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# 2023 ASR Distinguished Lecture: Decoloniality and Its Fissures. Whose Decolonial Turn?

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## Abstract

This paper examines the fissures within recent decolonial debates, arguing for the privileging of alternative narratives from formerly colonized groups and a shift away from centring colonialism. It calls for the recognition of decolonial struggles whose histories run deep and the need to link the struggles with indigeneity, its poetics of relations, and connectedness. Therefore, decoloniality requires thinking and doing and paying attention to social and economic well-being of hitherto marginalized indigenous communities, while giving due recognition to their poetics of relationality, reciprocity, and conviviality. Drawing on the example of #RhodesMust Fall movement in South Africa, it raises difficult questions around ownership, agency, while pointing to cracks that this contemporary movement surfaced, in spite of its claim to decoloniality.

## Résumé

Cet article examine les fissures au sein des récents débats décoloniaux, plaidant pour privilégier les récits alternatifs des groupes anciennement colonisés et pour s'éloigner de la centralisation du colonialisme. Il appelle à reconnaître les luttes décoloniales dont l'histoire est profonde et à relier les luttes à l'indigénéité, à sa poétique des relations et à sa connectivité. Par conséquent, la décolonialité exige de penser, de faire et de prêter attention au bien-être social et économique des communautés autochtones jusqu'ici marginalisées, tout en reconnaissant leur poétique de la relation, de la réciprocité et de la convivialité. S'appuyant sur l'exemple du mouvement #RhodesMustFall en Afrique du Sud, il soulève des questions difficiles sur la propriété et l'agence tout en soulignant les fissures que ce mouvement contemporain a fait surface en dépit de sa prétention à la décolonialité.

## Resumo

O presente artigo analisa as fissuras que atravessam os recentes debates descoloniais, defendendo que se privilegiem narrativas alternativas provenientes de grupos

anteriormente colonizados e um afastamento do colonialismo centralizador. Apela-se ao reconhecimento das lutas descoloniais, cujas histórias estão profundamente enraizadas, e à necessidade de relacionar essas lutas com a indigenidade, a natureza poética das suas relações e a sua conectividade. Portanto, a descolonialidade exige que se pense e se faça e se preste atenção ao bem-estar social e económico de comunidades indígenas anteriormente marginalizadas, ao mesmo tempo que se reconhece devidamente a natureza poética da sua relacionalidade, reciprocidade e convivialidade. Partindo do exemplo do movimento #RhodesMustFall na África do Sul, levantam-se questões difíceis acerca do direito de propriedade e da agência, ao mesmo tempo que se identificam falhas que este movimento contemporâneo trouxe à superfície, apesar da sua pretensão à descolonialidade.

**Keywords:** decoloniality; indigeneity; fissures; thinking and doing; border-thinking land; indigenous place-thought; ethical relationality

## Introduction: Coloniality and the search for alternative narratives

In her recent text, *Rising Up, Living On* (2023), Catherine Walsh starts her introduction titled "Beginnings" with a quote from Corine Kumar, which reads: "The world needs other stories". Hardly anything new, but nevertheless profound and rings with certain urgency. After all, the Nigerian writer, Chimamanda Adichie, has also cautioned us of the dangers of a single narrative, and her literary father, Chinua Achebe, had told us that "Whenever something stands, something else stands beside it" (Moyers 1989, 333). The three writers are drawing our attention to the complexity of life and the dangers of elevating one narrative to a pedestal in ways that shroud or simply silence others. The workings of colonialism and its power matrix has always been about elevating a single master narrative whose legacy speaks of nothing but devastation. As Walsh writes, "The Pakistani feminist Corinne Kumar reminds us of these stories, while calling forth the many others that we need to exist and re-exist in a world where existences outside and in the fissures and cracks of the dominant story line are denied" (Walsh 2023, 1).

Walsh's point is that we need alternative stories that will unsettle those narratives that coloniality has presented to the world as universal and uncontested. The purpose of such stories, she adds, is to create fissures and cracks within the body of coloniality; to put together dismembered bodies of the colonized space and land in order to create new decolonizing paths. It is for this reason that she argues that coloniality is not a metaphor. "It is embodied, situated, and lived" (2023, 2). In other words, like Frantz Fanon (1967) and Aime Cesaire (1972) before her, colonialism must be confronted and treated as a discourse which fundamentally frames all aspects of thinking, organization, and existence. It is the awareness that colonialism is a fundamental problem that inspires the colonized to privilege their ways of being without seeking approval and recognition from the colonizer. This is the path to decolonial thinking.

It is now taken for granted that decolonization goes way beyond the end of colonization. This is the point that Nelson Maldonado-Torres makes when he

writes, "For decolonial thinking decolonization is less the end of colonialism wherever it has occurred and more the project of undoing and unlearning the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being and of creating a new sense of humanity and forms of interrelationality" (2010, 97). Ngugi wa Thiong'o has made similar compelling arguments in his essays, *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) and *Moving the Centre* (1993). He calls it neo-colonialism and a theme that he takes up in most of his later works of fiction, *Petals of Blood* (1977), *Devil on the Cross* (1982) and *Matigari* (1987), although the neocolonial theme is obliquely mooted in *A Grain of Wheat* (1967). The kind of decolonial project that Maldonado-Torres and Ngugi talk of here will require epistemic, political and ethical interventions, but more importantly, sustained disruptive manoeuvres.

