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Grant J. Silva

Marquette University, grant.silva@marquette.edu

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# Comparative Philosophy and Decolonial Struggle: The Epistemic Injustice of Colonization and Liberation of Human Reason

Grant J. Silva

Department of Philosophy, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI

## Abstract

This essay explores the extent to which comparative philosophy can assist decolonial struggle. In order to accomplish this task, I offer not only a description of philosophy's colonization but also an account of how this discipline remains subject to the coloniality of knowledge. In short, insofar as race, gender, class, and sexuality are considered irrelevant or accidental to the production of philosophical knowledge, professional philosophy replicates, if not continues, what Rajeev Bhargava terms the epistemic injustice of colonialism. One response to the colonization of philosophy is “diversification” by means of putting into conversation philosophers, systems, and ideas from differing cultures or regions throughout the world. While a step forward, insofar as philosophical comparisons occur primarily on an East–West axis, philosophers are not necessarily addressing the biases, prejudices, racism, and exceptionalism endemic to their discipline. In fact, such a directionality typically reinforces the sense of historical development that undergirds Western philosophy's self-understanding. This

essay, therefore, offers a series of recommendations for how to radicalize comparative philosophical efforts so as to address global epistemic injustice and aid in the process of decolonization.

At its most basic, explains Frantz Fanon, decolonization is the replacement of one “species” of humankind by another. “The substitution is unconditional, absolute, total, and seamless,” he writes, “proof of success lies in a social fabric that has been changed inside out.”<sup>1</sup> The reason for this replacement should be obvious: as it stands, the conception of the human arising out of the European experience of colonization, which subsequently laid the foundation for the emergence of “modern man,” is predicated on the objectification, subjugation, and *dehumanization* of non-European peoples. Decolonization cannot mean, therefore, taking on and salvaging Eurocentric conceptions of humanity or the simple inversion of master and slave such that the colonized now dominate or view themselves as superior to the colonizer. If fully realized, decolonization results in novel ways of being human in the world, a replacement of the old oppressive social order with something new, a process through which both colonizer *and* colonized are changed, for it “infuses a new rhythm, specific to a new generation of men, with a new language and a new humanity.”<sup>2</sup> In this novel social arrangement, Fanon portends, those persons once treated exclusively as things, objects manipulated for the benefit of the colonizer, are made “men” (“full persons” one should say) through the process of liberation. How might philosophy, especially “comparative philosophy,” assist in this liberatory process?

Before answering this question, that philosophy *should* participate in this process needs to be made clear. After all, the claim can be made that philosophy, especially professionalized academic philosophy, has benefitted from and even been complicit in historical acts of colonization and the perpetuation of “coloniality.”<sup>3</sup> That is to say, central to the “humanism” arising out of the European experience of colonization are a series of assumptions regarding the normative use of reason, philosophical reason in particular. Historically, these assumptions performed the boundary-work that delineated between the kinds of persons capable of taking part in philosophical inquiry and those who cannot. In the present, these assumptions supply an assortment of metaphilosophical and methodological limitations regarding the extent to which the particularities of human existence (race, class, gender, sexuality, the intersections of these, and more) can manifest in the philosophical process. Limitations that continue to hinder philosophy's emancipatory potential. Nevertheless, as Fanon explains, *de*-colonization cannot be achieved by waving “a magic wand, a natural cataclysm, or gentlemen's agreement”; he continues, “it can only find its significance and become self coherent insofar as we discern the history-making movement which gives it form and substance.”<sup>4</sup> By “history-making movement,” Fanon means those practices and institutions through which colonization took effect (and takes shape). Attacking those movements, *decolonizing* them, is the key to addressing the mechanisms of oppression, subjugation, and exclusion that further colonization.

Philosophy, especially professional philosophy, is one such institution, or so I argue below. Thus, in order for decolonization to come about, the nature of philosophical practice, including the aura of sophistication, prestige, and civility that remains attached to it—remnants of philosophy's indebtedness to colonization—has to be critically examined. However, the decolonization of philosophy is no easy task. Because the *episteme* of Western philosophy is contoured by the history of modern European colonization and ideological justifications of it, philosophers can easily ignore and/or avoid their field's indebtedness to colonization. By “episteme” I have in mind the not-so-conscious background conditions and range of theoretical assumptions that make possible what is and what is not taken seriously within a discursive framework or knowledge community—the conditions for the possibility of a claim or idea being plausible or implausible within “the space of knowledge,” as put by Michel Foucault.<sup>5</sup> While there is room for debate with Foucault as to whether or not epistemes are intentionally maintained, “the abyssal nature” of modern Western thinking, to employ the concept afforded by Boaventura de Sousa Santos, establishes the conditions that lead to philosophy's colonization and disallow for the coloniality of knowledge to come into this field's purview.<sup>6</sup> Decolonizing the episteme of Western philosophy, therefore,

