

Symposium: Why Epistemic Decolonization?

Why decolonize knowledge and philosophy? Pascah Mungwini proposes that epistemic decolonization should be implemented to remain true to the spirit of philosophy and to the idea of humanity. Aaron Creller, Michael Monahan, and Esme Murdock focus on different aspects of Mungwini's proposal in their individual responses. Creller suggests some "best practices" so that comparative epistemology can take into account the parochial embeddedness of universal reason. While Monahan underscores that world philosophy as a project must openly acknowledge its own incompleteness and its instantiation in different world philosophies, Esme Murdock uses Glissant's thoughts to make a case for the right to opacity as a strategy for subverting the dominating power of Euroamerican reason. In his reply, Mungwini underscores that philosophy will be able to increase the amount of justice, beauty, and truth in this world only when its practitioners begin to exhibit genuine pluralism in their work.

Key words: conceptual decolonization; epistemic decolonization; epistemic liberation; epistemicide; Glissant; parochial universalism; translation; world philosophies

The Quest for Epistemic Liberation: What Can be Done to be True to Both Philosophy and to Humanity?¹

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The history of philosophy as an exclusive and exclusionary discourse and its projection as a European gift to the world needs no further elaboration save to emphasize that the consequences of that skewed narrative remain with us to this day. The question of epistemic liberation must be understood within a historical-philosophical context informed by, on one hand, epistemological assumptions about what counts as knowledge and, on the other, ontological suspicions concerning our parity as human beings. Perhaps these are two sides of the same coin. Just who and what counts as being human is central to understanding the historical conspiracy to equate the provenance of knowledge with a particular geographical place and segment of humanity. However, the search for knowledge and even truth has never been a preserve of any one particular category of human beings nor generation; its existence is evident throughout history and across cultures, and it will remain so as long as there are minds that continue to cognize. The project of decolonizing knowledge and philosophy proceeds from a realization of the fallacies and iniquities of history and belief in the idea that the future is an ideal that we should continuously reimagine for ourselves. Whereas the owl of Minerva took flight at dusk, and thus gave philosophy the character of a theory that elucidates the meaning of facts already accomplished, it is also true that philosophy can be the messenger of dawn, the beginning of historic change through a radical awareness of existence projected toward the future (Bondy 1986). This, I think, has been true of African philosophy to the extent it carries the emancipatory hopes and aspirations of its peoples. The problem of epistemic injustice that we face today is not a product of nature for which we must seek to gain a better understanding of the objective laws that govern its operations but a consequence of the arrogance of men who wanted to

elevate themselves to the level of gods. But as Mogobe Ramose (1999) correctly points out, biology, through the power of reproduction, has shown that the human race is one no matter how much we may pretend otherwise.

In examining the question on what can be done to be true to both philosophy and to humanity, a question that can elicit as varied responses as there are theorists, I will approach from the perspective of African philosophy. For reasons that will become clear later, reference will be made to the Resolutions on African philosophy passed by the Second Congress of Black Writers and Artists held in Rome March 26-April 18, 1959. The Negro Writers and Artists considered it their essential task and sacred mission to liberate their peoples and to unite everyone struggling for the liquidation of colonialism and its consequences, including those fighting for progress and liberty across the world.² An extract of the 1959 resolutions on philosophy reads as follows:

Considering the great role played by philosophical reflection in the elaboration of culture,
Considering that until now the West has monopolised philosophical reflection in such a way
that [the] philosophical enterprise seems unthinkable outside the categories forged by the
West,

The Sub-commission declares:

That for the African philosopher, philosophising should never mean forcing the African
reality through the mould of Western patterns.

That the African philosopher ought to base his [her] research on the fundamental certainty
that the Western form of philosophy is not the only form possible.

The Sub-commission:

Demands that the African philosopher should school himself [herself] in the traditions,
stories, myths, and proverbs of his [her] people in order to be able to draw from them the
laws of a true African wisdom complementary to the rest of the wisdom of humanity and to
extract and isolate the specific categories of African thought. (Presence Africaine, No. 24-25,
see Okere 1983: 129-30).

The decision to foreground my discussion on these resolutions is by no means fortuitous—they are a testimony to a long history of struggle against injustice. There is contained in these resolutions a clear imperative that resonates with the thinking of most Africanist scholars and philosophers to this day, that is, “the reaffirmation of the African’s inalienable right to reason” (Ramosé 1999: iv). Subsumed in these resolutions is the all-important question, which constitutes the title to this essay. As an acute reminder of the struggle, these resolutions also constitute a memory that we should seek to re-inscribe into the present going forward. It is important to be able to appropriate the spirit and mentality that inspired and gave birth to these resolutions. Epistemic decolonization is an act of liberation; it is, in the words of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986: 87), “the search for a liberating perspective within which to see ourselves clearly in relationship to ourselves and to other selves in the universe.” The significance of the relational aspiration expressed in this position should never be lost. It is to this and other issues that I now turn my attention. Within the confines of this short essay, I hope to demonstrate the convergence between the quest for epistemic liberation, the affirmation of our ontological parity as human beings, and the goal of world philosophies as an approach.

1 The Universal Right to Reason

This imperative constitutes the inspiration that drives African philosophy and all other philosophies from the so-called periphery. The geographical metaphor of center and periphery, which philosophers apply as an analytical model to understand the relationship between western philosophy and other philosophies, is only meaningful because one of the philosophical traditions has claimed for itself a hegemonic role as the vanguard of reason. Epistemic liberation begins to manifest at the very moment we depart from the naïve canonization of western models of reality, including blind adulation and exaltation of the universalist project. Epistemicide, that is, the systematic destruction of indigenous forms of knowledge, is a direct consequence of the ideology of universalism to which universities have served as both “the workshops and temples of the faith” (Wallerstein 1995:81). Epistemic liberation urges that such monotheistic temples be deconsecrated and opened up to allow for the worship of many gods, including the Orisas.³ When the Sub-Commission on African Philosophy declared that, “for the African philosopher, philosophising should never mean forcing the African reality through the mould of Western patterns,” two things are apparent. First, it is a protestation against the status quo in the form of imposed worldviews and conceptual frameworks. Second, it declares African philosophizing as an act of liberation. African philosophizing becomes coterminous with self-liberation and the critique of Eurocentrism. At the heart of African self-liberation is the critique of Eurocentrism as an integral step in the process of self-apprehension. Being a “critical (re)examination of the colonial intentions organic to Western modern philosophy” (Eze 1997a: 6), the critique of Eurocentrism aims to tackle the “pervasive bias located in modernity’s self-consciousness of itself [...] grounded at its core in the metaphysical belief or *Idea* that European existence is qualitatively superior to other forms of life” (Serequeberhan 1997: 142).

A similar epistemic quest animates decolonial theorists and philosophers of liberation from Latin America who have sought to expose the myth of western modernity and to unmask its darker side called coloniality as a core-requisite for epistemic liberation. Rooted in this myth is the problem of the global self-constitution of modernity, which is at the center of what counts as knowledge, including even the boundaries of where to look for philosophical ideas. I feel there is no better way to capture the object of the critique of Eurocentrism for African philosophy than the title of Robert Bernasconi’s inspirational essay, “Hegel at the Court of the Ashanti.” His essay title renders vivid the object of the critique of Eurocentrism in the African philosophical enterprise. In the essay Bernasconi (1998: 41) promises to “turn the tables and put Hegel on trial [...] to take him before the court of the Ashanti, where his use of evidence [including his self-serving exclusion of what would otherwise have been counter-examples to his discussion of Africa] can be interrogated [...] to demonstrate the unhistorical nature of Hegel’s statement about Africa.”⁴ It is also true that a worrying form of scholarly forgetfulness pervades the teaching of philosophy, and it is inimical to the quest for liberation. For example, Eze (1997b: 103) pointed to the prevalence of what appears to be an “overwhelming desire to see Kant only as a ‘pure’ philosopher, preoccupied only with ‘pure’ culture—and colour-blind philosophical themes in the sanctum sanctorum of the traditions of Western philosophy.” This is despite the fact that Kant produced one of the most damaging theories on raciology of the eighteenth century. With regards to the teaching of philosophy, this kind of forgetfulness or willful amnesia not only fails to prepare students to engage meaningfully with problems of the contemporary world, but it helps to sustain the myth of a benevolent ahistorical universal philosophy. By refusing to locate philosophy “in the fabric of historicity,”⁵ that is, in the

political exigencies and socio-intellectual contexts that shaped it, such willful forgetfulness or amnesia conceals truth and perpetuates ignorance.

Point number one above raises concerns regarding the imposition of a foreign worldview and conceptual framework. The objective is to reclaim the right to express African philosophical ideas using categories of reflection and conceptual frameworks deriving from African cultures. It is at the level of theory and ideas that Africa continues to suffer from the problem of an imposed template resulting in template scholarship. Our thinking has remained predominantly Eurocentric even though we are not ourselves Europeans. To address this malady Kwasi Wiredu (1996) advocates the need for conceptual decolonization in African philosophy. He recognizes the intellectual price that Africa continues to pay as a result of conceptual confusions and distortions caused by the implantation of a colonial conceptual idiom on the African mind. That the ultimate liberation lies in the ability to think through our philosophical issues in our own languages is an issue that is beyond dispute, and it is a point vigorously affirmed by many Africanist scholars and philosophers. The other resolution by the Sub-Commission, which states that “the African philosopher ought to base his [her] research on the fundamental certainty that the Western form of philosophy is not the only form possible,” is yet another affirmation of the African right to reason. It is as much a call to reject mimetic philo-praxis, as it is a confirmation of the existence of multiple possibilities. It points to the pluriversal nature of knowledge and understanding. This resolution underlines the critical point of departure for arguments on epistemologies of the global south that “the understanding of the world by far exceeds the Western understanding of the world” (Santos 2014: viii). The future of this world lies in the growth and promotion of “credible alternative philosophies whose complementary characteristics would make humanity richer and the philosophic enterprise itself more fascinating” (Okere 1983: 129). It is through the critique of Eurocentrism that parochial universalism can be supplanted, and out of that very process, the right for all to contribute to the production of knowledge and philosophy is asserted. The problem has always been that the west has sought to universalize its own particulars and at times even by force. From the foregoing, it is therefore clear that epistemic liberation depends in part on our ability to reclaim the universal right to reason in terms of being able to theorize our own reality as a people, including refusal to remain fixated with the northbound gaze in the form of blind submission to a hegemonic and parochial universalism.