Anibal Quijano, generally regarded as the father of decoloniality, tells us that the objectives of decoloniality involves, among others, the need to recognize that the "instrumentation of reason by the colonial matrix of power produced distorted paradigms of knowledge and undermined the liberating promises of modernity, and by that recognition, realize the destruction of the global coloniality of power" (2000, 452). Decoloniality is therefore synonymous with decolonial thinking and doing (Mignolo 2011, xxiv). It questions the histories of power emerging from Europe, which have always underpinned the logic of Western civilization. It aims to inspire a decolonial culture that seeks to delink itself from reproducing Western hierarchies and, finally, to encourage a framework of applying decolonial methods and practices to all facets of epistemic, social, and political thinking. As Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh argue, "Decoloniality seeks to make visible, open up, and advance radically distinct perspectives and positionalities that displace Western rationality as the only framework and possibility of existence, analysis, and thought" (2018, 17).

More recently and in the face of the grim impact of global warming and climate change, a number of scholars have joined the chorus in calling for alternative ways of dealing with planetary challenges. The French philosopher and environmentalist, Michel Serres, has warned that global climate change calls for new epistemologies that no longer imagine themselves as separate specializations because we need what he calls a "collective ethics in the face of world's fragility" (1995, 78). Serres calls for a kind of restoration of banished knowledges as a response to this challenge; one that understands the importance of the local while acting in response to the important ecological demands of the global. Kevin Gary Behrens (2014) and Achille Mbembe (2016), among others, have argued that African endogenous eco-philosophical positions have not been adequately considered in terms of contributing to the global dialogue on ways to address current climate crises.

The aim of this paper, though, is not to give a rehash of discourses on decoloniality and colonization before it. My aim, without dismissing what Mignolo and Walsh refer to as fissures and cracks of coloniality, is to instead focus on fissures and cracks within decoloniality discourse itself. Their point about fissures and cracks of coloniality is important in so far as they posit these as potential sites of struggle and insurrection. I am nevertheless interested in surfacing some of the silences—the faultlines and glaring oversights that discourses on decoloniality throw up, especially in the context of Africa. I am also

interested in how the recent upsurge on discourses of decoloniality, well-meaning as some of these may be, have been dogged by major contradictions, both in the way the discourses of decoloniality have been framed historically, especially the way it has ended up centring colonialism and Europe. I have in mind, for example, those struggles that were unleashed by the *#RhodesMustFall* movement in my own country of residence, South Africa, and the contradictions that have come to undermine what started in earnest as a project that sought to combine decolonial thinking and doing—theory and practice or activism as its motive force. But I am also interested in the ways in which the so-called decolonial discourse has been annexed in the Global North to a point where one begins to detect the desire to control and frame the terms and conditions of engagement; even of conversation across the divide.

## Challenging colonialism and coloniality as totalizing ideologies of dominance

To begin with, I am always very uneasy with the argument that posits coloniality and colonialism before it, as a discourse that fundamentally frames all aspects of thinking, organization, and existence. The call for re-existence as Mignolo and Walsh do is of course driven by the belief that conditions of existence under coloniality have been totally erased. We now know that this complete erasure was never possible, and as many scholars from Amilcar Cabral (1973) to Mahmood Mamdani (1996) have shown, colonialism was not only experienced by the colonized in uneven ways, but it never fully succeeded in establishing absolute hegemony over the colonized subjects. There was domination, but no hegemony. Hegemony entails not only persuasion but also acceptance of the totality of the colonial power matrix and its reigning ideology (Gramsci 1971). We now know that this was never the case, even within settler economies. As I have argued elsewhere, this understanding of coloniality has "tended to create a dilemma in which we express the desire to have a colonial subject or a former colonial subject that has a rich and complex consciousness, to exercise autonomous agency, and yet remain in the category of victim" (Ogude 2012, 14). Olufemi Taiwo (2022, 7), has also drawn attention to "an absolutisation of colonialism and its supposedly almost undefeatable capacity to bend the will of the colonised," adding that this "approach denies or at least discounts the agency of the colonised." What is being challenged here is the idea of colonialism that was resolutely colonial, despite the contradictions of its modernizing projects and its insistence on policing the boundaries of change. Coloniality and modernity are, unproblematically, reduced to two sides of the same coin: a colonial project defined purely by race and racism. This reading of colonialism and coloniality ignores the fact that colonialism's interventionist power was often shaped by the local actions of the colonized. And yet the view that colonial discourse and its translation into coloniality readily contains its challenges and tensions, continues to persist.

My point is that a number of scholars of postcolonial societies often work with the assumption that colonialism is the only history of these societies. There is

