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Navigating Plural Coloniality: Reflections on the Making of Black Afro-Francophone Higher Education in an Anglo-American Academic World

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This article examines the emergence of Black African Francophone higher education and what it means to navigate it in the broader context of the enduring legacies of French colonialism in an Anglo-American-dominated global academe. Even as fallist movements have revived and recentred key debates and conversations about epistemic decolonisation in the academe globally since #RhodesMustFall, there has been a tendency to construe the (neo)colonial imperial legacies that continue to shape global academe as Anglo-American. As such, the plurality of European colonialisms and the ensuing varied colonialities of power, knowledge, epistemic injustice, and death in the form of epistemicide and otherwise in formerly colonised regions remain under-examined. Meanwhile, these diverse systems have emerged from varied European colonial histories and present academics navigating those systems in decolonial ways with varied neocolonial intellectual and material challenges. Using Ousmane Sembène's film adaptation of 'La Noire de. . .' (Black Girl) as a metaphor to examine the coloniality of death (neo)colonially in the academe in Black Francophone Africa and its diasporas, I propose the concept of *agentic death* to examine how death becomes a site of self-reclamation and emancipatory possibilities in the face of compounded (neo)colonialisms.

Cet article s'intéresse à l'émergence de l'enseignement supérieur francophone noir africain et à sa place dans le contexte plus large des héritages persistants du colonialisme français dans un monde universitaire dominé par les Anglo-américains. Même si les mouvements fallistes ont ranimé et recentré des débats et conversations essentiels à propos de la décolonisation épistémique dans le monde académique à l'échelle mondiale depuis #RhodesMustFall (Rhodes doit tomber), l'on a tendance à considérer les héritages impériaux (néo)coloniaux qui continuent de façonner le monde universitaire mondial comme anglo-américains. Aussi la pluralité des colonialismes européens et les diverses colonialités qui s'ensuivent concernant le pouvoir, les savoirs, l'injustice épistémique et la mort, entre autres sous la forme d'épistémicide, dans les régions autrefois colonisées restent-elles sous-étudiées. Cependant, ces divers systèmes procèdent de différentes histoires coloniales européennes et présentent des défis matériels et intellectuels néocoloniaux précis aux chercheur.e.s actuel.le.s travaillant dans une perspective décoloniale. Employant l'adaptation cinématographique d'Ousmane Sembène de ≪ La Noire de. . . ≫ comme métaphore pour examiner la colonialité de la mort dans le monde univer-

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sitaire de l'Afrique francophone noire et de ses diasporas, je propose le concept de mort agentique pour analyser la manière dont la mort dans des régimes épistemiques néocoloniaux en milieu académique devient le site d'une autorécupération et de possibilités d'émancipation face au cumul des (néo)colonialismes Euro-Americains.

Este artículo analiza el surgimiento de la educación superior francófona en el África negra, así como el significado que conlleva el hecho de estudiarla en el contexto más amplio de los legados perdurables del colonialismo francés dentro de un ámbito académico global dominado por angloamericanos. Incluso en un momento en que se han reactivado los movimientos ≪fallistas≫, con el consecuente reenfoque de debates y conversaciones clave sobre la descolonización epistémica en el ámbito académico a nivel mundial desde #RhodesMustFall (Rodas debe caer), existe una tendencia a interpretar los legados imperiales (neo)coloniales que siguen moldeando la academia global como angloamericanos. Como tal, la pluralidad de los colonialismos europeos y sus consiguientes colonialidades diversas del poder, el conocimiento, la injusticia epistémica y la muerte, tanto en forma de epistemicidio como de otras maneras en las regiones anteriormente colonizadas, siguen estando poco estudiadas. Mientras tanto, estos sistemas diversos han surgido de variadas historias coloniales europeas y hoy les presentan diversos desafíos intelectuales, así como materiales neocoloniales, a los académicos que estudian esos sistemas de manera descolonial. Utilizamos la adaptación cinematográfica de Ousmane Sembène de ≪La Noire de. . .≫ (La chica negra) como una metáfora que nos permite analizar la colonialidad de la muerte en el ámbito académico del África negra francófona y de sus diásporas y proponemos el concepto de muerte agentiva con el fin de analizar cómo la muerte se convierte en un lugar de autorrecuperación y de posibilidades emancipadoras frente a los (neo)colonialismos compuestos.

Introduction

Since the #RhodesMustFall protests at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in March 2015, fallist movements across South African universities and beyond have been pivotal in reinstating the imperative to address the unfinished task of epistemic decolonisation in global higher education (Ramaru 2017; Kwoba et al. 2018). They have galvanised longstanding demands for universities to address their complicity in the enduring coloniality of knowledge and epistemicide. This complicity has been exerted through the sustained suppression and negation of other forms of knowledge as valid and as authoritative. These fallist movements have also brought to the fore, once again, the unfinished business of political and economic decolonisation in the African region and in international politics and their implications for epistemic decolonisation (Kwoba et al. 2018). In doing so, they have helped recentre past important work and invited new interventions about the coloniality of knowledge and the violence and workings of death, not just physical but also, and in particular, in the form of epistemicide, linguicide, scholasticide and in the increasing precarity of conditions for academic work and intellectual practice in universities, across the global academe (e.g., Grosfoguel 2002; Quijano 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013; Nyamnjoh 2016).

Surprisingly, however, in over a decade since the #RhodesMustFall protests at UCT, and sister fallist movements elsewhere in the world, the scholarly (re)turn to critically reflecting on epistemic decolonisation and decoloniality in African public universities and systems of higher education has largely focused on Anglophone institutions. This has meant that insufficient attention has been paid to the specifics

of the coloniality of knowledge in other *Europhone*[1] systems of higher education in the African region and what death in the form of epistemicide and linguicide, for instance, has meant in the face of these specifics of coloniality interacting within the broader context of Anglo-American domination in the global academe (Kane 2012). In particular, what it means to navigate the coloniality of death in the academe resulting from overlapping, compounded Western colonialisms across various systems of higher education in Africa receives insufficient attention. This article examines the politics of the making of higher education in Black Francophone Africa[2] within the broader context of an Anglo-American-dominated global academe. It makes a case for paying greater attention to how Black Francophone African scholars mobilise their agency to deploy death generatively and productively, at the intersection of compounded colonial legacies and the coloniality of death.

