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TOWARD AN AESTHETICS OF THE EPISTEMOLOGIES OF THE SOUTH

Manifesto in Twenty-Two Theses

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1. **We live in a world dominated by three main forms of domination that have been with us throughout the modern era: capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy** (Santos 2018). They are so intimately interconnected that none of them operates in isolation. However, the social forces that have been resisting against modern domination have usually focused on one of these forms and rarely on all of them. As a consequence, anti-capitalist struggles have often been colonialist, racist, and sexist in character, while anti-colonialist or anti-racial struggles have often condoned capitalism and hetero-patriarchy, and anti-patriarchal struggles have often been capitalist and colonialist or racist in character. The tragedy of our time is that domination operates as a coordinated totality, while resistance against it is fragmented.
2. **This pattern of domination, rather than being a mere economic or political model, is a Eurocentric civilizational paradigm.** It is served by an immense body of hegemonic knowledges—the epistemologies of the North—based on the negation of the inhabitants and knowledges of the territories that are subjected to colonization and exploitation and which I call the global South. The epistemologies of the North are the knowledge structure this civilizational paradigm has developed to legitimize itself. By ignoring the underlying articulation among the three main forms of domination, these epistemologies contribute to disarm social resistance against them. Under global neoliberalism, such disarmament has reached an extreme level illustrated by the idea that there is no alternative to the status quo, as supposedly proven by the failure of all attempts in the last 100 years to change it in substantive ways. However, as the most brutal forms of exploitation—exclusion, discrimination, inequality, and

the failure to recognize non-Eurocentric alterity—emerge or re-emerge and reach unprecedented levels in the wake of imperialism’s increasing aggressiveness, and as the ecological crisis deepens and political, physical, and ontological violence explodes out of control, it becomes all too evident that more than ever we need alternatives to this nightmarish *status quo* that thrives on destroying life, both human and non-human (Santos 2018).

3. We don’t need alternatives; we rather need an alternative thinking of alternatives. Oppressed social groups all over the world go on resisting against the different forms of domination and proposing alternatives to the status quo and often putting them in practice within their territories or contexts. But their struggles, waged in the global South, are either not known or discredited by the hegemonic epistemologies of the North and the political interests served by the latter. In any case, such struggles become vulnerable and bound to be neutralized. In order to confront such neutralization, an alternative thinking is called for.

4. The epistemologies of the South “occupy” the hegemonic epistemologies of the North in order to generate knowledges otherwise. The epistemologies of the South are multilocal procedures to identify and validate knowledges born in struggles against capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy, produced by the social groups and classes that have suffered most with the injustices caused by such domination. In its struggle against oppression and domination, each separate culture emerges as an important vector of resistance and knowledge production. The epistemologies of the South aim at valorizing such knowledges and thereby rearming and strengthening the resistance against oppression, discrimination, and domination. Just as imperialist domination has a vital need to exert cultural oppression, so every liberation struggle is, of necessity, an act of culture (Coomaraswamy 1927; Cabral 1979).

5. There is no global social justice without global cognitive justice. The epistemologies of the South do not question, in principle, the validity of modern science. They only refuse its claim to be the only valid knowledge, as well as the arbitrary split between sciences and arts. Social struggles rely, in general, on a variety of different knowledges already available, scientific knowledge included, and generate new knowledges as they proceed. As they combine and articulate different kinds of knowledges, they compile ecologies of knowledges. The epistemologies of the South aim at recovering and valorizing such knowledges and the articulations among them. To do so, they propose a conception of Eurocentric modern domination completely at odds with the one propounded by the epistemologies of the North (Santos 2016).

6. Sub-humanity is constitutive of the modern conception of humanity. To a large extent, colonialism is as much part of our contemporary reality as capitalism and hetero-patriarchy. Colonialism didn’t

end with the independence of the European colonies. It only adopted other forms, not dependent on physical territorial occupation by a foreign country (Nkrumah 1965). While capitalism is premised upon the formal equality of all human beings, both colonialism and patriarchy are based on the ontological degradation of certain groups of human beings. These are considered inferior and sub-human and treated as such (Fanon 1967; Federici 2004; Pérez Orozco 2014). Modern domination operates on the basis of an abyssal line that separates humanity from sub-humanity and converts them into two mutually incommensurable realities. The epistemologies of the North provide the ontological, epistemological, and political foundation for this line, whose abyssal nature resides in the radically violent and efficient way in which the imperial North ensures the ceaseless exclusion and exploitation of the global South (Santos 2007: 45–89). It is therefore imperative to explain the intimate connection between the epistemic project and the imperial political project that constructs the other as a non-human being, devoid of either knowledge or aesthetic sentiment. Beauty is key to telling humans from non-humans. But there is no shared idea of beauty that may apply to all communities and political interests.

