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Micheal Eze

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Article

OXFORD

Decolonizing "Decolonization" and Knowledge Production beyond Eurocentrism*

Michael Onyebuchi Eze**

ABSTRACT

I historicize decolonial theories within the context of epistemic contestations and knowledge production in Africa. I offer a critical appraisal of decolonization as simulated within Western academic institutions and argue that the current tempo of decolonization movements is by no means an accident of history; it is, in fact, a residual narrative of colonial epistemology. I offer internal critique and discuss the limitations of decolonization as an intellectual strategy, before addressing how Western academics have appropriated the discourse in a manner fitting an intellectual crusade. The decolonial scholar is, at the same time, perpetuating the mandate of colonial epistemology by substituting coloniality with subjective displacement. Finally, I suggest a modest proposal for adopting a new framework that admits the epistemic virtues of decolonization while eschewing its limitations and internal contradictions. My argument is that decolonization studies, as understood in contemporary African philosophy, has remained afflicted with the same disease it seeks to cure by (i) uncritical affiliation with historical generalizations, (ii) failure to recognize that history is no location of innocence and (iii) recolonization of non-Western ontologies through epistemic imperialism and network legitimation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the term decolonization is a fancy intellectual currency. It is helpful if you want to be a card-carrying African Studies scholar or gain legitimation or visibility as an area studies or postcolonial studies juggernaut. Herein, decolonization becomes a cliched currency for easy access to fame, gatekeeping rights, job opportunities, and even grants. Decolonization focuses on knowledge production in universities and how this is constitutively and substantively influenced by neoliberal and imperial temperaments. But why do we speak about decolonization? We do because knowledge is powerful and, depending on its legitimating procedures (that is, what makes knowledge become recognized as true or fact), knowledge shapes world politics,

*I dedicate this essay to Memory of Paulin Jidenu Hountondji (11 April 1942 – 2 February 2024)

**California State University, Fresno, US

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economies, foreign aid, international relations, and what is universally acceptable as public truth. Sometimes myths are constructed, normalized, and regularized as public truth, and people will still believe in them. Myth is understood here as a philosophical truth (λόγος) to move the mind of the community into action or inaction. So, in decolonization we ask: who gets to legitimate what is universally valid? Hence, decolonization, for lack of better expression, is a space of rupture, of refusal and revolution. It is a sphere of transformation and deconstruction. It is not merely about understanding the intellectual origins of ideas, but grasping as well its lifespan, layers of mutations, and transformations over time. Enormous literature has now been produced, most of which is written by Western-based academics who possess requisite material resources and network legitimation. Such material utility turns decolonial scholarship into a neoliberal commodity, something to be sold, bought, or used to reinforce or legitimize one's position. Sometimes, a non-Western scholar is added to the lot as a token of legitimation but, all in all, the practice of what has become a decolonial industry is the most systematic expression of epistemic imperialism.

I am aware of my own positionality as a person of color writing on decolonization. The position comes with certain privileges, that is, what one may term, *ontological rights* to criticize—a minority from the historically oppressed possessing subjective rights to talk about their oppression. This position allows me certain epistemic immunity to say things that, undoubtedly, my Western colleagues may not be able to say without being accused of racism, white privilege, or even white supremacy. Recognizing this ambiguous contestation comes the need to unmask our scholarship and be cognizant of what I suggest below—that every epistemic value we raise possesses an *ontological turbulence*.

The current ideological permutations surrounding decolonial theories make it even more critical not to fall into a false Manichean entrapment. But I am also aware that antiwokeness is also an ideological vicissitude that perpetuates epistemic coloniality. The challenge, then, is how to articulate *an occasion for dialogue.* I do not personally subscribe to the doctrine of decolonization as a displacement narrative, antiracist racism, or a reactionary discourse. I live in a Western society, and decolonization does not necessarily mean truncating everything Western or Western in origin but instead finding space for complementary epistemologies. Conversation on decolonization recognizes these ambivalences and tensions in our knowledge production and need not constitute the invention of new ontologies to displace the old ones since this too constitutes a new form of epistemic tyranny. To decolonize is to become aware of our own subjective location in history as Abiola Irele beautifully enunciated:

> We are conscious of the irreversible nature of the transformations the impact of Europe has effected in our midst and which are so extensive as to define the really significant frame of reference of our contemporary existence. The traditional pre-colonial culture and way of life continue to exist as a reality among us, but they constitute an order of existence that is engaged in a forced march, in a direction dictated by the requirements of a modern scientific and technological civilization. It also happens to be the case that Western civilization . . . provides the paradigm of modernity to which we aspire. Hence our mixed feelings, the troubled sense of acceptance and rejection . . . the ambivalence we demonstrate in our response to Europe and Western civilization is in fact a measure of our emotional tribute; it is expressive, in a profound way, of the cultural hold Europe has secured upon us—of the alienation it has imposed upon us as a historical fate.[1]

Rethinking decolonization is not just a recognition of my own subjective location in history, but understanding ways in which the project of decolonization has become plagued with the same diseases it wants to cure; exhibiting nuances of epistemic imperialism. I show the internal

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contradictions and ideological configurations that continue to shape knowledge production in African Studies and how decolonization as currently practiced or taught in academic institutions obscures rather than illuminates embedded structures of power relations and false consciousness in history now normalized as moral truth. *Decolonizing decolonization* is an attempt to interrogate the imposed misrecognitions in which concrete epistemic questions become subsidiary to professional interests of its practitioners.

