

# Critique of Ramon Grosfoguel's 'The Epistemic Decolonial Turn'

**Mogobe Bernard Ramose**

**ORCID iD:** <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3921-7613>

## **Abstract**

In this essay we offer a critique of Grosfoguel's 'The Epistemic Decolonial Turn' (2007). In order to do so, we situate him in the context of the conceptual history of Latin America, in particular its political philosophy. We argue that in view of the conceptual history of African political philosophy in the struggle against the injustice of colonisation the idea of 'decolonial' is redundant. We suggest that the force of Grosfoguel's argument must be taken seriously. Our submission is that instead of assimilating 'decolonial', it is best to opt for re-humanisation of human relations at all levels, since the project of Western colonisation has been and continues to be the stubborn refusal to recognise 'the other' as a human being. Using our own linguistic resources backed by the philosophy of *ubuntu*, we would rather opt for *mothofatso* and not 'decolonial'.

**Keywords:** colonisation, *ubuntu*, 'the right to be different', decolonisation, 'decolonial', 'colonial difference', insight, concept, epistemology, his-story, humanisation, African political philosophy

# **Ukuhlolisisa Izindlela zokwazi zokuguqula ukulwisana nokuqonela zikaRamon Grosfoguel**

**Mogobe Bernard Ramose**

**ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3921-7613>**

## **Iqoqa**

Kuleli phepha, siveza ukuhlolisiswa ‘kwezindlela zokwazi zokuguqula ukulwisana nokuqonela’ zikaGrosfoguel. Ukuze kwenzeke lokho simbeka esimweni somlando oqanjiwe waseLatin America, ikakhulukazi indlela yokubuka izinto ngokwezepolitiki. Siqakulisa ukuthi isimo esiqanjiwe sendlela yokucabanga ngokwezepolitiki sase-Afrika emzabalazweni obhekene nokungalingani komqondo wokulwisana nokuqonela akunamsebenzi. Siphakamisa ukuthi amandla omqakuliswano ka-Grosfoguel kumele athathelwe phezulu. Isiphakamiso sethu ukuthi esikhundleni sokuhlenganisa ‘ukulwisana nokuqonela’ kungcono kakhulu ukukhetha ukwenziwa kabusha ukwenza okunobuntu bobudlelwane babantu kuwo wonke amazinga, njengoba uhlelo lokuqonela laseNtshonalanga beluqhubeka futhi lusaqhubeka nokwenqaba ngenkani ukuveza ‘omunye umuntu’ njengomuntu ophilayo. Sisebenzisa izinsiza zolimi esinazo ezesekwa indlela yokucabanga yobuntu, sincamela ukukhetha *imothofatso* hhayi ‘ukulwisana nokuqonela’.

**Amagama asemqoka:** ukuqonela, ubuntu, ‘ilungela lokwehluka’, ukulwisana nokuqonela, ‘okwendlela yokulwisana nokuqonela’, ukwehluka kokuqonela, ukuqonda, umqondo, izindlela zokwazi, umlando wakhe, ukwenza okunobuntu, indlela yokucabanga ngokwezepolitiki yase-Afrika

# **Phetlheko ya taodisho ya Ramon Grosfoguel mabapi le seo a se bitjago ‘The Epistemic Decolonial Turn’ ebego phetogo ya tsebo go tloga ka nako ya tokologo ya monagano bokgobeng**

**Mogobe Bernard Ramose**

**ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3921-7613>**

## **Modu wa Taba**

Sebakwa taodisong ye ke go kwisisa gore na lethlaodi, ‘decolonial’ le tloga le tlhokagala na ge motho o tseba tatelano ya mantsu le diema tseo di bego di somisiwa ntweng ya tokologo ya mafatshe a Afrika. Letlhaodi le ‘decolonial’ le somiswa ke mongwadi Grosfoguel. Mo taodisong ye re ngaga gore letlhaodi le gale tlhokogala ge motho o kwisisa gabotse ntwaga ya tokologo ya mafatshe a Afrika. Re tshishinya gore go enale gore re adime letlhaodi le re kampe ra somisa la setso lentsu leo le laetsatsang gabotse gore go dira ba bangwe batho makgoba ke gobane bao ba dirang bjalo ba tlhoka botho. Gore mabaka a boele sekeng re tshanetse go kwisisa gore sebakwa ke mothofatso ya phedisano mmogo magareng ga batho.

**Keywords:** tokologo bothopjoeng, bokgoba, Afrika, Grosfoguel, mothofatso.

## Introduction

This essay is written in order to fulfil specific but interrelated purposes. One is to show that the argument of Grosfoguel in the article<sup>1</sup> lending its title to this essay can best be understood by reference to Latin American philosophy. This applies also to his other articles published in English to which we will refer. We distinguish between insight and concept. The former means the capacity to discern the deeper meaning of a situation and to act accordingly. Understood in this way, insight may be described as intuitive knowledge. The latter is the active construction of specific ideas or knowledge based upon a particular experience at a given point in time.

Our idea of history presupposes a criticism of history as a scientific discipline. History as a scientific discipline is inherently ‘his-’ or ‘her-story’, despite its claim to ‘objectivity’. As such, it is unlikely to become ‘our story’, that is, the ‘objective’ story of human beings as a family on this our mother Earth, thus far known to be the only planet hospitable to human life. The unlikelihood of ‘our story’ is as ethically disturbing as it is a fundamental contradiction of the scientific finding that:

At the DNA level, we are all 99.9 percent *identical* [emphasis added]. That similarity applies, regardless of which two individuals from around the world you choose to compare. Thus, by DNA analysis, we humans are truly part of one family (Collins 2007: 125 - 126).

It is significant that Collins uses the word ‘identical’, which underscores the oneness of humanness. To construe human beings as ‘the same’ is to allow for the possibility that others might be ontologically ‘different’. Social myths such as ‘blue-blooded’ human beings are predicated on the biological fallacy that human beings are ‘the same’. Differences in physical appearance are real. However, they may not be transmuted into ontological inequality. The right to exist and to reason is not dependent upon any specific biological feature. It also does not originate from the prior will and consent of any human being to come into existence.

As Gutierrez points out, ‘The right to think is a corollary of the right to be, and to assert the right to think is only to assert the right to exist’ (1983:

---

<sup>1</sup> Ramon Grosfoguel 2007. The Epistemic Decolonial Turn. *Cultural Studies* 21: 2-3, 211-223.

101). As will be shown in this essay, the transmutation of biology into ontology permeates much of the ‘history’ of the West, and the rest of humanity.

The second purpose of this essay is to show that Grosfoguel’s reference to Africa, especially in his initial articles, is often incidental. It is not directly focused on Africa in a way that delivers a substantial treatment of a particular aspect of the history of Africa with particular reference to colonisation and decolonisation. I am grateful to Grosfoguel for making time for person-to-person discussion of this aspect of his writings in Coimbra, Portugal (November 2018), along with subsequent correspondence.

Without denying the need for dialogue as the core of philosophical reasoning and practice, the third purpose of this essay is to assess the influence of Grosfoguel on decolonial thought in Africa and South Africa in the light of the paucity of the substance of his articles with regard to Africa and, South Africa and also with his explicit insistence ‘that decolonial thought cannot be developed by importing theories produced in different continents with very different social and historical realities to the African continent’ underlined by his direct admission that it is possible to produce ‘decolonial theories relevant to African liberation struggles’ (November 2018).

The fourth purpose of this essay is to question the relevance to Africa of ‘decolonial’ in view of the conceptual history and practice of colonisation and decolonisation in Africa. Linked integrally to this questioning is the intention to show that the continued use of the vocabulary of the colonial conqueror, in its initial and subsequent historical manifestations, is an implicit concession to the colonial conqueror’s ethically illegitimate authority to name and make, indeed to construct, reality on behalf of the conquered. The argument here is that it is ethically illegitimate to make this concession. We now turn to situate Grosfoguel in the conceptual history of Latin America.

We take the liberty to turn to literature in protest against ‘science’, which resists laughter and dance, even though it espouses aesthetics. A ‘science’ that adheres strictly to the *‘aequanimitas’* of William Osler is a questionable division of the human being into reason and emotion. It is a comatose reflection upon being-a-human-being-in-the-world. Be-ing as perpetual motion may be construed as reason manifesting itself as a rhythmic ebb and flow of the pluriversality and variety of beings in a dance.

## **Grosfoguel in the Conceptual History of Latin America**

From ‘Latin America’ we read the ethically compelling argument that: ‘Only

by looking historical truth full in the face shall we be able to embark upon the times to come with responsibility and efficacy' (Gutierrez 1993:4). The basic message of this citation is that an imprisoned truth cannot fulfil its mission to liberate others. The ethical imperative to 'face the truth of history' is a highly contested moral undertaking in theory and practice. This is primarily because:

Certain historians, sometimes whole generations of historians, find in certain periods of history nothing intelligible, and call them dark ages; but such phrases tell us nothing about those ages themselves, though they tell us a great deal about the persons who use them, namely that they are unable to re-think the thoughts which were fundamental to their life .... It is the historian himself who stands at the bar of judgement, and there reveals his own mind in its strength and weakness, its virtues and its vices (Collingwood 1946:219).