often a blanket of silence over what came before colonial rule or those indigenous practices and hierarchies that existed alongside colonialism and interacted with it. Any attempts to pay close attention to these repressed facets of postcolonial societies is often dismissed as a form of nostalgia and attempts at recovery in order to valorize or romanticize the past. If we agree with Mudimbe (1988) that there is no dead past and that we carry our past with us, then we should remember that colonialism did not inscribe itself on a clean slate, and it cannot therefore account for all that exists in "postcolonial" societies. Here we would do well to heed the voice of the Colombian writer, Juan Gabriel Vasquez, when he cautions in a BBC Hard Talk interview (July 11, 2024) that "There is no living future with a dead past." More often than not the food, or music, or languages, or arts of any culture that we think of as postcolonial evoke earlier histories or shades of culture that elude or simply pre-date the "colonial" moment as we know it. And I am fully aware that scholars such as Gayatri Spivak (1988) and Kwame Anthony Appiah (1991), have warned against how the so-called nostalgia to lost origins runs the danger of playing into the designs of imperialism and, that is, to deemphasize its impact on the colonized communities. Spivak is of course interested in what she calls "worlding," which involves both the violation and creation of the "third world" by colonial powers. Similarly, Appiah argues that the tendency to eulogize the precolonial past is "nativist" and a romanticization of a cultural past, which has become a preoccupation of some postcolonial intellectuals. But as the late Senegalese writer, Sembene Ousmane (1981), has cautioned us, the turn to the past need not always take the path of excavation nor an act of extraction, but a creative process of building an alternative culture from both the ruins of colonialism itself and from those living cultural formations that the colonized continue to carry with them. At any rate, colonialism did not just create a "Third World"; there are multiple worlds that were created out there, but those worlds were not defined exclusively by the colonized people's relations to colonialism. What arguments such as Spivak's and Appiah's do, is to flatten a range of competing histories and worlds out there that thrived both within and outside colonial tutelage and instead privilege colonialism as their defining features. And yet, as some African historians and indeed a number of colonized peoples have shown, colonialism was but "a minor episode" within a long and complex history (Ajayi 1968; Vaughan 1993, 47). Ajayi saw colonialism as an isolated episode that marked a break in the otherwise continuous exercise of African political agency. Whatever we may think of Ajayi's remark, he was right in asking us to question the total investment and power with which we have treated colonialism, as if Africans or the colonized had no life before that which colonialism tried to impose on them. Adu Boahen, that foremost of African historians, and the editor of the UNESCO history of Africa, "saw African societies in the late nineteenth century as dynamic, moving toward a form of modernity that retained sovereignty but selectively engaged with European commerce, religion, and education" (1985, 1521).

In my view, decoloniality as a conceptual tool suffers from some of the limitations of postcolonial theory before it. Postcolonial theory as many critics have observed was always totalizing and seeking to collapse difference far too easily. John McLeod (2000), for example, has drawn attention to how,

postcolonialism, through its reliance on Western theoretical models, tends to replicate and reinforce the colonialist structures it sets out to dismantle, and in relation to English, it "creates a ghetto for literature from once-colonised countries within English departments and degree schemes" (249). But perhaps more importantly McLeod questions its over-dependence on anti-foundational theories of knowledge that overlook the material socio-economic conditions that remain "the foundation of reality and determine how we live our lives" (257), thus often collapsing difference, especially the distinction between different regions and countries. McLeod, concludes that in its preoccupation with cultural processes, it has singularly failed to deal decisively with pressing issues of economic and class domination.

We now know that colonialism may have been spread across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and yet its practice and legacies remained deeply varied and uneven, although they shared some important features. If postcolonial theory has been accused of homogenizing colonial experience, decoloniality in its current form tends to face the same problem: the tendency to shift the focus away from specific geographies and institutions to individuals and their subjectivities; to shift away from a Global South preoccupation to a Global North preoccupation in which the latter provides the grammar and terms of engagement within decolonial discourse. It is a strategic ploy to usurp the terms and conditions of engagement and rob the Global South of their agency. In this sense both decoloniality and postcoloniality run the risk of becoming a vague and generalized condition of people anywhere and everywhere, and the specificities of different geographies do not matter. This is precisely Surren Pillay's (2021) argument that in drawing on decolonial theory as it travels from South America, one runs the risk of collapsing major differences that marked the actual manifestations of colonial practice in a number of countries in Africa and, in particular, the South African experience. His argument is that if French colonialism in South America pushed for assimilation policy, in a country like South Africa the emphasis was rarely on assimilation, if any, but on racial difference.

Decoloniality, just like postcolonial theory before it, is useful only in indicating a general process with some shared features across the globe. But if it is uprooted from specific geographies, decoloniality cannot become a useful tool in unravelling the workings of colonialism and its persistent discourses across the globe. Instead, the term begins to obscure the very relations of domination that it seeks to uncover. And yet, it has to be admitted—and this is where I part ways with Pillay—that the starting point for assimilation, wherever it was practiced, was always racial difference. The French and the Portuguese saw themselves as different and therefore the process of "humanizing" the colonized and drawing them closer was only possible through an instrumentalized form of assimilation. The colonized had to aspire to be "French" if they were to claim any affinity with French "civilization." Besides, assimilation as a colonial policy was not confined to Latin America as Pillay argues; it extended to the Caribbean, French West Africa, and indeed, to North Africa as well. Aime Cesaire's rebellion against French assimilationist policy, best captured in his extended poem, *Return to My Native Land* (1956), was the clearest disavowal of assimilation. It is not entirely

correct to dismiss the brand of Latin American decolonial theory as inadequate in understanding the problem of colonialism in Africa solely on the basis of different practices of colonialism such as assimilation. It is now taken for granted that even in instances where enormous emphasis was placed on difference, especially racial difference, there was always attempts made, even if limited as in British colonies and apartheid South Africa, to assimilate the "natives" into the cultures of the settlers. The British, for example, experimented with different forms of education in Kenya, starting with vernacular medium, that would later be referred to as Bantu education in South Africa, to emphasis on practical and technical skills for the natives, and eventually settling for the development of a select black elite, after the Indian experiment, that would champion its values. The English language syllabus was central to this project in acculturation of the natives into English values through a deliberate denigration of the so-called native cultures and the privileging of the English literary canon. Even South Africa's benign attempts to transform the natives while keeping them in their homelands and separate spaces, was characterized by an attempt to impose Afrikaans as the medium of instruction, leading to the 1976 Soweto revolt. The limitations of decolonial theory have to move beyond perceived differences in colonial policies to the specific modes of engagement by the colonized that the local conditions permitted.