2. COLONIZING DECOLONIZATION

At a local Dutch university in March 2023 was a conference themed *decolonizing climate change!* I paused briefly to understand the relationship between decolonization and climate change in a Western university. Indeed, a central colonial mechanism was the destruction of the spiritual and material world of non-Western societies such as the looting of resources, and domination of the public sphere or, as termed by Walter Rodney, *one-armed banditry* because

> for the first three decades of colonialism, hardly anything was done that could remotely be termed a service to the African people . . . It would be an act of the most brazen fraud to weigh the paltry social amenities provided during the colonial epoch against the exploitation, and to arrive at the conclusion that the good outweighed the bad.[2]

A view equally shared by Frantz Fanon is that the colonial looting and destruction of the African environment was for the creation of Europe: "[The] wealth which smothers her [Europe] is that which was stolen from the underdeveloped peoples. The ports of Holland, the docks of Bordeaux and Liverpool were specialized in the Negro slave trade and owe their renown to millions of deported slaves."[3] I recognize too that environmental concerns are not a local but a global phenomenon. But how does an epistemology or discourse that emerged within the province of historical trauma and violence become an ontological response for those primarily responsible for the more significant destruction of the planet? Did the Western decolonizer suffer the trauma of exploitation, rape, the inhumanity, hard labor, and other memories associated with colonialism? On what moral frequency does descriptive knowledge become a substitute for subjective experience acquired through history? Does an appropriation of "decolonizing" or "decolonial" moral language innoculate against the residual impact of the colonial violation of material and spiritual worlds?

The experiences mentioned above are no isolated cases. A simple internet search will reveal a plethora of cases: decolonizing food, sex, religion, etc. This is not to say that there are no epistemic conditionalities where decolonization could be a necessary response, especially in cases where colonial temperaments still influence politics, culture, and policy. My reservation is that, construed as an ideology, decolonization has become a commodity that is applicable at all times and circumstances, an epistemic magic wand that solves all problems of modernity, poverty, environment, health, inequality, and even gender violence. In this manner, specific contexts, histories, and experiences become substituted with categories that are "socially or ideologically determined."[4] The offshot is an ontological outlook which, as Janmohamed notes, "transmutes all specificity and difference into a (homogenous) magical essence."[5] Decolonization becomes a tool to maintain epistemic hierarchy and moral difference where the Western decolonizer seeks to "transform social and historical dissimilarities into universal, metaphysical differences."[6]Africans were colonized, so we decolonize by mystifying and collapsing the divergent histories and experiences of colonization as a coherent and homogenous "magical essence of the continent."[7]

Decolonization, as practiced thus in the West, is an ideological absolution from an immoral past; but it is not just an alibi against bad conscience; it enforces an epistemic and moral

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hierarchy of the Western academics who now see themselves as saviors or champions of the historically marginalized. The savior identity "functions as a transformative mechanism between the affective pleasure derived from the moral superiority and material profit that motivate imperialism."[8] The language of redemption, the genre of saving grace, becomes a "fetishistic representation of the native's moral inferiority" that subverts the very ontology of decolonization. This mechanism instead "enables the European to increase, by contrast, the store of his own moral superiority; it allows him to accumulate 'surplus morality', which is further invested in the denigration of the native, in a self-sustaining cycle."[9] Thus, decolonization becomes a new form of colonization through the civilization of histories, but, and this is an important distinction, through sociocultural and epistemic hierarchies. These hierarchies remain the location of power to define, delineate, mediate, and offer ontological essence of what constitutes decolonization, what I termed later as network legitimation. As Janmohamed acutely observes,

> the ideological function of this mechanism, in addition to prolonging colonialism, is to dehistoricize and desocialize the conquered world, to present it as a metaphysical 'fact of life', before which those who have fashioned the colonial world are themselves reduced to the role of passive spectators in a mystery not of their making.[10]

3. PERFORMING DECOLONIZATION

Moral rehabilitation of history through epistemic subversion is now cliched as decolonization in the Western academia. This Westernization of decolonization shares certain coherence with colonial discourse. In colonialism the native was a symbolic minority while the colonialist remained symbolic majority. What this means is that if the French or the Portuguese were numerical minorities but through military and technological superiority were able to exercise monopoly of violence and impose domination, they would become a symbolic sociopolitical and cultural majority. The colonial polices of *assimilation* and *assimilado* were the symptomatic expression of these majoritarian values. One would need to speak either French or Portuguese, become Roman Catholic, dress as European, etc. in order to become assimilated into the colonial public as a quasi-citizen of the state who has access to European *cultures, values, and forms of justice.* The noncivilized natives, on the other hand, even if they constitute the numerical majority, would by nature of their race and class remain symbolic political and sociocultural minorities.

In decolonial contestations, there is a shift in which the former colonialist maintains his hierarchy not as a political majority but instead as an epistemic majority while the formerly colonized remains an epistemic minority. The latter has to be spoken for or mentored into the correct way of speaking for themselves. There is a subjective displacement. One who never experienced colonialism imagines and appropriates this imagination as normative truth and thereafter universalizes this imagination as moral truth and public policy. Decolonization becomes an ideology that embodies the stereotypes, prejudices, and histories of the Western decolonizer, who then expresses these cumulative values of their own experience as ontological truth for policies and pedagogical formation across all histories, traditions, and epistemologies. The first danger in this procedural imperative is the arrogation of the right or epistemic hierarchy. The arrogation of rights gives legitimation to dominate epistemic space but also to the exploitation of formerly colonized historical trauma for the professional advancement of the Western scholar. In this whole process, the geographical location of the Western scholar in the comfort of his Western intellectual and physical space misrecognizes the power of such positionality. Here is an interface of race, class, and geography that not only furthers domination but fosters academic corruption in unimaginable ways.

