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Conversations from Jimma on the Geographies and Politics of Knowledge

Amber Murrey and Anteneh Tesfahun

Abstract

Drawing from decolonizing scholarships that call for a reorientation of knowledge-making that is more inclusive and reflective of oral modes of communication, this article takes the form of a performance autoethnography between two friends. This approach allows a rich complexity of subjects to emerge—from "decolonizing" pedagogies and curricula to university administration and the geopolitics of knowledge globally—at the same time that we retain a specific attention to our university in Jimma, Ethiopia. Our intention is to challenge conventional academic modes of writing through a contextualization of the contemporary struggles that young professors face while teaching in semi-rural Ethiopian universities. Although our discussions reflect our personal struggles, they are reflective of larger general trends in Ethiopian higher education. Academics working on the African continent often confront intersecting material, ideological, linguistic, financial, and political factors that work to exclude African knowledges from global or transnational knowledge exchanges. Our conversation allows us to reflect on the broad tapestry of the current moment, including interactions with administrative staff, violent histories of knowledge colonization, racial and gendered politics, the potential for social science knowledges for social justice, and more.

Keywords: geopolitics of knowledge, higher education, Ethiopia, race and the university

In this performance autoethnography, we offer a series of reflections on the nuanced experiences of teaching in Jimma University's Department of Governance and Development. We met on and off over a period of four months to talk broadly and often spontaneously about the politics and geopolitics of teaching in a public university in Jimma, a semi-urban city in southwestern

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Ethiopia. One of us (Amber) is an American expat faculty member teaching at Jimma during the 2015/2016 (i.e., 2004/2005 Ge'ez Ethiopian calendar) academic year. One of us (Anteneh) is an Ethiopian lecturer who has been teaching at Jimma for seven years after completing his master's degree at Addis Ababa University. Our discussions touched upon language, geography, politics, place, epistemology, and ontology—each of which create intricate but firm barriers and opportunities for academics working in Ethiopia. As discussed herein, these barriers often constitute acute financial, political, and infrastructural obstacles. These obstacles include strict travel restrictions in a racialized global political economy—or what decolonial scholars refer to as "global coloniality".[1] More than physical exclusion, scholars are often ideologically excluded and confined within liberalized and neoliberalized curricula adopted by the Ethiopian Ministry of Education.

Writing this piece collaboratively in this dynamic form prompted us to learn from and with each other, without requiring that our visions unite across issues, as is the case in a standard academic co-authored paper, in which any disagreements in interpretation and frictions in the thinking/writing process are left out of the pages. In structuring our exchanges as a "performance autoethnography," we drew inspiration from Claudio Moreira and Marcelo Diversi's innovative article, "When Janitors Dare to Become Scholars: A Betweeners' View of the Politics of Knowledge Production from Decolonizing Street-Corners." The performance autoethnography is a communicative mode that moves towards a decolonization of knowledge through the privileging of everyday encounters and lived experience, especially in spaces of marginalization, *as knowledge* (read as "valid" knowledge). This privileging is a form of unsettling dominant rules about how to create (and express) knowledge in a colonial university system that de-privileges everyday encounters as non-valid. D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera write, "performance has evolved into ways of comprehending how human beings fundamentally make culture, affect power, and reinvent their ways of being in the world."[2] Performing autoethnography allows us to situate ourselves, physically, emotionally, ethically, and politically, within our broader concerns with the geopolitics of knowledge globally. We approached this exchange with an open desire to

imagine fresh and collaborative ways of relating to each other in a university community in which academics are too often isolated, withdrawn, and/or non-attending. Through the performance of the autoethnography, we go in, around, and between our experiences. We confront and contest power, including our own.

Setting: An outdoor café near the main entrance of Jimma University's main campus in the early afternoon. ANTENEH and AMBER sit drinking buna (freshly ground, freshly brewed coffee) on cast iron chairs on an open veranda. Pencils and paper are at the ready.