2 African Self-Apprehension⁶

In this quest for decolonization, it is also important to turn our attention to the internalities of Africa in the sense of the intellectual practice of philosophy and where this has remained problematic. True decolonization begins at the level of understanding one’s own world; it is about African self-apprehension. Elsewhere I have used the paradoxical title “the poverty of the rich,”⁷ an idea prompted by the depiction of Africa as one of the richest continents in terms of its highly sought-after resources but which exhibits in the life of its peoples the worst levels of poverty. This economic anomaly is also unfortunately true about the situation of African philosophy on the continent. There are many causes, but I will select only two problems for analysis: one, the self-defeating attitude or circumspection concerning oral traditions, and two, the existence of “linguistic prisons” that have kept Africans hostage, preventing them from sharing the fruits of their intellectual labor as a people. To the first problem, I use the term self-betrayal, while for the second I adopt the term intellectual bondage. I will use the two code words (self-betrayal and intellectual

bondage) to analyze the meaning and significance of the last resolution, which demands that “the African philosopher should school himself [herself] in the traditions, stories, myths, and proverbs of his [her] people in order to be able to draw from them the laws of a true African wisdom complementary to the rest of the wisdom of humanity and to extract and isolate the specific categories of African thought.” By self-betrayal I wish to capture that sense of “excessive scruple or hesitation”⁸ from engaging fully with reference points and ideas arising from within the African culture itself and preferring rather to hover above concrete situations for fear of “ethnophilosophical contamination” and loss of philosophical purity. In analyzing this unfortunate condition, my point of departure is the position so eloquently put by Barry Hallen (2002: 11) when he stated,

There is yet another dimension to the history of philosophy in Africa—the virtual mountain of historical texts, still incompletely catalogued, that have been indiscriminately labelled African ‘oral literature.’ For it certainly is the case that academic philosophers were for long predisposed to turn up their noses at the suggestion that an anonymous corpus of writings that included myths, legends, poetry, and proverbs was truly worthy of the title ‘philosophy.’ One thing upon which Africana scholars and intellectuals largely agree is that the criteria used to define what is and what is not philosophy in the world today are unfairly biased by and for ‘philosophy’ as presently construed by western culture. There may have to be some common ground if the word “philosophy” is to continue to have cross-cultural significance. But Africa, in particular, has not received just consideration in that regard [...] In so many respects, it seems, Africa’s cultures have not benefited from the kinds of exhaustive and empathic scholarship that are being lavished upon other parts of the world.

The submission highlights a serious anomaly and an injustice that unfortunately persists in Africa. An entire corpus, which deserves careful attention and analysis, finds itself shunted to the background despite the fact that within it lies the promise of an epistemic thread linking our oral past and the literate present. It is my hope that going forward Africa will be able to persuade at least some among the budding African philosophers to abandon this path of self-betrayal. African philosophy must take shape around the struggles of its people, and these struggles are also “expressed by and lived through the ‘songs, [myths], poems, and folklore’ of its people. These are part and parcel of the memoir that philosophy must write; they are part of the conversation, both oral and written, that Africans must keep going in a creative fashion” (Bell 1989: 375). By broadening the area of philosophical exploration to cover all sources, including oral texts, we lose nothing as African philosophers. On the contrary, it allows us to:

reclaim part of the richness of an oral heritage that continues to play a role in the historical struggles that is the post-colonial experience in Africa; we reclaim the value of the substantial and important literary and artistic contribution that Africans are making to their own culture and which has significantly shaped the [...] understanding of the African reality (Bell 1989: 378).

It should be remembered that every civilization preserves for itself a classical archive from which it constantly draws in order to influence both the present and the future. The injunction “African know thyself,” which I have analyzed elsewhere in much more detail,⁹ is an acute reminder of this fact and a philosophical statement on the importance of intellectual self-apprehension and

liberation. It is a reminder to avoid the excesses of a form of elitism which Yai (1977: 18) deplores as the poverty of speculative African philosophy, which “eliminates politics [and cultural historicity] from philosophy” by reducing philosophy to an abstract practice that floats above society. Retracing the epistemic thread in the fabric of African culture will not be complete without a considered analysis of oral tradition as a form of literature and a veritable source of philosophy.

The second problem is what I have termed the problem of intellectual bondage, that is, the challenge posed by the linguistic situation, which prevents us from sharing the fruits of our intellectual labor as philosophers across the continent. Africa is home to a multiplicity of indigenous languages, which does pose its own myriad of challenges, but for academic reasons we have come to accept, as it stands, the efficacy of operating with a handful of foreign languages despite, of course, the obvious drawbacks related to the problems of having to express one’s ideas via a foreign medium. The colonial relationship that binds Africa to the west in a special way has also carved the continent into linguistic regions that for reasons much to do with colonialism also call for the cultivation of inter-philosophical dialogue at the local level. The production of philosophical works has also come to largely follow along the colonial linguistic lines. And so in terms of the professional and academic practice of the discourse of philosophy we have the Anglophone, Francophone, Lusophone, and Arabic traditions of philosophy on the continent. Few individuals are able to function across these languages. Philosophical ideas and insights produced on the continent therefore tend to remain locked away in “linguistic prisons,” militating against dialogue and cross-fertilization of ideas across a continent still struggling to come to terms with its own intellectual heritage. Across the world, translation has been used effectively to resolve most of the challenges posed by language differences. That way the seemingly insurmountable hurdle standing between successful dialogue and knowledge exchange is overcome. It is no wonder that Ngugi wa Thiong’o (2009: 96) calls “translation the language of languages, a language through which all languages can talk to one another.” It is through translation that the world has been able to share its intellectual and philosophical canon. There is arguably no part of the world that has not been touched by Marx and his theories on social revolution, thanks to translation. In most parts of Christian Africa, the Bible serves as a perfect example where indigenous peoples have literally come to own and communicate the message without the need for interpreters. Among other Africanist scholars, Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1986, 2009, 2012) has devoted time to argue for the restoration of African languages as an important step for the African renaissance. He conceives that restoration as part of the process of (re)membering Africa, that is, putting back together that which was (dis)membered at the (1884-5) Berlin conference,¹⁰ which partitioned the continent. The point I wish to make is that through translation, access to the expansive volume of literature produced across Africa will become possible, and with it a broader and more comprehensive understanding of its philosophical ideas. The philosophers who are beneficiaries of that exposure will not only be more knowledgeable about Africa and its thought traditions but will have greater ability to contribute meaningfully in terms of providing Africa’s input on the global knowledge landscape. Enhancing philosophical conversations in Africa across the language divide through translation is thus one way by which “Africa can add originality to the wealth of human knowledge, the way it once did in Old Egypt: enriching the world” (wa Thiong’o 2013: 162). This will be good for Africa and indeed for humanity.

From the foregoing, it is clear that the quest for epistemic liberation is an ongoing process, and it remains part of the unfinished humanistic project of decolonization in Africa. Reclaiming our right to reason by confronting the injustices of colonialism and Eurocentrism is one side of this fight. The other concerns itself with our own internal shortcomings; it involves confronting our own demons, so to speak. The demon of self-betrayal and the apparent lack of willingness to

consummate the already tried and tested program of translation are things that we can reasonably confront and resolve as a people creating conditions for many philosophical voices to flourish. I have sought to demonstrate that the quest for epistemic liberation, while coterminous with critiques of Eurocentrism in its varied manifestations on the epistemic terrain, places an equally strong imperative on African intellectual self-apprehension in the sense of “knowing ourselves.” Finally, and going back to the title question, allow me to draw from the telling analogy by Ngugi wa Thiong’o on world literature, which is as true of philosophy as it is for literature. According to wa Thiongo (2012: 55),

World literature would be like the sea or the ocean into which all streams from all corners of the globe would flow. The sea is constituted of many rivers, some of which cross many fields, but the rivers and their constituent streams do not lose their individuality as streams and rivers.

Unfortunately, the historical travesty that has allowed a hegemonic relationship to establish itself so strongly on the philosophical field causes some to mistake their rivers for the ocean and in some cases even try to overlook the fact that different rivers feed the ocean. Much as the different rivers are crucial to the vitality of the territories they traverse, it is in the ocean that true worldliness and universality is encapsulated. The idea of the ocean points to the boundless universality of our creative potential as human beings. There is no reason to hold humanity captive or force them to remain on the river instead of sailing in the ocean. World philosophies advocate an approach to philosophy that draws our attention to this reality. In this way, philosophy transforms itself into a forum for dialogue among cultures, a true conversation of humankind and a source of ideas with which to reshape the world in which we live together. This is as much a testament of the truth that lies behind philosophy as a practice and a reaffirmation of our ontological parity as human beings able to contribute to the noble enterprise called philosophy.

¹ The qualifier to the title is part of a concern raised by Okere in the inspirational article “Is There One Science, Western Science?” See Okere (2005: 33). I have however made a slight change to the original wording.

² From the Congress preamble, Asante and Abarry (1996: 229). The First and Second Congress of Negro Writers and Artists, both held in the 1950s, are regarded as landmark conferences that brought together leading black intellectuals for the purposes of addressing issues of colonialism and racism and consolidating the fight for decolonization.

³ The Orisas, also written as Orishas, are traditional deities among the Yorubas of Nigeria and other West African peoples of that region. The name is invoked in this context to argue for the recognition and promotion of epistemic perspectives from Africa. For a detailed account on these deities, see Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/orisha>.