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We cannot speak of knowledge production without talking about institutional hierarchies of power. So, if we are even to use the word "decolonization," the starting point is the institution that fosters and enables this intellectual mindset. Where is this knowledge produced? Who produces it? Why does it get more legitimation than other forms of knowledge produced, say, in less affluent, non-Western societies and institutions? There have been instances where African elites and academics, in order to gain legitimation, rent a "space" in these Western institutions for conferences or academic meetings on issues that have nothing to do with the West, but become relevant only because they were discussed at Harvard, Cambridge, or Oxford, an added legitimation in their CVs. Most African scholars who have tried to publish in highly "valued" Western journals or University presses understand that their luck is dependent on networks and references from Western colleagues based in Western universities or, in worst-case scenarios, exploitative charges from the so-called impact factor journals. They give the endorsement and recommendation of who becomes qualified to write or speak, and these would be those who follow the epistemic frame of recognition they have endorsed. The academic corruption sometimes evolves into a race of network connection: to be published, you need a godfather or mother who will offer an endorsement or make recommendation to the editor of a publishing house. For an article in a journal, you need an insider on the editorial board to defend your course. To get a job, you require a network of godfathers and mothers. I know many black scholars especially in the USA who have given up searching for jobs in the academia, especially in African or Africana Studies, because these jobs are all a charade; there is always *someone,* and the adverts are for official chronicles and choreographed performances. There is also the rat race of fellowships for African scholars who suffer the most ignominious conditions in order to gain a space of a few month's fellowship in a Western university. In one notorious case, a university in Holland offered a fellowship to African scholars, but they imposed the accommodation on the scholars at an inflated price above the market, the rent being part of the fellowship.

But why does a study focused on African ontology within Africa require epistemic validation within the Western intellectual gaze? Why would the Dogon Philosopher need to publish in a Western indexed-journal for his or her work to be recognized as impact-factor? Why would a Nigerian university demand a publication in an indexed Western journal before the promotion of a colleague who works on issues that are hardly of consequence to Western audience? Responses to these questions are not isolated from the instrumentalization of knowledge and control of capital: what to know, where to know, who can know, and who can teach what is known? Knowledge is a commodity and its acquisition is instrumental to capital. Where you publish and who validates what you publish is what guarantees an open possibility for access to jobs or academic positions. This interface between class, race, and geography is not merely descriptive but a location of epistemic hierarchy, reminiscent of Saladin's complaint to Chamcha in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*: "They describe us. That's all. They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct."[11] They maintain their hierarchy and regime of truth because of their geographical location. This is what gives them legitimation not only as symbolic majority but also as the representation of power and epistemic authority. The mechanism possesses all the credentials of coloniality of power, as Fanon elaborates:

> Colonialism has not simply depersonalized the individual it has colonized; this depersonalization is equally felt in the collective sphere, on the level of social structures. The colonized people find that they are reduced to a body of individuals who only find cohesion when in the presence of the colonizing nation.[12]

In the homogenization of histories and experiences of colonial oppression, decolonization is used without much attention to the internal differentiations of sociopolitical mechanisms

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and histories of colonial experiences. The colonial trauma in Ghana or Nigeria is different from that of Uganda and Kenya. Belgium, France, and Portugal had different agendas from the British. South Africa and Zimbabwe are not the same as Algeria or Morocco. The experience of the educated black male is different from that of his uneducated counterpart or black female. Sociocultural and political responses to colonialism equally triggered divergent responses from the colonizing forces, which in turn produced new frames of power relations. The response of the British to the Mau Mau anticolonial forces in Kenya is not the same as Kamuzu Banda's largely phlegmatic approach to colonial occupation. While the policies of *assimilation* and *assimilado* share constitutive similarities in colonial epistemology, they substantively differ from each other and even more from the British systems or the apartheid experiences. While violence is a shared constitutive value of the colonial enterprise, the degree and forms in which this violence was used were determined by context, and this, in turn, shapes the experiences and historical trauma inherited in the post-colony. Accordingly, "decolonization" as a homogenous term and a magic tool that represses all trauma, rehabilitates all memories, and reclaims all histories constitutes a form of epistemic violence. Besides, the divisiveness of politicized identity in the post-colony indicates more contradictions and ambivalences than a coherent imagination. The current tempo of decolonization as a universalistic epistemology that solves all problems demobilizes those still affected by the lingering effect of colonialism. It coerces everyone into a given description (political, economic, or cultural) offered by the imagination of Western scholars.

4. DECOLONIZATION AS SUPERIORIZATION

Colonization is an act of relationship that seeks to control not only the sociopolitical and economic asymmetries of a people but also imbues ideological formations that affect both the colonizer and the colonized. The first assumes a complex feeling of superiority, and so normalizes cultural norms of oppression as valid moral claims. As Edward Said has suggested, this normalization is what "allowed decent men and women to accept the notion that distant territories and their native peoples *should* be subjugated.. [and] . . . think of the *imperium* as a protracted, almost metaphysical obligation to rule subordinate, inferior, or less advanced peoples."[13] Second, for the colonized, a hegemony of values is imposed to subjugate, dominate, and annihilate cultural values. Through the brutality of the system and forms of cultural violence, colonial ideologies legitimate dehumanization and an inferiority complex, which is then normalized. This second phase of normalization, writes D.K. Fieldhouse, grounded the success of coloniality: "The basis of imperial authority was the mental attitude of the colonist. His acceptance of subordination—whether through a positive sense of common interest with the parent state, or through inability to conceive of any alternative—made empire durable."[14] The colonial condition is thus sustained by both colonized and colonizer, and each, as Said notes, "had a set of interpretations of their common history with its own perspective, historical sense, emotions, and traditions."[15] What seems more disabling in this politics of memory is the relegation of the pedagogic and emotive influence in generation of rememberance. How the European colonizer remembers Africa is not the same way that the colonized remembers the past, yet these differentiations are collapsed within a homogenous interpretation.

