Embodied Asymmetries: Skin Colour, Policing, and the Everyday Realities of African Postdoctoral Researchers in South-South Knowledge Ecologies

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Extended Abstract/Short Description

International Research Partnerships (IRPs) are increasingly celebrated as vehicles for fostering South-South collaboration and reducing reliance on Euro-American epistemic dominance. Yet, the lived realities of African postdoctoral researchers within these partnerships often reveal a more complex terrain marked by embodied asymmetries, racialised hierarchies, and structural exclusions. This paper interrogates how African postdoctoral researchers in South Africa experience marginalisation not only within academic spaces but also through everyday encounters with state institutions, most visibly the South African Police Service (SAPS) and other security agents.

Drawing on my personal experiences as a Nigerian postdoctoral researcher in South Africa, I highlight the disproportionate surveillance, harassment, and intimidation encountered in public spaces such as bus termini and streets, often justified on the basis of "foreignness" and visibly marked by skin colour. Such encounters are not experienced by European or North American researchers in South Africa, nor to the same extent by some African nationals from non-West African states. These everyday practices of racialised policing constitute a form of embodied exclusion that resonates with the Africa Charter's concerns about epistemic injustice, extraversion, and the dominance of Western-centric norms in global knowledge production.

The paper argues that embodied asymmetries represent a critical but underexplored dimension of IRPs in Africa. While the Africa Charter foregrounds structural inequities in epistemic frameworks, language dominance, and development frames, the lived bodily experience of African scholars, how they are seen, surveilled, and restricted in their mobility deeply conditions their capacity to participate in equitable partnerships. The differential treatment of African versus non-African researchers in South Africa illustrates how IRPs are embedded within wider societal and colonial legacies of race, exclusion, and the geopolitics of identity.

Methodologically, the study employs an autoethnographic approach, situating personal narratives of harassment within broader scholarly debates on epistemic injustice, racialised surveillance, and

postcolonial critiques of South-South collaborations. By linking embodied experiences with the structural dynamics of knowledge production, I aim to provide an interdisciplinary contribution that resonates with the workshop's objectives: to generate insights on power imbalances in IRPs through the analytical lens of the Africa Charter, enriched by the lived realities of early-career African researchers.

This paper advances three propositions. First, IRPs cannot be fully equitable if they fail to recognise the embodied vulnerabilities of African scholars within host societies, where race and nationality shape everyday interactions with state institutions. Second, racialised policing functions as both a metaphor and a material practice of exclusion that mirrors broader epistemic injustices in knowledge production. Third, confronting embodied asymmetries is essential for reimagining IRPs that are genuinely transformative and responsive to African realities.

By foregrounding the interplay of race, embodiment, and epistemic injustice, this paper challenges the narrow framing of IRPs as purely academic transactions. Instead, it situates them within lived, racialised, and contested ecologies of knowledge production. In so doing, it seeks to expand the Africa Charter's framework by integrating embodied asymmetries as a central analytical category, offering a pathway toward more inclusive and contextually grounded South-South research collaborations.

Keywords/Key-Themes: Embodied Asymmetries, Epistemic Injustice, International Research Partnerships (IRPs), Racialised Policing, South-South Knowledge Production