AMBER: I think it might be useful to situate our conversation in the context of current globalized struggles for racial, gender, and social justices in higher education. We are witnessing a moment of enormous resistance in universities across the continent. #RhodesMustFall in South Africa triggered sister movements across the U.K. In the U.S., there are powerful student movements rising against the racialized processes of knowledge "production" globally and historically, including campus "die-ins" against police brutality towards black and brown bodies. Right now, graduate students and research assistants are battling in my home country, the U.S., for the right to organize as laborers, having been stripped of the right when the courts declared them students and not workers. They are demanding wages that will allow us a level of financial security—as in, ensuring that we can pay our rent from month to month. Having been educated in the U.S. and the U.K. respectively, I have been deeply impacted, compelled, and motivated by these anti-colonial, decolonial, and de-colonizing energies. This rich and complex history is part of what compelled me to bring my family to Jimma and to come and learn and teach here.

ANTENEH: Honestly, I am also still learning about these developments.

AMBER: Universities have always been central spaces for protest and struggle for social justice across the continent and, maybe we can argue, particularly in Ethiopia.

ANTENEH: I think we should also discuss more details about our context: the Ethiopian context. For example, some of these issues—racialized police brutality and student debt—are non-issues in Ethiopia, where student fees are sponsored (or loaned)

by the government. Of course, with the cost-sharing scheme, we must repay our fees before receiving our diplomas. So I think that we are an exceptional case in terms of payment.

AMBER: Yeah, that is a good point. Tell me more about Jimma and our context, in particular. In a previous conversation, you mentioned that we should also describe some of the particular aspects of Jimma's infrastructure as a semi-urban—or, you might more aptly say "semi-rural"—place. Nearly 90 percent of our students come from the rural villages outside of Jimma, and although the town has nearly 200,000 inhabitants, the city has a rural feel, infrastructurally. It is not uncommon for us to have cyclical half-day power outs for a week at a time or for the Internet to be down for hours during the workday. At the same time, our College was recently furbished with a fully equipped computer lab and our M.A. classrooms have projectors and desktop computers. We have a multimillion-dollar football stadium and a new main university gate in the middle of construction. It seems as if a new building is going up every week.

ANTENEH: Jimma has now supposedly raised itself to a more urban city and university, but infrastructurally, everything is poor. Talking from the perspective of the Ministry of Education, Jimma is one of the early kingdoms of Ethiopia. So there is this pride since the city was, like I said, an early 19th-Century kingdom for the Oromo people. The Oromo is the biggest ethnic group in Ethiopia. Plus, given the regime's understanding of diversity, Jimma constitutes, ethnically and religiously, a disadvantaged group because it is predominantly Oromo and Muslim.

AMBER: Should we say more about Jimma University being located in a predominantly Oromo and Islamic geography? For example, why is this important now, in the 21st Century? We — instructors but also, especially, our students—face issues that are particular to our region of Ethiopia. Namely, the recent protests against the Addis Ababa Master Plan. I am not sure how much we *can* speak about this, but at least I should mention that a few months ago students on our campus threw rocks and destroyed the department's large, outdoor, fiberglass sign. The students were being rushed from campus by security and military police and, as they were racing by, some threw rocks at the sign because the

language of the sign is Amharic rather than the local language, Afaan Oromo. I mean, we have dozens of examples of these sorts of tensions on our campus just from the last six months. But we can never speak directly of them.

ANTENEH: The protest against our sign is a protest against the establishment. In today's Ethiopia, everything has the potential to be turned into a political subject. The damage to the sign may not be related to only the language. There is also this tendency among the mass of students, particularly in the Natural Sciences and Engineering fields, that Law and Governance, even as a discipline and faculty, are instrumental in maintaining and strengthening the status quo. I am thinking of ways to link the political with the university—they are not as linked as we wish them to be in Ethiopia these days.

Well, as you mentioned, Ethiopian universities have been at the center and prime drivers of protests for social change since 1960. The imperial regime was shaken and weakened by the students, though it was sent to the grave by soldiers. The military regime was also overthrown by forces that had their organizational roots in the universities. Just as the students, the teachers were also active in the protests at the time. The agenda was similar for all the students, students' union, teachers and the teachers' union, which was bringing about social changes. The students alone have taken a diverse path trying to bring about that progressive social change. However, the goal was shared. Today, however, the students are fragmented along ethnic and religious lines. There seems to be no shared agenda for them to stand together, let alone protest against. The only agendas that have been mobilizing the students en masse were problems associated with food in the universities. Even those seemingly shared concerns, with the cost of food, for instance, will always be turned into something divisive, as some will perceive them not to be genuinely about food, and others will try to use the chances to promote another, not as such shared agenda. The university leadership, on the other hand, has a different agenda that is usually subservient to the government. The teachers are usually in the middle. Most of the young teachers have positions on political issues, but these positions are not strong enough to do anything.