As Philip Rieff noted in his commentary on Freud's psychology: "the very reason that Hegel thought Africa not a proper subject for the historian, Freud would consider it most proper."[16] Africa gave Europe its identity through this subversive negation of the Africans as savagely different, not viable "as a bridge for syncretic possibility," but rather "a mirror that reflects the colonialist's self-image."[17] Through a discriminating order of difference, the colonizer arrogates to himself an ontological hierarchy where his histories, traditions, religions, and epistemologies

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are permanently held as cradle of humanity or viable source of moral value as Chinua Achebe observed,

> The West seems to suffer deep anxieties about the precariousness of its civilization and to have a need for constant reassurance by comparing it with Africa. If Europe, advancing in civilization, could cast a backward glance periodically at Africa trapped in primordial barbarity, it could say with faith and feeling: There go I but for the grace of God.[18]

This identity of superiorization is regularized through a subjective hierarchy of a "narcissistic self-recognition" in which the native is perceived as "too degraded and inhuman to be credited with any specific subjectivity, is cast as no more than a recipient of the negative elements of the self that the European projects onto him."[19] Yet, the utility of such hierarchy is undermined by embedded alienation in this process of self-cognition. To be human, the European needs to be a master. A subjective hierarchy is enforced, a configuration nurtured through subjective denunciation in which the European is *present* only because the non-Western other has been negated as an *absence*. Thus, to become, the oppressor self-alienates: "the subject is eclipsed by his fixation on and fetishization of the Other: the self becomes a prisoner of the projected image."[20]

Embedded in this epistemic truism is to live up to the received ideal of superiority. This superior identity received in an encounter with Africa is based on a false binary. Focusing only on the colonized imposes certain misrecognition that reinforces the epistemic violence of coloniality, i.e., the obsession that only the colonized has to change, to give up its mind (decolonization of the mind), has to reject culture (revolt), has to plead for recognition (subjective equality). While these might be conceivable for the well-meaning colonizer, it is only possible by what I have termed elsewhere as subjective conversation! Here, subjective conversation on the part of the colonizer and its assimilated terms of identity. It includes the denaturalization of the inherited notion of superiority complex, or superiority of Western civilization. It involves, too, a sociocultural and intellectual disposition for a nonracialized notion of equality; an unconditional regard and recognition of the other person in their differences and uniqueness that is, subjective equality.

Another problem of decolonization as superiorization is the focus on the colonized as one solely in need of decolonization, and the concomitant fixation on the subjective redemption of the colonized. Nevertheless, the evolving outlook furthers epistemic colonization. Epistemic colonization is an arrogant discourse which in its very ontology ignores the residual signification of Western identity for two reasons: First, the European identity is not a given. As shown earlier, Africa gave Europe its identity of subjective superiority by way of a differentiating scheme of difference. *We are because they are not.* The moment the colonial subject ceases to be a savage, at this point, the native diminishes in value and ceases to be a good native as his/her attempt to *unsavage* transfigures him/her into a bad native, a threat that remains inimical to subjective survival. The shifting and conflictual ambivalence is that to desire or to be like the colonizer is to lose the material value of colonial humanism and its associative privileges of subjective hierarchy. To be "human" for the non-Western other in the colonial regime is to remain a savage, *stay in your place,* and have some recognition. For the Westerner, they are superior because they are not barbaric, they love gold, not emotional but rational (see for example the Enlightenment anthropology of the likes of Kant, Hume, Montesquieu or Hegel). This myth of superiority is nurtured as the colonizer's moral reality; an ideological configuration which is then appropriated and regularized as universal truth. Second, the colonized is assimilated through the matrix of power that came with colonization. The mandate from the superiorization complex is used to define and normalize control, domination, and oppression in terms of culture, politics, and economics. Hence, too, the colonized accept this myth and live it out as public truth, as Paulo Frere

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rightly observed: "The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom."[21] Fanon concurs:

> The 'truth' of the oppressor, formerly rejected as an absolute lie, was now countered by another, *an acted truth*. The occupier's lie thereby acquired greater reality, for it was now a menaced lie, put on the defensive. It was the defenses of the occupier, his reactions, his resistances, that underscored the effectiveness of national action and made that action participate in a world of truth . . . *the occupier's lie became a positive aspect of the nation's new truth.*[22]

As shown earlier, colonial ontology functions through subjective displacement in which the "savage" gave the European "other" its ontological essence through a schematic regime of difference. The European is not a savage but a superior being that is intelligent, educated, cute, and scientific. The savage other is a being only when they have been civilized according to European moral hierarchy. Hence, the thesis is that to colonize is to civilize, and to civilize is to humanize *à la* European historicity. Notice the continuity between coloniality and decoloniality as the same logic applies: The colonized savage is still an obsession, but this time, object of our epistemic charity that desires salvation from our (European) past inhumanities. What is now termed as wokeness is a resignification for ultraliberalism. In superiorization, the non-Western other becomes a paradox of Manichean allegory, a locus of difference and recognition. They need to be inferior in order to sustain the Western intellectual ego, which thrives primarily through a relationship of domination and self-negation, as Abdul Janmohamed enunciates:

> Genuine and thorough Otherness is possible only if the self can somehow negate or at least severely bracket the values, assumptions, and ideology of his culture . . . . [By] allowing the European to denigrate the native in a variety of ways, by permitting an obsessive, fetishistic representation of the native's moral inferiority, the allegory also enables the European to increase, by contrast the store of his own moral superiority; it allows him to accumulate 'surplus morality', which is further invested in the denigration of the native, in a self-sustaining cycle.[23]