requires shining the light of reason into “the abyss,” a level of metalucidity, to borrow from José Medina, capable of pointing out the limitations of the “space of knowledge” as shaped by the epistemic injustice of colonialism.<sup>7</sup>

For these reasons, this essay first offers an account of the colonization of philosophy such that I can demonstrate how the coloniality of knowledge remains in effect. This essay then returns to the question asked above: How might the decolonization of philosophy, aided by the promotion of comparative philosophy, assist in overcoming the sense of objectification Fanon is concerned with? How does “recognizing” (for lack of a better word) the philosophical subjectivities of nonwestern colonized peoples, both past and present, *call into question* and challenge a social order dependent not only upon on historical acts of colonization but also a monopolization of knowledge production and philosophical wisdom?

Admittedly, the idea of comparative philosophy, and even cognates such as “non-Western” or “noncanonical” philosophy, add to the problem. As a subfield of philosophy that strives to place into conversation differing philosophical systems, ideas, and thinkers from diverse cultural backgrounds, this area bears much potential in terms of assisting decolonization and bringing about structural change within the discipline of philosophy. However, comparative philosophy itself stands in need of decolonial critique. This subfield is where many Western philosophers view the engagement with philosophical Others to be appropriate and where “diversity” is typically welcomed (I am tempted to say “quarantined”). The problem is, what passes for “comparative philosophy” takes place within the confines of a specific cartographic and geopolitical imaginary shaped by modern European colonization and ideological justifications for it. This imaginary situates Europe and the North Atlantic, and more broadly “the West,” as the center of not only the globe but also as the main protagonist of world history. Connected to this cartographic imaginary are forms of asymmetrical historicity, linear models of historical and philosophical progress, and the normalization of a particular geopolitical outlook (think about G. W. F. Hegel's claim that, much like Spirit's development, history travels from East to West). This outlook assumes normative proportions that enable some, while hindering other, comparative efforts. Usually, those comparisons taking place on an East-to-West directionality are welcomed. Comparisons venturing from the global North to the global South, say, between Europe and Africa or Latin America, or those comparisons that dare to even think about South-to-South relations (which includes disenfranchised voices within colonial metropolises and places like the United States), are undervalued if not scoffed at in professional philosophy. In short, the idea of comparative philosophy needs to be wrested away from a pervasive orientalism (in Edward Said's sense of the term) that welcomes diversity insofar as it effectively makes no difference in the production of philosophical knowledge but mostly reflects the interests of those in positions of power.

Amidst the fact that it has historically been commandeered and that diversification efforts in in philosophy are frequently tokenized, I maintain that treating formerly colonized peoples as philosophers, taking the idea of comparative philosophy seriously, and striving to build a truly *global* and not just *globalized* community of knowledge producers, aids in the abovementioned reconceptualization of humanity. The difference between a global and a globalized philosophical community prefigures much of what this essay is about, to employ the language of the comparative philosopher David Hall.<sup>8</sup> As he explains, a *globalized* philosophical community is the byproduct of “Anglo-European sprawl,” an expression that I take to be quite the euphemism for the range of epistemic injustices that typically accompany colonialism. A *global* philosophical community means rethinking long-held assumptions and convictions about the locales, cultures, and subjectivities from which philosophical thought emanates. I do not just mean the promotion of philosophy from the so-called “post-” colonial world, but also a reconsideration of exceptionalism that undergirds Western philosophy, an exceptionalism derived from the false universalism afforded through conquest and cultural imposition. Decolonizing philosophy is thus a process through which the philosophically dispossessed, or those said to be incapable of rigorous philosophical thought on account of their relationship to colonization, become co-contributors to the intellectual life of

humanity on terms that are more their own. While I do not purport to offer an exhaustive list, this essay ends by outlining what is necessary for comparative philosophy to play this role.