Hence whereas some regard 'history' as valid and true others and, sometimes even as the final statement on a particular situation, others consider it to be dubious and falsifiable. This may be illustrated by the reference to the fact that 'history' including that of Latin America, may be understood from two different and contending perspectives.

Latin America [is] a third continent promptly and violently incorporated into the process of which we speak. This even is regarded as a *discovery* by those who see history from the old continent (as they themselves call it.) A covering, others call it – referring to a history written in blatant disregard of the viewpoint of the inhabitants of the so-called New World. The 'Conquista,' it was dubbed in the old history books; 'invasion', some prefer to call it today (Gutierrez 1993: 2).

It is plain from the above that 'history' not only of Latin America but across the globe is a morally contested terrain. Even the name Latin America is morally and historically problematic to the extent that it is not the name given to this region by the indigenous peoples conquered in the unjust wars of colonisation. If Columbus had the courtesy to ask the indigenous peoples the name of the place he landed on first and, of the region would the region be known as Latin America? We will revert to an elaborate answer to this question in our discussion of the authority to give a name to a human being or a place. In the

meantime, we use the name in this essay with more than guarded scepticism.

From the literary point of view, Sir John Squire reflects upon the history of Latin America in his poem: *There was an Indian*.

There was an Indian, who had known no change  
Who strayed content along a sunlit beach  
Gathering shells. He heard a sudden strange  
Commingled noise; looked up; and gasped for speech.  
For in the bay, where nothing was before,  
Moved on the sea, by magic, huge canoes,  
With bellying cloths on poles, and not one oar,  
And fluttering coloured signs and clambering crews.  
And he, in fear, this naked man alone,  
His fallen hands forgetting all their shells,  
His lips gone pale, knelt low behind a stone,  
And stared, and saw, and did not understand,  
Columbus's doom-burdened caravels  
Slant to the shore, and all their seamen land.

The 'naked' man gathering shells on the beach did not tell Columbus that he was an Indian. Instead of telling Columbus who he was, the 'naked' man ran away, unseen by Columbus. So, why is he an Indian? Palmer replies that:

The name West Indies recalls the fact that the discovery of the New World was due to an attempt to find a western route to India, and that, when Columbus crossed the Atlantic and sighted land, he fancied he had reached the western coasts of the Indies .... The Spaniards did their best to convert, massacre, or enslave the native population; which, gentle and unwarlike, could offer only a poor resistance. Human life was held cheap by these conquerors. Their cold-blooded cruelties were as revolting as they were frequent (Palmer 1924: 19).

Grosfoguel (2013: 82) describes Columbus' imagination as a 'mistake'. Earlier, he refers to this 'mistake' as a wrong belief on the part of Columbus (Grosfoguel 2013: 79). He does not proceed to pose directly and explicitly the question as to whether or not Columbus had any authority to give

a name to the region. However, the question is implied through his use of 'Indians' in inverted commas. This suggests that he is in accord with the submission that it is ethically questionable to impose an identity on a people and their land, simply on the basis of 'fancy' or a 'mistake'. It is even more curious that erudite scholars such as Francisco de Vitoria wrote a learned treatise 'On the American Indians' (*De Indis*) with apparent lack of concern over the validity of the identity of the people about whom he was writing.

Columbus, cited in Grosfoguel, confirmed the bodily nakedness of the 'Indian'. From this he inferred an 'epistemic nakedness' based on the imagined docility of the 'Indian'. For him, this meant that the 'Indian' was ready-made by nature to be a 'servant'; a slave with the capacity to be converted to christianity<sup>2</sup> (Grosfoguel 2013: 80). In the light of this preliminary critique of the authority to name, what are we to make of the name of the country, Colombia?

Whereas it took only arrogant 'fancy' and an indifferent 'mistake' to impose a name on a people and their land, we know that a 'British woman, ... Lugard's girl-friend ... christened us Nigeria' (Achebe 1984: 6). Thus, the name 'Nigeria' is not the product of a collective democratic decision by the indigenous peoples inhabiting that geographic region. The fact that the indigenous peoples were not consulted at all in the naming of the political construct called Nigeria is not merely an incidental disregard (Taylor 2013: 33) or innocent discourtesy to the indigenous inhabitants. On the contrary, it raises the question as to whether or not Lugard and his girlfriend considered them human beings equal in dignity to themselves.

From West to Southern Africa, we read concerning the latter that Cecil Rhodes was 'one of the few men to have given his name to a country' (Maurois 1953: 22). Rhodes himself declared proudly that: 'to have a bit of country named after one is one of the things a man might be proud of' (Maurois 1953: 95). Today, Rhodesia is replaced by Zimbabwe. Rhodes still lies buried in Zimbabwean soil. If humans could speak from their graves Rhodes would have long answered the question whether or not he is 'proud' to be buried in Zimbabwe. It is interesting to note that many writers, myself included, continue

---

<sup>2</sup> We take the view, like Wole Soyinka (1999: 32) that the 'convention that capitalises this [Christianity, Christian] and other so-called world religions is justified only when the same principle is applied to other religions, among them, the Orisa'. We will use the small letter 'c' except in the case of verbatim citations.



to refer to 'Latin America' even in the face of the submission that '*Abya Yala*' is the indigenous name of the region. It seems best to consider the following as a partial answer to the question of the continued use of 'Indian' and Latin America.

We shall use, without fear of objection, the word 'Indian', since that is what the inhabitants of these lands (regarded, for well-known historical reasons, as the 'West Indies') were called in Las Casas' time; indeed it remains common usage today, even among native persons and organizations [sic] of Latin America (Gutierrez 1993: 468).

We underline the point that the conquered of the Earth, with exceptions among them, live until this day under the increasingly heavy yoke of 'Columbus's doom-burdened caravels'. The survival of Columbus' burden of invasion without moral justification underlines the point that his-story is a contested moral terrain. It is a pointer, in our time, of the unfolding struggle for 'our history' as a true reconstruction and reflection of the 'truth' about ourselves as human beings on this contingent mother planet Earth; the 'truth' that includes the revelation of truths concealed and suppressed for centuries by those who continue to refuse to know them as they are being enunciated by the conquered of the Earth. The 'two truths' told in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* can hardly suffice, because they are a species of self-deception that makes *Macbeth* a tragedy. Five centuries ago, Las Casas warned us against such concealment and suppression of other truths. According to him:

Only historical honesty can deliver us from the prejudices, narrow interpretations, paralyzing [sic] ignorance, and the deceptions foisted on us by private interests, which lay our history on us like a permanent mortgage instead of transforming it into a thrust to creativity .... A concealment of the complexity of what occurred in those years for fear of the truth, in order to defend current privileges, or – at the other extreme – a frivolous, irresponsible use of offensive expressions, condemns us to historical sterility (Gutierrez 1993: 457).

We now turn to the ethical question on the authority to give a name to another; a human being or land – country. The ethical aspect of this question is that imposing a name on another human being is to undermine the principle

of the ontological equality of all human beings. To disregard inquiring from the original inhabitants of the land the name of their land is to be afraid of ‘the truth’ of history.

## **The Authority to Give a Name to Another: A Human Being or Land – A Country**

He or she who gives a name to another must have the legitimate authority to do so. This adage is deeply-rooted in many cultures of Africa. In practice, it is manifested as a hallowed ritual permeated with sacredness. It is elevated to an ethical status. Its observance – though challenged by the intrusion of Western ‘civilisation’ – is such that in practice if one or more of the relevant aunts or uncles is absent, then the name-giving ceremony may be halted. In the name of proselytisation, christian names were imposed upon the indigenous peoples conquered in the unjust wars of colonisation, including those in conqueror South Africa. Pairing indigenous with christian names was deemed to be a superstitious mixture of the profane and the sacred.

It is instructive to consider the name ‘South Africa’ itself. An ethical historical reflection would surely render it more truthfully as: ‘Conqueror South Africa’. Many of our relatives and friends ended up not only being given christian names, but also being renamed, for example, ‘*two boy*’ just because the posterity of the colonial conqueror had neither the wish nor the patience to learn to write and pronounce the name Mosimanegape, meaning; yet another boy.

In the wake of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) in Conqueror South Africa, in part influenced by Aime Cesaire, the teacher of Frantz Fanon, many adherents of the BCM, together with many other politically conscious people among the subjugated and the exploited renounced their christian names in order to undermine the illegitimate authority of the colonial conqueror to give them names. Others, determined that victory over colonialism in its various historical manifestations shall be attained, gave their children victory-oriented names such as Bafentse, Nqobile, Koketso, Hlulani, Mofenyi, Manqoba, Moferefere, Gundo, Mailagofengwa, Ofentse, Nkululeko. In the light of this, Paulo Freire’s argument that even the peasant ought to win back ‘the right to *say his or her own word, to name the world*’ [emphasis original] (Freire 2003: 33) is beyond reproach.