Accordingly, fixating only on the historically oppressed as the only one in need of decolonization is to perpetuate the hegemony of sociopolitical and cultural imperialism. As Aime Cesaire notes, a nation that colonizes de-civilizes itself; decolonization has to be both the colonizer and colonized: "No one colonizes innocently . . . a nation which colonizes . . . a civilization which justifies colonization . . . is already a sick civilization." Colonization dehumanizes both the oppressor and the oppressor for as the saying goes, *to hold someone down in a gutter, you have to be there in the gutter with them!* What Cesaire is suggesting is that only a barbarian treats others as barbarian:

> . . . colonization . . . dehumanizes even the most civilized man; that colonial activity, colonial enterprise, colonial conquest, which is based on contempt for the native and justified by that contempt; inevitably tends to change him who undertakes it; that the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as *an animal,* accustoms himself to treating like an animal and tends to objectively to transform *himself* into an animal.[24]

The masking or mystification of another person's humanity leads to objectification of the other, an epistemic equation that leads to the relation of domination and violence. To achieve subjective equality is to understand decolonization as a therapeutic necessity for both victims and villains (note: *not just the victims*); and as political mandate for nonracialized hierarchy.

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Linked to superiorization is a version of decolonization as an act of intellectual smuggling and space appropriation. In the section that follows, I show how Western academics have appropriated the cause of decolonization as a personal duty and intellectual crusade. In their theorization, they merely replace the what is now cliched as "coloniality of power" with subjective displacement and network legitimation.

5. DECOLONIZATION AS SPACE APPROPRIATION AND INTELLECTUAL SMUGGLING

If coloniality thrived through the universalization of Eurocentric ideas that are privileged over other values, in decolonization, the Western academics who are the leading champions of decolonization movement are simply decolonizing or in the decolonial industry for its material utility in terms of grants, visibility, or recognition. First, most of these scholars are not trained in any area of African Studies, philosophy, or intellectual history. Second, many of these academics have access to Africa through textbooks legitimated through the same institution they wish to decolonize. They offer a solution, but to problems they perceive as universal and only meaningful to them in terms of morality, justice, democracy, etc. Herein, a new coloniality emerges in trying to decolonize on behalf of the native subject (now a mute audience). For example, the Western decolonizer appropriates a specific meaning of morality or justice now judged to be universal and configured as decolonial truth. Decolonization becomes an epistemic pop-culture, a performance akin to a religious act of initiation, for the purposes of purifying and liberating one from ancestral participation in colonialism or other crimes against humanity. It also then offers an intellectual currency through which Western academics gain subjective legitimation.

Transcending epistemic boundaries without training has become the nature of academic adventurers in African Studies. African Studies has become one discipline anyone can jump into without any training or background. For lack of opportunities, one does not turn from being an astronaut to performing surgeries in theatres just because one reads a few medical books. Even for cross-allied disciplines, a philologist does not become a historian because he understands the origins of a literary text. African Studies is one of the few disciplines in which anyone can or could become an expert—no training is required, and no research or in-depth study of experience is needed—but a redemptive epistemology in which anyone, everyone who is unable to break new ground in their own field, turns to as a last resort. Perhaps, a justification emerges that one knows a black person or has a black friend, has been to Africa, or knows someone who knows a black person. This is how the discipline of African Studies becomes compromised by what may be termed epistemic poison. African Studies is now a commodity, something to be traded on, instrumentalized, or applied in an arbitrary format. Take, for example, the Southern African concept of ubuntu. This cultural philosophy has become a commodity for neoliberal epistemology. In Europe, we have ubuntu houses, restaurants, and psychological centers—all managed by white Europeans who often possess only vague ideas of how the concept evolved, its historicity, cultural signification, or misrepresentations.

The fact that one can switch to African Studies or African philosophy or history without any background training perpetuates the logic of coloniality. Here, African studies (or philosophy) is simplistic, does not require training, and is not scientific; anybody can teach or do it. This, itself, is colonialist and perpetuation of Africa in the racist trope, *a child of the moment with a simplistic lifestyle,* no historical equality with Europeans, no sophistication or imagination, and we have to teach and civilize them. These societies do not have capacities to grasp ideas, concepts, or notions of causality.[25]In ascribing such atavistic topography to the non-Western other, the Western ego is considered a master civilization, and "history springs only into being at the magic touch of the white races."[26] African Studies is one such epistemic child of the moment to which

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the Western academic (even without prior training) could nurture to adulthood. The child has been adopted by a paternalistic protector, an epistemic adoption.

Adoption is also a form of mummification; it is not about taking the hand of the child to teach it to lead the way; it is about defining values, negotiating morality, and institutionalizing the terms of new power relations now regularized as public truth. In encountering the adult European, this simplistic, angelic child of nature is the antithesis of "a universal subject that is indispensable to the knowing of truth and thus constitutes the apex of history."[27] This universal adult educates and instills historical memory and morality in the child. Hence as Hegel would note, Africa is a *child* without history and morality, it has "remained . . . shut up; . . . the land of childhood, which lying beyond the days of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of night . . . The negro, as already observed, exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state."[28] The African is a child of the moment that needs an adult European to grow and mature. The child, even though he possesses "wonderful characteristics," needs constant supervision, because "*It* has largely remained a child type, with a child psychology and outlook." He is not a bad human, but only needs adult protection, for

> A child-like human cannot be a bad human, for are we not in spiritual matters bidden to be like unto little children? Perhaps as a direct result of this temperament, the African is the only happy human I have come across. No other race is so easily satisfied, so good-tempered, so care-free.[29]