I do agree with Quijano (2000, 533) that the history of decolonization has always been that of "unsettling" the settler; it has always been about the struggle to topple the coloniality of power and its constitutive matrix, wherever they are found. In other words, throughout the history of struggle, and one that persists to the present, decoloniality has always been defined by persistent, even if uneven, forms of insurrection and political activism. This is where decolonial theory differs fundamentally from postcolonial theory because the latter tends to gesture towards accommodation and a search for a common denominator. It is, therefore, difficult to agree entirely with Fanon and Cesaire, when they argue that the native or the Negro is made—through political and social instruments—not born. This figure of a passive native that is simply created through structures of colonialism is hard to accept, even when we agree that there is a colonial situation that casts roles. But the colonized are not doomed to accept these roles as the history of anti-colonial struggle has shown—the colonial matrix of power could be challenged, deflected, and undermined, even if within limits. That the colonizer was always forced to adapt its strategies in the face of demands and challenges of the colonized is now undisputed, and in many instances, forcing the colonizer to adjust and modify its boundaries of control and authority. In such a context, one cannot talk of outright domination, let alone hegemonic control. But perhaps more disturbing as Eileen Julien (2000, 158) has noted, "A self-critical capacity, particularly with respect to the past, is rarely attributed in postcolonial literary studies [read decolonial discourse], to indigenous groups, especially those in largely oral societies." And this brings me to the important place of indigeneity in the decolonial struggle.

## Indigeneity as a fundamental condition for decoloniality

I want to linger on the issue of indigeneity because I believe if there is any major fissure in decolonial discourse as it is theorized today, it is the absence of indigeneity as a fundamental condition for decoloniality. The Native American poet, Natalie Diaz (2022), has reminded us that there can be no radical humanities and humanity without indigenous knowledge, describing indigeneity as a practice of that place we are in; the space we occupy, even under colonial occupation that is always complimentary to itself. She adds that there can be no decoloniality without recourse to indigeneity. "As humanists," she asks, "how can we imagine the future if we don't know where we are; if we don't know whom we have displaced?"[1] Indeed, why do we pretend to love the land and nature without accepting the land's people? She argues that the institutions that structure our lives have been taught to be silent on these issues, especially those that touch on indigenous people. And yet relationality as found in indigenous philosophies such as *Ubuntu* / *Utu* or *Buen Vivir* teaches us that it is about, "connections and correlations" (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 2; Ogude 2018; 2019).

Diaz argues that the tendency to see indigenous peoples as people of the past that simply need to be assimilated into white modernity, is one such huge lie that the discourses of decoloniality in its current form refuses to confront. Instead of seeing indigenous people as always becoming, we see them as static. This is one aspect of indigeneity that we are not fully ready to deal with; and that is the notion of indigeneity as understood to represent, for example, Native Americans, the Māori of New Zealand and Aboriginal peoples in settler colonies like the USA and Australia. And it is not enough to study these groups, and to acknowledge that they have been in a state of emergency for decades. What is needed is to bring their voices to the fore; to privilege their narratives; their histories—a problem that we know only too well in Africa. Zoe Todd has captured this problem eloquently:

> Indigenous bodies, stories, knowledge, and "contacts" ("informants", "participants" or "interlocutors") act as a kind of currency or capital that is concentrated in the hands of non-indigenous scholars and administrators. Therefore, overwhelmingly, it is still white people who control the flow of this knowledge and the parameters of these relationships. (Todd 2017, 386)

I am not suggesting that it is impossible to talk about indigenous worldviews from "outside," and to engage in dialogue. My point is that, without an indigenous and nonwhite power base there is the real risk that, "decolonisation becomes a domesticated industry of ideas" as Sium (2012, IV), reminds us, one "that is removed from the acutely situated logics of indigenous and non-white activism and scholarship" (Esson et al. 2017, 386). Moreover, coloniality's hierarchy of primarily white racial superiority, and indigenous and non-white inferiority, are rendered invisible and left unchecked. Therefore, Olufemi Taiwo's (2022, 7) argument that privileging of indigenous voices amounts to the surrender of African agency and their ability to repurpose received ideas cannot be

further from the truth. The counterargument is that African agency need not reside simply in their ability to mimic and repurpose received knowledges, but also in the ability to allow their repressed and known traditions to enter into dialogue with borrowed ideas. In my view, epistemic reconstitution is impossible without taking recourse to banished or repressed knowledges of indigenous and formerly colonized communities, especially when we accept that settler colonialism works through erasure. The deliberate attempts to recover indigenous voices and knowledges is precisely because indigenous formations were the target of epistemic violence, which was directed not simply at its knowledge systems, but also at traditional structures of leadership, to empty them of any power and authority.

I want to posit here that we need to see indigeneity not simply as an epistemology that seeks to reimagine alternatives to colonial thinking and practice, but more importantly as a method: a methodology and pedagogy of conversation—dialogue. What the majority of indigenous thought systems encourage, as I have pointed out, is the principle of relationality. Indigenous modes of thinking offer different ways of reading our worlds and the constitutive social, cultural, political, and spiritual relations. They stress relationality, connections, reciprocity, community building, sharing, social responsibility, and generosity as key to the process of coming to know.[2] They are therefore best suited to challenge and disrupt the falsely constructed supremacy of Western science. And although I agree that Western intellectual traditions may be useful and relevant in understanding our world today, I have to submit that no one knowledge system can offer a complete understanding of the world. Indeed, Western intellectual heritage and rich traditions, including philosophical ideas, have historically borrowed from and been influenced by other intellectual traditions and vice versa. I also recognize that Western intellectual traditions are not homogeneous, and aspects of these may illuminate particular ways of knowing and understanding our world. The problem as I see it, is their will to dominate, and their assumed supremacy, and legitimacy that works to oppress—and delegitimize—other ways of knowing, thinking, being, living, and imagining. Its hegemony and tyranny of ideas has disproportionately devalued other bodies of knowledge as well as damaged and denied the humanity of whole communities. Achille Mbembe describes this as "A Eurocentric canon [which] attributes truth only to the Western way of knowledge production. It is a canon that disregards other epistemic traditions" (2016, 32). This is why, as Todd argues, the Western academy needs to "dismantle the underlying heteropatriarchal and white supremacist structures that shape its current configurations and conversations" (2015, 247).