⁴ Please note that even the words in the square brackets are from the article by Bernasconi (1998: 43), but I have inserted them there to bring out what I wish to emphasize.

⁵ See Outlaw (1996: 52).

⁶ The term is used here in the sense of having a better understanding and appreciation of one’s own culture and traditions. For this sense of the term, see also Soyinka (1976).

⁷ I am here referring to an essay I presented at the 24th World Congress of Philosophy in Beijing (13-20 August 2018) with the title “Philosophy’s Troubled Past and the Challenges of Our Time.”

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- ⁸ See Hountondji (2002a: xvii) for some of this terminology.
- ⁹ See Mungwini (2016, 2017a).
- ¹⁰ It is the meeting at which European nations sat down to divide the continent of Africa among themselves, culminating with the drawing of boundaries that have balkanized the continent to this day.

The Idiomatic Double Bind: Is Pluralism a Necessary Part of the Quest for Epistemic Liberation?

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In my experiences in the classroom as both a teacher and a student, earnest question asking for the sake of understanding is always more powerful than agonistic question asking for the sake of winning. With this in mind, Professor Mungwini's "The Quest for Epistemic Liberation: What Can be Done to be True to Both Philosophy and to Humanity?" prompts and recontextualizes a problem I frequently find myself asking as I attempt to understand the ethical and political implications of cross-cultural and comparative approaches to epistemology. Putting the problem succinctly: How does one balance the pull to use vocabulary from a colonial tradition on the one hand with the desire to work outside of that vocabulary and its lexical fetters on the other? In some ways, this appears to be a type of the philosophical double-bind mentioned by Bernasconi (1997). What I appreciate about Mungwini's approach is an identification of the tension in philosophical methodology and the outlining of a solution, but as an inquisitive reader I eagerly await an explicit answer to this particular question.

In particular, the most difficult phrase, and surely one that is central to the piece, is "universal right to reason"; Mungwini's identification of translation and interpretation as necessary contexts for understanding proper usage of such terms seems spot on. In my own work, I rely on Henry Rosemont, Jr.'s description of concept clusters to inform my attempt at giving voice to classical Chinese concepts that are often reduced to Western lexical constellations.¹ In Rosemont's context, the concepts he is concerned with are related to ethics in a cross-cultural context:

It may seem that a big fuss is being made over a little word: why not simply find the closest approximation to the English 'moral' in the language (culture) under investigation, and proceed with the analysis from there? [...] But now consider as a specific example the classical Chinese language in which the early Confucians wrote. Not merely does that language contain no lexical item for 'moral,' it also does not have the terms corresponding to 'freedom,' 'liberty,' 'autonomy,' 'individual,' 'utility,' 'rationality,' 'objective,' 'subjective,' 'choice,' 'dilemma,' 'duty,' 'rights,' and probably most eerie of all for a moralist, classical Chinese has no lexical item corresponding to 'ought'—prudential or obligatory (Rosemont 1988: 61).

Whether discussing ethics or epistemology, the problem seems the same. Like Mungwini's call to Kwasi Wiredu's work, the conceptual idioms we use are clustered in association with one another, embedded in a network of meaning that has a history. Given this, it seems like "reason," especially a "right to reason," is informed by a European-based concept cluster. "Reason" and "rationality," as well as "right" and "individual," are deeply connected to a history of European Enlightenment self-articulation in terms of religion and secularity, all of which is part of the context of justification for colonization and the colonial exportation of Eurocentric conceptual idioms. If this is the case, is appealing to a "right to reason" itself a call to use that idiom?

This prompts a new articulation of Robert Bernasconi's double bind.² While his initial formulation is related to whether African philosophy counts as philosophy, the problem has a greater reach. Leah Kalmanson and Sarah Mattice (2013: 3-4) find the same problem in the East

Asian context. Mattice (2010: 43-4, 2014: 30) takes the problem further into the metaphors used in gatekeeping philosophical reasoning from non-philosophical. In this case, the double bind is about the conceptual context of “universal,” “right,” and “reason.” On the one hand, accepting these terms seems to imply accepting a colonial idiom, and on the other it seems like articulating an alternative account in response to the colonality of that idiom would place the discourse in a localized context, and thus outside of philosophy. It seems as if there are only two possible responses to this question: reject reason and substitute an alternative idiom, or argue for a pluralism where reason is not singular. A denial of the exclusivity between these choices is articulated in Mungwini’s analysis when he states, “It is as much a call to reject mimetic philo-praxis, as it is a confirmation of the existence of multiple possibilities” (Mungwini 2019a). Such a simultaneous rejection and re-articulation of reason as part of philosophical praxis pushes the problem into the realm of universal claims, however. Again, Mungwini: “It is through the critique of Eurocentrism that parochial universalism can be supplanted and out of that very process, the right for all to contribute to the production of knowledge and philosophy is asserted” (Mungwini 2019a). In trying to be true to humanity, the right to reason is made universal, but is there such a thing as a non-parochial claim to universality? It seems that any such claim would lead to a blanket approach that would repeat the erasure of the original colonial idiom by making a claim to universality, or lose the claim to human reasoning by only appealing to a local idiom.

While my own work does not deal with the particular colonial histories of Africa or South America, it does intersect with the problems of the importing of colonial idiom. I borrow from comparative work on Chinese ethics to articulate similar problems in reducing accounts of knowledge to western frameworks. Kwong-Loi Shun points to the framing of Chinese texts in non-Chinese frameworks as a problem of asymmetry. Such a problem is not simply a problem of translation and accessibility of texts to western audiences, either:

[T]he tendency to study Chinese thought using Western philosophical frameworks that is found in Chinese language publications could not have been explained in terms of access, nor is it set in the context of institutional deliberations. Even for similar studies in the English language, scholars engaged in such studies likely see their work not just in terms of access or institutional fit, but as making a substantive contribution to the objects of study. Thus, it seems more likely that the asymmetrical tendency has to do with certain views about the objects of study, certain sentiments that approaching Chinese thought using Western philosophical frameworks has a certain intellectual value that studies from the other direction might not have (Shun 2009: 472).

Shifting Shun’s point into the issue of colonial idiom, the problem is thus one that is based on historical circumstances that have generated the values and criteria in our institutions, which then influence the contours of asymmetric idiomatic relationships, relationships which distort and erase the cluster-relations that allow for local, particular experiences of knowers, knowing, and knowledge. Therefore, based on Shun’s account of asymmetric philosophical comparisons, if we accept a notion of “universal right to reason” that has a history of being a colonial idiom, we are accepting the standards and criteria that provide such a right to reason its force.

Accepting those assumed standards and criteria that give colonial idioms their traction is dangerous because it justifies claims beyond the immediate use of the selected idiom, especially when a claim like universality cannot be met. Jonardon Ganeri’s response to colonial descriptions of the problem of universality in reasoning reveals a pathway for rejecting a singular reason. According

to him, the problem of reason as a cultural idiom is tied to the very claim of universality being made about it.

So colonisers took what was in fact itself a local way of using reason [...] falsely promoted it as a unique acontextual methodology, and denied that outsiders had so much as a concept of the general application of reason on the grounds that they did not share its parochial epistemic practices (Ganeri 2016: 135).

Ganeri's point highlights the tension mentioned above, namely, that what we are doing when we accept the colonial—i.e., parochial—idiom of a “universal right to reason” is accepting that colonial claim to universality. This is a tension that I am unsure of how to resolve, especially when both idioms have an historical and localized context. In a call for a *universal* right to reason, how does one reconcile the universality in a way that does not override the localness and the particularity of experience?

Although it seems like Mungwini appeals to colonial idiom, it also seems like he is doing so in a way that tries to thread the needle, rejecting the disjunction of this idiomatic double bind by appealing to a form of pluralism. If the term “reason” admits of multiple possibilities, then the term is a starting point, not a final point. His quest to “be true to philosophy and humanity” seems to require a pluralism that opens space for discourse while appealing to an efficacy that, like Sandra Harding's (2015) appeal to strong objectivity, is based on the locally relevant concerns of those affected by the research, discourse, and knowledge production. In this way, perhaps the use of “universal right to reason” is a co-opting of the colonial idiom for the sake of staying within the bounds of philosophy, while the appeal to African self-apprehension is the articulation of those local concerns in a space where a new idiom is possible.

Similarly, his focus on the liberatory aspect of the epistemic quest points to an expression of “universality” and “right” that is not exhaustive, but rather one that co-opts those terms. In translation and interpretation as a form of self-apprehension, the concepts available for expression and articulation include the colonial idiom, reshaped through a different set of concerns from their original locale. Acknowledging the socio-historical context of our concept clusters, of our idioms and their usage, does not require abandoning them all, but if we take Ganeri seriously, “universality” (or a local methodology making a claim to acontextuality) does seem to be inextricably attached to the politically and philosophically destructive overreach of colonialism. If these terms are being re-read in a new way, more should be said to reshape the cluster connections in a contrasting way, being clearer about which connections are valuable and should be retained and which are not. Perhaps the universal aspect of a right to reason is not in an individuated right each person can participate in alone, not the rational faculty of a Cartesian non-extended substance. Instead, the universal aspect could be related to discourse's need for participating, located reasoners.³ This seems to point us back towards a pluralistic commitment about reason, where the commonality is not about reason as an abstract faculty, but about reasoners as historically and culturally situated persons with commitments and concerns that shape what counts as good reasoning.

Elsewhere, in discussing reasons to strive for better symmetry with respect to cross cultural engagements, I suggest a set of four “best practices” for comparative epistemology:

1. Avoid universal statements lacking context.
2. Avoid claims that do not include historical, cultural, and political sensitivity.