I refer to the coloniality of death to describe conditions of death in the form of physical elimination, epistemicide, linguicide, and still other forms of death produced through European colonisation. Under such conditions, death itself is a site of struggle not just to remain alive, but also, and critically, to recover and deploy it productively and agentically as a practice of escape and emancipation. My conceptualisation of the coloniality of death builds on the existing literature on the coloniality of power and the coloniality of knowledge, as theorised in post/de-colonial scholarship (e.g., Thiam 1978; Plumelle-Uribe 2001; Traoré 2002; Quijano 2007; Mignolo and Escobar 2010; Ndlovu 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). The experience of violence at the hands of varied and compounded Western (neo)colonialisms, and the resulting epistemic injustice and epistemicides, have shared and specific implications for African academics dealing with various European colonial legacies (Hooks 1989; Fricker 2007; Nyamnjoh 2016). This reckoning and deployment of death towards productive ends through one's agency in the face of the coloniality of death through what I call *agentic death* helps account for how African scholars navigate compounded and overlapping European colonial legacies under these prevailing conditions of death in the global academe (Masaka 2017; Masaka 2018; Tshaka 2019). I propose *agentic death* as a process of self-extrication from epistemic and institutional structures beholden to and complicit in the entrenchment of neocolonialism.

Informed by the work of Orlando Patterson's and Neil Roberts' seminal works on social death and marronage, *agentic death* captures the ways that, while the implications of what the imposition of conditions of death under and through (neo)colonialism may not be reversible, emancipatory politics can and are pursued through a reclamation of agency and an agentic redefining of how death can be wielded to self-defined emancipatory ends (Patterson 1982; Roberts 2019). In his text *Social Death*, Orlando Patterson offers a powerful sociological discussion of slavery, writing that "[p]erhaps the most distinctive attribute of the slave's powerlessness was that it always originated (or was conceived of as having originated) as a substitute for death, usually violent death (. . .). Archetypically, slavery was a substitute for death in war (. . .). The condition of slavery did not absolve or erase the prospect of death (. . .). Because the slave had no socially recognized existence outside of his master, he became a social nonperson (. . .). This is achieved in a unique way in relation of slavery: the definition of the slave, however, recruited, as a socially dead person" (Patterson 1982, 5). Neil Roberts takes issue with the rigidity of Patterson's approach to thinking about social death, arguing that the agency of enslaved persons, especially in the case of Black peoples who developed entire canons of thought around flight in the form of physical and epistemic marronage and emancipation, ends up being unfairly minimised if at all acknowledged (e.g., Lorde 2004; Patel 2016; Bledsoe 2018;

[1] I deploy Ousmane Kane's terms *Europhone* explored in his book Non-*Europhone* Intellectuals (Kane 2012) to refer to higher education systems in Africa arising from European colonialisms and patterned after European universities and higher education systems.

[2] By Black Francophone Africa, I refer to those African countries formerly part of colonial French West Africa and French Central Africa. These countries still use French as their official language.

Davis 2020; Kiguwa 2021). My intervention does not view these two powerful contributions as mutually exclusive or antithetical to each other. Instead, it works with both together as needed complementary lenses through which to appreciate the complexities of life and death that ex-enslaved and ex-colonised Black (Africans) populations have faced and for which they have generated resistance and emancipatory epistemic tools and practices under both slavery and colonialism (see for example Kaepernick et al. 2023).

These particular dynamics need to be put in conversation with initiatives towards epistemic decolonisation in universities founded as part or as an extension of British colonialism. These challenges, while broadly shared, are also informed and inflected by more particular European colonial legacies that need to be navigated depending on whether the colonising European powers were French, Belgian, Portuguese, German, Italian or Spanish. The ways that African scholars and intellectuals continue to face these specific and shared challenges in the production and circulation of knowledge are a function of the workings of plural, overlapping coloniality. Despite the significance of Francophone Africa as the largest Francophone space globally and the particularities of its higher education systems and academic career development, the academe in these African Francophone regions and their diaspora receive limited attention (e.g., Nubukpo 2010; 2014; Dodman 2019; Taylor 2019; Mianda 2022). Further still, the ways that compounded coloniality of death is negotiated through the possibility of an agentic wielding of death in academic spaces for flight or marronage, and towards generative possibilities, deserve further examination.

To do this, the article proceeds with a discussion of *agentic death* and Ousmane Sembène's "La Noire de. . ." as an apt metaphor to understand the conditions of death that enduringly shape (neo)colonial conditions of existence and of work and of being, in the so-called post-independence era in Black Francophone Africa. I then examine the prevailing conditions of death in the global academe and contextualise what Afro-Francophones experience. In the interstices of these interactions, these African intellectuals craft possibilities and ways out that may not always be intuitive yet are powerfully generative. This paper serves as an invitation for further work on the intersectionality of scholarly positioning and output, as well as the implications for knowledge production, and a focused discussion of how Afro-Francophone scholars navigate *agentic death* in the face of a form of double coloniality—French and Anglo-American.

Agentic Death Through Ousmane Sembène's "La Noire de. . ."

In the context of compounded coloniality, French and Anglo-American, and in the face of colonially imposed and neocolonially sustained conditions of what I have called the coloniality of death in the global academe, Black Francophone scholars mobilise death agentically to productive, emancipatory ends. Sembène's film offers a compelling lens to examine what (Black) Afro-Francophone scholars negotiate in their academic careers. Reckoning with the specificities of European colonialisms, their implications for the trajectory of African universities and systems of higher education, as well as for the careers and academic output of African scholars on the continent and in the diaspora, is crucial for a more nuanced conversation about what epistemic decolonisation entails and how it is pursued. In the face of the threat of erasure and epistemicide, *agentic death* is revealing of the sorts of possibilities that Black Afro-Francophone scholars craft and explore to navigate the plural coloniality they face in the academe. This is namely navigating Francophone African higher education in the context of an Anglo-American-dominated global academe. Furthermore, thinking through both the imposition of death (neo)colonially and the agentic mobilisation of death can help broaden the study of how decoloniality is attempted and sustained through contextually subversive practices.

Through "La Noire de. . ."Sembène offers insights into what it might have meant to navigate imposed conditions of death as well as what I call *agentic death* in the post-independence context. His exploration helps make sense of what happened in these newly officially independent Black Francophone states (Langford 2001). Set in officially independent Senegal and the neo-colonial metropole, France, "La Noire de. . ." explores Diouana's quest for work in post-independence Senegal, which she eventually finds as an au pair in a White French immigrant family in Dakar, Senegal. This White French family eventually moves back to France, taking Diouana with them to look after their children. While she is excited about going to France in the first instance, she quickly discovers the sort of social death that prospects of employment and social mobility entailed for young Senegalese women like herself in supposedly independent Senegal and the supposedly attractive former colonial metropole, France. In the film and through Diouana's story, Sembène explores the enduring colonial structural constraints on being, living, and aspiring to some sort of social mobility in officially independent Black Francophone Africa, and in the diaspora, as a Black African woman. Through the film, Sembène explores Diouana's experiences within the exploitative system she is subjected to in Senegal and even more so when she moves with the White French family she works for to France. This is one hellbent on exploiting, disrespecting, and, in effect, subjecting her to the coloniality of death in the post-independence era. Realising that she is trapped, unable to leave the house she works at in France, and unable to return home or even get in touch with her family in Senegal, she sets her things in order, packs her bag and takes her own life in a final and assertive exercise of agency, a flight (or marronage) from oppressive conditions, and preservation of her dignity.