If we agree with scholars like Mignolo that "the modern foundation of knowledge is territorial and imperial" (2012, 205) and Escobar (2004, 210) that subaltern intellectual communities have the "potential to foster alternatives to Western modernity," then we need to encourage not just the process of delinking colonial modes of knowledge production, but also the need to centre other alternative ways of thinking rooted in indigeneity and local knowledges of the marginalized communities. Mignolo and Tlostanova (2006) refer to this alternative as "border thinking"; the kind of thinking that is not circumscribed by the

limits that Western modes of knowledge production imposes on our ways of knowing. This kind of thinking should involve an engagement with multiple epistemologies, but which also involves nonreified understanding of indigenousness and indigeneity as a source of knowing.[3] It implies that Western attempts to offer a universal idea of indigeneity, even when indigenous scholars have rejected any attempts to offer a common and ossified definition of indigeneity is flawed. Therefore, definitions that insist on fixing indigeneity in the past rather than seeing it as an active process of becoming—of resistance and insurrection—with multiple political horizons need to be challenged. Similarly, Sarah Hunt (2014) refers to Euro-Western academic treatments of indigenous knowledge as a form of epistemic violence, in particular the ways that indigenous ontologies are reified and distorted in the structures of knowledge emanating from European and North American academy.

Indigeneity is also about land and place as knowledges that are not fossilized or essentialized in time and space. Land is inextricably tied to indigeneity, and the saliency of Indigeneity rests on its connections to the land, whether land is taken both concretely and metaphorically, allowing bodies to implicate space in the act of learning or coming into being. It evokes more than a physical presence. It is a spiritual place and a spiritually centred understanding of social space. This is in part what Vanessa Watts (2013, 20–34) has described as "Indigenous Place-Thought," which readily compares with discourses on "ontology of dwelling" that has been widely theorized by the British anthropologist Tim Ingold (1996; 2000). Indigenous place-thought "is based upon the premise that land is alive and thinking, and that humans and non-humans derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts" (Watts 2013, 21). Land in Watts's view, has agency, thereby disrupting hierarchies of agency, which seeks to define land—soil—only in relation to humans. Land, therefore, is about place, environments, water, sky, and soils. It is about physical and emotional attachment—a place that bestows on us culture, histories, and memories. Indeed, the quintessential anti-colonial struggle was always about land, and although we want to de-emphasize it as we privilege epistemology, it is the struggle about land as an ancestral resource with all that it embodies that defines the real substance of decoloniality.

To put land's significance into perspective, we only need to understand that capitalist development is grounded on the politics and economics of extraction that advances the destruction of lands-beings, and with it, knowledges embedded in indigenous lands.[4] Is it any surprise that we now talk about the destruction of lands in Africa, Asia, and South America as if this is just the sheer act of climate change, an undifferentiated anthropogenic process delinked from economic imperialism? In order to engage a historical model of ecology and an epistemology of space and time, Wilson Harris suggests that we must enter "a profound dialogue with the landscape" (1962, 75). We can also argue that histories that are rooted in land, in its broadest sense, have always provided the vital and dynamic methodologies for understanding the transformative impact of empire and the anticolonial / decolonial epistemologies it tries to suppress.

We need to ask ourselves why our story-tellers, in particular those from former colonies and settler economies, keep going back to the land.[5] The answer is simple. We cannot address historical and racial violence without

understanding literary representation of geographies among postcolonial writers, and they teach us one thing, and that is that the land is "saturated by traumas of conquest" (Harris 1962, 8). Since it is in the nature, so to speak, of colonial powers to suppress the history of their own violence, the land and even the ocean become all the more crucial as recuperative sites of postcolonial historiography. That is why Diaz reminds us that the conditions of occupation are always complimentary of its occupants and its "furniture." Is it surprising that the economics of human ecology, which has been a vital historical aspect of postcolonialism, remains overlooked, not just by dominant forms of Anglo-American thought, but equally, within discourses of decoloniality?

An exaggerated preoccupation with epistemological issues within the discourses of decoloniality, now acknowledged as an off-shoot of postcolonial theory (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020), has meant that environmental issues that affect the poor in the Global South, for example, take a back seat. The point is that when we focus as we should on cultural and epistemological aspects of decoloniality, these should never be at the expense of economic decolonization focusing on the material realities of postcolonial societies. Taiwo (2022) is justified in being critical of the undue emphasis placed on culture by decoloniality in its current form. There is need for greater attention to be paid to issues of economic dependency, resource extraction, labour exploitation, and trafficking of human beings—now seen as neo-slavery—that involves some of the most vulnerable among the colonized: women and children, largely from the Global South. All these, I argue, are forms of late coloniality.