3. Avoid attachment to conceptual furniture.
4. Avoid separating efficacy from particularity.⁴

These best practices are, in some ways, my attempt to avoid pitfalls on the way to an account of knowledge (and possibly philosophy) that is more responsible, and hopefully liberatory. Following Ganeri's criticism of claims to universality, these best practices are tentative and provisional, with an aim towards remedying the problem of the colonial double bind. Whether or not these align with Mungwini's articulation is still open, however, and I look forward to learning his own thinking on the matter.

¹ See Creller (2018).

² The original double bind as found in Bernasconi (1997: 188): "Western philosophy traps African philosophy in a double bind: Either African philosophy is so similar to Western philosophy that it makes no distinctive contribution and effectively disappears; or it is so different that its credentials to be genuine philosophy will always be in doubt."

³ Although perhaps I have just substituted one colonial idiom for another here?

⁴ See Creller (2018), especially chapter 5.

Reflections on Decolonizing Philosophy: Can there be Universality Without Universalism?

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The colonial depredations of the past half-millennium have wrought immense harm across the globe. Such harms have clearly been material, involving resource extraction and environmental degradation, exploitation of resources both natural and human (including, of course, enslavement and genocide), and the cultivation of ongoing relations of dependency in the “post” colonial moment. Yet they have also been profoundly *spiritual*, involving cultural marginalization and psychological disempowerment that, in the forms of racism and ethnocentrism, have become in effect part of the very symbolic air we breathe (regardless of whether we happen to be the beneficiaries or the victims of these processes). In other words, these relationships of dependency, marginalization, and disempowerment have come to function not only as *normal*, but as natural and inevitable (Wynter 2001: 40). This generates, among other kinds of harm, a specifically epistemic harm that undermines and disempowers the colonized in their capacities as knowers. Mungwini’s stimulating essay takes up the question of how to respond to this kind of epistemic colonization by posing the question of epistemic liberation, with an emphasis on the ways in which this impacts and informs the practice of philosophy. This focus on philosophy is particularly compelling, given philosophy’s long-standing pretensions toward being a liberatory endeavor. In this brief response, I want to draw out and build upon three key themes in Mungwini’s essay: the concept of the *modern* and its relation to the future, the relationality of the subject, and the tension between the universal and particular in our concepts of reason and philosophy. I will suggest that Mungwini’s essay points the way toward certain universal concepts and commitments without falling prey to the pitfalls of exclusionary universalism.

As his title makes clear, Mungwini is concerned in part to find a way to be true to philosophy (or at least, I would add, to the promise of philosophy) *and* to humanity. This task arises as a problem because of the historical and ongoing Eurocentric exclusionary practices and norms that govern and have governed the practice of philosophy (both in and outside of academia). As a result of “epistemological assumptions about what counts as knowledge” and “ontological suspicions concerning our parity as human beings,” the philosophical practices, texts, and traditions of Europeans¹ have come to associate themselves not just with a particular tradition of philosophy, but with Philosophy and Reason *simpliciter* (Mungwini 2019a: 70). In this way, it has largely excluded the philosophical traditions and practices of the colonized as a matter of course. If philosophy *as such* (and by extension, reason) takes both the form and the content of *European* philosophy, then any intellectual practice, in order to be properly thought of as philosophy or philosophical or rational, must mimic or adopt that form and content. Consequently, to the extent that Africans, for instance, are doing something in any significant way distinct, it simply cannot be philosophy. By the same token, to the extent that Africans come to do something recognizable to the dominant paradigm as philosophy, then it is explained as the result of a successful “civilizing” mission—the arrival of the “light of reason” into the “dark continent.” It is in this way that philosophy can be understood as *colonial/colonizing* in precisely the spiritual sense described above. Furthermore, the problem is not simply that philosophy imposes European standards and norms of reason that disavow their Europeanness, but because reason is so closely linked to philosophical anthropology—to conceptions of what it means to be (truly or fully) *human*—it is intimately linked to racist hierarchies

of full versus sub humanity (Mungwini's "ontological suspicions concerning our parity as human beings). It is in this way that philosophy is complicit in a kind of universalism—the taking of one particular tradition/approach to be *the only* true or proper approach, and this is why Mungwini is calling for an epistemic *decolonization*.

Mungwini makes this link between colonialism and universalism explicit in his essay, tying it to "epistemicide" (Mungwini 2019a: 72). As he understands it, the ongoing reduction of the philosophical to the European, especially in our educational curricula, "helps to sustain the myth of a benevolent ahistorical universal philosophy" (Mungwini 2019a: 73). This understanding of universalist philosophy as "ahistorical" is crucial. Not only does the history of philosophy extend well beyond the ancient Greek world (cf. Gordon forthcoming), but the idea of the ancient Greek world as *European*, and even the idea of Europe as such, is intimately connected to the project of associating the European with the rational (cf. Park 2013; Monahan 2011: 153-182). This aspect of epistemicide is a matter of disavowing or ignoring the history of philosophy from Africa and the Americas.² Yet, at the same time, in addition to taking a mythologized position toward the history of philosophy, this epistemicide has a future orientation, as well. If all philosophy proper is essentially European, then for the colonized thinker, there is only one future, and it is, to paraphrase Fanon, European (Fanon 2008: xiv). To think *properly* is to think like a European, which means that there is no way to think properly *as an African* (hence, the term "epistemicide" is remarkably poignant). When colonial philosophy forecloses the possibility of a future for African philosophy (in part because it disavows the history of African philosophy), then bringing thought to bear on such a future is, as Mungwini stresses, both a decolonial and a liberatory act. This is why Mungwini stresses that the decolonization of philosophy must turn toward "the idea that the future is an ideal that we should continuously reimagine for ourselves" (Mungwini 2019a: 70).

In a sense, as Lewis Gordon has argued, it is a feature of the colonial encounter to create for the colonized a condition in which they no longer belong to the future (Gordon 2018: 335). The "primitive" belongs strictly to the past, while the colonizers bring with them the one true and inevitable path to the future. The *modern*, as opposed to the "traditional" society, is the one that will continue to develop into a distinct future, rather than endlessly repeat the same. As Mungwini rightly observes, European modernity saw itself not as a path to a future, but as *the* path to *the* future, enforcing epistemicide on the colonized. This might lead some to follow Walter Dignolo in holding that "coloniality is constitutive of modernity and therefore there is no modernity without coloniality" (Dignolo 2012: 24). If modernity is essentially exclusionary and universalist, if it is the effort to "universalize its own particulars and at times even by force," as Mungwini puts the point, then surely decolonization/liberation must be anti- or post-modern (Mungwini 2019a: 74). I do not think that Mungwini is committed, however, to this understanding of the modern as exclusionary. To draw out this point, however, I will need to first turn to the subject of this act of decolonization/liberation.

"Epistemic decolonization," Mungwini affirms, "is an act of liberation" (Mungwini 2019a: 71). This is in part because of this direction-toward, or openness-to, a future that includes the (formerly) colonized. Quoting Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Mungwini stresses that what is significant in this attempt to see oneself in the future is, in the African case especially (but by no means exclusively), a "relational aspiration" (Mungwini 2019: 71). The significance of the relationality he briefly references here is best illustrated by way of contrast. The colonial subject is ultimately, to put a twist on the classic Cartesian formulation, the *ego conquiro*—the conquering subject who stands in a dominating position over others without being in a co-constituting *relationship* with them (cf. Grosfoguel 2013). It is an atomistic subject that stands in ultimate ontological isolation. In contrast, the view of

subjectivity to which wa Thiong'o is referring is one that stands in an essential and constitutive relationship with others. The subject of European modernity, the *ego conquiro*, can in this way be contrasted with the *Ubuntu* sense of the subject common in many parts of Africa (if not by the same name), which is profoundly relational (cf. Ramose 2002). This is linked quite clearly to oral philosophical traditions, the suspicion or disavowal of which Mungwini likens to a kind of "intellectual bondage," in that orality emphasizes the sharing of time and place and the building of *communities* of meaning-making (Mungwini 2012: 5). For the relational subject, both to be human *as such* and to be *this* human in any given case is a matter not of some isolable and discrete substantive form of Being, but rather a matter of standing in particular relations with other human beings. In other words, it is in and through the relationships that nurture and sustain us (or, as in colonialism, that can also alienate and degrade us) that we come to be the individuals that we are, and as Mungwini rightly stresses, oral tradition is a key contributor to this "relational aspiration."

This appeal to a relational account of the subject opens a space for challenging the universalism of European modernity. If, following Lewis Gordon, we understand the modern as that which is directed toward the future, then we must recognize that there are many modernities, and what he calls "Euromodernity" is only one among many (Gordon 2018: 335). A distinguishing feature of Euromodernity is a denial of the possibility of standing *in relation* with other modernities. Because it sees itself as the one and only true future, and denies its cultural specificity in favor of a totalizing universalism, it forecloses relationality by destroying, co-opting (usually through market forces), absorbing, or just ignoring any alternatives. Just as the *ego conquiro* stands alone as a discrete and sovereign subject, Euromodernity sees itself ontologically as the only game in town. This is what, in part, motivates the move to see modernity and decoloniality as antithetical (or rather, to see coloniality and modernity as inextricably linked). But this is in effect to fall for Euromodernity's hype, so to speak. It may claim that it just is modernity *simpliciter*, but this has only ever been a self-serving myth. Instead, one may, following Sylvia Wynter, seek to "relativize" Euromodernity—to displace it from its assumed centrality/normativity, and place it *in relation* with other modernities (Wynter 2006: 161). In other words, the move here is to dislodge Euromodernity's self-concept as the only future possible, just as, for Wynter, the self-concept of *European Man* is not the only authentic account of the human as such. This seems to be what Mungwini is suggesting in his appeal to wa Thiong'o's metaphor of streams and the ocean and his account of world philosophies. In calling for European philosophy to recognize itself as a river, rather than consistently mistaking itself for the ocean, Mungwini is, as I read him, calling for exactly this sort of relativizing of Euromodernity. I see this as linked to the appeal to a relational subject, insofar as we see that the individual or particular is constituted in and through their relation to the whole, rather than self-sufficient and independent. Euromodernity has always in fact been in relation to Afromodernity (Serequeberhan 2000) and Indigenous modernities (Simpson 2014)—its pathology has been to deny this relationality. With this turn to relationality in mind, let us return to the problem of the universal.