This will to resist and renounce the illegitimate authority of the colonial conqueror to impose names upon the conquered is a significant reaffirmation of the power of the conquered to recover their authority to give names to themselves according to their own culture. It is thus a change in the geography of authority from illegitimate to legitimate authority. It is the restoration of epistemic freedom and the repudiation of slavery especially if one considers that from Western antiquity right up to our own time – despite the formal abolition of slavery – the slave was deemed to be a nameless sub-human being.

When a person's name is changed, their former name is made obsolete and so, in theory, is the life they knew prior to enslavement .... Greek literature expresses a reluctance on the part of free persons to address slaves by name .... choosing to address or not to address one's slave by name is indicative of the power the master has over his slave .... By not acknowledging a slave's name, the slave is deprived of an individual identity and is relegated, a nameless entity, to a subhuman status (Wrenhaven 2013: 32 and 40).

The 'nameless', 'subhuman' status of a slave, identifiable by an arbitrarily imposed number, by way of condescension, means that the slave is merely an object of command. To resist and challenge this as the Black Consciousness Movement activists have done is to reaffirm the right to human identity second to none in its humanness.

## **Grosfoguel belongs to the Conceptual History of Latin America**

One of the earliest figures in the history of Latin America is the Spanish Dominican priest – later Bishop of Chiapas – Bartolome Las Casas. He is, historically, the predecessor of Enrique Dussel by at least four centuries in Latin America. He is known to have been an incisive and relentless critic of the Spanish conquest of Latin America and, later Africa by Portugal, after his deliberate renunciation of its fundamental injustice which he condoned initially (Gutierrez 1993: 304 and 320). To Las Casas, Africa was present not incidentally but in a focused and substantive manner (Gutierrez 1993: 319-324). Dussel does not hide that he was inspired by Las Casas. In admiration, he embraces him as 'the theologian of liberation' (Dussel 2003: 213-314) even

though this appellation did not exist at the time of Las Casas. We will revert to this point. Grosfoguel also acknowledges Las Casas (Grosfoguel 2013: 83). However, he accords him much less significance and prominence than he deserves compared to his disproportionate elevation of Nelson Maldonado-Torres (Grosfoguel 2013: 81). Furthermore, Grosfoguel does not conceal that he was inspired by Dussel. He extols him as a scholar whose philosophical and theological writings are ‘fundamental for anybody interested in the decolonization [sic] of knowledge and power’ (Grosfoguel 2013: 73) in our time. This brief chronology delineates the chain of identity of insight in successive historical contexts, yielding multiple and varied conceptual constructs speaking to the evolution of the original injustice of colonisation. The sustained focus upon this original injustice constitutes the basis for conceptual affinity in varied historical conditions. Grosfoguel belongs to this conceptual history in Latin America, even though he is himself a native of Puerto Rico. He may, therefore, be regarded as one of the proponents of the conceptual history of Latin America. Mignolo also acknowledges Las Casas (Mignolo 2002: 92). We now turn to the identification of some of the specific insights and arguments of Las Casas with the acknowledgement that both Gutierrez and Dussel (Dussel 2011: 190-210 and 240-251) have already done so. The purpose is to show, following both authors, that some of the specific insights and arguments of Las Casas endure until our time albeit under different names.

### **The Case Put Forward by Las Casas**

Born in Seville, Spain, in 1484, Bartolome Las Casas was ordained a Dominican priest in Rome in 1507. He arrived in the Indies ‘only ten years after Columbus[’s] ... “doom-burdened caravels”’ (Gutierrez 1993: 17). In 1543 he became Bishop of Chiapas. Although initially complacent about the injustice of the Spaniards towards the indigenous inhabitants of the ‘Indies’, he subsequently renounced this position and turned into a vigorous and relentless critic of this injustice until his death in Madrid on 18 July 1566.

Las Casas’ renunciation of the Spanish injustice was – to use a theological term – a veritable *metanoia*; a radical change of epistemic and convictional perspective demanding a practice consonant with the fundamental change. In this sense, Las Casas proved himself able to adopt the viewpoint of the ‘other’ without becoming the ‘other’ or claiming to have first-hand direct experience of being the ‘other’.

The adoption of the viewpoint of others became for Las Casas a matter of Christian spirituality and theological methodology alike .... He tried to understand things from a point of departure in the Indian, poor and oppressed .... This way of looking at things could only be very different from that of his compatriots .... for Las Casas, it is not a mere question of the importance of *direct knowledge* of a particular state of affairs. It is also a matter of adopting the perspective of others, other persons, in order to experience and understand from within the situations and events in which those persons are caught up (Gutierrez 1993: 85 and 87; italics in the original).

This is the first insight that we wish to identify from the life of Las Casas. It underlines the point that it is cognitively possible to adopt the viewpoint of the 'other' and act upon such an understanding. It would appear that Mignolo's understanding of the 'colonial difference' is, paradoxically, a rejection and, an acceptance of this point.

Las Casas defended the Indians, but the Indians did not participate in the discussions about their rights .... Black Africans and American Indians were not taken into account when knowledge and social organization [sic] were at stake. They, Africans and American Indians, were considered patient, living organisms to be told, not to be heard (Mignolo 2002: 63).

The presupposition pertaining to the first sentence of this citation is that if the 'Indians' had spoken for themselves about themselves then their enunciation of their experiential historical condition would have been qualitatively different from that of Las Casas. One need not quarrel with this because even a slave and a slave-holder will not articulate the same – but not identical – historical experience in qualitatively the same substance. Arising from this understanding, the following question may be posed: how are scholars like Dussel, and Grosfoguel, to name but a few, different from Las Casas as portrayed here by Mignolo?

Quijano and Dussel make it possible not only to conceive of the modern/colonial world-system as a sociohistorical structure coincident

with the expansion of capitalism but also to conceive of coloniality and the colonial difference as loci of enunciation. This is precisely what I mean by the geopolitics of knowledge and the colonial difference .... Decolonizing [sic] the social sciences and philosophy means to produce, transform, and disseminate knowledge that is not dependent on the epistemology of North Atlantic modernity – the norms of the disciplines and the problems of the North Atlantic – but that, on the contrary, responds to the need for the colonial differences. Colonial expansion was also the colonial expansion of forms of knowledge, even when such knowledges were critical to colonialism from within colonialism itself (like Bartolome de las Casas) or to modernity from modernity itself (like Nietzsche). A critique of Christianity by an Islamic philosopher would be a project significantly different from Nietzsche's critique of Christianity (Mignolo 2002: 61 and 80).

It would appear from the above citation that Mignolo denies the possibility that one can adopt a perspective other than one's own – from one's roots – in investigating reality, in particular, human relations. His observation that Las Casas' criticism of the injustice of colonialism was a criticism 'from colonialism itself' is based on his understanding of 'coloniality and the colonial difference as loci of enunciation'. This is somewhat ambiguous and dubious. It is true that Las Casas arrived in the 'Indies' with the epistemological baggage of his time. Thus, his absence from his native Spain did not necessarily mean that a shift in geographic space is equal to a shift in epistemological position. Up to this point we concur with Mignolo. However, his assertion that Las Casas criticised colonialism 'from within colonialism', presumably in epistemological terms, is dubious.

If we understand Mignolo correctly, this means that it is experientially impossible to adopt the viewpoint of 'the other'. Mignolo's insistence on the 'colonial difference' as the locus of enunciation is indeed valid to the extent that it is the recognition that immediate and direct experience is epistemologically non-transferable. The problem arises when this is extended to mean that it is cognitively impossible to adopt the viewpoint of 'the other'. This position dissolves his 'colonial difference' into solipsism, precluding dialogue. The non-transferability of direct and immediate experience is not equivalent to the impossibility of cognitive comprehension and communicative expressibility of the experience to others. Expressibility opens the way to dialogue, which is an

indispensable element of philosophising. Based on this reasoning, ‘colonial difference’ is not tantamount to radical epistemological inexpressibility, leading to inevitable solipsism. On the contrary, the immediacy and directness of experience is mediated by expressibility, which is the possibility condition for dialogue. In the dialogical encounter, it is possible to assume the point of view of the ‘other’ in the quest to understand and change reality. Understanding the ‘other’ from the ‘other’s’ point of view is necessarily limited, because the ‘other’ as alterity cannot be comprehended totally and fully. This is because the emergence of the ‘other’ is a simultaneous exposure and concealment, thus leaving a residue of the unknown about the ‘other’. Nevertheless, the ontological impossibility of grasping the ‘other’ totally and fully opens the window to a limited knowledge of the ‘other’. Accordingly, in the domain of human relations, rootedness in mother Earth does not signal inevitable death when the roots are replanted in another different type of soil. Is Antjie Krog’s *Begging to be Black*, an ill-fated undertaking even before it is begun?