Decoloniality in its more recent form has increasingly become a buzz word, dogged with conceptual ambiguity and lack of theoretical precision. Todd has cautioned us thus: "Whenever a term or trend is on everyone's lips, I ask myself: 'What other story could be told here? What other language is not being heard? Whose space is this, and who is *not* here?'" (2015, 244). The danger has been an attempt to annex decoloniality for all sorts of ill-defined struggles, leading to gross contradictory interpretations. This has made it easier to co-opt coloniality discourse and to package it into hollow institutional structures, for example, which focus on notions like "diversity and inclusion," but which sometimes simply tinker around with long-standing structural issues, while steering clear of any attempts to shake the power matrix at the core of coloniality. A good example is the preoccupation with name-change of buildings and street names in the former colonies, often named after nationalist politicians. While one is alert to how settler colonialism worked through a deliberate saturation of public spaces by encoding an ecology of imperial signs on the landscape, including built-in-environment, and through a mapping of local geographies in ways that undermine or simply delete local signs for meaning-making, a mere reversal of these signs is not sufficient. One must still ask who occupies those buildings; whose economies are served by the newly baptized roads and streets. As long as the male white figures continue to dominate the public spaces within the academy, for example, the academy's structures will continue to reproduce whiteness in Europe and North America, and indeed in former colonial outposts such as South Africa. So "diversity and inclusion," if not carefully applied to bring about radical change with reference

to heteropatriarchal and white supremacist structures that shape the terms and conditions of dialogue, will always end up entrenching those hierarchies embedded in the dominant modes of knowledge production, especially in contexts where white men continue to hold sway as thought leaders. Mbembe rightly calls this

> "epistemic coloniality"—that is, the endless production of theories that are based on Eurocentric traditions ... produced nearly always by Europeans or Euro-American men who are the only ones accepted as capable of reaching universality; they involve a particular anthropological knowledge, which is a process of knowing about Others—but a process that never fully acknowledges these Others as thinking and knowledge-producing subjects. (2016: 36)

This hierarchy, for example, is most evident in the way white men reproduce whiteness through what has been described as a "citational relational" practice; that is, the practice of citing white men generation after generation, thus reinforcing the white patriarchal Eurocentrism that is dominant in most disciplines (Ahmed 2012).

In the Global North, the grammar of "diversity" has also been used to focus on the interests of white women in the name of gender parity, while inclusion is deployed to assimilate people of colour into institutions that in their structure and architecture, continue to serve white and elitist interests. Decoloniality has become a tool for selective breeding and selective inclusion, while practices of the past remain unchanged. Money can be "invested" in projects and academic work that theorize decoloniality, as long as they do not involve unsettling long-held intellectual traditions and have no links to grassroots movements. In other words, decoloniality has been hollowed out of activism and its insurrectionist spirit, and yet as Tuck and Yang (2012, 3) remind us, "Decoloniality is a radical challenge to 'unsettle' the architecture of privilege." It must involve the decolonization of mind and revolutionary action as Fanon (1967) and Ngugi (1986) argue. This is what Mignolo and Walsh describe as "doing-thinking, with the people, collectives and communities that enact decoloniality as a way, option, standpoint, analytic, project, practice, and praxis; that is the activity of thinking and theorising from praxis" (2018, 9). They add: "Of interest here is how those who live the colonial difference think theory, theorize practice, and build, create, and enact concrete processes, struggles, and practices of resurgent action and thought, including in the spheres of knowledge, territory-land, state, re-existences, and life itself" (9).

The challenge here is that decoloniality is often discussed in highly theoretical terms, with less focus on practical, actionable steps for achieving decolonization in "real-world" contexts. Similarly, the homogenization of the Global South has a way of blurring the differences and challenges within the global South itself. The assumption that the structures of decoloniality and its layered manifestations are similar among the colonized, regardless of the specificity of their contexts, can be misleading. But it also implies a blanket silence over, for

example, the struggles of Native Americans in the USA, Khoisan in Southern Africa and the Aborigines in Australia, among others, as I have pointed out. It has become so convenient to engage in anti-racism, especially anti-Black racism, while decoupling these from indigeneity.

In South Africa, my country of residence, we have collapsed "diversity and inclusion" into an omnibus called "Transformation." In fact, for an institution to demonstrate that they are changing, they must have a transformation office and a transformation forum, which quite often is simply preoccupied with gatekeeping and number crunching of who is allowed in and who is kept out. Diversity discourse often ends up being a focus on nonintersectional notions of either gender or race. The idea of diversity in South Africa, for example, degenerated into the politics of black insiders and black outsiders. This has meant a crude political and economic exclusion of the African Other. While the #RhodesMust Fall movement drew its inspiration from Black Consciousness leaders like Steve Biko and an array of Pan-Africanist thinkers such as Kwame Nkrumah, this did not stop the Fallist Movement, as it came to be known, from claiming the university space as South African and therefore belonging to South African blacks. Increasingly, we started observing a marked blurring line between what started as a radical movement seeking to topple the colonial matrix of power within the institutions of higher learning and the marauding xenophobic or shall I call it Afro-phobic crowd that hounded the immigrants, specifically, the African immigrants across the nation (Mbembe 2016, 32). A narrowly defined nationalist struggle for control was increasingly supplanting the initial impetus to free us all from the trappings of apartheid and colonial thinking and their legacies embodied in statues like that of Cecil Rhodes—the symbolic edifice of colonialism that was rightfully targeted—and a colonially embedded curriculum that alienated many black students, often leading to high attrition rate among blacks at undergraduate level in the name of keeping standards. Decoloniality had morphed into a diversity issue that showed no interest in black solidarity or even intersectional class interests of the underclass across the continent and beyond. Indeed, the neoliberal agenda of corporatization of the universities and curriculum change that were the root cause of some of the problems the Fallist Movements were fighting against, had taken a back stage in a context where a narrow affirmation of blackness, in this instance black South Africans, became the default position masked under the rhetoric of decoloniality. It was not enough to have blacks from the rest of the African continent as professors. And one could understand how the legacy of apartheid and its devastation on the black population had left what Mignolo refers to as the "colonial wound" that needed urgent attention; a wound that an outsider who had never experienced apartheid could hardly appreciate, let alone come close to understanding the embodied experiences of black students. But the call for radical change sat uneasily with the anti-African sentiments that undermined any talk of solidarity among the oppressed blacks. One also needs to understand the role of the African Other in these struggles; often playing the role of a by-stander and prone to being co-opted as the reasonable; judicious and following the path of non-violence, order, and reason, while being paraded as a model of what a disciplined African can achieve. But perhaps most disturbing was the silence on the land issue, which

ought to be at the heart of all decolonial projects. The *Fallist Movements* were by and large preoccupied with narrow elite interests revolving around free tertiary education, and that is in spite of the painful reality that free and universal education has not been realized at foundational level.