Diouana's navigation of death reveals both the violence and limitations under neocolonial conditions in what is supposed to be post-independence Black Francophone Africa, and in the neocolonial metropole, France. In the film, Sembène explores the possibilities, albeit constrained, for exercising agency in the face of the coloniality of death, creating emancipatory possibilities through an agentic deployment of death. Sembène ends the story with a poem about the violence of death: Diouana's life and death are an extended metaphor for being and living under the neo-colonial conditions of the post-independence era. In the short story ("La Noire de. . ."), which Sembène had written before producing the film by the same name, he wrote the following poetic verses:

> Tu meurs de l'implantation
> Tels les cocotiers et les bananiers
> Meublant les rives d'Antibes
> Ces arbres implantés et stériles
> (Sembène 1961)
>
> You die from implantation
> As the coconut and banana trees
> Lining the shores of Antibes
> These implanted and sterile trees
> (English translation by this author)

In the face of the imposed forceful social death brought about by the working and living conditions she is forced to exist in, Diouana's suicide is a final act of protest and a refusal to be forced to die, unable to be and become what she had imagined when she moved to the neocolonial metropole. Sembène's poetic imagery construes death as tied to a sort of implantation that saps creative potential and self-actualisation. To live under such conditions is, effectively to die. In the face of such oppressive conditions, Diouana deploys her agency to mobilise death differently to the way that death is being wielded against her, not only as a form of escape or marronage but also, and importantly, as a protest and reclamation of her dignity. By choosing flight

or marronage by means of suicide, as she does, Diouana uses her agency to mobilise death in generative ways. The possibility of a generative, agentic mobilisation of death is perhaps most strikingly conveyed by this sense of haunting that is present, enduringly potent, and yet also at risk of being transient, in the wake of Diouana's death (in the film). She maroons, and her death haunts.

This haunting, as evidence of a potent afterlife to her suicide, is depicted throughout the film by an ever-present mask that Diouana acquires and takes with her to France, which is returned by her boss along with her other belongings. As her former boss drops her items off and leaves Diouana's family's neighbourhood, a child picks up and wears the mask and follows Diouana's boss as he nervously hurries away, unsure of what to make of the child following him with the mask. In a final scene wherein a French newspaper downplays and exoticises Diouana's suicide, Sembène reminds his audience of the enduring prevalence of the coloniality of death and the enduring trivialisation of Black lives and deaths. This haunting endures through the film itself which Vlad Dima explains as having been based on a real woman called Diouana Gomis whose story Ousmane Sembène had read about in the French newspaper *Nice-Matin* (Dima 2025, 7).

Thus, Sembène powerfully captures both what enduring colonial structures foreclose and what radical emancipatory politics might just be possible through *agentic death*. Through this depiction, he offers a valuable lens to appreciate what Afro-Francophones might pursue and render possible for emancipation, as well as what the mobilisation of death in generative ways might be at risk of. Sembène explores the possibility of the coloniality of death existing in tension with *agentic death* and how productive the latter is. It is in this sense that Patterson's and Roberts' reflections on social death and marronage are complementary; while the coloniality of death endures, the power to reclaim and deploy death agentically to emancipatory and productive ends is made possible. In life—under prevailing conditions of neocolonial violence—and in death, Diouana defiantly exercises her agency, upholding and asserting her dignity. This assertion has an afterlife through a haunting whose potency persists, politically productive and defiant. Sembène's film is a powerful metaphor for what it means to live in post-independence Senegal and also more generally in Black Francophone Africa and its diasporas. It reveals how navigating life, work, and life aspirations entails navigating the coloniality of death, whereby conditions of death, whether physical, social, linguistic or epistemic, have been (and continue to be) imposed (neo)colonially (e.g., Wa Thiong'o 1986; Ravishankar 2020; Murrey and Daley 2023). To address the coloniality of death through *agentic death* is to render death potent through a radical redeployment toward generative emancipatory ends in the form of marronage and as haunting.

As such, the film is helpful for thinking about academia in the neocolonial post-independence Black African Francophone academic space, in the region and in the diaspora. The film helps to think about how death, while not inherently emancipatory, can be and is agentically redeployed in radical ways by African scholars and intellectuals to emancipatory ends. Sembène also helps us to think about the spaces and interstices of compounded coloniality, where such emancipatory and epistemically radical practices might be crafted and pursued. Diouana's relationship to the French language, for instance, which she understands but does not express herself in throughout the film, is revelatory of what it means to negotiate linguicide and its resulting alienation from one's language in one's own country, even at official independence, particularly in one's quest for work (Oliver-Powell 2021).

Black Muslim French Americanist Maboula Soumahoro's book *Black is the Journey Africana the Name* is poignantly revealing of these linguistic tensions and how she navigates *agentic death* vis-à-vis the implications of linguicide and epistemicide through her own experience (Soumahoro 2022; 2020). In her book, Soumahoro discusses her experience as a Black Afro-French Muslim woman academic with Ivorian

heritage in France: negotiating her political belonging in France, her alienation from her mother's tongue, leaving her with French, and how she came to find a visceral intellectual belonging in Harlem, New York, mediated by English. It was this radical Black intellectual tradition that powerfully emboldened her as a Black intellectual in a way that she, a Black Afro-French woman in France had never quite had a chance to be. Dealing with the linguicide which she writes about, saying "[le]Français est ma langue maternelle sans pourtant être celle de ma mère"[3] (Soumahoro 2020, 33), she finds, through English, a connection to a rich and sustained intellectual tradition that enables her to find community in making sense of and dealing with this imposed death, whilst also distancing herself from this language by saying "French, then, is not my mother tongue" (Soumahoro 2022, 7). English is less burdensome in some ways for Soumahoro, who indicates that "The English language does not belong to me, it owes me nothing, and I owe it nothing in return" (Soumahoro 2022, 7). Soumahoro's intervention echoes Sembène's illustration of such tensions through Diouana's story, in that it evidences *agentic death* by revealing how her intellectual journey and academic becoming, through circulating in English and radical non-French intellectual spaces, are deployed to open possibilities for decolonial practice for her, given where and how she is situated.