7. **Modern forms of social life are divided into metropolitan sociability and colonial sociability and are kept apart by the abyssal line.** Metropolitan sociability—the field where imperial legitimacy is politically generated—is the mode of operation of modern domination between formally equal human beings. Social exclusion does exist, but it is not abyssal, in the sense that it is governed by norms only possible in a community of formally equal human beings. Colonial sociability is the mode of operation of modern domination between unequal human beings, i.e., between full-fledged human beings and sub-human beings. Social exclusion is here abyssal, as it is ruled by norms that can only be imposed on sub-human beings. Metropolitan sociability is the zone of being upon which the epistemologies of the North have built all modern universal ideals. Colonial sociability is the zone of non-being, as Fanon pointedly put it (1963, 1967). The knowledges produced by the populations subjected to colonial sociability are either silenced or made invisible, irrelevant, or non-existent. This is what epistemicide (Santos 1998: 103), the marginalization or massive exclusion caused by the epistemologies of the North, is all about. By denouncing this phenomenon, the epistemologies of the South open new and immensely diverse landscapes of knowledges otherwise.
8. **For the epistemologies of the South, there is no single general aesthetics.** The epistemic dislocation proposed by the epistemologies of the South disrupts in fundamental ways the credibility of general, universal, culturally monolithic conceptions of beauty, creativity, space-time, aura, authorship, orality, and so on, and so forth. It denounces the radical partiality of the metropolitan sociability on the basis of which modern

aesthetic conceptions have claimed to be universal, that is, valid, irrespective of the context in which they were generated. In other words, the epistemologies of the North generate a unique aesthetic canon and seek to export it to the rest of the world as a prescriptive benchmark, together with a hierarchical, class-based separation between art and craft. At the same time, in recent decades, many global financial institutions have become major players in the international art world. In connection with auction houses (which try to get as much money as possible for the works of art), they have had a considerable influence in making the rates of return on investment the primary determinants of “good” art.

9. **The epistemologies of the South call for a new aesthetics, the aesthetics of the South**, a plurality of artistic post-abysal creative practices born in the struggles against capitalism, colonialism, and heteropatriarchy. There are thus two main aesthetics paradigms, the aesthetics of the North and aesthetics of the South. The aesthetics of the North are abyssal aesthetics, as they ignore or are unaware of the existence of the abyssal line separating the zones of being from the zones of non-being and the epistemic, aesthetic, ethic, political, and cultural consequences of such a separation. They accept on their face value all the conventional artistic dogmas of universality, spatiality, temporality, and creativity. On the contrary, the aesthetics of the South take the abyssal line as the founding vector of their creativity. From the vantage point of the epistemologies of the South, the art of other cultures, and the aesthetic theories developed outside the paradigm of the epistemologies of the North can provide the key to other pasts and new futures.
10. **For the epistemologies of the South, the key dichotomy is between abyssal and post-abysal artists rather than between metropolitan and colonial artists.** The artists that adopt the aesthetics of the North are abyssal artists; those that embrace the aesthetics of the South are post-abysal artists. They denounce the existence of the abyssal line and seek to overcome it through their art. The history of global art is not the history of world art, but it has been turned into a history of the art of many a hybrid object, the end result of processes of circulation and exchange, of art objects once created in the global South, but stolen amid the violence of capitalism and colonialism. These objects are now an important part of the museum collections of the global North (Sarr and Savoy 2018). This is the history of the art produced by neoliberal globalization. In light of the hegemony of the aesthetics of the North, what we often call contemporary art is in fact but a small portion of the art produced in our time, the part that is promoted by conventional curators and the global elites (Elkins, 2006: 19).
11. **The post-abysal artist is an especially prominent practitioner of the epistemologies of the South.** In a time so widely characterized

by the drought or lack of alternatives, the centrality of art for the epistemologies of the South resides in the fact that the post-abyssal artist is best equipped to bring together in the same artistic artifact or event the denunciation of the three main forms of modern domination and the articulations among them. By doing so, she overcomes the curse of fragmentation haunting resistance against modern domination. At the same time, she is in a better position than anybody else to problematize the roots of art in the epistemologies of the North—an egotistic, elitist, individualistic, and market-driven type of art, predominantly focused on form. This is in sharp contrast to many non-Eurocentric forms of artistic practice, which tend to view art as communal, non-commercial, functional, and holistic, a part of people's daily experience and of their lives (Assefa 2015: iii).