Mignolo’s apparent radical epistemology steeped in ‘colonial difference’, leads to the edge where a distinction must be drawn between ‘alterity’ and ‘exteriority’. Given Dussel’s reliance on Levinas and, Mignolo’s endorsement of Dussel, it is apt to turn to another interpretation of Levinas in the search for the distinction between ‘alterity’ and ‘exteriority’. Burggraeve explains the concept of ‘exteriority’ thus:

To read is to raise oneself up to, to listen to and obey exteriority, the essentially new which does not rise up from within ourselves but breaks in upon us as a ‘revelation’ from the foreign, touching us such that we – while remaining ourselves – become radically ‘other’ (Burggraeve 2007: 31).

Obedience to ‘exteriority’ is impossible without being touched by it. It is the feeling of being touched which solicits a response from the one touched. The response can be varied. The variety includes the possibility of the touched becoming ‘radically ‘other’’. Is this another way of stating that the touched can adopt the point of view of the ‘other’ even without losing its own rootedness?

Burggraeve develops the theme of the ‘radical alterity of the other’. He submits that: ‘the other person does not belong to any series or set: the otherness of the other person is not inscribed in any logic and is not at all reversible or mutual. ... the other person exceeds and thus escapes the genre

which is human. His otherness is other than that of the series a, b,c, d. It is not relative but absolute, and therefore wholly irreducible to either me or any genre' (Burggraeve 2007: 88). This is approaching Mignolo's 'colonial difference' very closely, but as 'alterity' and not 'exteriority'. It appears that 'alterity' and 'exteriority' are synonyms according to this citation.

This impression is strengthened by the following.

Wisdom does not come from within, by means of self-knowledge ... but from without, from the outside. Wisdom begins in the traumatism of exteriority and alterity, which at the same time implies a sublimity .... By speaking to me the other awakens in me something new, which I previously did not yet possess and which would need to be drawn out of myself and made explicit. In this regard the other is my 'teacher', who by means of speaking to me ... brings me into contact with his non-extraditable alterity that can only be known if it is acknowledged and respected. I cannot predict nor foresee the speaking – the revelation – of the other; I do not have the other in my hand, and that is precisely its alterity that makes me 'wise'. In being addressed by the other I am no longer the first and the original, the 'arche' or 'principle' to which all else refers back; I am no longer the designer but the addressee, the one who listens and thus is called to respond and again question (Burggraeve 2009: 131).

It is important to note Burggraeve's use of the conjunction 'and' with reference to 'exteriority', 'alterity'. Despite the conjunction, which appears to connect two different concepts, it seems 'or' could have served the same purpose to the extent that both concepts appear to be synonymous. The 'non-extraditability' of 'alterity' is once again very close to Mignolo's 'exteriority', which underpins his 'colonial difference'. Perhaps one has to abandon the search for a difference in meaning and, instead acknowledge the 'proximity' rather than the synonymy of both concepts.

Dussel, one of Mignolo's flagships, argues that Las Casas respected the Indian in his '*exteriority* .... [showing] precisely his ability to cross the frontier of the system and make himself open to the *exteriority of the other as other* .... Our prophetic theologian of liberation goes on building up his case against the alienation of the other .... This explicit *theologian of liberation* was, in addition, an ideological theologian' (e.i.o. Dussel 2003: 213-214).



It would seem then that Dussel does quite explicitly accept that it is cognitively possible to adopt the position of ‘the other’. To the extent that Mignolo relies on Dussel for his understanding of exteriority in that much should the paradox of its acceptance and rejection of this possibility evaporate. In support for our argument on the evaporation of Mignolo’s paradox, we read, furthermore, that:

Bartolome de Las Casas assumes decidedly in his argument the dominated indigenous perspective as the starting point of his critical discourse, organized [sic] logically and philosophically from the horizon of the modern scholasticism of the School of Salamanca ... (Gutierrez 1993: 198).

The *second point* we wish to identify is Las Casas’ ethical defence of ‘the right to be different’. With particular reference to an errant conscience: ‘the conscience of those who believe themselves to be performing a good deed’ because of an ‘*excusable and invincible ignorance*’ (Gutierrez 1993: 2003). Las Casas submits – with particular reference to the performance of human sacrifices – that: ‘The Indians ‘are obliged’ to defend their own traditions and religion by force of arms against those who would seek to suppress them by force. So we have a just war indeed’ (cited in Gutierrez 1993: 204). This matter is already complex. But it becomes even more engaging and complicated when it is extended to the political domain. At the time of respective concessions to political independence of the majority of the countries in Africa, the ‘traditions and religion’ of the indigenous peoples conquered in the unjust wars of colonisation were simply acknowledged as ‘customary or traditional law’, never to attain epistemic parity with the law of the conqueror, benignly named ‘The Constitution’ as the ‘highest law of the land’. This hides the immorality of transmuting the original injustice of colonisation into justice. Based on this reasoning, the appellation, ‘customary or traditional law’ is the living reminder in our time that it is unethical to transmute injustice into justice.

The *third point* we wish to identify is Las Casas’ defence of the ethical imperative to learn and know the language of ‘the other’, in this case, the ‘Indians’. He submits that ‘a language is an element of the culture of a people. And culture is life, ...’ (Gutierrez 1993: 90). It goes without saying that many missionaries have tried their best to obey this imperative. It is also unnecessary to labour the point that it is in the interest of scholarship to have ‘a working

knowledge' of the language of 'the other' being researched.

The *fourth point* we wish to identify is Las Casas' direct and forthright concern with the just war doctrine, with particular reference to the Indies and Portugal's invasion of Africa. The divine or ecclesiastical backing for the latter is the well-known bull *Romanus Pontifex* issued in 1455 by Pope Nicholas V, to king Alfonso V of Portugal. Las Casas considered that Africans had the same rights as Indians (Gutierrez 1993: 327 and 329). For him, the critical question was,

whether the wars being waged against the natives were just or not .... the wars being waged by the Portuguese are bereft of all justification. As these wars are not just (although defensive wars waged by Canarians or Africans against Europeans would be), the slavery to which these populations are being reduced is illegal and immoral (Gutierrez 1993: 321 and 326).

Thus, Las Casas, more than five centuries ago, established the relevance of the just war doctrine to all the situations of the injustice of colonial conquest.

In our time, the original injustice of colonial conquest appears to be overlooked by Davis' superlative laudation of the constitution of Conqueror South Africa (Davis 2018). This is possible only if the 'history' of the country is a covering based on the ethically questionable 'right of conquest'. It is pertinent to remind the learned judge Davis that from within the camp of the colonial conqueror, we read more recently that:

The basis on which the modern South African law has arisen is the Roman-Dutch law. This legal system resulted from the combination of principles of Roman law and Germanic law in the Netherlands and was brought here, of course, by the early settlers (Gibson 1975: 1).

It is significant that Gibson here takes for granted – as a matter of course – that early settlers brought their law to what they named South Africa by mere benign divine ordinance. The disregard of the reason and the means by which 'Roman-Dutch law' came to be 'the basis' of 'the modern South African law' until this day is also to be found, for example, in earlier publications by Verloren van Themaat and Wiechers, *Staatsreg*, Hahlo and Kahn, *The South African Legal System and its Background* and, a later publication by

Hosten, Edwards, Nathan and Bosman, *Introduction to South African Law and Legal Theory*. It is necessary to remind the readers that it is through the injustice of colonial conquest in total disregard of the just war doctrine that ‘the Roman-Dutch law’, modified in different historical contexts, persists to this day as the ‘basis’ of the contemporary law in Conqueror South Africa. Accordingly, the just war doctrine is still relevant to Conqueror South Africa despite the historical blindness of Praeg mesmerised by the ‘history’ of ‘South Africa’ according to the conqueror (Praeg 2019: 104-107). Contrary to Praeg, the doctrine of the just war is still alive, even outside the boundaries of Conqueror South Africa as the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrate (Craig 2011).

The *fifth point* we wish to identify is Las Casas’ concern over the ontological equality of all human beings. For him, all human beings are ‘racial siblings’. The practical outcome of his convictional insight, following upon his debate with Sepulveda, was *Sublimis Deus*, the bull of Pope Paul III issued on 2 June 1537. The bull is regarded ‘as the most important papal pronouncement on the human condition of the Indians’ (Gutierrez 1933: 302). The bull is definitely important for ‘the human condition of the Indians’; their ontological status. However, its opening sentence, ‘All men are rational animals’ is a decisive rejection of the restrictive interpretation of Aristotle’s famous ‘man is a rational animal’. At the same time, the ‘all’ extends the scope beyond the ‘Indians’ and thus includes all human beings, especially the conquered of the Earth. Instead of bringing to an end in terms of both conviction and practice to the struggle for reason, *Sublimis Deus* has ironically intensified this struggle for the humanisation of humanity up until our time.