Within the academy there has been a worrying fixation with epistemology rather than a shift towards praxis that both reveals and seeks to address how forms of violence and "microaggressions" experienced by indigenous and racialized groups within the academy and in everyday life have become normalized and officially sanctioned by institutional arrangements (see Mbembe 2016; Tate 2014; Tejeda, Espinoza, and Gutierrez 2003). To explain my point, let me go back to the example of the *#Rhodes Must Fall* (RMF) movement, which started at the University of Cape Town. The movement began in March 2015 with the agitation against the statue of Cecil Rhodes, which soon became the rallying point for transformation at the university. In their view, this symbol represented those violent memories of British colonialism in Southern Africa (Ogude, 2023). The protests included silent marches and organized demonstrations that finally pushed the university to remove the statue. With the removal of the statue in April 2015, #RMF continued to situate itself right inside other decolonization debates. These debates morphed into various social discourses and decolonization debates, resulting in the collective name *#Fallist Movement*, that would spread to other campuses in South Africa and beyond (Kasembeli, 2020).

My point though is that, to realize its goals the students moved beyond theory and coupled their struggle with various forms of activism: public protests, debates, demonstrations, public conversations, overnight vigils, chanting, occupying buildings and disrupting meetings (Kasembeli, 2020)—some worrying contradictions within the movement notwithstanding. And yet, when the University of the Western Cape organized a discussion forum, titled "The University and its Worlds"—a flagship project on critical thought in African humanities hosted on the occasion of the International Consortium of Critical Theory workshop—it was disrupted.

The meeting was convened by Judith Butler and Premesh Lalu at the Centre for Humanities Research at the University of the Western Cape. This event hosted a panel discussion, which included high-flying intellectual luminaries such as Judith Butler, Wendy Brown, David Theo Goldberg, and Mbembe on 26 May 2016. There was a marked air of expectation, based on the names and stature of these scholars. Goldberg argued that the university had shifted from being a space for public consumption, to one for the middle classes — making it a supply and demand enterprise. Brown spoke about the corporatization of the university, manifest in investor conduct/shareholder valuation, that encourages an obsession with ratings in order to enhance value for investors. Butler began by acknowledging the critical importance of the students' movements in questioning colonial history and defined the university as a place where radical critiques can be generated, adding that "a change is not quite imaginable without a profound disruption", proposing "disruption as a point of departure for a new university" (Kasembeli 2020, 322).

In a performance of theatrical ironies, Kasembeli writes, "The meeting would end unceremoniously when, during Q&A, a group of students refused to hand

over the microphone to the facilitator and rejected attempts by the panel to respond to their questions" (2020, 322). The professors were silenced and were led out when the students ultimately started chanting, bringing the discussions to a halt, as the staff and a section of students reportedly watched in disbelief.

How does one read and even start to justify this kind of disruption as an act of refusal—resistance and activism all rolled into one? Here is a context / space in which black students are calling for their voices to be heard, for inclusion of their own, and a predominantly white panel enters, telling them how to do it. The white faces of Butler, Brown, and Goldberg, never mind their well-known radical profile, nevertheless represented what the black students resented—an academic hierarchy defined along racial lines. Their embodied experience was that of a university with few or no black university professors from their communities. The absence of black professors at the university and a decolonized curriculum that speaks to their experiences, was for these students, part of colonial and apartheid legacies of racial privileges, justification for white supremacy and exploitation. Were these the haunting ghosts in the psyche of these black students? How did these well-meaning intellectuals fail to see that they were the wrong actors on this troubled stage? For the students, holding on to the microphone was a metaphor for reclaiming their voice: the representation that black communities demand and deserve in the discussion and dissemination of knowledge in the South African university of the twenty-first century. It was in fact the tension between "high" theory and the practices of the daily reckonings of black students that could not fit neatly into an "orderly" discourse that was being demanded of them. It was also about who should speak for the black Other. As Suren Pillay (2021, 397), commenting on the specific case of South African education has observed, "the experience of a generation entering the university after 1994, in particular at the formerly white liberal universities, was an experience of subtle and alienating forms of racial discrimination that the formal end of apartheid in 1994 did not square with."

## Whose decolonial turn?

I want to use the above drama that unfolded at the University of the Western Cape to make some salient points about ownership of the decolonizing process and the creation of the space where alternative stories can find expression. Quite often, even when well-meaning, we may risk alienating those on whose behalf we purport to speak. The scholars that I refer to above really nailed down the precise problems that confronted the students, but in seeking to speak for them, they were engaged in a form of epistemic violence. The students still remained outsiders to matters that for them were embodied experiences, very close to the bone. At any rate similar demands, when made by students, are often seen as unrealistic and highly problematic. The speakers talking about similar issues were afforded the audience by the academic staff, who started walking out, one by one, as the students stood up to engage the visiting scholars. In a striking irony, the eminent scholars were accorded the legitimacy that the students were denied. And although the speakers had called for disruption of the university's

regime of doing things, theirs were disembodied voices and lacking the kind of action that students were calling for. The decolonial turn, I wish to submit, had been hijacked by the professors who could be tolerated by the majority of their audience, even though they talked of the same issues that often rattled and kept the same audience on edge. It amounted to an intellectual posture, which posed no threat to the enduring liberal structures of the university, hidden under the cloak of order, freedom of speech, intellectual tolerance, and academic decorum for engagement.