12. **The post-abyssal artist lives in constant confrontation with the canon and its gatekeepers.** Since the artistic canon officializes art, and hegemonic art is the one following the codes of the aesthetics of the North, the canon is always confronting the post-abyssal artist with a hostile posture. Insurgent curators, acting as gate openers, are crucial for the recognition of the post-abyssal artist. Insurgent curators distinguish between two types of post-abyssal artists: those who received artistic training in the context of metropolitan sociability and overcame it successfully, and those with other types of (but not excluding metropolitan—Barndt 2011) training.
13. **The post-abyssal artist is an absent artist before becoming an artist of absences.** The post-abyssal artist focuses on those artistic forms and practices occurring on the other side of the line (the side of non-being), i.e., forms and practices that are considered by the aesthetics of the North to be monstrous, blasphemous, primitive, or non-existent. The aesthetics of the South revolve around the creativity of the life experiences and social practices of those populations that are forced to live on the other side of the line—colonial sociability; they focus on their resistances and desistances, on their own ideas about the abyssal line, and the concrete or imagined possibilities of overcoming it. The post-abyssal artist responds deeply and intuitively to the indignity of subjecting human beings to the condition of sub-humanity. She is a creator of humanity, which is tantamount to expanding the possibility of re-imagining our world. As the great Ugandan artist Okot p'Bitek once wrote, the artist “carves his moral standards on wood and stone, and paints his colorful ‘dos and don’ts’ on walls and canvas” (1986: 40). In Europe, Adrian Paci and Carlo Levi are some the best exemplars of an artistic rendition of the abyssal line—the former with his *Centro di Permanenza temporanea*,¹ and the latter with his 1945 book *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (*Christ Stopped at Eboli*), which portrays the unspeakable sub-humanity of the dwellers of the caves in Matera, where he had been exiled by Mussolini. The post-abyssal artist is a consummate practitioner of the sociology of absences.

- 14. The post-abysal artist is a not-yet artist before becoming the artist of the not-yet.** The not-yet artist (Bloch 1995) is an emerging artist. According to Gamedze (2015), it is possible to expand the dimension of art so that “when we talk about art, we are speaking of a conscious, creative approach that is in response to images, and through response, creates its own images.” The post-abysal artist has to struggle for recognition while subverting the rules that govern that very recognition. She specializes in the not-yet, the emergent, the latent, the potential, whatever is on its way to be recognized and to add innovatively to the artistic present. She creates mental ideas and landscapes that transcend the false inevitability of a truncated present. This often entails combining the very ancient resources with the most recent or technologically “advanced” ones. One of the most impressive demonstrations of the capacity of art to cause new alternatives to emerge is the Orchestra of Indigenous Instruments and New Technologies,² created and directed by Alejandro Iglesias Rossi at the University of UNTREF, Buenos Aires. The post-abysal artist is a consummate practitioner of the sociology of emergences.
- 15. The post-abysal artist is an expert at tracing the abyssal line, thereby interrupting the present.** By affirming and denouncing the abyssal line, the post-abysal artist contracts the present and exposes its partiality (read metropolitan sociability, as only this side of the abyssal line). At the same time, she expands the present by showing and inventing the non-official artistic present, along with the forms and practices generated by the resistance against colonial sociability (read the other side of the line). The interruption of the present is grounded on a double exercise of radical remembrance of oppression and radical anticipation of liberation.
- 16. The post-abysal artist thrives on the creation of third values or entities.** Dichotomic polarizations or binaries prevent the monstrosity of colonial sociability from becoming aesthetically intelligible. The post-abysal artist is an expert in imagining third values or entities that stand outside such binaries. The following abyssal binaries are of great importance: society/nature, individual/community, and immanent/transcendent. This means that the post-abysal artist recognizes the deep and deeply entangled interpenetrations generated in the contact zones forged by Eurocentric modernity over the last 500 years. But these third values or entities are the post-abysal way of imagining differences without hierarchies, of moving beyond the colonial, capitalist, and hetero-patriarchal hierarchies. Third values are at the origin of the pluriverse.
- 17. The post-abysal artist is an artist whose art is created *with* rather than *about* or *upon*.** Specializing in absences and emergences, the post-abysal artist creates her art very much as a craftsperson does, and indeed she learns from other craftspersons who do not aspire to become artists. Post-abysal authorship is built upon the ruins of such dichotomies characteristic of the

aesthetics of the North as abstract ideals/concrete artwork, subject/object, and individual/community. The post-abyssal artist is neither an auratic individual nor an undifferentiated cog of the community. Her presence in art is similar to the one envisaged by Okot p'Bitek when he wrote that

the true African artist has his eyes firmly fixed, not to some abstract idea called beauty “up there” as it were, but on the philosophy of life of his society. His voice, the thunder of his drums, the vibrating of her buttocks, and the slashing of the sky with his horn, the wood or stone curved into a figureless figure of a—is it ghost?—are his contributions to the celebration of real life here and now. (1986: 23)