Soumahoro's reflections are very much marked by this tension between the coloniality of death that she navigates as a Black Muslim Afro-French woman scholar in the French academe and the *agentic death* that can enable her to operate in English thereby accessing and making Black intellectual communities through the historic hauntings that continue to shape the radical Black tradition in Africa, the Americas, the Caribbean and beyond. Her reflections also convey the very real and enduring coloniality of death, which alienates her from her mother's tongue, Dioula, and intellectual production in this language. Soumahoro's exploration of these intellectual tensions and possibilities dovetail with Lionel Zevounou's reflections about his intellectual and academic journey beginning in Benin Republic, which was marked by a history of foreclosure of epistemic alternatives in Black Francophone Africa not long after official independence, and the possibility of radical renewal through scholarly output on Critical Race Theory, which has been produced largely in English (Zevounou 2022). Zevounou examined the tensions needing to be addressed as well as how he came to apprehend them and make sense of what it means to navigate coloniality in Afro-Francophone academia in the African region and as a Black Afro-French scholar in France. As part of this reckoning, and together with a few colleagues, he co-established *Marronnages,* a French-language academic journal concerned with examining what it might mean to engage critically with the conditions of the academe for non-White, particularly Black French and Francophone scholars (Hajjat and Moschel 2022; Johnson et al. 2024). What both Soumahoro's and Zevounou's interventions illustrate is how reaching for a different language becomes a space of flight or marronage not because English would be inherently emancipatory nor because it restores one's access to one's ancestral language, but because their wielding of it becomes a means to accessing Black radical intellectual traditions. *Agentic death* in this case is manifest amidst linguicide and epistemicide towards emancipatory ends and decolonial intellectual engagement. This potential and power reside not in the language, namely English, and its colonial hegemony, but in its agentic deployment by Black Afro-Francophone scholars situated in the ways described amidst linguicide and epistemicide.

[3] French is my mother tongue without being my mother's tongue

Situating Black Francophone Higher Education in Africa

As already indicated, the European colonial projects, while similar in their investment in conquest, subjugation and exploitation, went about their colonial business in slightly different ways and with varied epistemic implications. The histories and trajectories of public universities in Africa offer valuable insights into these varied European colonial legacies and their implications for higher education in the region. Further still, colonial links between higher education in Great Britain and colonially founded universities in (now) former British colonies, often the first (Anglophone) ones, have come under scrutiny. In this vein, Adam Branch for instance has shown the ways that African Studies Centres and Western academics in the UK, particularly at Cambridge but also elsewhere, played a prominent role in the colonial project and in knowledge production about Africa colonially and post-independence not least through the founding and building of centres of African Studies and of (often the first national) public universities (Branch 2018). Furthermore, fallist movements have helped recentre critical conversations about the colonial origins and subservience of entire disciplines to the colonial enterprise (e.g., Mafeje 1971; Asad 1991, Asad 1991; Grovogui 1996; 2001; Moshirzadeh 2009; 2011; Trouillot 2015; 2006; Park 2017; Rutazibwa and Shilliam 2018; Pailey 2020; Shilliam 2021). However, as already indicated in this paper, even as the return to examining colonial production in and through the academe and its legacies occurs, much of this very important work continues to happen largely in English and with a significant focus on Anglo-American institutions.

If establishing universities was a critical part of British colonialism, the comparatively limited and even non-existent establishment of universities in French, Belgian, Portuguese, Spanish, German and Italian colonial Africa was part and parcel of their colonial projects. While universities such as the University of Ibadan, the University of Ghana at Legon, and the Makerere University, for instance, were established as universities in the 1930s and 1940s by British academics, Black Francophone Africa saw the establishment of all its first national universities, except for the University of Dakar, after official independence in the 1960s and 1970s. Even in French North Africa, where France did establish a university in its former settler colony Algeria, the situation was similarly grim. In Algeria, the first steps towards the establishment of the first *Europhone* national university included the creation of a Military Medical School in 1833 to accompany colonial military conquests, and, in 1857, Algeria's first Medical School and first institution of higher education. Establishing this first Medical School paved the way for subsequent schools founded upon the French university model and aimed at serving the French colonial enterprise (Singaravélou 2009). As Aïssa Kadri explains, "this university [of Algiers] built at the end of the 19th century is not concerned with the autochthones. . . [this university] helps give the colonial ideology shape (. . .) [and] relegates the autochthones to special certifications for the natives so to segregate them and force them into exile first in the metropole and subsequently in other countries" (Mélia 1950; Kadri 2007). It was only after World War 2 that the number of indigenous Algerian students began to rise in the metropole and in Algeria. However, even as these changes began to occur, disparities remained stark. Kadri reports that in 1953–1954, while one European out of every 227 Europeans was a student, only one out of every 15,341 Muslim Algerians was one (Kadri 2007).

The case of Algeria, while disturbing, contrasted starkly with colonial Black French Africa, namely *Afrique Occidentale Française* (AOF) and *Afrique Equatoriale Française* (AEF), where no universities, barring the University of Dakar, were established until after independence. Instead, the colonial school *William Ponty* was established in 1903 in Senegal to train Black African (subaltern) colonial administrators. Several Black African Francophone leaders who were the very first Black African representatives of the colonies in the French Union parliament under the

French Fourth Republic, and who had in some cases served as ministers in the French government (in the French Community under the French Fifth Republic), became the first presidents at independence. This was true of Sékou Touré, Modibo Kéïta, Leopold Senghor, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, Lamine Senghor, and Tiémoko Garan Kouyaté, to name but a few of those who would go on to become key political and intellectual leaders. Lamine Senghor and Tiémoko Kouyaté for instance, founded the *Ligue de Défense de la Race Nègre* as members of the French Communist Party (Dieng 2011). Meanwhile, the other four men mentioned would go on to become the first presidents of their countries upon official independence. Alongside *William Ponty*, the French colonial administration also established the *École Normale de Rufisque* in 1933 to train women teachers and, in the process, to produce wives for those Black African men graduates of *William Ponty* (Barthélémy 2003; Blum 2012). Both the *École Normale de Rufisque* and William Ponty were fashioned after the *École Normale* in France, and as elite colonial institutions for the training of African (colonial) administrators and teachers. Upon completing their studies at these institutions, some of those students went off to the *École Normale de Médecine* in Dakar, which trained medical doctors, pharmacists or veterinarians. African women students, such as Aoua Kéïta, who were trained as wet nurses, went to the colonial school in Bamako, in what was then French Sudan. Those who pursued university degrees would go to France to study. This was true of Jacqueline Coulibaly[4], for instance, who was a Malian activist who went to the Sorbonne in Paris after completing her studies at the *École Normale* in Sénégal.

This colonial governance of higher education under French colonialism meant that the models for higher education to which the first leaders had been exposed and were most conversant with were the French institutions of higher education, namely the *Grandes Écoles* and universities. This would have a bearing on the way higher education was forged in these former French colonies after independence. Furthermore, anti-colonial struggles in these Francophone states had to reckon with the brutal violence of colonial rule as well as the particular colonial structures through which Black Francophone leaders and their peoples existed as French colonial subjects and, subsequently, second-class citizens. For these leaders and their collaborators, anti-colonial resistance as a political and intellectual project was convened in a variety of spaces, notably, the French National Assembly (especially in the French Union under the Fourth Republic), and transnationally on the continent as evidenced by the establishment of the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain*[5] (RDA) (Suret-Canale 1994; Kouadio 2025). However, if Black Francophones did form radical anti-colonial solidarities and movements at universities in the metropole, the founding of national universities in newly independent Francophone African states did not proceed, for the most part, from these anti-colonial intellectual currents.