For many years after my Ph.D., I struggled with academic placement in the USA. Having studied with a leading intellectual historian in modern history, Jorn Rusen, I was convinced that a German Ph.D. with a summa cum laude would open doors of opportunities. What I did not anticipate was network legitimation and my own subjective location in the Western academy. Despite many publications including books, I applied for over one hundred teaching positions. I had a few interviews, but often I was given vague reasons for rejection. Sometimes, one received an automated response after application that your file was no longer in consideration. In another example, I applied to a historical black university in the USA and was told that they were interested in scholars at the beginning of their career. But I was also starting, or so I felt. At one instance someone from the search committee reached out to me: they were intimidated by your cv. They were jealous. You were a threat. How could I be a threat I responded? I just need a job to fend for my family. One is only jealous of someone who has succeeded. To which he then responded, there are often three piles of files in job applications, and yours does not fit the profile in terms of network, positionality, and location in history. That was the bitter truth. On another occasion, a professor resigned because of the racism regarding to my candidacy—all these were in history, philosophy, African or Africana Studies. It was then that I decided to go back to school, this time at the University of Cambridge, thinking that I would perhaps gain some recognition by studying at a prestigious school. To Cambridge, I went and started all over. A few years later I graduated with a second Ph.D. However, Cambridge neither colored me white nor gave me any edge. Despite numerous publications and outstanding teaching evaluations, a permanent position remained a mirage for years. I had many connections but was only useful as an informer or one to be saved. One is a necessary scholar to the extent that one offers legitimation to their work and research. At another prestigious university in the USA, one wryly remarked, why don't you go and find a job in Africa? We are both American citizens, and she was white and a director of a center dedicated to Africa. I had no response as she had power, and she decided who came on a visiting scholarship. I had but to swallow my pride and walk away in shame, in shame of my homeland, ashamed because of my subjective location in history as an African, but especially a black male.

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The Western-based scholar assumes the spokesperson for the colonized, framing the questions, answering the questions they pose for themselves, and problematizing the issues, but issues which remain meaningful and relevant only to the conversationalists. In this dysfunctional rescuing of African epistemology, the Western scholar creates a problem which only they can solve; or problematize an issue for which only they have the solution. It is them that Okot P'bitek refers to as "mercenaries in foreign battles none of which was in the interest of African peoples . . . intellectual smugglers."[30] They are not just smuggling but also engaged in what may be termed *space appropriation.* Space appropriation suggests this opportunism where nontrained experts, because of their positionality (having studied in Western universities or Western-related subjects), or racial privilege automatically qualify to write about Africa, Latin America, or Asia. Herein, decolonization becomes a new form of imperialism. They will frame the conversation in ways that reflect their biases, histories, and prejudices. *I speak about your past oppression but only in ways that I understand them through my history, training, experiences, and peculiar vision of morality and justice.*

When Gayatri Spivak famously wrote her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?"[31] she was indicting the Indian elites who spoke for everyone in a totalizing and homogenous fashion where the elite history and experience is assumed to signify the political history of the Indian public. Unlike subalternity, however, the decolonization crusaders are only interested in their own academic achievement and ambitions, where decolonization, as Bill Ashcroft observes, is just a "critical orthodoxy" emanating from "the expropriation of the field by contemporary centers of academic power."[32] New positions are created in the universities to satisfy the need for decolonial scholarship, and it is these untrained experts who have access to the space of education. Hence, there is an epistemic necessity to decolonize our curriculum but only insofar as one of *us* frames, teaches, and defines the terms of what is to be taught. Ultimately, they create a problem, of which only they can solve. They define the questions themselves and produce the solutions as well, but within the same circle of sameness. And back to square one: Western intellectual space becomes a center of what Jurgen Habermas famously termed *"Anerkennungswürdigkeit"* (recognition worthiness).[33] Knowledge produced in such centers and its processes thereof become privileged and prioritized over non-Western centers of learning. Since such knowledge is simultaneously commodified, they are promoted in ways that shape culture, politics, international relations, and even trade. Thus, the intellectual trajectory of what decolonization scholarship has become in Western academies; repeating the same cycle of coloniality, only this time through the language of wokeness and epistemic imperialism!

Epistemic imperialism indicates this commodification and appropriation of historical experience and values now reformatted within the Western intellectual space. The term "minority," for example, is no longer a reference to racialized minorities, to those who, because of their historical location as people of color, were denied access to institutional, sociopolitical, and economic space. Now, this term, like others, like *oppressed minorities,* people of color, and blackness, is generalized *sans* the historical context in which those concepts evolved and evoked emotive legitimation. Blackness is no longer about people racialized in this color; everyone who suffers oppression is *black.* Notice that in appropriating this language into a new normative frame, the historical experience where those terms emerged in the first place is displaced with a new ontological experience. Ideas, experiences, and people for whom or from whom these ideas were generated in the first place are then only instrumental values to feed the Western intellectual ego. Blackness is no longer about black people; colonialism is no more about the historical usurpation and abuse of humans in Africa, and decolonization is not about uncolonizing—these are now universal terms applied or used in almost every circumstance or situation. A new epistemology emerges that speaks the language of epistemic justice, but only a specific understanding of justice that we have redefined for the Western intellectual ego.