The second thing is that the university space is by its very nature elitist and keeping the discourse within the boundaries of an enclosed hall signalled an imprisonment of ideas and the freezing of the struggle within the space where it could be governed by the rules of orderliness and reason—Western rationality—detached from the daily struggles of the students. It was cold theory; thinking without doing—without action.

Finally, the students, like the professors they detest, had themselves reduced the struggles to personal interests, in ways that did not always coincide with the interests of the struggling people outside the academy. The disconnect between the demands of the students and the challenges faced out there by the poor, is symptomatic of decolonial struggles that are not rooted in intersectional challenges of the wider society. So, the struggles, whether these took the form of *#FeesMustFall* or curriculum change or the language debate, were fundamentally engaged in the war of the privileged. My point is that the decolonial turn as it is conceived within the academy, may appear radical, but it lacks a soul and a sustained push to connect it to the wider problems of economic deprivation, extraction, environmental degradation and dependency, and struggles about land among indigenous and non-white groups. It remains an arrested decolonization.

## Conclusion

So, who gains when these gaps in decoloniality are opened up? Our challenge during this anthropogenic age, is to surface those alternative ways of thinking that have been deliberately excluded throughout history, and often through violence. Of significance are those localized, ecologically friendly forms of knowledge that have been delegitimized in favour of logics of extraction and exploitation, often masked under "universalism" and "development" (see Bang and Kolodziejczyk 2012; de la Cadena 2015; Power 2022). The challenge going forward is to acknowledge the deficit in Western scholarship as a number of scholars have argued (Mbembe 2001; Dabashi 2015; Mignolo and Walsh 2018) and to embrace these alternative ways of meaning-making.

To account for the deficit in Western scholarship, we need a decolonial episteme and method that allows for the coexistence of—and conversation between—multiple epistemologies ("multiple-epistemes"), but more importantly to amplify critiques and thinking on different scales, from local communities, indigenous peoples, and non-European and non-state intellectual traditions. This calls for what Dwayne Donald (2009, 6) refers to as "ethical

relationality," that is, the awareness that despite our diverse and varied place-based cultures and knowledge systems, we live in a world together, not just in relation to other human communities, but more importantly in relation to other nonhumans, and therefore must constantly think and act with reference to those relationships. In his view, ethical relationality is rooted in "ecological imagination," underpinned by balance and reciprocity, which most indigenous modes of thinking espouse. We cannot decolonize heteropatriarchal ways of thinking and practice simply through dominant knowledge systems that have held sway for centuries, while other knowledges are simply banished, repressed, or denigrated. In the context of African environments and societies we now know that the impact of colonial interventions and legacies was underpinned by European denigration and displacement of local knowledges developed over centuries in conjunction with local ecosystems (see Tilley 2011; McCann 2005; Ross, 2017), by literally pushing some of them underground. The answer, as I have attempted to show, is embracing alternative ways of thinking, but underpinned by action—a sustained struggle for change and renewal.

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## Notes

1. My references to Natalie Diaz are based on the notes taken during her lecture to the Consortium for Humanities Centres and Institutes (CHCI) on November 30, 2022 and subsequent verification of the details of the lecture made available to me by the Executive Director of the CHCI in October 2023, while preparing this article.
2. See my own elaboration on the issues in my works on Ubuntu philosophy, which attempt to theorize not simply our connections and interdependence as humans, but also our human and nonhuman relationships (Ogude 2018; 2019). See also BBC REEL interview on the concept of Ubuntu, February 24, 2022: https://www.bbc.co.uk/reel/video/p0bqvs1f/the-philosophy-that-can-change-how-you-look-at-life; James Ogude, "Philosophy in a Nutshell Part 5: An Interview by David Routledge on 'The Philosopher's Zone,'" ABC Radio, Australia, Sunday, November 2020: https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/philosopherszone; Dr. Maria Isabel Perez Ramos in conversation with Professor James Ogude on "Ubuntu and the Principle of Co-Agency in African Ecology," at Conference Streams Transformative Environmental Humanities, Stockholm, Sweden, August 4–8, 2020; "Ubuntu and the Principle of Co-Agency in African Ecology," https://www.meetstreams.com/schedule/6-august-the-conversation/, or directly through our YouTube channel at: https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=0PZp9jkG7Ns&feature=emb_logo&fbclid=IwAR17mcH5fRNfvAJxzREAQ9KvIzz8ewsLUfGxEWE3kqLHFoV4dxZiZ5f0rLA
3. Achille Mbembe (2016, 37) argues that the notion of universal knowledge for humanity is only possible "via a horizontal strategy of openness to dialogue among different epistemic traditions." See also Ngugi wa Thiong'o's chapter on "Cultural Dialogue for a New World" in *Moving the Centre* (1993, 42–46).

4. See another compelling argument in Cajetan Iheka's *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature* (2018), in which he demonstrates how colonialism worked to create the artificial divide between Africans and their environment. The separation of the human from nature inaugurated a perverse attitude towards nature, in which proximity to nature was portrayed as backward and anti-modern.
5. See, for example, the fiction of these African writers, especially from settler economies, and the way they keep going back to the trope of land in their works: Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1967; 1987); J. M. Coetzee (1999); Zakes Mda (2000); Yvonne Vera (2002); and Charles Mungoshi (1975).

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