To be sure, the 1930s, the 1940s, and the 1950s were important for academic production in Black Francophone intellectual and student spaces, particularly in West Africa and in the diaspora in France. There was a concern for sustaining an Afrocentric intellectual life amongst African students in the diaspora and ensuring that the political priorities around liberation and emancipation for colonised peoples, especially Black African peoples, would remain at the forefront of political organising and mobilising among students in the diaspora who were studying for the most part in the colonial Metropole, France. To this end, outlets such as *L'Étudiant Noir*, *La Revue du Monde Noir* and others became pivotal intellectual outlets and interventions. The founding of *Présence Africaine* in 1947 was an unambiguously modernist project seeking not only to be in conversation with Black African youths but also committed to integrating them within Western civilisation. However, even though this was the outlook as expressed by its key founder Alioune Diop, it was a broad

[4]Jacqueline Coulibaly became Joseph Ki-Zerbo's wife

[5]The Democratic African Rally was founded in 1946 at the Bamako Congress

project operating in French but publishing a wide range of texts and material and foregrounding translation work from Arabic to French (Diop 1947). The objective in Alioune Diop's vision was primarily to inform young Africans about humanism in Europe. He spoke of an intellectual mental *métissage* that prompted the establishment of the journal, coupled with a desire to provide intellectual material for the youth on the continent which Diop described as "lacking intellectual nourishment" (Diop 1947, 8; this author's translation from the original in French). While he had been instrumental in the founding of *Présence Africaine*, Diop's position on the politics of cultural production towards intellectual emancipation was often only mildly radical. Despite this, his editorial practice made the journal and publishing house a pivotal convening space for Black intellectuals. For instance, it was *Présence Africaine* that published Cheikh Anta Diop's seminal text *Nations Nègres et Culture* (Diop 1979).

Outlets such as *Présence Africaine* highlighted how production occurred within and beyond academic spaces, in line with the acute and widespread awareness of the types of work emancipation necessitated and the multiplicity of fronts and approaches required to tackle French and other European colonialism, as well as anti-Black (epistemic) racism. Needing to make decisions about how to engage intellectually and academically in the face of impending erasure has been part and parcel of how to reckon with past and continued epistemicide. It has forced intellectuals to think about how to negotiate continued engagement in academic knowledge production and in the global academe. While intellectual production was never limited to Europhone universities, which under British colonialism were established as part and parcel of the colonial enterprise, they did play an important role in Pan-Africanist anti-colonial struggles. In Black Francophone Africa, the development of universities in Black Francophone Africa has been a site of contestation where anti-colonial struggles have been committed to imagining and delivering alternatives for learning and training Black Africans in a Black internationalist perspective (Blum 2017a). However, reactionary colonial and neocolonial forces sought to subdue decolonial efforts, ensure control and eviscerate more radical intellectual projects. These particular histories of resistance and colonial legacies exist alongside and are compounded by Anglo-American domination in ways that both erect a compounded coloniality to be navigated, as well as opportunities to decide how to exist academically in order to be able to do one's intellectual work.

As the foregoing section shows, higher education in Black Francophone Africa has been subjected to (neo)colonial structures inherited from French colonialism from its inception. Even though many of the national universities in this subregion were established after independence, they were modelled after the French system, staffed largely by French academics in their early years, and not always supportive of radical anti-colonial and decolonial politics. Thus, some of the more radical African intellectuals who had forged solidarities with their African peers during their studies in France found that the French state did not just enact repression against anti-colonial resistance but also, especially in the Fifth French Republic, outsourced this repression to supposedly independent Black African Francophone states. Official independence brought political changes and, importantly, a more covert operation of coloniality in so-called independent states. Across Black French African colonies, the University of Dakar was the only university founded before independence. Historian and former Ivorian president Laurent Gbagbo wrote that the founding of Côte d'Ivoire's first national university, the *Université de Cocody*, was a ploy to control radicalisation and prevent returning Ivorian students from challenging the neocolonial establishment (Gbagbo 1983). Student and academic staff protests in Senegal in the 1960s against Senghor's approach to governing higher education in the country are emblematic of the reactionary politics that shaped the early days of higher education upon the attainment of official independence in Black Francophone Africa. Writing about these dynamics in higher education in Black Francophone Africa, Françoise Blum writes that

> imperialism for university studies from West Africa has a face, and that face is a French one (…). [F]or French university students as for the rest of European students, American imperialism is the archetypal figure of all imperialisms. Anti-imperialism which is the heir of anticolonialism during the time of the war of Algeria, has replaced it through opposition to the Vietnam war rekindling opposition against the wars of Indochina and Algeria. But this imperialism, with the possible exception of the two losers of the Second World War, which have American bases on their soil, remains rather abstract. In French-speaking Africa, on the other hand, imperialism is French and has a very real presence. (Blum 2012, 156; this author's translation from the original in French)

Unlike Algeria where a violent war paved the way for independence, the onset of official independence in Black Francophone Africa was a carefully curated enterprise, in several instances imposed after violent repression, that ensured very little would change structurally in ways that would unsettle French interests in the Francophone sub-regions. Active French repression of independence movements from the late 1940s to the late 1950s ensured that all anti-colonial political leaders had been assassinated physically or politically (through a deradicalisation or the wholesale shutting down of radical projects) at the point of independence (Béti 2009; Murrey and Daley 2023). In addition to this, independence broke up Black Francophone Africa, creating individual governments to stall political processes that would challenge neocolonial politics and sustained a bi-regional economic situation through the two CFA currencies that continue to tether most of Black Francophone African states to France. It was in this context that Black African student political organising in France was stalled and eventually disbanded. In the former colonies, state leaders worked on the establishment of national universities that focused on technocratic training and undermined radical politics. As Françoise Blum explained:

> In Africa, the active propaganda carried out by FEANF, in the form of courses, conferences, etc., became more difficult after independence. The new [Francophone African] states were stricter than the colonial authorities. The popular university founded by the UGEAO (Union générale des étudiants d'Afrique de l'Ouest), the General Union of West African Students, in September 1956 continued in Senegal, but it became impossible to hold more political conferences, except in very exceptional cases, such as in the socialist Congo. Similarly, the circulation of the journal *L'Étudiant d'Afrique Noire* was restricted. There are no data about the journal's production and circulation after 1960. Between recurring financial difficulties and censorship, it is quite possible that distribution ceased or was, in any case, severely limited. (Blum 2016, 115; this author's translation from the original in French)

Colonial violence not only first imposed a monolingual school system that was to shape the education trajectories and outcomes of the first Black African Francophone (and at the time, French) cadres who were expected to subsequently work for the colonial administration. It also violently opposed attempts at devising academic alternatives, even colonial ones. For instance, only a year after being adopted in 1948, a motion of the National Assembly of the Fourth French Republic to establish two universities in colonial Black French Africa and one in the so-called associated states, was debated anew in parliament on 8th July 1949 (Territoires Associés Création d'une Université Africaine 1949). This sort of colonial resistance was further evidenced in the active sabotage of resolutions such as the one for the establishment of Centres of Local Culture in Overseas Territories (*Centres de Culture Locale*) proposed on 1st July 1949 by three parliamentarians, supported by progressive Black African parliamentarians like Gabriel d'Arboussier which was defeated with 112 against only 35 in favour (Centres de Culture Locale dans les Pays d'Outre-mer 1949).