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The RIPPLE Institute of Philosophy in Belgium sent a CFP on "Rethinking Racism and Colonialism in the Ethics and Policies of Migration," held in Belgium between 20–21 September 2023 (as I reflect on this paper). The workshop articulated, as their goal, theorizing racism and migration and studying the enduring impact of colonialism. The public announcement is very instructive, and I cite it at length:

> *The workshop questions in which ways (normative) theoretical questions about admission, borders, selection, and integration, can be formulated in order to mitigate, rather than adding injury to, the harmful legacies of colonial and racist 'connected histories' . . . . We also specifically invite the contributors not only to uncover colonial history but also connect it to forward-thinking approaches to the ethics and policies of migration that shape our current time. In this sense, the workshop aims to make real progress on the question of how to offer historically informed ways of thinking about Europe's borders and bordering practices.*[34]

The keynote speakers for the conference were all based in Western universities. Three speakers were from England; one was from the Netherlands, two were from the same university in the USA.[35] But what was more telling was what appears later in the CFP: "*While we aim to guarantee a suitably mixed line-up, in terms of seniority, geography, and gender, available slots are limited due to the small-scale setup of the workshop. We are unfortunately unable to cover travel and accommodation expenses.*"

Such a CFP is precisely what I mean by network legitimation. First, their position in Western universities gives them access to positional legitimation and material resources to frame the conversation in ways that reflect their problematization of issues, of which only they have a solution. Second, the conversation is on colonial history, but only to the extent that it is a starting point that would "connect it to forward-thinking approaches to the ethics and policies of migration that shape our current time." Hence, the historical legacy of colonialism is displaced with political expediency of what is needed to be heard, that is, *moving forward.* Third, while the organizers are able to "guarantee a suitably mixed line-up," they are, "unfortunately unable to cover travel and accommodation expenses." The last point thus illuminates the moral habit of Western decolonial scholars. To indicate that they do not have money to invite scholars is a positive discrimination against scholars from the global south, who would otherwise depend on funding to be able to fund their flight, pay for visas, or even afford accommodation. It positively excludes anyone from historically colonized spaces or those excluded from the "borders."

What the aforementioned case in point teaches is how decolonial scholarship has become re-colonized through new forms of epistemic imperialism. These are those who possess network legitimation in terms of access to resources or links to publishing houses. Second, they frame the debate, and their own articulation of ideas is then universalized through published papers (in university presses or peer-reviewed journals) as a yardstick or standard practice for the discipline. As Pauline Hountondji argued, the non-Western other, in this case, is just a voiceless topic in a story told about him or her, an "antithesis of an interlocutor; he is merely a topic; a voiceless face under private investigation, an object to be defined and not the subject."[36] They are not only appropriating the historical legacies of the oppressed but perpetuating imperial legacies through this subversion of history and narrative of creating a new material space for the Western intellectual. This new material space is where academics, including those not trained in the field, suddenly become experts. This is a space of neocoloniality, space appropriation, and, ultimately, of epistemic imperialism. Thus understood, decolonization itself is thoroughly colonized through subversive politics of wokeness. Wokeness becomes an ideology of misrepresentation that appropriates the language of the historically oppressed to create a new narrative of morality that is universalized as epistemic truth. The kind of Justice they desire, the notion

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of humanity they promote, and even redefining the very ontology of human equality; these are ideals that feed into the material necessities of creating a problem that only the Western intellectual can solve. Notice, too, that the meaning of oppression, the notion of what it means to be a minority, now gains new meaning through this Western gaze and not from the experiences of the historically colonized. We define what it means to be a minority and then offer that as a frame of reference for universal truth. This misrecognition is epistemic imperialism, as John Paul Sartre complained in *Black Orpheus*:

> Here . . . are black men standing, black men who examine us; and I want you to feel, as I, the sensation of being seen. For the white man has enjoyed for three thousand years the privilege of seeing without being seen. It was a seeing pure and uncomplicated; the light of his eyes drew all things from their primeval darkness. The whiteness of his skin was a further aspect of vision, a light condensed. The white man, white because he was a man, white like the day, white as truth is white, white like virtue, lighted like a torch all creation; he unfolded the essence, secret and white, of existence. Today, these black men have fixed their gaze upon us and our gaze is thrown back in our eyes; black torches, in their turn, light the world and our white heads are only small lanterns balanced in the wind.[37]

6. CONCLUSION

Academics are in a rat race for survival, and my pessimistic outlook is that we are in a survival mode and at the mercy of institutions and hierarchies of power. As a teacher, I always communicate to my students that every knowledge possesses what I have termed *ontological turbulence*, that is, epistemic mobility, uncertainty, ambivalence, and the potential of change. This is precondition for epistemic reconciliation and dialogue as I showed elsewhere: "When epistemology claims ontological absolutism, it becomes a dogma often nourished by biases, prejudices, or stereotypes . . . dialogue is an attempt to transcend these epistemic boundaries in which dogmatic infusion of ideas are normalized as public truth and are often regularized as socioeconomic and political reality."[38] In my classes I look at the larger picture and everything is contested and contestable. We have to be conscious of our biases, mindsets, formations, and how false myths inform our reality of what we teach and want to teach. Second, we have to not only recognize the agency of the colonized but speak with them not just *to* them. Why would I supervise a doctoral student who works on the Suffist movement in Senegal or Mali without engaging with local actors or even co-supervising such a thesis with a scholar from that locality? What, then is my legitimation? As academics, we often have chips on our shoulders especially when we come from Western Universities and interact with other scholars or institutions not located within the Western epistemic space. We are either paternalistic or curiously colonialist, engaging only to appropriate and claim as ours. The legitimation of our effort is dependent on this intersubjective-ethical engagement. Ultimately, it is epistemic humility to recognize spaces where myths thrive as truth.