The question that motivates Mungwini's essay makes two crucial appeals to what is universal. Its phrasing makes appeal to singular concepts of "philosophy" and "humanity" to which our epistemic practices may or may not be "true." These are each linked to the two problematics with which he opens his essay—the problem of what counts as knowledge (philosophy), and the problem of humanity (racism or the "ontological parity" among human beings). As we saw in the discussion of modernity, the colonial tendencies of Euromodernity lead to a reduction of both "philosophy" and "the human" to *European* philosophy and *European* (white) humanity. It mistook, using wa Thiong'o's metaphor, a river for the ocean, and led some to see any appeal to the universal as necessarily pernicious—as exclusionary and totalizing. Mungwini's critique of universalism

acknowledges these aspects of Euromodernity, yet in raising the question of an epistemic practice that is true to philosophy and humanity, he is clearly not inclined to abandon the universal altogether. So how does one navigate this tension?

Knowledge and understanding, Mungwini tells us, have a “pluriversal nature” that is in direct opposition to the “mimetic” tendencies of the dominant Euromodern paradigm of philosophy (Mungwini 2018: 4). For Mungwini, the struggle to decolonize philosophy and to secure the African “right to reason” does not reduce to isolated and particularistic practices utterly unintelligible to each other. Aníbal Quijano’s approach to the problem is sympathetic, when he writes:

First of all, epistemological decolonization, as decoloniality, is needed to clear the way for new intercultural communication, for an interchange of experiences and meanings, as the basis of another rationality which may legitimately pretend to some universality. Nothing is less rational, finally, than the pretension that the specific cosmic vision of a particular ethnics should be taken as universal rationality, even if such an ethnics is called Western Europe because this is actually pretend to impose a provincialism as universalism (Quijano 2007: 177).

The point, it seems, for both Quijano and Mungwini, is for each particular philosophical tradition to recognize its own incompleteness. It is, in the end, a failure of rationality to assume one has a complete perspective on or account of reality. No river is sufficient unto itself, and each makes its own contribution to the larger philosophical (universal) ocean. This is one reason why the question of parity or equality across human (colonial) difference is so very critical—in addition to the many moral and political reasons why such “ontological” inequality is pernicious, it impoverishes the “dialogue among cultures” that Mungwini takes to be the hallmark of genuinely universal human reason. If Euromodernity dismisses the very idea of African reason, then not only are Africans and those of African descent harmed, but the epistemic capacities and abilities of Europeans and their descendants are also (but surely not equally) harmed. This is why, for Mungwini, translation is such a key aspect of epistemic liberation. If we are to even approach the ideal of what he calls a “true conversation of humankind,” which is surely a practice which aims at the universal, then translation, or our ability to communicate adequately across cultural and linguistic difference, is going to be critical to the success of that endeavor.

Of course, translation is only ever from river to river, so to speak, so it remains critical to bear in mind the incompleteness of any translation—of the gaps that will inevitably emerge when attempting to span linguistic borders. Mungwini seems at times overly optimistic about the role of translation,³ but his discussion of translation is brief, so his view remains underdetermined by this text. The key point I want to emphasize is that one must avoid the ideal of translation as a kind of isomorphic interchangeability across languages. That would be to assume that the aim is to arrive at some final, closed system of linguistic exchange without any gaps, and would inevitably result in a kind of universalism. As in Mungwini’s discussion of world philosophies, translation gestures toward the universal in its openness to exchange, even with the inevitable gaps, rather than in any attempt to arrive at final and complete closure. He is surely correct about the vital role translation could play in facilitating the liberatory kind of philosophy he advocates, but I would append a critical caveat regarding how far we think translation can take us.

In the end, Mungwini’s essay offers a path to a kind of universal that is not necessarily universalistic—a way of thinking about what philosophy is *as such* that doesn’t reduce it to a single tradition or norm. Rather, we find that what is universal about philosophy is its openness to its own

incompleteness, and its pursuit, through dialogue and exchange (relationality), of what is shared across and through the *gaps* that emerge in the course of this dialogue. In this way what is universal is revealed in our very attention to what is particular, and they are intimately bound up with each other (cf. Monahan 2011: 216-21). If he is correct about this, and I wholeheartedly believe he is, then World Philosophy, which of course requires that there be many world philosophies, is in fact the center of a philosophy that is, in Mungwini's words, "true" to itself. This is because each particular philosophical tradition, being incomplete in its own right, requires interaction with different traditions in order to discern those lacunae. The result is a kind of productive tension across different world philosophies (particular traditions), and the interaction to at once produce and resolve those tensions is World Philosophy proper. Of course, resolution of particular tensions leads to the production of new and different tensions, which means that World Philosophy can never be a complete and fully realized system, but requires this ongoing interaction of particular philosophies in order to generate those further tensions through which World Philosophy emerges. My preferred metaphor here is that of productive *friction*. Just as sound requires the interaction (friction) between two elements (a bow on a string, a hammer on a piano wire, air through vocal chords), so World Philosophy is constituted by the interaction between two or more philosophical traditions, but not reducible to the mere sum of those parts. Acknowledging this truth challenges philosophers across the globe to radically re-think our curricular and pedagogical norms, and to see this not only as good philosophical practice (which it is), but as critical to decolonizing philosophy and fulfilling its promise as a liberatory practice.

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- ¹ I mean "European" here in the broad sense that would include descendants of Europeans in settler colonial states, like those in North America and Australasia. Significantly, South Africa should be included here, insofar as the academic discipline of philosophy remains profoundly dominated by European and Anglo-American traditions there (with some noteworthy exceptions, including Professor Mungwini's own program at UniSA).
 - ² The case is somewhat different with Asian philosophy. It is marginalized and fetishized in different ways, but it is at least given some recognition within mainstream European/Anglo-American philosophy (cf. Van Norden 2017).
 - ³ For example, when he writes: "Across the world, translation has been used to effectively resolve most of the challenges posed by language differences."

Sites of Epistemic Friction: Are Decolonial Desires Entitled to Opacity?

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The question posed and addressed in this symposium is indeed a complex and challenging one. As Pascah Mungwini meticulously charts and expresses, the projects of epistemology cannot be considered without also considering ontological suppositions about what it means to be human. Unfortunately, philosophy has quite explicitly developed exclusionary notions of who counts as human and thus has a particularly limited and oppressive conception of who can know, produce knowledge, and philosophize. A further issue is perhaps the implication in the question that frames this debate: the notion that we, as philosophers, both understand and agree about what “philosophy” and “humanity,” in fact, mean. Obviously tackling either or both of those concepts and entities would bring me well outside the parameters of this piece, but I think starting with that particular orientation is valuable for various reasons directly related to what epistemic decolonization requires. Defining epistemic decolonization is not a straightforward or simple task, but generally epistemic decolonization, in my understanding, points toward the ability, through freedom and liberation, for peoples to know in ways that are culturally appropriate and unhindered by external pressures and forces of domination. How epistemic decolonization takes form is a diverse, unfolding, and hermeneutically open project, which is in part why it is so difficult to define, but also why it is so powerful—topics which this piece will engage with as it proceeds.

To begin, I should state that the dominant understanding—informed by the attempted universalization of particular western ways of knowing and conventions (often through violence and imposition)—is a particular understanding of what philosophy is. In this attempted universalization of a particular situation to the global context, the dominant understanding has also framed humanity as of course capable of philosophizing in theory, but in practice has only looked for and acknowledged the knowledges of a small portion of human communities, namely, Europe and its descendants. Thus, philosophy qua this small set of western ways of knowing has been dictated by this particular situation and has told a very particular story about it. In this regard, “philosophy” defined in this limited way is not something I have any interest in being true to, nor am I interested in being true to the subsequent exclusionary humanity that leaves out the majority of the human community, including myself.

However, it is also important to understand the bind that histories of epistemic colonization and domination wreak not only on our epistemological traditions, our understandings, and so on, but also on our ability to turn toward ourselves without the mediation of domination and alienation. What I mean by this is that whenever I try to write, I usually end up detouring through that which I do not want to write, but often need to explain. And this is just one of the ways in which what I want to express is endlessly complicated by the obstacle of domination and colonization. Addressing this very concern, Martinican poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant states:

And now what they tell me is, ‘You calmly pack your poetics into these craters of opacity and claim to rise so serenely beyond the prodigiously elucidating work that the West has accomplished, but there you go talking nonstop about this West.’—‘And what would you rather I talk about at the beginning, if not this transparency whose aim was to reduce us? Because, if I don’t begin there, you will see me consumed with the sullen jabber of childish

refusal, convulsive and powerless. This is where I start. As for my identity, I'll take care of that myself' (Glissant 1997: 190–91).

Here, Glissant is addressing critiques leveled at his call for the right to opacity. For Glissant, the right to opacity is a form of decolonization in the sense that it is a turning away from the imperative of knowledge constructed within the western tradition of “knowing” as “making transparent” and, thus, reduction. The right to difference is intimately connected to the right to opacity by the desire of Glissant to maintain the irreducibility of difference. However, Glissant, in responding to these critiques, also expresses some of the frustrations and binds that epistemic decolonization poses, in that decolonization is not so simple or uncomplicated as a mere refusal or turning away from the west. This is precisely because of how deeply the west is entangled with our understandings, and in fact, ourselves.

I think this attention to the danger of transparency and reduction is something that is also present in Mungwini's piece, especially in the resistance to the forced formation of African knowledge and philosophies into western molds:

That for the African philosopher, philosophising should never mean forcing the African reality through the mould of Western patterns. That the African philosopher ought to base his [her] research on the fundamental certainty that the Western form of philosophy is not the only form possible (Presence Africaine, No. 24-25, see Okere 1983: 129-30) (Mungwini 2019a).