## 1 The Epistemic Injustice of Colonialism

The colonization of philosophy can be explained in a variety of ways. Each account prefigures the specific normative path that *decolonization* should take. For some philosophers, multiple, if not competing, narratives about the colonization of philosophy might invite skepticism and uncertainty about which narrative is correct (if any at all) and whether philosophy was ever really “colonized.” As sincere as this concern may be, part of what the decolonization of philosophy requires is a multiplicity of origin stories about philosophy's colonization in order to account for the variegated axes of oppression through which the coloniality of knowledge manifests.

My account begins with what Bhargava terms the epistemic injustice of colonialism. Although brief, his views situate the idea of colonization within the language of epistemic injustice. While the literature on epistemic injustice is privy to discussions of class, race, gender, sexuality, the intersections of these, and more, much of it remains fairly silent on colonization's role in the creation of epistemic injustice. This is not to suggest that all instances of oppression that have an epistemological dimension are rooted in historical acts of colonization. Nevertheless, this silence is odd since the abovementioned aspects of human social identity are axes of oppression through which colonization and the various forms of social stratification connected to it came into existence. Without addressing colonization's role in the creation of epistemic injustice, or so I argue, philosophers and social theorists focus on the symptoms and not a plausible source of the malady, a point that should serve as proof of the depths in which the episteme of Western philosophy remains steeped in the coloniality of knowledge.

According to Bhargava, colonization is an injustice that unfolds economically, politically, and culturally. At the cultural level, colonization is typically accompanied by a unique form of epistemic injustice, “a form of cultural injustice that occurs when the concepts and categories by which a people understand themselves and their world is replaced or adversely affected by the concepts and categories of colonizers.”<sup>9</sup> For Bhargava, the colonization of minds is paramount to exerting continued dominance over the colonized. As he puts it, colonization requires the “ceaseless drain of wealth from the colony to the metropolis. . . . Neither economic nor political control could have been sustained without the pervasive belief in the cultural superiority of the colonizers.”<sup>10</sup> One might take issue with the claim that absent the belief in the cultural superiority of the colonizer it is impossible to sustain economic and political control. Sheer force and threat of violence, after all, are typically enough. As true as that might be, Bhargava examines a form of colonization that is equally damaging to the lands, bodies, culture, and minds of the colonized. This sense of colonization requires the thorough and complete subjugation of the colonized in order to facilitate their continuous exploitation—the type of colonization one finds in the history of Latin America and the Caribbean rather than the outright genocide and forced removal of indigenous people as in the case of the United States (this is not to say that genocide and forced removal from ancestral lands did not occur in Latin America or Caribbean, too).

Bhargava recounts three ways of colonizing minds, all of which lead to feelings of inferiority, alienation, and despair. The first, partly outlined above, entails an abrupt and imposed change in the content of an epistemic framework. This particular epistemic injustice occurs when a forced alteration takes place and when a group, due to damage or loss, is incapable of sustaining, retrieving, or further developing its own way of thinking. Since epistemic frameworks are typically bound up with religious systems and linguistic practices, replacing an epistemic framework by forced religious conversion, the imposition of language, and alterations in formal and informal education are some of the vehicles for conquering minds.<sup>11</sup>

Bhargava defines an epistemic framework as “a historically generated, collectively sustained system of meanings and significance, by reference to which a group understands and evaluates its individual and collective life.”<sup>12</sup> Epistemic frameworks arise organically within communities. They are ways of responding to material and social or cultural demands and reflect the range of opinions, wisdom traditions, and critical reflective capabilities of a community. When no injustice occurs, epistemic frameworks are usually passed on from one generation to another. This is not to say, however, that the transmission of an epistemic framework is guaranteed, nor are they pure, pristine, self-contained, or “uncontaminated” systems. No human being or population group is an island unto themselves; both *inter-* and *intracultural* undercurrents and pressures shape the reality of any cultural group. Neither is there a single way of thinking, a solitary attitude, or essential outlook necessary to an epistemic framework. Instead, Bhargava's focus is on the “basic epistemic forms” of a cultural grouping or linguistic population. These forms are without a doubt dynamic, yet stable enough for a sense of identity and community to be possible. (One can easily abide by a family resemblance model for understanding the nature of epistemic frameworks.)