This is perhaps because we have seen the repercussions of protesting when we were students. We have been part of such protests against the regime and, you know, most of us have suffered. Not me personally, but many of my friends have suffered because of that, and usually in vain. That has taught us that the protests do not yield, and they are usually sabotaged. When we get to be in a position of power as a teacher, we would rather be quiet in such instances because it would have implications on not only our academic lives but our personal lives as well. For instance, if I do anything that either goes against or for the protests, as a teacher I will be under the spotlight. I will be in danger from both sides. So the political involvement of these young teachers usually has a long-term implication in the person's life. Young academicians, most of us anyway, have become cynical when it comes to protesting for social change—even perhaps about social change itself. There is this surging tendency to self-censor when it comes to political issues. I even have to censor myself in my own circle on social media. I do not want people to know my political leanings. I do not want to be recruited nor do I want to be the target, because these are the only options of a young and politically active academician in Ethiopian universities.

AMBER: As I am listening to you, Anteneh, I am thinking that what we are discussing is also the state of the intellectual in a neoliberal era, in which academia has been privatized and restructured through corporatization. Of course there are particularities to each context and history, but even in America, for example, there are so many cases of academics being persecuted or fired for their political ideologies. It might be interesting for us to consider what we can learn from the case of Steven Salaita, a professor who was fired from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign for his political comments about the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territories on Twitter. I know many American academics—particularly people of color (as we say in the U.S.), women, LGBTQ+, and radical academics—who are also fearful of social media and state surveillance. But what we are talking about here in Jimma is about more than job security—not that any of these cases can be reduced to being "just" job security. But there are complex psychophysical costs associated with the fear, shame,

anger, and stress that arise during moments of personal and public crisis on campus.

ANTENEH: It, indeed, is ironic that we, as academicians, are expected to do research on issues that matter to society and disseminate our findings, yet we are under the watchful eyes of security forces. These security forces and officials do not say anything on these issues unless we manage to make them as apolitical as possible. Even here, in Ethiopia, it is safe to say that being a "professor" gives you authority, but at the same time it puts you under the spotlight. For instance, I am supposed to make an academic analysis of the situation associated with the protests as a teacher of political science. And I did just that for myself with very close friends. However, an attempt to communicate that assessment in writing or public engagement, as academicians do, could be problematic. It is at least perceived to be so. Our students do, indeed, listen to us. If, from an academic point of view, I say that the regime is right, there are fundamental elements among the students who will threaten me. If I say that the students' quest is right, I will be harassed from the government. Even if what you teach supports the government, the government will not protect you from the mob and vice versa. One of the challenges facing young academics is that everyone silences them. We are silenced both by those with power as well as the so-called "powerless" mob. This one goes against our scholarly mandates to say and to write. We have been self-censoring for as long as I can remember.

AMBER: How do you connect this back to what you were saying earlier, though, about how international and transnational student movements are "not" happening here? I have never taught on a more politically active campus, although you would hardly know it if you watch international news or if you attend faculty meetings.

ANTENEH: The federal police are on campus, yes, but we are used to it, in a way. Academic institutions and the people who lead them do not have independence from the system. Those who lead the board of directors of almost all universities are the high-flying political figures with some kind of tie with the particular university. The universities' management is who usually calls for the police to intervene to control disturbances by the students. Therefore, the management stands on the side of the police, and if you dare ask

the police to go out, you will be met with force. Those in the West, where the academic institutions are independent, seem to have the luxury of asking those questions. In Ethiopian universities, the presence of uniformed Federal Police has ceased to offend the teachers and the students alike. Calling the police whenever there is an incident or disturbance on campus has become a norm.

AMBER: I raised the issue of the whiteness of Ethiopian curricula during our first conversation. We have since spoken a lot about Francis Nyamnjoh's arguments about "epistemicide"—or the killing of ways of knowing—by a global hegemonic knowledge paradigm that is deeply Eurocentric.[3] Too often our curriculum is determined for us. The subjects and materials seem designed to produce a particular sort of student: a student who memorizes and restates. I have noticed this pattern at my daughter's kindergarten in Jimma, too.