18. **The post-abyssal artist is a cantilever.** Like a cantilever lamp post, the beam of her creativity is fixed at one end and loose at the other. The light is shed by the free end and illuminates not only the two sides of the abyssal line, but the line itself. Depending on the movements of the beam, darkness and light may be equally distributed between metropolitan sociability and colonial sociability. The post-abyssal artist interrupts the modern division that views metropolitan sociability as light and colonial sociability as darkness. The post-abyssal artist sees light in darkness and darkness in light. And her vision goes beyond the imperative of sight, to express multiple emotions and senses.
19. **The post-abyssal artist specializes in struggle, experience, and corporeality.** Specifically, she specializes in struggles of liberation and emancipation, in the experience of abyssal exclusion, the corporeality of enslaved, racialized, and sexualized bodies. From the Arabian Peninsula to the Red Sea, Sudanese cartoonist Abu'Obayda Mohamed has created heart-wrenching pieces that capture the painful reality experienced by the inhabitants of these parts of the world. In his words, “art is not always about pretty things; [it] is about who we are, [it] is the reflection of what is happening in our lives and how it affects our lives.”³
20. **The post-abyssal artist walks on the abyssal line.** No matter how or where the fixed end of the beam of light, sound, or any of the other senses is located, the artist becomes a post-abyssal creative activist provided her art aims at being lived and felt on both sides. This is only possible by walking on the line. Such walking destabilizes the abyssal line and may even dislocate it. The post-abyssal artist works continuously toward the reconfiguration of a new sense of territory, spreading a planetary coexistence that challenges the asymmetric relations of power that still define our present. The post-abyssal artist is an acrobat. She is a refugee who inhabits simultaneously the internment camps and her native home town. In this sense, her art mirrors historical and cultural processes that need to be recognized. It's not just the artistic object that counts, but the processes that constitute it and the way of bringing these processes to the light.

21. **The post-abyssal artist is a monstrous translator.** She translates the abyssal exclusions that characterize colonial sociability into aesthetic motives and forms that are monstrous and intelligible at one and the same time. The monstrosity of the artist consists in showing the ontological degradation and the fabricated absence of which colonial, patriarchal sociability is made. Art is sketching, drawing, painting, performing, and savoring, in order to document, educate, and motivate. An artist like Yinka Shonibare, MBE,⁴ deliberately remakes Europe's past in Africa and what unites Africa's present in Europe. To recuperate, reproduce, and redress the past in this manner is to avoid simple arrangements or rigid attachments. The monstrous historical and cultural flows in Shonibare's works mirror contemporary art with stories of complex belonging.⁵
22. **The post-abyssal artist is an active promoter of new possibilities.** As an amplifier of the not-yet, the post-abyssal artist turns ruins into seeds, invents new territories as liberated zones, and old territories as counter-hegemonic time-spaces. Her ultimate goal is a vision that encompasses all people, while recognizing differences unmarked by any hierarchy; to imagine and give visibility to a new society, a cooperative, loving world, free of oppression and limited only by the imagination. The great task of the post-abyssal artist is to create art which cannot be ignored and which urges us to fight for freedom from oppression. Her subjectivity entails subversion. She trains herself to address problems that cannot be solved under the conditions of modern domination. By doing so, she becomes an unconditional defender of alternatives.

Notes

- 1 See <https://welldesignedandbuilt.com/2012/03/02/adrian-paci-centro-di-permanenza-temporanea/>, accessed in February 2019.
- 2 See <https://untref.edu.ar/mundountref/orquesta-instrumentos-autoctonos-nuevas-tecnologias-xirgu>, accessed in February 2019.
- 3 See <https://www.okayafrika.com/young-sudanese-art-is-fueling-the-protest-revolution/>, accessed in February 2019.
- 4 Ironically, Shonibare's name insists on the historical paradox of his being a member of the British Empire (MBE).
- 5 See https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/yinka_shonibare_mbe/, accessed in February 2019.

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