This passage sits well with Glissant's demand for the right to opacity and the resistance to epistemic violence. For the imperative to transparency and reduction as embedded within dominant western ways of knowing is not an inert or abstract specter (or at least not only that), but rather deeply informs the methods through which western domination was trafficked globally in forms such as colonialism and imperialism, processes which are continuous. “The fundamental certainty that the western form of philosophy is not the only form possible” moves us toward epistemic liberation and decolonization by expressing the reality of the multiple, different, and irreducible knowledges, ways of knowing, and epistemic traditions that are each informed by different and unique existences (Mungwini 2019a). The right to opacity calls for the right for these existences and epistemologies to exist and flourish without the violence of attempting to make them transparent or reducible to the master narrative of dominant western epistemology or philosophy. But, importantly for Glissant, this also means talking about that violence in the first place as a violence that must be resisted, which informs part of the positionality of the Black Caribbean philosopher.

1 Opacity, Refusal, and Entanglement

In what follows, I will examine further these epistemic frictions between opacity, refusal, and entanglement within projects of epistemic decolonization to question some of the conclusions Mungwini asserts in his section on “African self-apprehension,” particularly the notion of self-betrayal. First, I should define and motivate how I am using the term epistemic friction. I am relying on the work of Anna Tsing to motivate my understanding of epistemic friction. For Tsing,

Cultures are continually co-produced in the interactions I call ‘friction’: the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference [...]. As metaphorical image, friction reminds us that heterogeneous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power (Tsing 2005: 4–5).

Tsing’s notion of friction presents an interesting way of understanding entanglement and the power inequalities that reside in knowledge production as sites of both interaction and friction. It also addresses the particularly messy and complex process of exchange and intermeshing within epistemic entanglements that is often either excluded or oversimplified in the presentation of knowledge production qua epistemic domination. So part of the way we can understand the desire to either refuse or bypass the west while talking non-stop about the west is through the not neat or straightforward ways in which non-dominant, non-western epistemologies are entangled with western ones, neither of which are monolithic, despite the presentation of particularized universalism as the *one* true epistemological framework or way of knowing. When I confront the projects of domination and colonization present in the work I want to write, but cannot or cannot yet, I am coming face to face with the opacity and confusion of this entanglement itself. For Tsing, this conception of friction gives us some room to sit with and explore that opacity without the certitude or will to dominate that transparency and reduction present.

In relation to thinking about the role of “African self-apprehension” and the obstacles to it that Mungwini offers in thinking a way toward epistemic decolonization, I would like to complicate the presentation of the obstacle of self-betrayal. Mungwini states that “[t]rue decolonization begins at the level of understanding one’s own world; it is about African self-apprehension” (Mungwini 2019a). Mungwini continues by describing his first obstacle to this self-apprehension, as self-betrayal. “By self-betrayal I wish to capture that sense of ‘excessive scruple or hesitation’ from engaging fully with reference points and ideas from within the African culture itself and preferring rather to hover above concrete situations for fear of ‘ethnophilosophical contamination’ and loss of philosophical purity” (Mungwini 2019a). While I take Mungwini’s point about the particular irony of fear of “‘ethnophilosophical contamination’ and loss of philosophical purity” given the understanding that western dominant philosophy is precisely an ethnophilosophy parading as universal, I worry about the oversimplified expression of this hesitation as self-betrayal. I wish to complicate this by emphasizing both the right to opacity and the messiness/unpredictability of epistemic friction. So, a critical aspect of epistemic decolonization is precisely the process of coming to understand the dominant philosophical myth that presents transparency qua domination as the primary goal of knowledge as in fact one epistemological framework among many, and perhaps not an ideal one at that. Perhaps it also follows from this that this way of knowing is in fact a colonial imposition that we are empowered to resist *through* practices of decolonization.

The quest for epistemic liberation by way of epistemic decolonization, I agree, has much to do with the understanding of one’s own world and self. However, this is a deeply difficult, complex, and messy process even within relatively ideal conditions; the entanglement of domination and colonization in processes of decolonization makes it even more difficult and not straightforward. Self-betrayal in this sense seems to be relatively final and transparent. I wonder if instead we can sit with the complexities at the same time that we critique the way dominant western philosophical systems have affected understandings of our own various traditions. It seems to me that the right to obscurity and the work of Glissant has much to add to this understanding and complicating of self-betrayal as a product of the ways in which colonization is something entangled within even our best desires or attempts to decolonize. Is self-betrayal as transparent as this? Surely part of the work of

decolonization is facing the obstacles to knowing presented by systems of power and oppression, but we also must create space for the degree and levels of challenge faced by differently positioned philosophers living legacies of marginalization and oppression globally. While the self-betrayal Mungwini outlines is problematic, especially in the African context, where the archive of oral histories is extensive and noted, does this critique also universalize this experience or reality in ways that reduce important opacities or differences?

Part of why Glissant stresses the right to opacity, I believe, also comes from his own situation as an Afrodiasporic Caribbean philosopher. Much of Glissant's work centers, by my reading, Tsing's concept of friction in attempting to understand relation and syncretism: preoccupations that stressed the unpredictability, movement, and entanglements of ideas and worlds. I think an additional major obstacle to decolonization is posed by the inheritances of ideas of biological, cultural, and epistemic purities that we must navigate as people who live the consequences of colonization and violence, both epistemic and otherwise. Part of how we understand our worlds is by understanding the violence and harms of colonization and the effects they have on our own traditions as well as our understandings of those traditions. But our traditions are also not static or pure (and perhaps never were) in the sense that complete or absolute recovery of those is possible or should be advocated for. Is a pressure toward purity, an epistemic inheritance of the western imperative of transparency, somehow at play when we betray ourselves? Here, then, I am interested in how epistemic refusal is also a tactic that has been offered as a means of moving toward decolonization.

A theme that has emerged in contemporary literature on decolonization is the politics of refusal. Audra Simpson writes about the ways in which part of Indigenous resistance to historical and ongoing settler colonialism has been the development and enactment of a politics of refusal, which involves a turning away from the state (Simpson 2014). Practically, this can encompass various activities, such as refusing to apply for or carry a settler nation state passport or militantly occupying and protecting your land from settler state expropriation. A politics of refusal seems to be deeply connected to the right to opacity, but also appears to be a friction worth exploring in relation to the realities of entanglement. A politics of refusal is a fruitful avenue toward decolonization precisely because it directs attention to the ways in which colonization is an aspirational project that is never closed or finished. It also situates resistance and activities toward decolonization squarely in the lived experiences and desires of the oppressed and colonized. I believe this is an important connection to the ways in which decolonization has identified a return to the traditions of the colonized prior to or in spite of colonization as a key aspect of what decolonizing means. It manifests the desire and necessity to affirm the existences and resistances that colonization and colonialism precisely failed to extinguish or assimilate.

However, a politics of refusal also appears to be subject to some of the same issues of oversimplification, in the sense that a "turning away from" presupposes that we understand in a transparent sense that which we are turning away from and perhaps even that which we are turning toward. Refusal and betrayal seem to have this kind of epistemic relationship of certainty or knowability to the entity which they are applied to. I wonder if, in part, the challenge of what both Mungwini and Simpson suggest through their respective works is a reimagining that can be informed by both traditional archives and future orientations that move away from colonization, but that might be augmented by thinking about the right to opacity as a key condition of both of those projects. Decolonization is a wickedly difficult problem precisely because of the complexity and entanglement of colonization, which does not define us, but can also lead us to refuse and betray in ways that are not straightforward or knowable in the total or absolute sense. It is useful here to bring

in the work of la paperson when they explore the spontaneity, unpredictability, and incompleteness of coloniality and invoke the idea of decolonial desires. “My position is impossible, a colonialist-by-product of empire, with decolonizing desires. I am, maybe you are too, a colonialist scrap, I desire against the assemblage that made me” (paperson 2017: xxiii). la paperson stresses the ways in which colonial machines and systems break down and are used and repurposed in ways coloniality never imagined. In this way, the position of the colonized is equally impossible and open to the reassembling and breakdown of decolonial desires and dreams. These impossibilities coexist and are in fact part of the power of decolonization—the fact that it is constantly being reassembled, rebuilt, and taken apart, and incapable of being imagined in totality or eternally (paperson 2017).

In the same way that decolonization calls for the freedom and space to explore our own archives and traditions, or even to sit with the incompleteness and loss of our archives, I think it also and importantly calls for an epistemic openness to the opacities we face both in the archives and ourselves. Or it calls for an epistemic openness, if we think with paperson, to the ways in which our behavior is not always decolonial, because there is no absolute purity, and a politics of purity actually frustrates the unpredictability that is part of the power of decolonizing desires (paperson 2017: 65). For me, then, a critical part of moving towards epistemic liberation is the ability to come to terms with how turning towards and turning away from myself is part of the project of navigating the entangled projects of colonization and decolonization while knowing that I can always accept and advocate for myself nonetheless. Thus, to echo Glissant, once more and at last, “As for my identity, I’ll take care of it myself” (Glissant 1997: 191).

On What Can be Done to be True to Both Philosophy and to Humanity: Further Reflections

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In the whole sweep of history there is nothing more impressive than the spectacle of noble men who had the spirit to fight unreason and ignorance and who did not hesitate, not only to renounce material advantages, but even to jeopardize life and happiness in order to increase the amount of beauty, of justice, and of truth which is the essential part of our patrimony (Sarton 1927: 20).¹

The imperative to increase the amount of beauty, of justice, and of truth in the world must define our practice of philosophy. I wish to begin by thanking the three respondents both for their insights and for contributing to this dialogue and “productive friction” (to borrow from Michael Monahan). Perhaps, before I begin this rejoinder, it may be appropriate to provide the reason why I settled for the topic in the first place. While Africa is the particular historico-cultural horizon from within which these reflections spring, my focus was largely driven by the desire to keep dialogue alive on a topic that can never be closed as long as bias and lopsidedness continues to characterize the epistemic field. Part of the problem follows from our troubled past, where attempts have been made to privatize and therefore claim absolute ownership even of qualities that, by virtue of who we are, form the natural endowment of every human being. The Greeks have spoken of the sin of hubris—the arrogance of men who wanted to elevate themselves to the level of gods. It is perhaps philosophy that has the potential to bring the world closer in terms of appreciating without hubris the contributions each can make to the totality of existence. But of course in putting this amount of faith in philosophy, we should be able to distinguish between the history of philosophy, that is, the story of philosophy and everything about its past that we very much deplore, and the promise it holds, the great hope it is pregnant with, the hitherto unachieved potential of philosophy (Okere 2004).