In the face of such resistance, (in parliament) in the colonial metropole as well as on the ground across colonial Black French West and Central Africa, the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (African, Democratic Rally known as the RDA) served

as an essential backbone for radical anti- and de-colonial intellectual work amongst students, even as it faced severe repression and was significantly undermined. The workings of epistemicide cannot be taken for granted. When the anti-colonialists in parliament campaigned for the establishment of the University of Dakar in the first instance in 1948, they were operating within colonial structures and crucially deploying these towards epistemically radical and decolonial ends. However, this approach would still encounter hurdles after official independence. Thus, even as French colonial structures were opposed to the establishment of universities demanded by anti-colonial resistance during its colonial rule, the subsequent establishment of universities post-independence was not necessarily inscribed within a decolonial or anti-colonial perspective.

Navigating Plural Coloniality in Black Francophone African Higher Education After Official Independence

Official independence in Francophone Africa, which spawned neocolonial political and economic conditions captured by the concept of *Françafrique*, was delivered amidst difficult conditions for those Black African Francophone students who were politically active and anti-(neo)colonial, studying in France at the time (Amondji 1984; Verschave 2000; Anoma 2023). These conditions that radical students were subjected to would worsen, culminating in an official decree disbanding of the *Fédération des Étudiants d'Afrique Noire en France*[6] FEANF (Federation of Black African Students in France) under French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in 1980 (Blum 2016, 2017b; "Personal Communication with a former FEANF president," 28 July 2025). Founded in 1950, the anti-colonial student movement FEANF was first presided over by Dahomean woman and medical student, Solange Foladé. The student organisation was birthed out of a commitment to revolutionary decolonial politics. The French communist party worked closely with the FEANF, which organised Black African Francophone students studying in France and challenged politics in France in relation to its colonial politics in Africa, especially in Algeria, but also beyond. It also worked closely with the RDA and was targeted by the French state.

Alongside the growing repression of university students in the neocolonial metropole, newly officially independent Black Francophone states began to create national universities for the first time outside of Senegal. As illustrated in Sembène's film, even as official independence was being rolled out, the terms of neocolonial repression were in the works, jeopardising the physical and intellectual lives of radical and anti/de-colonial Black Francophone African university students in France and in Africa. As national public universities began to emerge in Black Francophone Africa, an organisation federating higher education in the space was established, which contributed to making it possible for states to repress and undermine anti-(neo)colonial and anti-imperial resistance. The *Conseil Africain et Malgache pour l'Enseignement Supérieur*[7] (CAMES) was founded in 1968 (Cissé 2018). It is a regulatory body which links together and coordinates higher education across member states. It oversees academic progression from *agrégation* (roughly equivalent to tenure) to becoming *maître de conférences* (roughly equivalent of associate professor) and then *professeur titulaire de chaire* (full professor). Furthermore, it is the organisation in charge of accrediting (private) universities. Headquartered in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, the organisation also provides oversight to governments, particularly the presidents of member states and the ministries of higher education and research. The institution has 19 member states, of which former colonies in Black French Africa and Madagascar were foundational members in 1968, along-

[6] Federation of Black African Students in France
[7] African and Malagasy Council for Higher Education

side Rwanda and Burundi. Guinea-Bissau, Equatorial Guinea, and the Democratic Republic of Congo joined in 2005, 2010 and 2011, respectively (ibid.). While the CAMES provides a powerful and valuable platform for institutional collaboration and eases the movement of academics across the academic spaces it regulates, the Council is also beholden to neocolonial forces, which have shaped it since its inception. The organisation's structure gives the Executive across African states significant levels of power over it, making it difficult for the CAMES to operate as independently as it could as an academic council across its member states. Repression against radical intellectual life was essential in organisation's founding moments. While the first general secretary was supposed to have been an Ivorian academic, the then Ivorian president, Houphouët-Boigny, stalled the process out of concern for this academic's alleged communist leanings. Given the historical ties between the communist party in France and anti-colonial organisations in Francophone Africa, the excuse was code for anti-colonial. This Ivorian radical academic having been sidelined, Burkina Faso was given the role to provide a secretary general. Thus, the organisation's first general secretary became Joseph Ki-Zerbo. From the outset, Ki-Zerbo expressed concerns about universities in Madagascar and Black Francophone Africa crafting their own agenda and not just reproducing French Higher Education. Since then, the extent to which higher education in the region has been able to chart its own path has been limited. This was despite the fact that the year of the founding of CAMES was significant for radical politics on university campuses around the world. In the African region, demands to Africanise academic staff became louder than ever before. In Senegal, demonstrations to this end made 1968 memorable as an important turning point in higher education in the country, in the Francophone zones and the wider region (e.g., Monaville 2022; Blum 2017). It is remarkable that even as demands were echoed across the region for the Africanisation of the public service at the same time, this came to mainly mean replacing French *coopérants* with African civil servants, which, while important, did not get to the root of the need to address neocolonialism.

The founding of the CAMES as an overarching transnational organisation beholden to states led by presidents that were (and in several cases still are) themselves beholden to French neocolonialism, reflected broader neocolonial and anti-decolonial politics that emerged, enabled through a sort of "neocolonial independence", in the words of Yves Benot (1969), or a "Foccart-Houphouët [set of] terms of independence", in the words of Marcel Amondji (Anoma 2023), thrust upon Black Francophone Africa. The violent disbanding of the FEANF in the post-independence era was part of a broader process of eradicating radical politics among intellectuals and university students in the former colonial metropole and in Black Francophone Africa. In this context, flight or marronage meant, in many instances, insurgent intellectual practice in exile or on the margins of national contexts, as was the case with Mongo Béti, Marcel Amondji, Bernard Dadié, to name but a few such intellectuals. Furthermore, the CAMES became an institution through which the executive across Francophone states could monitor the radicalisation of higher education in Francophone Africa and curb it. Early on, and under such conditions, the incarceration and violent repression against Ivorian academic and linguist and then-important opposition pioneer in Côte d'Ivoire, Simone Gbagbo, under Houphouët's single party, was possible (e.g., Amondji 1984).

In many ways, post-independence, the means of violent repression against radical intellectuals and academics in Black Francophone Africa and in the diaspora became a joint enterprise between some single-party states in Africa and the neocolonial metropole in France. The ties between higher education in Black Francophone Africa and the neocolonial metropole, France, endure through the sustained institutional ties that continue to bind national African universities and French higher education. The tethering to French institutions endures not only through France's continued popularity as a choice destination for Francophone African students. The

ties between CAMES universities and French higher education also persist through the sorts of degrees awarded and reforms to the system. For instance, CAMES institutions adopted the LMD system. It is a system that retains elements of the older French higher education pathway (which was practised across Black Francophone Africa) and has hybridised it with elements from Anglo-American systems of higher education. In this way, it collapses the academic journey from the equivalent of a Bachelor's Degree, *la Licence*, to the PhD, *le Doctorat*[8]. The introduction of the LMD followed reforms in France through the so-called "Bologna Process" of the European Union, which was largely influenced by Anglo-American dominance in global higher education.