ANTENEH: Jimma is of course very much prepared to study horticulture, cash crop production, and other agricultural sectors. However, politics weighs more in defining the university than the administration, the socio-economic condition of the region, and the Jimma Zone as a whole. Currently, Ethiopia has 37 public universities, and 10 more are under construction. Most of these universities were opened to address the popular demand for local development and silence dissent that may result from it. Jimma University is located in an old and historic town that deserves to have a prominent university but the expansion seems to be too much: "Too much" because the programs that the university runs go beyond the university's capacity to *do*. Opening a Master's and even a Ph.D. program has become a very easy enterprise. This is illustrated through many departments. For instance, take our own department. The government imposes a summer Master's degree program in Civics and Ethical Studies. We accepted to open this summer program despite the fact that we had no Ph.D. in the staff, as the two Indian expat professors had left for vacation. We were not ready in terms of infrastructure.

AMBER: There are discrepancies between the paper version of the university and the "actual" university. Another issue is the issue of the vacuum of a political curriculum, compounded by the "brain drain" of leading political scholars to universities outside

of Ethiopia, often under political pressure to leave. This was precisely the historical socio-political context that *pulled* me—as well as other expat faculty from India, the Philippines, and other countries of Africa—to Ethiopia. Ethiopian higher education has gone through this “massification” in the last 15 years and, as a result, there is a shortage of faculty members across disciplines and a massive increase in the numbers of admitted students.[4]

ANTENEH: I do not think these are new trends, though.

AMBER: You are referring to the “expatization” of faculty?

ANTENEH: Exactly. These are reflections of historical patterns: American expat faculty founded Addis Ababa University. Our “modern education” was developed by expats—including by Ethiopians who have gone abroad for studies in North America and Europe. In the 1960s and 1970s, the political science department was filled with white faculty—mostly American expats. As such, our education, supposedly traditional, is alienated. The situation continued that way until the revolution and the military junta adopted the path of socialism. At that time, most of the western expat staffs left the country, willfully or otherwise. For quite some time, Ethiopia had a limited number of universities and a number of educated people who could staff those universities and colleges. Yet again, in the 1990s (during the second revolution), 40 Ethiopian professors were expelled. This created a huge vacuum at Addis Ababa University, which was nearly the only university at the time. The university was completely crippled. Insufficiently qualified faculty entered and trained students, who became even more insufficiently qualified faculty at other universities, training other students, who then became incompetent professors. It’s like they often say that there was a “generation gap” created when the Italians assassinated our intellectuals. This was then repeated.

AMBER: And again repeated in its present form . . .

ANTENEH: Recently, as you said, the number of universities has strikingly increased and so does the demand for professors to staff them. With so many pressures pushing faculty out of Ethiopia, our human potential is no match for the ever-increasing number of universities.

AMBER: Right, hence this heavy recruitment from outside of Ethiopia.

ANTENEH: Yes, there is an urgent need to bring expat faculty en masse. The previous economic incapacity to hire highly educated expat faculty was resolved, somewhat, by economic growth, to some extent. There was aid and loan money earmarked for the recruitment of foreign staff. Nonetheless, it doesn't seem to be enough to prevent the past from repeating itself.

AMBER: Yes, in our own department, we are constrained by an absence of a sufficient number of permanent, experienced academics. In our College, for example, we have three faculty members with Ph.D.s. At the same time that our lecturers and professors are teaching more and more students, our financial resources and human "infrastructures" are constrained. In nine months of teaching in Jimma, I have become aware of this problematic and paradoxical emphasis on "capacity building" from institutions in the North. In the first place, cross-institutional forms of training tend to be determined by the institutions in the North, which have access to the grant funds. This too often results in academics based in Jimma attending training after training sponsored and organized by academics and institutions in the North or the East. These trainings are formatted according to the priorities determined by the funding bodies and agencies. Equally problematic is the budgetary management of such trainings, as the majority of funds are often spent to cover the salaries and traveling expenses of Northern and Eastern scholars who travel to share their knowledge and "expertise."

ANTENEH: And in the second place?

AMBER: In the second place, there are capacity-building initiatives that assist in individual career development. These fellowships and grants importantly send academics abroad for graduate-level education. Yet there is a stark and debilitating dearth of returning academics. Taking just the example of our department, in the past six years, our College has sent 17 academics abroad for M.A. or Ph.D. study. Only two have returned.