We are often told in moral admonitions that the “truth shall set you free,” but I believe it is also time “to set the truth free” so that it is no longer immured to one particular worldview and form of existence. This is no doubt one sure way to increase the amount of beauty and justice in this world. There can be little argument that it is in the centuries of suppressed truth that most of the problems we confront today lie. Because of the synergy between conquest and religion, the biblical declaration by the divine that “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6) appears to have been arrogantly appropriated and its logic extended to give force to mundane claims over epistemic authority. Even “no-one gets to the Father except through me” curiously mirrors the attitude of the dominant philosophy and that of its foremost defenders, who often insinuate that, for African philosophy to be philosophy, it must mirror its western benefactor. This is despite the fact that contestations over the definition of “philosophy” remain unsettled. Lucius Outlaw, Jr. (1992: 73) does well to remind us that

We mislead ourselves if we require that there be something more than ‘family resemblances’ common to all the instances we recognize as instances of ‘philosophy,’ where the common

feature is more or less systematic *reflection* on various aspects, in various areas of experience to the end of facilitating ordered, meaningful existence. 'There are no transcendental rules *a priori* that are the essential, thus defining, feature of 'philosophy.'

It is in the idea of family resemblances that the relationships among disparate philosophies of the world must be understood. Equally significant is that once we are able to view philosophical practices historically, we will be drawn to appreciate that every instance of philosophy is marked by finitude (Okere 1983). Against this backdrop, dialogue becomes not only the way to learn from but more significantly the means to come to terms with the parochialism inherent in each and every tradition of philosophy. To move closer to this reality is in keeping with the goal of world philosophies as an approach.

1 On Translation

The qualifier to the title of Monahan's article is posed in the form of a question: "Can there be Universality without *Universalism?*" with the 'ism' of universalism in italics. I agree with him in his rejection of a totalizing universalism and in that each philosophical tradition must recognize its own incompleteness. It is equally important to see the freshness he brings in terms of fleshing out, in very crucial ways, some of my brief allusions (others in a manner that I had not even envisioned) to the problems of this universalism that only speaks to and about itself. Monahan is also correct in his caveat on translation, and it is a point well taken. Translation is a problem that is itself in need of a solution. He warns against falling for "the ideal of translation as a kind of isomorphic interchangeability across languages" and "to bear in mind the incompleteness of translation" (Monahan 2019). He also correctly points out, at the same time, that I have not engaged or spelled out my understanding of translation in any detail in the article. It is true that given the length of the essay I could not get into that in any detail. I have touted translation as a possible solution to one of the philosophical challenges on the African continent, but in doing so I am equally aware of the many challenges that translation poses. While translation is indeed problematic for many reasons, some of which are pretty obvious, I believe that within it lies a potential solution to one of the major philosophical handicaps facing us on the African continent. As I agonized about the history and politics of translation and the role it has played in epistemic imperialism versus the potential it holds for dialogue and cross-cultural intelligibility, I wondered whether this is not that one case where the cure may be located in the poison. In other words, the solution to the linguistic handicap we face might lie in the equally problematic practice called translation. It is therefore important to distinguish between "translation as erasure,"² as an insidious agent of epistemicide on one hand, and translation as a counterhegemonic tool and a means to achieve dialogue and intelligibility. I have argued for translation as an instrument to metaphorically bridge the gaps and as a means for opening horizons of knowing and of enhancing access to philosophical resources kept out of reach from many on the continent on account of the linguistic handicap. It is in this latter sense that translation can be instrumental in African self-apprehension necessary for epistemic liberation. No doubt, this would be one way for African philosophy to meet the imperative of adding to the amount of beauty, justice, and truth in the world. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) employs translation in the context of social struggles for emancipation and in his argument for epistemologies of the global south. In an interview article by Alison Phipps entitled "Other Worlds are Possible"—a title that speaks to the central idea in Santos's argument for epistemologies of the south, and one that agrees with my work

here—Santos touches on the enigma of translation and justifies his use of it with particular reference to real examples from his field work among communities in Latin America. Although he acknowledges the problems of translation, he nevertheless adopts and advocates it as a means of bringing together and organizing and consolidating the various counter-hegemonic struggles in the global south. Accordingly, he states, “even if translation is a ruin, translation is still desirable and necessary if and when it is about community and about the common tasks, the hard common tasks at hand” (Phipps 2007: 98). By the term “the hard common tasks at hand,” I am sure he refers to the challenge of bringing different people together to coordinate in their social struggles for emancipation as victims of the social, political, and economic systems of exclusion. Similar “hard common tasks” and struggles are apparent in Africa in many significant areas of existence including knowledge and the academy. Philosophically, the counter-hegemonic struggles are at the root, if not the very origin, of African philosophy as an academic discipline on the continent. In other words, African philosophy, including even the emancipatory spirit that drives and gives it its timbre or tone, is directly related to political struggles against domination. And so, it would follow that translation as an instrument for the counter-hegemonic struggles could occupy the same role it does in Santos’s social struggles in the African philosophical context, though with slight variations.

Philosophically, the struggle to realize the truth that other ways of looking at the world are possible, and that the western mode is just one among many, requires consolidating African philosophy and its conceptions of reality. That can be achieved by laying the foundation for dialogue across the linguistic regions of the continent, and this is where translation becomes a necessary, albeit limited and imperfect tool. Translation may therefore go a long way in helping to establish a formidable philosophical tradition capable of standing on its own in terms of contributing to the knowledge available to humanity. This is the sense in which I conceived of the role of translation in African philosophy—an instrument that, despite its own issues, could help us on a continent that is yet to realize its full potential to foster genuine exchange of ideas and philosophical cooperation across various aspects of life. As with any call for self-apprehension, “the question of who we are, in other words, is always also a question of our history, and crucially, our future” (Monahan 2018: 288). It is therefore crucial to note that my call for African self-comprehension, to which translation must serve as a means to an end, is not backward-looking but rather looks at history as the source from which we should drink and renew our strength, so as to forge ahead in the caravan of human progress.³

2 On the Complexity of Our Existence as Colonial Subjects

We are a people who live the consequences of colonization and violence, both epistemic and otherwise. Part of how we understand our worlds is by understanding the violence and harms of colonization and the effects they have on our own traditions as well as our understandings of those traditions (Murdock 2019).

I consider the above submission a fitting summary of what Esme Murdock argues in her article, and it seems to constitute the point of departure for her engagement with the complex problem of decolonization and epistemic liberation in particular. And here we share the same insights. Similarly, when she writes, “whenever I try to write, I usually end up detouring through that which I do not want to write, but often need to explain. And this is just one of the ways in which what I want to express is endlessly complicated by the obstacle of domination and colonization,” her frustration too

is part of what defines this complex discourse (Murdock 2019). But as she rightly quotes from Glissant, “if I [we] don’t begin there, you will see me [us] consumed with the sullen jabber of childish refusal, convulsive and powerless” (Murdock 2019). I take it that the “there” in the statement by Glissant refers to the experiences of colonialism as the historical condition within which we find ourselves, and one in which and through which we must wage this struggle for liberation. It is also, I believe, the same kind of experience that Tsenay Serequeberhan (1994) in part subsumes under the signifier “African historicity” in his reference to philosophy and the struggle for liberation in Africa. Our philosophy takes this as its point of departure; it derives from it the rage and impetus that in part defines it as the kind of philosophy it is. Our philosophizing acknowledges this history as an indispensable part of our existence, but it is not the only history. And it is here that I propose African self-apprehension in the sense of a concerted effort to know our history and ourselves as a people.

Murdock does express concern towards what she sees as my over-simplification of the complex condition behind what I have designated as “self-betrayal.” The refusal to get down to understand one’s culture and its traditions as texts from which to draw philosophical concepts and ideas that could be brought to contribute to the ecology of concepts available to humanity and posterity and the refusal to use them as the base from which to take off in our philosophical reflections remains, for me, a form of betrayal. I agree with her that “Surely part of the work of decolonization is facing the obstacles to knowing presented by systems of power and oppression, but we also must create space for the degree and levels of challenge faced by differently positioned philosophers living legacies of marginalization and oppression globally” (Murdock 2019).

Let me add a note on the reason for articulating self-betrayal in the way I did although I am aware of the complexity that surrounds it. In choosing to shift part of the blame to ourselves, in this pointing at what I believe is our own complicity, and therefore in advocating that we begin to hold ourselves to account, I was trying to avoid two common pitfalls. The first is a form of fatalism that does not get us anywhere, and the second is feeding the discourse of recrimination by which “we constantly reject onto others the responsibility for all our misfortunes and misdeeds” (Hountondji 2002b: 504). Perhaps a balance has to be struck between the historical circumstances that we find ourselves in against the capability we can exercise in seizing back the initiative and regaining control over our own destiny.