There is surprisingly little published work on the CAMES despite its significance in higher education in most of West and Central Africa. Ivorian historian Chikouna Cissé produced the first comprehensive history of the CAMES, providing important insights into the organisation's trajectory (Cissé 2018). While it is a very important and powerful regulatory organisation in Black Francophone African higher education and is thus known among academics in Black Francophone Africa, the CAMES does not seem particularly legible to African academics elsewhere in the region, especially (though not only for) colleagues in African English-language universities. The limited knowledge on this institution persists despite its transnational scope and relevance for higher education in over a third of African states. As a result, besides the demands for Africanising universities in Africa post-independence since the 1960s, where Black Francophone African countries like Senegal would feature prominently, much of the ongoing conversations about decolonising universities in Africa tend to focus on (Europhone[9]) universities founded as affiliates of the University of London or by British scholars from other elite British universities.

There have been attempts in the region to bridge the divides. One such initiative has been through CODESRIA. However, these deeper challenges and their implications have led CODESRIA to become better known in English-language academic circles than in Francophone ones. Writing about CODESRIA[10], Zevounou has underscored how little-known the organisation is in academic circles across Black Francophone Africa, despite being based in Dakar (Zevounou 2020). Despite the organisation's objective to foster collaboration across the various regions of Africa colonised by different European powers, the barriers persist. These enduring barriers are not so much a consequence of linguistic differences resulting from the very limited knowledge of higher education systems across Africa, of their (neo)colonial histories, and of how they are positioned under prevailing Anglo-American domination in global higher education. European domination generated colonial states and colonial legacies that were very similar across the board, yet also with particularities tied to specific European colonialisms that continue to influence and shape politics, universities, and national higher education systems across Africa (e.g., Zevounou 2022).

Within the CAMES system, academics must navigate national and regional academic hierarchies in French, and if they wish to expand their set of academic interlocutors beyond the Francophone world, they must be aware of the structures, publishing practices, and academic cultures that prevail in an Anglo-American-dominated global higher education system. While a transformed and decolonial CAMES could offer an alternative organisational structure for higher education in Africa, it is currently beholden to neocolonial structures that are likely to continue to bring it into the fold of Franco-Anglo-American compounded domination. Mean-

[8] Previously, upon completing one's school leaving certificate (le *baccalauréat*), the cycle started with *la licence*, followed by *la maîtrise*, *le DEA-DESS*, *le doctorat de 3ème cycle* and *le doctorat d'État*.

[9] I use the term *Europhone* as coined by Ousmane Kane to mark the difference between European-language speaking African academics and Arabic-speaking traditions of thought and academics in Africa

[10] CODESRIA is the Council for Development of Social Science Research in Africa. It is a Pan-Africanist non-governmental academic research organisation that was founded in 1973 and is headquartered in Dakar, Senegal

while, there is an opportunity for emancipatory epistemic politics in and through this institution. Whether these politics might be pursued will, in part, depend on the extent to which this organisation and its member institutions engage with past and current Black (African) radical intellectual traditions and movements, as well as the transformative debates they have generated. One way forward would be through sustained critical engagement with the conditions and histories that shape what epistemic decolonisation might mean, and what the coloniality of death entails in various parts of the African academe.

"Publish or Perish": Conditions of Death in Global Higher Education

The overview of higher education in Black Francophone Africa provided in the foregoing sections, which illustrates how academics in these regions and their diaspora negotiate (compounded) coloniality in and beyond these regions, is seldom fully accounted for in discussions and debates about higher education in Africa and globally. Generally, Africa remains under-represented in global academic publishing. As Amina Mama, Paul Zeleza and others have shown, African intellectuals and academics across the continent generally continue to be under-cited in scholarly production about Africa (e.g., Wa Thiong'o 1986; Mudimbe 1989; Mkandawire 2005; Olukoshi 2006; Mama 2007; Zeleza 2009, 2019). This is especially important as citational and academic publishing infrastructures shape global academic knowledge production and Africa's place within it (Mills 2022; Asubiaro et al. 2024; 2024).

But even as this is the case for the region at large, production from Black Francophone Africa (and from Lusophone and Hispanophone Africa) tends to remain even more marginal. As such, for instance, the pioneering work of Black Francophone African women feminists, such as Aoua Kéïta and Awa Thiam's *La Parole aux Négresses,* is not sufficiently engaged alongside the important work of English-language Black (intersectional) feminist scholars (Thiam 1978; Mianda 1997; Kéita 2014). This is despite the powerful work that scholars like Fatou Sow, Amina Mama and Ayesha M. Imam have done by convening African feminist intellectual spaces at the CODESRIA and through their scholarship (Sow 2012). Consequently, the radical subversive emancipatory politics pursued in the face of the coloniality of death at institutions like the CODESRIA or within higher education regulated by CAMES end up under-examined. The work that Sow, Mama, and Imam have done has not only been consequential for Black African feminism but also significant for the fortification of African feminist intellectual traditions across various African systems of higher education, where they have been academics. It is crucial to recognise the significance of bringing this radical decolonial work to the fore, particularly in the systems of higher education in which African scholars build their careers. Their work was crucial for establishing African feminist spaces in the region that transcended colonially established and neocolonially sustained borders and academic delineations. It also highlighted the particularities of the academic systems they were coming from.

To better understand what decolonial work in the academe means in Africa requires a steadier engagement with the region's diverse systems of higher education. It is also essential to understand the various colonial legacies and their implications for the trajectory of these university systems and what it means for academics to engage decolonially within and beyond them. This is especially needed, given how often the structuring and organisation of higher education in Black Francophone Africa are too often illegible to non-Francophone academics, even in other parts of Africa. As a result, it is often the case that, in order to be legible beyond Francophone academic worlds, one must have academic partners in, or at least be legible in, Anglo-American academic worlds, or be sufficiently conversant with English-language publishing within Anglo-American higher education structures. This question of legibility, unfortunately, disproportionately shapes aca-

demic knowledge production and circulation in the region and beyond. Thus, under the prevailing conditions imposed by Anglo-American dominance in global higher education, building an academic career is as much a function of navigating what the global system requires as of working through the more immediate systemic demands stemming from other colonial systems. This means that being legible in Black Francophone Africa might not translate neatly into being legible across global higher education, not just because of language barriers but also because of different academic practices and requirements.