ANTENEH: The morals of young professors are broken. No hopeful young academician wants to stay in Ethiopia. There is no

respect. There is no job satisfaction. There are no benefits. So what happens? As you said, in our department, those who established the department in 2006 are no longer here. Why do you think this is so? They left.

AMBER: Where did they go?

ANTENEH: Most of them studied in Europe, and then they went to America. So we have new people. This reflects the desire to leave. Let me count the number of faculty who did second Master's degrees abroad and who are not here: one. . . three. . . six. . .then we have Mohammad. . . eight. Around eight people who could have had a great contribution to the university and the department. They just left. That is because you only make yourself here just to work somewhere else that rewards. In Ethiopian universities, you are only here to get the opportunity to learn and then leave. They know this, and for this reason, they keep our degrees hostage. As a young aspiring academician, we look around and then—often with no hope or at least no promise of coming back—we leave. Even if we come back, we will not be treated any better. As we earn more and more degrees, we are still somehow underappreciated.

AMBER: What will you do?

ANTENEH: I cannot settle for whatever I get here—for the respect that I am given (which is much lower than the administrative staff) and the benefits that I am entitled to (which is much lower than the leadership, and I can often not even get myself through the month).

AMBER: You mentioned the administration; what about them?

ANTENEH: Look, last week I went to the college administrator and I wanted to collect soft copies of books and put them in the computer lab. Students, particularly undergrad, are not well-versed in using computers, so it is usually hard for them to Google and find reading materials to write their papers and read for their exams. Hence, as coordinator of the ICT and E-Learning department of the college, I wanted to store soft copies of books on the computers in the lab. To do this, I needed a flash drive. But the Director of Administration was like, "there is none." I

knew that there were at least two. But that is her power. I had to argue with her.

AMBER: Did she give it to you?

ANTENEH: Finally! I had to fight like a little kid. [Laughs.] I had to go and ask the storekeeper, who confirmed that there were drives. Then she finally gave it to me. That is what they do to you. It is about how furious you are. Are you furious enough to press enough to pass through these people? You just get exhausted. That could have stopped me had I not been in a good mood that day. I do not get extra payment for that job, neither would I be punished for not doing it. This is how discouraging it gets. It is like the university is primarily for the administration; I just call them "obstacle staff" rather than support staff. I sometimes just do not want to come to the university.

AMBER: This reminds me of a story that I heard from a colleague a couple of weeks ago, too. He needed a dry erase marker for class, so he went to the secretary to get one. She made him sign a document before she would give him the eraser. [Heavy sigh.] *One* eraser. These sorts of daily obstacles are exhausting. Even for me, because I am not an office holder, I do not have a printer, but my students—my some fifty students in one class—need me to print everything for them because they do not have the money to pay for copies. I try to tell my students that I do not have a printer, and they tell me that they do not have money to print; we are at an impasse.

ANTENEH: Giving young people knowledge and expertise—*this* is fascinating. But I sometimes think, "Ugh, it is not worth it . . . let the students be; it is too much to fight in this way, every day." In the end, I will be like the uninspired teachers. There are many of them.

AMBER: But *we* are the young ones! If we do not remain committed somehow, despite all of the obstacles—despite any "obstacle staff"—who will?

ANTENEH: Yes, certainly, in Ethiopia, the university has always been a breeding ground for young revolutionaries.

AMBER: We have a public relations expert at Jimma, Kassahun Kebede, who is also an artist, poet, and Amharic author. His art is absolutely stunning and deeply political. He is optimistic, committed, and passionate. He is employed in an administrative position in the university, although he should be running an art department, which, by the way, we do not have. He shared some of his paintings and drawings with me. Two of them in particular illustrate the multifaceted difficulties pushing and pulling upon intellectuals in Jimma. In the first, titled *Intellectual Polio,* the intellectual is embodied in the form of a skeleton, wearing tattered robes (Figure 1). Dangling from the tassel on the graduation cap, on the mortarboard, is a hung corpse. The lips are sewn shut and the logo on the front is, again, the image of sealed lips. The intellectual is bodily wounded with knowledge, missing a leg, and using broken pencils and pens for crutches.

