his daughter Bahra, is organized around the Islamic concept of the qibla, the direction of Mecca toward which Muslims orient themselves in prayer, as the governing metaphor for a father's

orientation of grief toward the transcendent. By making the qibla the architectonic principle of the collection, Dzukogi introduces into the English-language lyric tradition an Islamic cosmological framework that carries its own epistemology of the sacred, its own account of the relationship between the living and the dead, the human and the divine, and the particular and the cosmic. The University of Nebraska Press describes the collection as exploring how "the language of memory functions as a space of mourning, connecting the dead with the world of the living," culminating in "an imagined dialogue between the father and his deceased daughter in the intricate space of the family." What this description gestures toward is the epistemological claim embedded in Dzukogi's formal architecture, namely that the Islamic-African framework of spiritual orientation provides cognitive resources for navigating extreme experiences of loss that are not reducible to the secular or Christian epistemologies that dominate the Western lyric tradition.

Dzukogi's most recent collection, *Bakandamiya: An Elegy* (2025), extends the epistemological project of his earlier work into a still more ambitious register. Described by its publisher as a book-length epic poem that "covers more than five hundred years of cultural transformation" in northern Nigeria, subverting the legend of Bayajidda "from a Bori spirit's point of view" while expanding "the griot tradition of Bakandamiya, a poetic form from northern Nigeria popularized by Mamman Shata," the collection represents one of the most radical attempts in contemporary African poetry to recover a pre-colonial

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epistemic tradition as a resource for thinking about colonialism and African futurity. Kwame Dawes describes it as "a groundbreaking work of beauty and urgency," drawing on "Hausa griot traditions as well as animist thought" in ways that invite comparison with Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino*. Like p'Bitek's foundational poem, *Bakandamiya* uses an indigenous oral form as the epistemological container for a critique of colonial and postcolonial violence that Western lyric forms could not sustain. In Mbembe's terms, the collection performs the synthesis of an Africa "in the process of synthesizing itself, in a mode of disjunction and redistribution of differences," constructing from the archive of northern Nigerian epistemic traditions a mode of knowing the region's history that is irreducible to any single tradition while remaining rooted in all of them (Mbembe 5).

The epistemological orientations enacted by all three poets, the relational knowing of the Yoruba ecological tradition, the nomadic knowing of the perpetually displaced subject, and the cosmologically oriented knowing of the Islamic-African poetic tradition, do not merely supplement but challenge the epistemological framework of Western modernity, generating forms of knowledge about grief, dispossession, belonging, and the responsibilities of the powerful to the earth that the dominant epistemology is structurally unable to produce. To insist on the irreducibility of these knowing practices is, as Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues, a claim about cognitive justice, the insistence that "epistemic freedom is the freedom to think, theorize, interpret the world, develop methodologies and write from

where one is located" (14). What the poets examined here demonstrate is that this freedom, enacted aesthetically, is present and available in the poem itself.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that contemporary Nigerian poetry, as practiced by Osundare, Oriogun, and Dzukogi, constitutes a sustained project of epistemic resistance, contesting the coloniality of knowledge at the level of form, language, cosmology, and cognitive orientation, and proposing in its place alternative epistemologies rooted in Yoruba, Islamic-African, Hausa, and diasporic intellectual traditions. Through decolonial close reading, the paper has shown how these poets inhabit what Mignolo calls the colonial difference and generate from that inhabitation forms of knowing that are philosophically distinctive and epistemologically generative in ways that existing scholarship on Nigerian literature and decolonial thought has not adequately theorized.

The theoretical concept of border poetics developed here suggests that the long tradition of Nigerian and African literary production can be read as a continuous philosophical project, one of constructing and refining forms of knowledge adequate to the African experience in all its historical complexity and philosophical depth. The stakes of engaging this project are ultimately stakes about the human, about what it means to know the world, who is recognized as capable of knowing it, and what forms of understanding are granted the status of philosophy rather than folklore. Contemporary Nigerian poetry constitutes an aesthetically powerful

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and humanly compelling insistence that African epistemic traditions are not peripheral to but constitutive of any genuinely adequate account of human knowing and human freedom. It is, in the fullest and most demanding sense, decolonial praxis, not a representation of decolonization but its enactment.

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