The five points we have identified testify to the relevance of Las Casas to the contemporary struggle against the injustice of colonisation in its various manifestations under successive historical situations. The physical memorial of the yellow *San Cristobal de Las Casas* monument in Chiapas, Mexico stands out as a beehive from which many continue to suck the honey of wisdom. Las Casas is also remembered in our time as carrying a bread basket, sharing bread with the poor and feeding them with the spiritual works of mercy. He is the memorial of a never drying up well from which the many who are thirsty for truthfulness, justice and peace continue to quench their thirst. The *Instituto Bartolome de Las Casas-Rimac* in Peru is the granite fortress challenging scholars to be faithful to the truth of history for the sake of justice and peace in the world: an objective to which Las Casas fearlessly devoted the better part of his life. It is therefore fitting to conclude this section with two

stanzas from Casaldaliga's poem, *A Bartolome de Las Casas* (To Bartolome Las Casas). The poem is translated from Las Casas native Spanish (in Guitierrez 1993: 470-471). The two stanzas read as follows:

Five hundred years shall they be, O seer,  
and today, more than ever, the continent roars  
like a volcano of wounds and burning coals.  
Teach us once more to evangelize [sic],  
Along a sea delivered of its caravels,  
Holy father of America, Las Casas!

It is in 'the open veins of Latin America', the [*Las venas abiertas de America Latina*] (Galeano 1973) and across the globe in the roaring 'volcano of wounds and burning coals' that the struggle against the inhumanity and the injustice of colonial conquest continues in our time. We now turn to Augusto Salazar Bondy's characterisation of Latin American philosophy in our time.

### **Bondy's Characterisation of Latin American Philosophy**

Six years before Grosfoguel obtained his Doctorate in Sociology, Bondy gave the following characterisation of Latin American philosophy. The characterisation is important because it is a further elaboration on the conceptual history of philosophy in Latin America. Bondy, is a Peruvian philosopher born in Lima. In his article, *The meaning and problem of Hispanic American Thought [Can there be a Latin American philosophy?]* he submits that in Latin America, 'there are no creative figures to found and nurture their own peculiar tradition, nor native philosophic 'isms'' (Bondy 1986: 233). He then proceeds to identify seven characteristics of the Latin American philosophy of his time, namely:

1. *Imitative sense of thought.* Thinking is done according to theoretical moulds already shaped in the pattern of Western thought – mainly European-imported in the form of currents, schools and systems totally defined in their content and orientation.

2. *Universal receptivity.* An indiscriminate disposition to accept all manner of theoretical product coming from the most diverse schools and national

traditions, with extremely varied styles and spiritual purposes .... This receptivity, which betrays a lack of substance in ideas and convictions, has often been taken for an Hispanic American virtue.

3. *Absence of a characteristic*, definitive tendency, and of an ideological, conceptual proclivity capable of founding a tradition of thought, of sketching a profile in an intellectual manner.

4. *Correlative absence of original contributions*, capable of being incorporated into the tradition of world thought. There is no philosophic system of Hispanic American roots, or doctrine with meaning in the entirety of universal thought .... The most relevant philosophical figures of Hispanic America have been commentators or professors, but, no matter how fruitful their action in this field may have been for the educational process of our countries, it has not had an effect beyond our own cultural circle (Bondy 1986: 234; italics in the original text).

5. *Existence of a strong sense of intellectual frustration* among cultivators of philosophy. It is symptomatic that, throughout the history of our culture, its most lucid interpreters have planted time and again the question of the existence of their own philosophic thought. Responding to it, ..., almost unanimously with a complete negation, they have formulated projects for the future construction of such thought. Significantly, this unrest and reflection are not found, or are rarely found, among those nations that have made fundamental contributions to the development of philosophy.

6. *There has existed permanently in Hispanic America a great distance between those who practice philosophy and the whole of the community*. There is no way to consider our philosophies as national thought, with a different seal, as one speaks of German, French, English, or Greek philosophy. It is also impossible for the community to recognise itself in these philosophies, precisely because we are dealing with transplanted thought, the spiritual products of other men and other cultures, which a refined minority makes an effort to understand and to share .... However, when an elaborate intellectual creation is genuine, it reflects the conscience of a community finding in it profound resonance especially through its ethical and political derivations.

7. *The same scheme of historic development and the same constellation of traits – although negative – are suitable to the activity unfolded during more than four centuries by the men dedicated to philosophy in a plurality of countries, often far removed physically and socially from each other as is the case of Hispanic America ... [emphasis original] (Bondy 1986: 235).*

These seven characteristics may be construed as a censure of dependency upon the ‘local histories’ of others in the elaboration of philosophy, which is, in the first place, the manifestation of the epistemological paradigm of other ‘local histories’. They pose a challenge to philosophers to elaborate on a sovereign ‘philosophic-ism’ rooted deeply in the experience of being-a-Latin-American-in-the-world. Bondy’s challenge then is an argument for the necessity of what will later be called the ‘philosophy of liberation’; a call for the transition from dependency upon the ‘local histories’ of others; later to crystallise itself as ‘the colonial difference’. His is the demand for reasoning from the ‘border’, even if the border was not erected by those excluded from that which it encircles. Enrique Dussel, a contemporary of Bondy, is among the first to respond to this challenge. It is important to note that in his response, Dussel does mention Bondy specifically. Note also the ambiguity of the answer that Dussel ascribes to Bondy. According to him:

Of all the facts of daily experience in the world, philosophy of liberation has interpreted one as the fact that can gestate a new discourse. Since about 1965, there have been some Latin American philosophers who have asked themselves whether it was possible to do philosophy in underdeveloped countries. A little later the question was put another way: Is it possible to philosophize [sic] authentically in a dependent and dominated culture? That is, the facts of underdevelopment and then of dependence and the fact of philosophy appeared to be mutually exclusive or inclusive only with difficulty. Those facts reshaped themselves into a problem, into the central problem of philosophy of liberation: Is a Latin American philosophy possible? With time it grew into: Is a Latin American, African, or Asian philosophy of the peripheral world possible? (Dussel 1985: 172).

Peruvian Augusto Salazar Bondy, now deceased, answered courageously: No! No, because a dominated culture is one in which the ideology of the dominator has been adopted by the dominated – by

the colonized [sic], Memmi would say. The problem evanesces with a flat denial. Nevertheless, there is another possibility, an affirmative possibility. It has been put forward as a working hypothesis (Dussel 1985: 172).

Does Dussel mean by this that Bondy actually denied the possibility of ‘an-other’ philosophy, rooted deeply in the Latin American experience? If the answer to this question is in the affirmative, then what is the significance of Bondy’s seven point critique of the Latin American philosophy of his time? Bondy himself answers these questions and removes any ambiguity there might be. We note the difference in year of publication of the English versions, with Dussel’s text appearing a year earlier than that of Bondy. However, the fact that the Spanish version – a language the present author does not know – was published in 1968, *Existe una filosofía de nuestra América?*, and his other: *Sentido y problema del pensamiento filosófico hispanoamericano*, published in 1969 suggests that Dussel, conversant in Spanish, is referring to either one or both of these texts being the only ones written by Bondy on the question on hand. Bondy’s answer is the affirmation of the possibility and, indeed the demand for ‘an-other’ philosophy in Latin America.

Hispanic American philosophy has before it – as a possibility of its own recuperation – a destructive task that, in the long run, will be destructive to its current form. It must be an awareness that cancels prejudice, myths, idols; an awareness that will awaken us to our subjection as peoples and our depression as men. In consequence, it must be an awareness that liberates us from the obstacles that impede our anthropological expansion, which is also the anthropological expansion of the world. It must be, in addition, a critical and analytical awareness of the potentialities and demands of our affirmation as humanity .... It has been suggested, even by outstanding figures of our culture, that in the distribution of philosophical tasks, theory should belong to Europe and application to Hispanic America. I am convinced also, however, that the strict theoretical character, which is the highest contemplative requirement indispensable to all fruitful philosophy, is merely another way of condemning ourselves to dependency and subjection. In philosophy, as in science, only he who has the key to theory can appropriate the advances and powers of civilization. Our

philosophy should be, then, both theory and application, conceived and executed in our own fashion, according to our own standards and qualities (Bondy 1986: 243).

In view of the above citation, there is neither uncertainty nor ambiguity with regard to Bondy's position on the question as to whether or not there can be a Latin America philosophy. It is significant that Bondy uses the word, 'liberates' as though he is conveying the wish to be counted among the precursors of the philosophy of liberation. His critique of the conceptual history of the Latin American philosophy of his time remains a crucial contribution to the shift of philosophical paradigm and emphasis that is critical of the original injustice of colonisation in its various historical manifestations. Against this background, we continue with Dussel's response to the challenge posed by Bondy.