Certainly, the direness of the situation, which is particularly concerning in Africa, is not limited to this region. The metaphor of death pervades global higher education. It transpires in the sort of precarity that has been making the academe increasingly uncertain for, and even hostile to, academic research and teaching. The wholesale shutting down of departments in the United Kingdom, the impending redundancy faced by many academics, and the erosion of linguistic diversity, even as global higher education continues to be increasingly dominated by English, all point to these dynamics (e.g., Shahjahan and Morgan 2016). Under prevailing conditions, the adage "publish or perish" has become a well-known and well-rehearsed admonishment (to junior scholars especially) about how one might hope to secure permanent positions and progress meaningfully in one's academic career. The pathway to avoiding perishing in academia includes publishing, usually in English-language, high-ranking journals. The challenge is real, and increasingly dire conditions in the global academe are felt and decried by scholars around the world. Indeed, a considerable and growing body of work has emerged shedding light on and addressing the grim prospects for linguistic diversity in academic knowledge production, as well as difficulties faced by leading academic journals based at universities and research institutes that are not elite and well-endowed (and usually Anglo-American) (e.g., Boussebaa and Tienari 2021; Parreira do Amaral 2022). But the complexity of choices to be made regarding one's academic career in the face of increasing challenges in the global academe has to do with negotiating marginality, not merely within the West, which European scholars have decried and rightly so, but also globally (Stavrevska et al. 2023).

Writing about scholars in Lebanon, Lebanese academic Sari Hanafi incisively remarked that the admonition "publish-or-perish" poses a challenge for academics operating in Anglo-American systems of higher education (Hanafi 2011). For those scholars not only operating vis-à-vis Anglo-American domination in the academe but also in systems of higher education with roots in other Western colonialisms and other epistemes, the challenge is not as straightforward as publishing or perishing, as dismal as that situation itself may be. The more complex situation that scholars operating in other systems of higher education face, particularly, although not only in the Global South, is indeed, as Hanafi poignantly observed, publishing locally only to perish globally or publishing globally only to perish locally (Hanafi 2011; Karkour and Vieira 2023). Thus, decisions are to be made around how one's career is to grow, what direction one's national academic context might be going into, how to adapt to that, understanding what sort of influence elite Anglo-American trend-setters in the academe might project, and so on. This situation is even more complex when those negotiating this conundrum are navigating the layered coloniality of knowledge, power, and death (physical, epistemic and otherwise), from marginalised positions in the aftermath of slavery, colonialism and enduring neocolonialism in the African region and its diasporas.

In the face of these challenges, learning from one another in the global academe is crucial to understanding the prevalence of coloniality and its implications for academic work. Doing so is also important to elucidate the sorts of idiosyncratic challenges faced vis-à-vis the plural coloniality of knowledge, the shared and more particular needs for decolonisation, and, importantly, as illustrated by Sembène's film, how death might become an important site of self-reclamation. To be sure,

radical Black intellectual spaces are well-versed in this mutual learning. Black intellectuals and academics have long practised various forms of flight, often in and through exile and through convening radical Black spaces conducive for learning about shared and comparable challenges experienced because of their Blackness. Siyabonga Njica, for instance, has recently explored this in his historical account of Bloke Modisane's intellectual life in exile during the Cold War (Njica 2023). Other examples include Anna Julia Cooper, Paul Robeson, and James Baldwin, among others, African American intellectuals who found a space in Europe where they could be, even though these spaces themselves were racially fraught (Horne 2016; Cambridge Union 2025). The conditions under which they lived and worked in exile in Europe and elsewhere would certainly not be described as freedom, but they opted for a form of flight or marronage to be able to exist and continue their intellectual practice in somewhat freer ways. And yet, while they still operated under the constraints of state-sponsored racism and colonialism, they affirmed and exercised their agency by deciding how to wield death. By removing themselves from places and spaces that constrained them, stifled them, and subjected them to forms of death, physical and intellectual, they were opting for places perhaps less violent to them but still violent in ways comparable to the places they would have left. Crucially, they would have wielded death through their agency in a generative manner. Sembène's film reveals the use of marronage through the politically and intellectually generative wielding of *agentic death* through the insistent and persistent exercise of one's agency in the face of and despite enduring conditions of neocolonial control, the obfuscation of freedom, epistemicide and epistemic injustice, in the post-independence era in (Black Francophone) Africa. *Agentic death* reveals what is possible or rendered possible at the interstices of compounded coloniality as death becomes reclaimed as a site of flight and generative emancipatory politics for intellectual and academic work. To learn from this work is imperative if we are to be better resourced for the task of epistemic decolonisation in African systems of higher education and beyond.

Conclusion

Higher education in Africa negotiates British and other European colonialisms together with, like the rest of higher education globally, Anglo-American domination. This paper has shown that there is a tendency, however, to treat the colonial legacies to be reckoned with in higher education on the assumption that these legacies are just British and that in the post-independence, contemporary world, Anglo-American neocolonial domination is the most significant force to be reckoned with, across global higher education. While Anglo-American domination significantly shapes higher education globally, and while the British colonial empire was vast, it is nonetheless important to examine the colonial legacies of other European colonialisms. Understanding the layered nature of coloniality of knowledge, power, and death is crucial for how decolonial scholarship makes sense of the vantage points from which decolonisation is pursued, as well as how overlapping American and European (neo)colonial and imperial legacies are encountered and radically addressed by African scholars. I examined how thinking through *agentic death* helps make sense of what happens through agentic deployment of death differently, creatively and subversively, where death is imposed from various colonial vantage points. Using Sembène's film "La Noire de. . .," I discussed both what enduring colonial structures foreclose and what radical emancipatory politics might just be possible through agentic death. The film helps to think creatively about how death, while not inherently emancipatory, can be and is agentically redeployed in radical ways by African scholars and intellectuals to emancipatory ends. To address the coloniality of death through agentic death is to render death potent through a radical redeployment towards generative emancipatory intellectual ends.

Through the concept of *agentic death,* I examined the ways that in the face of the coloniality of death, both physical and in the form of epistemicide, and the coloniality of knowledge in higher education, the agentic deployment of death becomes a site of resistance and radically intellectually and academically productive. To deploy death to emancipatory politics and decolonial intellectual and academic practices is powerful to understand what the task of epistemic decolonisation entails for scholars variously situated. It also helps to make sense of what is rendered possible at the interstices of compounded coloniality, where decolonial politics might otherwise be improbable. I have shown that this practice among some Black African Francophone scholars is important for understanding what it means to decolonise higher education in Africa and for appreciating the possibilities engendered by *agentic death,* and that can be learned from for radical and transformative politics in higher education. The meanings of epistemic decolonisation as positionally informed and the sorts of subversive practices that might be decolonial, even if they do not appear to be thus at first, require a more thorough understanding of the plurality of coloniality that scholars in the region and the diaspora are navigating. The insufficient attention paid to higher education systems in Africa, in this case, Black Francophone Africa, means that there are missed opportunities to broaden the conversations and debates about what it means to decolonise higher education in the region and the implications for knowledge production from Africa to the global academe.

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