

Situating Africa

An Alter-geopolitics of Knowledge, or Chapungu Rises

Ruth Simbao

Only when universities on the continent fully recover and take their rightful—and leading—role in the production of African scholarly knowledge will African studies in the rest of the world become a truly strong field (Paul Tiyambe Zeleza 2009: 133).

This journal issue marks the beginning of a new partnership with *Africana Arts* at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa, joins the editorial consortium. As the National Research Foundation Chair in Geopolitics and the Arts of Africa,¹ I will work with collaborators based largely on the African continent to produce one issue of *Africana Arts* per year. This first issue has grown out of conversations with artists, curators, and writers based in Uganda, Zimbabwe, and South Africa at a publishing workshop organized by Rhodes University, as well as an institutional collaboration with Makerere University in Uganda. It also includes a dialogue with colleagues in Tanzania, Zambia, Nigeria, Egypt, South Africa, Benin, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe, the US, Uganda, and Angola/Portugal. A core goal of our work is to significantly increase the participation of authors based on the African continent as a way of strengthening our discipline with a scholarly approach that takes seriously an alter-geopolitics of knowledge as a political concept (Koopman 2011; Mignot 2016).

At the time of writing and compiling the articles for this *Africana Arts* issue, Rhodes University, or UCKA, at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (in name that registers the loss of an official name change)—was captured by heavy-handed police power and the intermittent sound of rubber bullets being shot at students.

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1. Lee-Ray Jason. Documentation of the police response to the Fees Must Fall protests on the University of Witwatersrand campus, 2016. Photo: Lee-Ray Jason.

Along with other campuses across South Africa, this place of knowledge-production became, for many students and staff, a site of intense trauma and violence (Fig. 1). Shortly after the 2015–16 higher education protests peaked and the militaristic response of the police severely deepened the crisis, students and colleagues at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda, similarly experienced a lockdown accompanied by violence and state control when President Yoweri Museveni officially shut down the university (Marka 2016; Nkwamanya 2016). How do we grapple with knowledge-production when the people producing knowledge—students, lecturers and researchers—are being faced with physical harm in response to the fact that they are, in part, challenging epistemic violence? How do we write about the arts of Africa in a global academy that still privileges Western epistemological traditions when questions that are being asked on the African continent about ways of situating Africa, African knowledge, and African universities' resists, at times, in the spilling of blood? How do we teach from this body of knowledge that we and others in our discipline produce when the people we teach and learn from are not safe in our places of learning?

In this First Word and in the dialogue "Reaching Sideways, Writing Our Ways," I reflect on the current status of the scholarly field of the visual and performing arts of Africa at this particular time of revived calls

on the African continent for the decolonization of knowledge (Heleta 2016; Mberembe 2016). It is significant to recognize that the recent protests in South African higher education, which incorporate a critique of curricula and pedagogical approaches in South African universities, were historically preceded by the call in the late 1980s by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Henry Ousele-Anyamba, and Taban Lo Liyong at the University of Nairobi to decenter Western modernity and British literature, to prioritize African literature by abolishing inherited structures, and to place Kenya, East Africa, and Africa at the core of the curriculum in order to focus, first and foremost, on the situation of Kenyans and Africans (Giriba 2011; Ngugi 2011; Gates 2014: 20–13).

Refuting both a universalist defense of post-place constructions of knowledge and a continentalist defense of reductionistic notions of knowledge, I contemplate how Africa is situated in our discourse. My use of the word "situating" refers to a positioning that is physical and metaphorical, and draws from lived experiences guided by specific situations. Viewing all geographies as situational—that is, deeply embedded and simultaneously contingent, constitutive and process-based—I argue for a geopolitical approach that displaces the typically conservative and masculinist framework of geopolitics in international relations. Less chauvinistic, top-down forms of geopolitics might extend into areas such as critical geopolitics that draws on poststructuralist ideas of discourse and representation (Jones and Sage 2010), feminist geopolitics that includes a politics of social justice (Dowler and Sharp 2000), anti-geopolitics that registers challenge and resistance to state-centered