This hypothesis, under the thematic of a 'philosophy of liberation', was launched by a group of thinkers from Argentina. The hypothesis is as follows: It appears possible to philosophize [sic] in the periphery – in underdeveloped and dependent nations, in dominated and colonial cultures, in a peripheral social formation – only if the discourse of the philosophy of the center [sic] is not imitated, only if another discourse is discovered. To be different, this discourse must have another point of departure, must think other themes, must come to distinctive conclusions by a different method (Dussel 1985: 172-173).

It is within the context of the philosophy of liberation that Grosfoguel participates in contemporary Latin American thought. Bondy presented a strong argument against the intellectual dependency of Hispanic thought on West European philosophy. He also argued against material or economic dependency with particular reference to the relationship between the United States of America and Latin American states (Bondy 1986: 241). In an apparent response to Bondy's arguments, Mignolo makes the submission that:

Dependency theory has not yet lost its posture, although it has been severely criticized [sic]. It is capable of holding its own in the middle of a critical tempest because its critics addressed the conceptual structure of dependency, not its *raison d'être*. The fact that dependency



at large was and is the basic strategy in the exercise of coloniality of power is not a question that needs lengthy and detailed argumentation. Even though in the current stage of globalization [sic] there is a Third World included in the First, the interstate system and the coloniality of power organizing [sic] it hierarchically have not vanished yet (Mignolo 2002: 62).

It is in the light of this submission that we may understand Mignolo's introduction of 'border thinking' as one of the important concepts of contemporary Latin American philosophy<sup>3</sup>.

Border thinking or theorizing [sic] emerged from and as a response to the violence (frontiers) of imperial/territorial epistemology and the rhetoric of modernity (and globalization) [sic] of salvation that continues to be implemented on the assumption of the inferiority or devilish intentions of the Other and, therefore, continues to justify oppression and exploitation as well as eradication of the difference. Border thinking is the epistemology of the exteriority; that is, of the outside created from the inside; and as such, it is always a decolonial project .... 'Critical border thinking' instead is grounded in the experiences of the colonies and subaltern empires. Consequently, it provides the epistemology that was denied by imperial expansion. 'Critical border thinking' also denies the epistemic privilege of the humanities and the social sciences – the privilege of an observer that makes the rest of the world an object of observation (from Orientalism to Area Studies). It also moves away from the post-colonial toward the de-colonial, shifting to the geo- and body-politics of knowledge (Mignolo 2006: 206).

It is in this context that Grosfoguel focuses on 'the ego-politics of knowledge' (Grosfoguel 2012: 88-9), where he problematically states that: 'In

---

<sup>3</sup> Mignolo uses the concepts 'Third World' and 'First World' also at pages 63, 65 and 73 of the cited article. He does not, however, give any hint that he is critical of the broader usage, unlike F. Parkinson, who rightfully argues against such in his *Philosophy of International Relations: A Study in the History of Thought* (1977).

order to escape the predicament of the ego-politics of knowledge, it is absolutely necessary to shift the geography of reason toward ‘an-other’ geopolitics and ego-politics of knowledge’ (2012: 95). His endorsement of the ‘ego-politics of knowledge’ here undermines his earlier criticism of Descartes ‘solipsism’ as indispensable for the making of the ‘myth of a subject with universal rationality that confirms itself as such’ (Grosfoguel 2012: 89). Since the ‘an-other’s’ construction of knowledge is also based – in part – on the ‘ego-politics of knowledge’, is its knowledge free from ‘solipsism’? Solipsistic knowledge which is ‘mythical’ by definition can hardly make a credible claim – theoretically, at least – to a place in the geography of either ‘universal’ or ‘pluriversal’ knowledge. Solipsism must dissolve to restore the subject’s freedom to engage in dialogue in the construction of knowledge. Furthermore, Grosfoguel focuses on Africa, albeit incidentally, in his argument against the original injustice of colonisation in its various historical manifestations. It is to Grosfoguel and Africa that we now turn.

## **Grosfoguel and Africa**

In the very early days of his philosophical writings in the English language, Dussel emerges with a direct and substantive interest in, and concern for Africa. Having mentioned figures of resistance to the colonisation of Africa such as Frantz Fanon, Samir Amin and Agostinho Neto (Dussel 1985: 74 and 77), and of Patrice Lumumba, a Congolese; certainly a member of the Bantu-speaking peoples, he writes:

When the traitorous soldier was about to plunge his bayonet in Lumumba’s entrails, that hero exclaimed, ‘All for the liberation of the African people!’ His life was an offering and homage in the *projecto* of a new country. The supreme moment of his liberative praxis was his own death. His blood fertilizes [sic] the birth of a new Africa. That is why his subversive praxis was ethical; what he undertook – destruction of the old, the dead – was metaphysical (Dussel 1985: 77; italics in the original).

Even in his later work, *The Politics of Liberation*, Dussel reveals a substantive focus on Africa, including the Bantu-speaking peoples (Dussel 2011: 236-246). In this way, Dussel is very much closer to *ubuntu*, the philosophy

and praxis of the Bantu-speaking peoples in Africa. In this respect, he is light years away from Grosfoguel. The latter would probably plead, in reply, that:

There are plenty of decolonial thinkers in Africa and South Africa that anybody interested in producing African decolonial thought has to take very seriously in order to develop Decolonial theories produced in relation to the context and realities of Africa [...] decolonial thought and theory cannot be the same everywhere. It has to be plural according to different contexts and realities. Kwame Nkrumah, Steve Biko, Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Julius Nyerere, Amilcar Cabral, etc. are among decolonial African thinkers that I have encouraged to read and study seriously in order to produce decolonial theories relevant to African liberation struggles (Letter to author from Grosfoguel, dated 21 November 2018).

None of the ‘decolonial African thinkers’ mentioned in the letter become ‘decolonial thinkers’ merely by virtue of a solemn baptism from ‘the epistemic decolonial turn’.

Both Las Casas and Dussel were and, the latter still is, physically far away from Africa. Yet, their focus on Africa was substantive. The result is the continuing impact of their insights and arguments on African thought. It is indeed fair to leave the construction of ‘decolonial’ or any other theory to Africans themselves as Grosfoguel does. However, it is not cognitively impossible for non-Africans to make a substantial contribution to African thought. By virtue of the ethically questionable ‘right of conquest’ the conquered of the Earth have, arguably, made a substantial contribution – though rarely with any influence at all – to the thought of the colonial conqueror. By voluntary commitment to the conquered of the Earth it is possible to make to make a substantial synergetic contribution to one another.

It is pertinent to note that Dussel’s philosophy of liberation was published in Spanish – *Filosofía de la Liberación* – twelve years before Grosfoguel obtained his Doctorate in Sociology. In appreciation of Dussel’s contribution, from 1986 the present author lectured on Dussel including other Latin American philosophers such as Leopoldo Zea, Augusto Salazar Bondy, and Arturo Andres Roig, alongside some African philosophers such as Theophilus Okere, Kwame Nkrumah, D. Masolo, Kwasi Wiredu, Paulin Hountondji, and Kwame Gyekye in the University of Zimbabwe. He

subsequently extended this to Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia, and many universities in South Africa. The difference between their contribution and the influence of Grosfoguel in Conqueror South Africa is that the insights and arguments of the former do have a substantive content on Africa and, thus meet the criterion of ‘relevance’. Only with vulnerable affirmation can the same be said with regard to the latter.

Like Dussel, who described Las Casas as a ‘theologian of liberation’, Grosfoguel also embraces Aime Cesaire as a ‘decolonial thinker’ (Grosfoguel 2012: 95). The recognition of identity of insight points only to conceptual affinity. It may not be transmuted into conceptual identity. Furthermore, Las Casas and Cesaire belonged to historical contexts different from our own. Against this background, we concur with Gutierrez that:

... to dub Las Casas a ‘liberation theologian’ may have the interest of calling attention to certain important aspects of his thought .... We understand and appreciate what is meant by those who express themselves in that way. Still, we prefer not to do so. It does not seem to us to be appropriate, even necessary, for an expression of our appreciation of his theological work and witness. That work and witness transpired in a context very different from today’s, at the social level as at the theological. Conceptual tools and the language are different too .... We cannot ask him to speak after the fashion of a person of the twentieth century (Gutierrez 1993: 8).

Using the vocabulary of the colonial conqueror to pursue critical dialogue between the conquered and the colonial conqueror is to imprison the conquered in the epistemological paradigm of the colonial conqueror. It is one thing to use the vocabulary of the colonial conqueror in the quest to identify precisely what is at stake. This is a must. But it is quite another matter to confine the critique of the issues raised to the linguistic and, by implication, the cultural framework of the colonial conqueror. The vernacular languages of the conquered do have equal ethical value to that of the colonial conqueror (Gutierrez 1993: 87). The present author has, in concurrence with Ali Mazrui, declared more than a decade ago (Ramosé 2003) that I shall use the invention of ‘Africa’ (Mudimbe 1988) under protest (Mazrui 1986: 38).