Entrapped between abstract universalism and particularity of ideological interests, decolonization would neither negotiate transformative epistemology nor emancipatory ontology but be commodified and valued only if it legitimates professional and pedagogical interests. It obscures divergent histories and imposes misrecognition on internal differentiations, ambivalences, and tensions of colonized peoples, which is now framed as a homogenous experience deserving a single universal response. This imposed misrecognition turns into new forms of coloniality. To avoid this entrapment, we should be brave to think outside the box. Decolonization ceases to be just a pop ideology thrown around by anyone who "thinks" or supposes they know something

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about postcolonial theory or historical oppression. It is not a magic wand for all epistemic questions or a mandate for dysfunctional rescuing of African epistemologies. Although it might offer insight towards understanding certain philosophical anxieties, it can also distort or infuse ideological distortions on forms of knowledge that is produced. Epistemic signification cannot be separated from its methodology, and since knowledge is ultimately affected by the system that produces it, what we do need is not then to jump into the decolonial bandwagon but a paradigm shift. We need to change the kind of questions we ask and recognize our positionality, as David Scott asks, What is the question? What is the problem we want to solve? What solutions do we anticipate? How has this worked in the past? Wrong question with right answers? Right Questions with Wrong Solutions? Wrong questions and false solutions?[39]

As we reflect on the past, it is a commitment to historical empathy that generates epistemic mobility. We must be aware of the impact of our work in the present and the future, what may be termed herein as *prophetic empathy*. It is not just because decolonization is fashionable at the moment or that we use it to get a job, but we must ask how this ontology speaks to the future? Epistemic imperialism and subjective hierarchies must be rejected. There is a difference between knowledge as material possession and education as transformative experience. The former is a material necessity for the recipient of the information, often reserved for the privileged few who then appropriate the information thus received to perpetuate domination and maintain hierarchies of power. It is like most African or Africana Studies centers in Europe and North America that legitimize the anthropological study of Africa to further the interests of the donor nations or host countries. Education, on the other hand, does not discriminate about who receives information; the purpose is to inspire and move the mind of the community or illuminate acquired material experience; it is transformative and emancipatory. As carried out in Western academia, decolonization is primarily for knowledge production for informational purposes or as an alibi against bad conscience or used for job placement opportunities. It is neither pedagogical nor transformative. The purveyors of this intellectual crusade are neither concerned about self-emancipation nor institutional transformation other than the one that favors their careers and their chosen inheritors of knowledge. They create a new myth out of the old tale; they take the old racist motifs and reframe it as a "woke" philosophy. The difference is that this *wokeness* is never really woke but only perpetuates the racial arrogance of history.

That is all![40]

NOTES

1. Abiola Irele, "In Praise of Alienation," in *The Surreptitious Speech: Presence Africaine and the Politics of Otherness* 1947–1987, ed. V.Y. Mudimbe (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 201–24, 202.
2. Walter Rodney, "How Europe Underdeveloped Africa," in *Perspectives On Africa: A Reader in Culture, History, and Representation*, ed. Richard Grinker and Christopher B. Steiner (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1987), 586–96, 585.
3. Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth* (London: Présence Africaine, 1963), 81.
4. Abdul R. Janmohamed, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory," in *The Post-Colonial Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Hellen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1985), 18–23, 20.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 22
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 23
9. Ibid. 3
10. Ibid., 22
11. Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (Random House, 2008), 172.
12. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, op. cit., 293–94.
13. Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 10.

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14. Ibid. 11.
15. Ibid.
16. Cited in Frank Ankersmit, "Foreword," in Michael Onyebuchi Eze, *The Politics of History in Contemporary Africa* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), ix.
17. Janmohamed, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory," op. cit., 19.
18. Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa," *Massachusetts Review* 18(4) (Winter 1977): 782–94, 792.
19. Janmohamed, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory," op. cit., 20.
20. Ibid.
21. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum Books, 2000), 47.
22. Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1965), 76, ("An acted Truth"—my emphasis; the rest as italicized as in the original).
23. Janmohamed, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory," op. cit., 23.
24. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, [1962]1972), 39, 41.
25. See Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *The Notebooks on Primitive Mentality*, trans. Peter Rivière (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), 155, 157ff.
26. Arthur Gobineau, *An Essay on the Inequality of Human Races*, (New York: Putnam's, 1915).
27. José Rabasa, "Allegory of Atlas" in *The Post-Colonial Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Hellen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1985), 358–64, 364.
28. E. Chukwudi Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 35
29. General J.C. Smuts, *Africa and Some World Problems, Including the Rhodes Memorial Lectures Delivered in Michaelmas Term, 1929* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), 75f.
30. Okot p'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1971), 102, 107.
31. Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988), 271–313, 270.
32. Bill Ashcroft, *On Post-Colonial Futures: Transformations of Colonial Culture* (London: Continuum, 2001), 24.
33. Cited in Dieter Fuchs and Andrea Schlenker, "European Identity and the Legitimacy of the EU," *Background Paper Team* 12 (2006), 4.
34. See https://hiw.kuleuven.be/ripple/events/agenda/workshop-rethinking-racism-and-colonialism-in-the-ethics-and-policies-of-migration.
35. This was the originally advertised list of guest speakers. The final list of speakers circulated after the workshop is different from what was originally circulated in the CFP. Despite the differences, all the speakers were based in Western universities. The only difference with the postconference line up is additional numbers and variations from countries of origins: Netherlands (3 speakers, two from the same university), England (3), Belgium (2), Norway(1), USA (1), Switzerland (1). None of the speakers came from the historically colonized.
36. Pauline Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, 2nd ed., trans. Henri Evans and Jonathan Rée (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 34.
37. Jean P. Sartre, "Black Orpheus," trans. S.W. Allen, *Présence Africaine* 10/11 (1951): 219–47, 219.
38. Michael O. Eze, "Interculturality as Dialogical Reciprocity in African and Comparative Philosophy," *Filosofie & Praktijk* 43 (3/4) (2022): 49–64, 51.
39. David Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 6–7.
40. This article was inspired by the *Decolonization Workshop Series* at Cambridge University's Politics Department on February 15, 2017. It was here that I coined and first used the phrase "decolonizing decolonization" in an attempt to enunciate my intellectual frustrations and epistemic fatigue about how decolonial theory in the Western academy has turned into a band-wagon movement through intellectual smuggling and other forms of epistemic imperialism.

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