Figure 1: “Intellectual Polio” by Kassahun Kebede. Reproduced with permission from artist.

In the second, titled *Siphon,* the scholar is a siphon, moving material from one place to the next (Figure 2). The head of the

Figure 2: “Siphon.” Sketch by Kassahun Kebede. Reproduced with permission from artist.

intellectual is a calabash, from where the knowledge collected from screens and books pours out. The body of the intellectual is abstracted and dissolves into invisibility—like flowing water—below waste. The arm is a mere geographical form. The earth seems destroyed and cracked around the intellectual. Or, the intellectual might be breaking through an obstacle of some sort to retrieve knowledge. Then, above the calabash head, is a halo. The intellectual is at once a collector, a divider, and a transmitter of knowledge . . . and, for this, somehow revered (or, maybe, burdened) with a halo.

Inside the JU faculty café. A busy space, full of mostly male university lecturers and professors. ANTENEH and AMBER sit at a large table near the windows on the far side of the room.

ANTENEH: Khat is also an issue. If we are going to speak honestly about our reality in Jimma, we need to address khat. The teachers are exhausted because of all of these problems—like their disillusioned students and the "obstacle staff"—so what do they do? They just go to their offices in the morning, they lecture—not teach(!), just lecture—Then, in the afternoon, nobody is around. Everyone is enjoying a two-hour afternoon khat session. That is why, if we are talking about Jimma and the young teachers, I just do not like to call us academicians . . .

AMBER: It seems like it has gotten better . . .

ANTENEH: No, you have simply gotten used to it. Sometimes people say to themselves, "You know, it is Dr. Amber's class," so they make a special effort.

AMBER: Okay, yes, you're right. People see me as like "a step out the door." It makes many of my relationships somehow artificial. There is sometimes this idea, this desire, that I connect people with those "important people" in North America and Western Europe.

ANTENEH: Yes, but not as artificial as just the word is (or implies). People *want* to be their good selves. In the 1960s, white people were not adored here. Whatever they had was nice but—especially the Italians—we did not like them. Now, we want to show you our good side.

AMBER: I understand that . . . but it has the result of reproducing neocolonization. It is like Ethiopia is going through what many other African universities went through earlier, the "expatization" of higher education, with all of its attendant racial and colonial politics. Many non-African professors joined African faculties during the early independence period, but at the same time, their presence was contentious and contested. In her book, *Decolonizing the Mind*, Brigit Brock-Utne retells a story of a white faculty member who was promoted to the Dean of a program in Tanzania . . . he was promoted simply for being white.[5] My place in Ethiopia must be tentative.

Pause.

Part of the reason why I am here is because my own professors have inspired me. Several of my advisors and former professors lived and worked for periods in Tanzania, Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Ghana. Horace Campbell, Patricia Daley, and Patricia McFadden. Walter Rodney, whom I never knew, famously taught at the University of Dar Es Salaam. These are radical Pan-African scholars who politicized their curriculums and fought actively to build emancipatory knowledge communities on the continent.

ANTENEH pauses in his writing. AMBER drinks from her small cup of buna.

It is a distressing development that today's radical scholars in the US, Canada, and Western Europe are not making more efforts to teach and work for substantial periods of time on the continent. South Africa is an exception. Again, though, I am not talking about the sorts of neoliberal North/South training culture that has become dominant in the last decade. I wonder if it might also be a reflection of neoliberalizing structural adjustment programs and the emptying out of African states in the 1980s and 1990s. Mahmood Mamdani, for example, in his book *Scholars in the Marketplace: The Dilemmas of Neoliberal Reforms at Makerere University 1989-2005*, quotes a World Bank representative as declaring that Africans do not need their own universities—rather, they can send a minority abroad to Europe and North America "if they need."[6] It is only recently that the World Bank and International Financial Institutions have placed an emphasis on the

importance of higher education, but, of course, this emphasis is coming with their own prism of priorities.[7]

Inside AMBER's home in Jimma. ANTENEH and AMBER sit at a small wooden table that has been converted to a desk. It is messy with stacks of papers and books. Children's voices are heard intermittently, singing, laughing, and crying. Music plays softly from the TV. AMBER types quietly as they speak.

AMBER: So, Anteneh, how do we make it work? How do we make it work, here in Jimma, for our families and for ourselves?