We now turn to the significance of Grosfoguel’s ‘The Epistemic Decolonial Turn’ for Africa.

## **The Significance of Grosfoguel's 'Epistemic Decolonial Turn' for Africa**

Grosfoguel commences his essay with the clarification of his dissatisfaction with the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group 'composed primarily by Latinamericanist scholars in the USA' (Grosfoguel 2007: 211). His main concern is that the Group reproduced the epistemic schema of Area Studies in the United States. This had epistemic 'consequences' which he 'as a Puerto Rican in the United States' could not readily accept. For him there was a need for an epistemology that could move beyond the 'epistemic schema' of Area Studies in the United States. This is the need to 'decolonise the Western canon and epistemology' (Grosfoguel 2007: 211). The outcome of his experience with the South Asian Subaltern Studies Group was the 'need to decolonize [sic] not only Subaltern Studies but also Postcolonial Studies' (Grosfoguel 2007: 212).

Grosfoguel identifies three points in order to transcend the deficiencies mentioned in the preceding paragraph. These are:

- (1) that a decolonial perspective requires a broader canon of thought than simply the Western canon (including the Left Western canon);
- (2) that a truly universal decolonial perspective cannot be based on an abstract universal but would have to be the result of the critical dialogue between diverse critical epistemic/ethic/political projects towards a pluriversal as oppose to a universal world;
- (3) that decolonization of knowledge would require to take seriously the epistemic perspective/cosmologies, insights of critical thinkers from the Global South thinking from and with subalternised racial/ethnic/sexual spaces and bodies (Grosfoguel 2007: 212).

We take no issue with Number 1 except to state that 'decolonial' is subject to our criticism of the use of the vocabulary of the oppressor. We have made this criticism above. We note that 'oppose' in Number 2 is as it appears in the original text. Furthermore, Grosfoguel's option for the 'critical' leaves the exclusion of the uncritical unexplained. His use of 'universal', though elaborated in the subsequent 2012 article, to which we have already referred, does occupy a somewhat tense relationship with 'pluriversal' under Number Three. In the 2012 article, Grosfoguel opposes 'uni-versalisms' to 'decolonial

pluri-versalism'. This opposition does not meet his third criterion requiring that taking 'seriously the epistemic perspective/cosmologies, insights' of others – as we struggle with his exclusion of the uncritical – from 'the Global South'. We understand 'the Global South' not as 'a simple geographic location but a metaphor for human suffering under global capitalism' (Mignolo 2002: 66). Accordingly, Africa as a whole also belongs to 'the Global South'. The question then is: why '-ism' – as in pluri-versal-ism – singular or plural since the basic philosophic 'insight' of the philosophy of *ubuntu* is the suffix '-ness' and not 'ism'? (Ramosé 2005: 35-46) The purpose of this question is to show that unlike Las Casas and Dussel, Grosfoguel is light years away from Africa as we have already argued above.

Grosfoguel identifies his main proposal as the search for an epistemic perspective enunciated from 'racial/ethnic subaltern locations' in order to contribute 'to a radical decolonial theory beyond the way traditional political-economy paradigms conceptualize [sic] capitalism as a global or world-system' (Grosfoguel 2007: 212). Grosfoguel leaves it to the reader to determine which tradition he has in mind, since his conception of the 'traditional' leaves the question open. Furthermore, since the 'subalternised' did not voluntarily put themselves in that position, historically, one wonders at Grosfoguel's complacent adoption of this concept. Why should those continuing to suffer the consequences of the original injustice of colonial conquest still cling to the vocabulary of the conqueror as if they lack linguistic resources to construct their own concepts related directly to their continuing suffering? (Sogolo 1993: xiv-xv). Talk of an 'African renaissance', for example, is disturbingly close – psychologically – to the desire to remain as close as possible to the oppressor. It is fearful of emancipation from the deadly claws of the oppressor.

We take issue with Grosfoguel's uncritical acceptance of the appellation 'Third World' just as we have already done above with regard to Mignolo. Furthermore, we note that we have already critiqued his use of the 'ego-politics of knowledge' above and need not repeat the critique here. It is also interesting that Grosfoguel refers to the 'so-called discovery', but overlooks to give any hint of its technical meaning – precisely in the conqueror circuit – as Williams (1990) does. Furthermore, we take issue with Grosfoguel's use of 'non-European languages' and 'non-Western people' as if other languages and the rest of humankind is simply a counterfoil of the European and the Westerner. The present author has experienced robust aversion and rejection by the 'Europeans' or 'Westerners' being addressed as

the non-Africans. The Black Consciousness Movement in Conqueror South Africa travelled a long liberating path in debunking the myth of ‘non-Europeans’ or ‘non-whites’ spread along the breadth and length of the country to ensure exclusion based on a fictive ontological hierarchy.

One of the problematical assertions of Grosfoguel is that:

One of the most powerful myths of the twentieth century was the notion that the elimination of colonial administrations amounted to the decolonization [sic] of the world. This led to the myth of a ‘post-colonial’ world (Grosfoguel 2007: 219).

It is doubtful if this ‘myth’ ever was in Africa. In the first place, the physical ‘elimination of colonial administrations’ in many parts of Africa involved only bodily absence. The new administrators of Africa in black or yellow bodies often continued the same administration that was forcibly implanted into Africa. It is therefore problematical to equate physical ‘elimination’ with epistemic eradication. Even those African leaders who openly declared their love of the Westminster or French political paradigms recognised, by their very love of these systems, their administrations as the continuation of that of the physically absent administrators. The proposal of *Ujamaa* by Nyerere was an epistemic departure from keeping the physically absent administrators present. Because of this, Western imperialism killed Tanzaphilia (Mazrui 1969: 267).

The love of the Westminster or French system did not blind certain African leaders to the ethical imperative for epistemic liberation. For example, in his speech to the first meeting of the republican parliament of Ghana, Nkrumah declared that:

A commission is being appointed to investigate and report upon university education and the Government intends that a University of Ghana will be created which will not only reflect African traditions and culture, but will also play a constructive part in the programme of national awakening and reconstruction.

Thus, for Nkrumah, the ‘postcolonial’ world meant also the practical implementation of a programme towards epistemic liberation. Nyerere with his *Ujamaa* and Nkrumah with his ‘creation’ – perhaps inadvertently indicated a beginning from zero, in the sense of either the elimination or the modification

of the Western epistemological paradigm – of a ‘University of Ghana’ asserted and affirmed by an epistemic turn after the concession to political independence by the colonial conqueror.

The epistemic turn described above does not necessarily require the label ‘decolonial’, especially in view of Nkrumah’s *Consciencism: A philosophy and ideology for decolonisation*. Decolonisation refers to the cessation of the status of being a colony. The colonies ceased to exist physically in Africa at political independence. Some African leaders, for example Nkrumah and Nyerere, asserted and affirmed an epistemic turn precisely as a challenge to the still dominant epistemological paradigm of the colonial conqueror. In this situation, why should ‘decolonial’ return to Africa act not only as a reminder that there were colonies in the continent but also as the harbinger of a purportedly new epistemic paradigm to deal with the already challenged epistemological paradigm of the colonial conqueror?

In his speech, ‘Africa’s Challenge’, delivered to the Ghanaian Parliament on 6 August, 1960, Nkrumah argued that ‘The new colonialism creates client states, independent in name, but in point of fact pawns of the colonial power that is supposed to have given them independence’. Nkrumah does not return to decolonisation. Rather he introduces a concept consistent with the recognition that the colonies have ceased to exist, at least physically. This concept is: ‘the new colonialism’ extensively discussed in his book, *neo-colonialism*. As is well-known, aid promised to Ghana by the United States of America was withheld at the publication of the book. It would seem that even the United States observed a burgeoning epistemic turn deemed to be a challenge to its hegemony.

It would seem then that the addition of ‘decolonial’ to the conceptual history of African political philosophy is somewhat redundant. The redundancy is placed into sharper relief by the recognition that the insights contained in Bondy’s article already referred to are identical to those of Nkrumah’s *Consciencism*. Though geographically far away from each other and, not knowing each other at that time, it is as if Nkrumah and Bondy were writing sitting right next to each other. Here is an example of identity of insight. Nkrumah cautions the ‘non-Western’ student of philosophy against studying philosophy ‘in the same spirit’ as the Western student. We certainly censure Nkrumah’s use of ‘non-Western’, just as we have done with regard to Grosfoguel. We however recognise that his conception of the ‘non-Western’ also includes Latin America. It is salutary to note that his ‘non-Western’ must



give place to ‘the South’ as explained by Mignolo above. Here is an example of a new concept preserving an insight already present in the past. The same cannot be said of Grosfoguel’s ‘The Epistemic Decolonial Turn’. However, the force of his argument in this and his other essays we have referred to must really be taken into account, and this is the significance of Grosfoguel to Africa and, South Africa in particular. Does Africa and the conquered of the Earth fare much better without the concept, ‘decolonial’? To this question we now turn.