3 Concerning the Foreign Idiom

The article by Aaron Creller offers a critique that centers on what he calls the “idiomatic double-bind” (Creller 2019). In the essay, he raises other important issues but focuses specifically on my call for the reaffirmation of the “universal right to reason.” He correctly identifies this concept as historically belonging to the colonial idiom. And so he asks, “How does one balance the pull to use vocabulary from a colonial tradition on the one hand with the desire to work outside of that vocabulary and its lexical fetters on the other?” (Creller 2019) This I think is what stands out as one major issue to which a response must be preferred. Of course, there are other questions that he raises, but they all seem intertwined with the first one. Among these are the following two questions: “In trying to be true to humanity, the right to reason is made universal, but is there such a thing as a non-parochial claim to universality? In a call for a *universal* right to reason, how does one reconcile the universality in a way that does not override the localness and the particularity of experience?” If I read Monahan’s argument correctly, it would appear that he alludes to a similar problematic but then

goes further to point to a possible way of addressing the apparent tension. Here, allow me to quote from the essay by Monahan, at the point where he argues,

the struggle to decolonize philosophy, and to secure the African “right to reason” does not reduce to isolated and particularistic practices utterly unintelligible to each other.

[...] what is universal about philosophy is its openness to its own incompleteness, and its pursuit, through dialogue and exchange (relationality), of what is shared across and through the *gaps* that emerge in the course of this dialogue. In this way what is universal is revealed in our very attention to what is particular, and they are intimately bound up with each other (Monahan 2019).

To read this together with my analogy of the river and the ocean (see Mungwini 2019a) would seem to me another way of addressing the concern, but of course philosophy, being what it is, leaves statements open to different interpretations, in a way helping to keep productive dialogue going. If this takes care of the last two concerns above, what is left for now is to revert to the first question above that speaks to the appropriation of a foreign conceptual idiom in addressing African realities.

First, I should point out that this question is a recurring one in many discussions of African philosophy,, although it is often clothed differently depending on the style of each individual philosopher and nature of the argument or essay that prompted the reaction. To illustrate its recurring nature allow me to point immediately to the essay by Monahan in this dialogue, and staying within the family, so to say, I can again point to Jonardon Ganeri’s (2016) essay published under this very stable under the name of this journal’s precursor, *Confluence: Online Journal of World Philosophies*. These are just two instances among many more. Let me now turn to this crucial question in African philosophy, which, no doubt, arises for other philosophies in similar positions. Anticipating that this kind of problem may be raised by the reader regarding his appeal to hermeneutics and other conceptual tools located from within the western canon, the African philosopher Serequeberhan makes the following statement in the introduction to his seminal text, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*.

The reader should not be surprised to find, throughout this study, positive references and appropriations, as well as critical rejections of the European philosophic tradition. [...] To be a Westernized African in today’s postcolonial Africa means ultimately to be marked/branded—in one way or another—by the historical experience of European colonialism. We should not try to “hide” from this all pervasive element of our modern African historicity. Rather, our efforts to surmount it must begin by facing up to and confronting this enigmatic actuality.⁴ This then is the hermeneutic task of this study, for ultimately the antidote is always located in the poison! (Serequeberhan 1994: 11)

There is no reason for me to overemphasize the point by Serequeberhan at this point except to draw attention to the meaning and significance of the phrase, “the antidote is also always located in the poison.” And I have no doubt that Africans, being keen observers, did not take too long to realize the import of that lesson. Earlier in this essay, I did allude to an unfortunate development in the story of humanity where attempts have been made to privatize a quality that is itself the natural endowment of all—the fact of being human. And so, the philosophical problem that we are confronted with at this point is a direct offshoot of this historical travesty. To right this wrong, the foreign idiom of rights is appealed to as a means to an end; that is, it is invoked in order to reaffirm

the humanity of the African and on that basis set them on a path to begin the fight for authentic liberation. More fundamentally, the universal right to reason is invoked not to serve the same kind of purpose it served in the colonial context, but as a counter-hegemonic weapon. In this sense, it serves as an instrument to reassert African humanity in relation with others and not against the other, as was historically the case. This relational component needs to be noted for its implications. Finally, and in response to this crucial question, allow me to point to a myth of history that somehow seems to burble underneath as the energy that fuels this question. This is the myth of cultural and intellectual purity and self-sufficiency. Civilizations from time immemorial have borrowed ideas from each other, although for some reason others have tried frantically to erase or conceal their indebtedness to other cultures with the hope of projecting epistemic self-sufficiency and originality. In other cases, they have even gone to the extent of planting traces of their own preferred race at every significant symbol of civilization, even in precolonial indigenous lands.⁵ It is in the history of civilizations to adopt, adapt, and appropriate ideas to improve one's situation, and when that happens, it is how that benefits humanity that must matter. After all, archaeology and the story of evolution, to the extent I know it, tells us that at one point the world was African—that is, Africa is the cradle of humankind. In the struggle that Africa is waging, it appears less of a concern where and what resources we can use in this fight for justice. The important element of it all is the universal aspiration in the sense of justice for all and not for a particular segment of humanity. Commitment to the phony ideals of conceptual purity and self-sufficiency pales into insignificance in the face of the broader ethical and humanistic concerns over justice and a better world for all.

When Bryan Mukandi (2019), representing the crop of upcoming African philosophers, poses the question “What are the conditions of possibility for dialogue that does not begin with and is not grounded on ‘Greece’, and all that the metonym implies?” he expresses frustration with this entrapment or the “asphyxiation” that he witnesses on African philosophy. Crucially, Mukandi does not only identify factors contributing to this asphyxiation but alludes to a future possibility where instead of “the north-bound gaze,” African philosophy begins to look elsewhere, to its “neighbors,” that is, those outside the so-called center for collaboration and inspiration. Elsewhere, I argue that by aligning the practice of African philosophy to a particular conceptualization of the enterprise, what was meant to serve as the springboard for intellectual freedom, including the liberation of thought and imagination in Africa, became restrictive if not downright intolerant or repressive in its practice. The vitriolic attacks and intolerance directed at so-called ethnophilosophy is a case in point. The question raised by Mukandi seems to confirm the shift in academic philosophy, so well put by Ganeri (2016) when he articulates the defining elements of what he calls the “new age” that philosophy is entering, or more correctly the new age it has already entered. This is a period marked by so many things, including the waning of unbridled privilege on the philosophical field. And considering recent global developments, it is only a matter of time before these relationships in the so-called philosophical periphery begin to unleash contemporary philosophies that are not imitative but restorative, creative, dialogical, and forward-looking. There is an inescapable and potential coming into being of “new autonomous and authentic forms of articulation” (Ganeri 2016: 137) distinct from but equally complementary to other traditions. I have no reason to doubt that this significant shift marks the twilight of that self-regarding arrogance that has been a feature of the philosophical landscape for centuries.

4 Concluding Remarks

As I move to conclude my reflections on this debate, allow me to draw from the wisdom of one African philosophy elder, on a point that is as much inspirational as it is educational. This is something I consider critical if at all we do agree to take philosophy as an enterprise premised on dialogue and exchange of ideas. According to Mogobe Ramose (2003:405),

From different experiences with particular reference to space and time might arise similar insights. The fact that similar insights are arrived at by different routes and also at different times calls for the distinction between argument and insight. Upon this distinction one may well understand why and how different and, even at times apparently contradictory arguments may none the less be advanced to support a similar insight. *What is objectionable then is the claim that since the insights are similar all other arguments, except one, must be banished. Instead, different arguments pertaining to a similar insight must be entertained precisely because they form the basis for dialogue which is the basic principle of philosophy.* [Italics are mine]

The importance of this submission in the context of our engagement speaks for itself. It is true that philosophy is yet to fully recover from its sordid past, but the direction it has taken is one that is indeed promising. Admittedly, I have come to be drawn to the view that the joy of philosophy lies elsewhere, that is “in the co-operative development of ideas, in the exploration of new perspectives, in the creation of visions in which the everyday becomes interesting, even fascinating. Criticism has its place, of course, but criticism is, or ought to be, only a tool for shaping ideas, for expanding our vision. It is not, or ought not to be, an end in itself” (Solomon 1999: 8). It is only at that point when our practice and teaching of philosophy begins not only to accept but exhibit genuine pluralism in its outlook that philosophy will be able to increase the amount of justice, of beauty, and of truth in this world.

Finally, it would be a travesty to conclude this essay without expressing my great appreciation to Monika Kirloskar-Steinbach for making this dialogue and “productive friction” possible. It is through her that I have been able to metaphorically meet and speak to each one of you, and hopefully the dialogue can continue in other forums going forward.

¹ I have chosen to open the essay with this quotation not only because of the fundamental truth in what it says but because it is a testimony which follows from the achievements, not of one specific culture, but that of thinkers spanning different centuries and geographical places and traditions. The title of the book, *Introduction to the History of Science Volume 1 from Homer to Omar Khayyam*, bears testimony. Homer, author of the famous *Iliad* and *Odyssey* is said to have been Greek, while Omar Khayyam was a Persian mathematician and philosopher. I am particularly drawn to emphasize the significance of their work in increasing (and not diminishing) the amount of beauty, of justice, and of truth that is the essential part of our heritage. This must inspire our practice of philosophy going forward.

² For a discussion of this, see Vazquez (2011: 27). Even the title to this article places this problem at the core of what he was addressing.

³ See Ki-Zerbo (1981: 23).

⁴ I wish to draw attention particularly to the resonance between this position and what is expressed by Glissant, cited in Murdock, where he states “if I don’t begin there, you will see me consumed with

the sullen jabber of childish refusal, convulsive and powerless. This is where I start.” We are branded one way or the other by this history, and any serious quest to understand ourselves must take that history as a crucial point of departure, not as the end point.

- ⁵ Although Africanist scholars can point to numerous such intellectual conspiracies, I have in mind here the numerous theories put forward by colonial scholarship to account for the origin and construction of the Great Zimbabwe monuments. Given its magnificent architecture, it was felt that the indigenous Shona peoples could not have been its builders—and all this because of racial prejudices. I discuss this point in my book, *Indigenous Shona Philosophy: Reconstructive Insights* (Mungwini 2017b). It took the work of numerous archaeologists to finally put these conspiracies to rest by providing ample and unrivalled evidence that the monuments were indeed constructed by the indigenous peoples themselves.

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