ANTENEH: Like I said, the young and the talented that are in the universities seem to be cynical about making a better future while they are still here. So, most of us are trying to use the universities as stepping stones to more rewarding jobs, mostly outside of the country. These young people are recruited because they performed well and excelled as students, yet they came because they could not afford to further their education by their own. They are left hoping that they will get what they merit. Very few seem to be content with their situations and very few plan to make teaching a career—not because most of us hate teaching but because the future seems bleak in terms of financial security as well as job satisfaction. I remember the time when being a lecturer was a big deal for the ordinary folks in the neighborhood. Now, it is no more. We have very small income to envision a better financial future. There is ever-decreasing job satisfaction, resulting from unstable policies that disregard the teacher. There is diminishing respect that teaching gets us as a profession. Because of all of this, the young Ethiopian academician will continue to look out for better places.

I remember the late prime minister saying to the African youth at a conference "[B]lame us because there is enough blame to go around but don't act as a victim. . . . Look out for what you can do and start by doing it." There is enough blame to go around, complaints to be made, fingers to be pointed, but in the end, it is us who will suffer if we do not do our part. Such a spirit is necessary to make it work from the side of the young struggling academicians.

The major stakeholders in education—(in addition to the teachers, policymakers, the university management and

administration, and the students)—also need to pay attention to why we are losing our youngest and brightest. It seems like they are thinking of us, young academicians, as expendable. It is like we are replaced in a blink of an eye. Instead, measures at all levels (administrative, institutional, policy) should be taken to encourage a better future at our universities. All stakeholders should help us to make our fights *for* the institutions we work for (instead of against the institutions or for ourselves alone).

AMBER: What about our potential? What about what we can make of this place, where many of our students are bright and curious and hopeful?

AMBER's fingers pause on the keyboard.

For instance, I began my Master's-level seminar this semester with an open discussion about the *why* of knowledge, particularly in Jimma. We read articles about the domination of statistical analysis in the field of Development Studies. I urged the students to consider the social and political dilemmas of rendering every social phenomenon somehow calculable and quantifiable. This conversation is even more urgent in a context of the coloniality of knowledge and power—where certain non-hegemonic knowledges are dismissed as inferior, murky, less clear, and less articulate.[8] Our conversations during this first class period were really animated. The students were distressed by the demystification of statistical analysis and World Bank reports on GDP and international poverty lines. Cultivating that passion is really what education is all about. Then, at the end of the semester, most of my students submitted topics for their thesis that reflect the priorities of International Financial Institutions—with buzzwords like "good governance." That animation and critique had somehow fallen off.

ANTENEH: Yes, we, the young academicians, need to be reminded that ours is an indispensable input to create a better future. This is what we seek, in those universities and the country in general. Instead of simply complaining that we are not being heard, we have to work harder to get our voices heard. It will take time and effort. But we must believe that we are what this country and society have—and we should be committed to working for our own betterment.

Notes

[1] Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).
[2] As quoted in Hari Stephen Kumar, "Decolonizing Texts: A Performance Autoethnography." MA Thesis, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, 2011: 36.
[3] Francis Nyamnjoh, "A Relevant Education for African Development—Some Epistemological Considerations." *African Development* XXIX (2004): 161-184.
[4] Kedir Assefa Tessema, "The Unfolding Trends and Consequences of Expanding Higher Education in Ethiopia: Massive Universities, Massive Challenges." *Higher Education Quarterly* 63 (2009): 29-45.
[5] Brigit Brock-Utne, *Decolonizing the Mind: Education in Africa.* (Oslo: Institute for Educational Research, 1997).
[6] Mahmood Mamdani, *Scholars in the Marketplace: The Dilemmas of Neoliberal Reforms at Makerere University 1989-2005.* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2007).
[7] Kingsley Banya and Juliet Elu, "The World Bank and Financing Higher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa." *Higher Education* 42 (2001): 1-34.
[8] For an examination of the racialized geopolitics of knowledge disputes and corporate involvement in education-as-development in extractive projects in Central Africa see Amber Murrey, "Imperial Knowledge, Decolonial Geographies and Working Beyond "The Language of the Mouth" in *Borders, Borderthinking, Borderland: Developing a Critical Epistemology of Global Politics,* Marc Woons and Sebastian Weier (eds). (E-International Relations Publishing, forthcoming May 2017.)

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