### **Colonisation is against Learning to be Human**

The basic thrust of Western colonisation in its various historical manifestations to date involves the stubborn refusal to treat ‘the other’ as a human being. We limit ourselves to the experience of colonisation by the West without implying any moral excuse for other colonisers in the world. From ancient Greece right up to our time, the leitmotif of colonisation has been the defence of the de-humanisation of ‘the other’ by guile, myth and the application of brute physical force (Isaac 2004:30). Often these three elements went together in the West’s self-imposed mission of the de-humanisation of humanity under the guise of ‘civilisation’. In the contemporary conceptual history of African political philosophy, ‘the quest for a true humanity’ second to none underlines both the beginning and the continuation of the struggle against the original injustice of colonisation. To borrow the expression in inverted commas from Bantu Biko is not to dub him a ‘decolonial’ thinker. On the contrary, it is to underline the point that the ontological equality of all human beings ought to be realised in practice. From Latin America we learn that:

Dehumanization [sic], which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it, is a *distortion* of the vocation of becoming more fully human. This distortion occurs within history; but it is not an historical vocation. Indeed, to admit of dehumanization [sic] as an historical vocation would lead either to cynicism or total despair. The struggle for humanization [sic], for the emancipation of labor, for the overcoming of alienation, for the affirmation of men and women as persons would be meaningless. This struggle is possible only because dehumanization [sic], although a concrete historical fact, is *not* a given

destiny but the result of an unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressors, which in turn dehumanizes [sic] the oppressed (Freire 2003: 44).

The ethical-historical counter to dehumanisation is learning to be human. It is indeed a life-long learning, because each historical moment can have its peculiar manifestations of dehumanisation. Because of this re-humanisation presents itself as the fundamental ethical counter to dehumanisation. On the basis of this reasoning, it is re-humanisation and not ‘decolonial’ that speaks to the basic issue of the struggle for truth, justice, and peace in the world. As a conceptual tool to understand and struggle against injustice in a given historical moment, the ‘decolonial’ is merely optional, since it can neither supersede nor eradicate the ethical-historical project of the re-humanisation of human relations at all levels. It is not only Africa but the entire human family – the ‘racial siblings’ of Las Casas – that will fare better with the pursuit of the project to re-humanise human relations.

## **Conclusion**

We have placed Grosfoguel in the conceptual history of Latin America, in particular, the political philosophy of that history. We have shown that he does belong to this history and is its continuator in his own right. We have questioned the relevance of ‘the epistemic decolonial turn’ to Africa showing that the conceptual history of African political philosophy can fare better without the label ‘decolonial’. We are aware of the many points we could have raised, for example, Grosfoguel’s distinction between ‘coloniality’ and ‘colonial situations’ (Grosfoguel 2007: 220) in relation to the ensuing tension between ‘democracy’ and timocracy. But the strictures of space dictate otherwise. By challenging Grosfoguel’s predilection for ‘-ism’, we have shown how far away he is from the ‘-ness’ of the philosophy of *ubuntu*. If we should resort to our linguistic resources against the background of this philosophy then *mothofatso* would be the appropriate concept for a continued re-humanisation of human relations.

## **References**

Achebe, C. 1984. *The Trouble with Nigeria*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

- Bondy, A.S. 1986. The Meaning and Problem of Hispanic American Thought [Can there be a Latin American Philosophy?]. In Gracia, J.J.E. (ed.): *Latin American Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*. Buffalo & New York: Prometheus.
- Burggraeve, R. 2007. *The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love: Emmanuel Levinas on Justice, Peace, and Human Rights*. Bloechl, J. (trans.). Milwaukee: Marquette University Press.
- Burggraeve, R. 2009. *Proximity with the Other: A Multidimensional Ethic of Responsibility in Levinas*. Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications.
- Collins, F. 2007. *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*. London: Pocket Books.
- Collingwood, R.G. [1946] 1961. *The Idea of History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Craig, J.N., P. de Paulo, A. Messina & D.P. Tompkins (eds.). 2011. *Augustinian Just War Theory and the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq*. New York: Peter Lang.  
<https://doi.org/10.3726/978-1-4539-0782-5>  
PMCID:PMC3768767
- Davis, D.M. 2018. Is the South African Constitution an Obstacle to a Democratic Post-colonial State? *South African Journal on Human Rights* 34: 359 - 374.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02587203.2018.1543839>
- Dussel, E. 2011. *The Politics of Liberation: A Critical World History*. Cooper, T. (trans.). London: SCM Press
- Dussel, E. 2003. *Beyond Philosophy: Ethics, History, Marxism and Liberation Theology*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc
- Dussel, E. 1985. *Philosophy of Liberation*. Martinez, A. & C. Morkovsky. (trans.). New York: Orbis Books, Maryknoll
- Freire, P. 2003. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Ramos, M.B. (trans.). New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Galeano, E. 1973. *The Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*. Uruguay: Monthly Review Press.  
[https://doi.org/10.14452/MR-025-04-1973-08\\_3](https://doi.org/10.14452/MR-025-04-1973-08_3)
- Gibson, J.T.R. 1975. *South African Mercantile and Company Law*. Cape Town: Juta & Company Limited.
- Grosfoguel, R. 2007. The Epistemic Decolonial Turn: Beyond Political-Economy Paradigms. *Cultural Studies* 21: 211 - 222.
-

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162514>

- Grosfoguel, R. 2012. Decolonizing Western Uni-versalisms: Decolonial Pluri-versalism from *Aimé Césaire* to the Zapatistas. *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* 1,3: 88 - 104.
- Grosfoguel, R. 2013. The Structure of Knowledge in Westernized Universities' Epistemic Racism/ Sexism and the Four Genocides/ Epistemicides of the Long 16<sup>th</sup> Century. *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-knowledge* IX, 1: 73 - 90.
- Gutierrez, G. 1983. *The Power of the Poor in History*. Barr, R.R. (trans.). New York: Orbis Books, Maryknoll.
- Gutierrez, G. 1993. *Las Casas in Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ*. Barr, R.R. (trans.). New York: Orbis Books, Maryknoll.
- Hahlo, H.R. & E. Kahn 1968. *The South African Legal System and its Background*. Cape Town: Juta & Company Limited.
- Hosten, W.J., A.B. Edwards, C. Nathan & F.J. Bosman 1977. *Introduction to South African Law and Legal Theory*. Durban: Butterworth.
- Isaac, B. 2004. *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Krog, A. 2009. *Begging to be Black*. Cape Town: Random House Struik.
- Maurois, A. 1953. *Cecil Rhodes*. Wadham, R. (trans.). London: Collins Clear-Type Press.
- Mazrui, A.A. 1969. *Violence and Thought Essays on Social Tensions in Africa*. London: Longman Books Limited.
- Mazrui, A.A. 1986. *The Africans*. London: BBC Publications.
- Mignolo, W.D. 2002. The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101,1, Winter: 57 - 96.  
<https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-101-1-57>
- Mignolo, W.D. & M.V. Tlostanova. 2006. Theorizing from the Borders: Shifting to Geo- and Body-politics of Knowledge. *European Journal of Social Theory* 9,2: 205 - 221.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431006063333>
- Mudimbe, V.Y. 1988. *The Invention of Africa*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Palmer, H.W. 1924. *Our Empire Overseas*. London: Blackie and Son Limited.
- Parkinson, F. 1977. *Philosophy of International Relations: A Study in the History of Thought*. London: Sage Publications.

- Praeg, L. 2019. Totality by Analogy: Or, The Limits of Law and Black Subjectivity. In Praeg, L. (ed.): *Philosophy on the Border: Decoloniality and the Shudder of the Origin*. Scottsville: Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Ramose, M.B. 2005. *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*. Harare: Mond Books Publishers.  
<https://doi.org/10.4314/sajpem.v22i2.31364>
- Ramose, M.B. 2003. I Doubt, therefore, African Philosophy Exists. *South African Journal of Philosophy* 22:2: 113 - 127.
- Wrenhaven, K.L. 2013. *Reconstructing the Slave: The Image of the Slave in Ancient Greece*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Sogolo, G. 1993. *Foundations of African Philosophy*. Ibadan, Nigeria: Ibadan University Press.
- Soyinka, W. 1999. *The Burden of Memory: The Muse of Forgiveness*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Taylor, P.C. 2013. *Race: A Philosophical Analysis*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Verloren van Themaat, J.P. & M. Wiechers 1967. *Staatsreg*. Durban: Butterworth.
- Williams, R.A. 1990. *The American Indian in Western Legal Thought: The Discourses of Conquest*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mogobe Bernard Ramose  
Research Professor  
Department of Clinical Psychology  
Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University  
Ga-Rankuwa, South Africa  
[tanella@mweb.co.za](mailto:tanella@mweb.co.za)