A second epistemic injustice occurs when indigenous ways of thinking are devalued by colonizers *and* the colonized (and not necessarily replaced). “Here, the epistemic frameworks of the colonized group are still around, pretty much intact in a recognizable, coherent form,” writes Bhargava.<sup>13</sup> The colonized might even readily identify native ways of thinking as plausible options or alternatives to the colonizer’s viewpoint. Nevertheless, “they are blindly rejected as worthless.”<sup>14</sup> Worthlessness comes from eschewing central strands of indigenous epistemologies and simultaneous embracement of those aspects of their culture and knowledge systems that support or coincide with the views of the colonizer. Colonizers thereby exploit any commonalities they had with the colonized and reject inconvenient differences so as to facilitate uptake of the imperial way of thinking. One consequence of this second epistemic injustice is that it lays the foundation for the false universalism that (typically) undergirds colonizing cultures. That is to say, historically, a justification for modern European colonization was the appeal to universal history or an ability to demonstrate the type of historical breadth that speaks to the West’s cultural advancement and superiority. This breadth is assisted by the identification of commonality or “sameness” and the rejection of difference in those cultures being colonized (thus, as I explain below, comparative endeavors that strive to find commonality or demonstrate how “we’re all the same” further this particular aspect of the epistemic injustice of colonialism).

A third variety of epistemic injustice within colonialism is the imposition of collective identity and denigration of any meaningful sense of individuality. “When a group encounters strangers,” Bhargava writes, “it sees them only as an undifferentiated mass through a crude stereotype, as if they are all the same, each merely instantiating the broad features shared equally by all.”<sup>15</sup> Here, Bhargava's main concern is the blurring of individuality, which, one can argue, gives cultural groups the messiness and dynamism that reflects the reality of life. Instead of complexity, colonization offers a totalizing, homogenous, and static group identity. The end result is the loss of epistemic autonomy—not just the ability to think for oneself but *the ability to think as a self*, that is, as an individuated and unique person. Conjoined with the replacement and denigration of indigenous ways of knowing, this third injustice leaves one with a shell of an identity composed of essentialized forms lacking any real, particular substance. Colonized people are therefore denied an opportunity to define themselves according to their unique cultural and historical frame of reference and instead think as “indigenous,” “African,” “Indian,” “Aztec,” etc. At this juncture, one can even argue that national independence movements and nation formations, for instance “Mexican” or “Algerian,” continue this particular manifestation of epistemic injustice insofar as they require a level of homogenization that is often at odds with the reality of human life. For instance, although I am of indigenous ancestry, for me to think as a “Latino,” or for that matter a “Mexican-American” or simply just as “Mexican,” means I must buy into a series of generalizations that may or may not reflect my ancestral history prior to the colonization of Mexico or the southwestern United States. By taking

these social categories and ascriptions on—an unavoidable task if liberation is the goal—I am relying upon concepts and categories afforded through the process of colonization in the formation of my identity.

This third epistemic injustice reveals much about the depths of colonization and the limits of overcoming it from a thoroughly subjugated viewpoint. The construction of ascriptive identity and social categorization are colonial impositions that readily supply images of what colonized peoples essentially are or should be like. These ascriptions obviously include normative assumptions about how the colonized “think,” if at all. The resistance to these generalizations typically attacks the essentialism and fixed nature of these ascriptions. Nevertheless, these identity formations persist. Because of the destruction of native ways of thinking about the self, the social world many people inhabit today, including my own, is one in which these identity formations are invested in and maintained by the *colonized*, not to mention the colonizers. This is one way that “coloniality survives colonialism,” to quote Nelson Maldonado-Torres: “It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience.” He continues, “In a way, as modern subjects we breath [sic] coloniality all the time and everyday.”<sup>16</sup> I emphasize Maldonado-Torres's mentioning of subjectivity formation in *modern* contexts. Putting this into perspective, Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel speak of indigeness as “an identity constructed, shaped, and lived in the political context of contemporary colonialism.”<sup>17</sup> This is not to say that the tribes, clans, nations, and communities referred to as “Indigenous peoples” are not native to lands they inhabit. However, indigenous identity today is an “oppositional place-based existence,” one that is conscious of “being in struggle against the dispossessing and demeaning fact of colonization by foreign peoples.”<sup>18</sup> Alfred and Corntassel refer to an identity that must constantly define itself against a backdrop of dehumanization and eradication.

It is worth reiterating that when it comes to the epistemic injustice of colonization change itself is not bad within an epistemic framework. It is often the case that “paradigm shifts” or “turns” (as in the “linguistic turn”) occur within an epistemic framework on its own for a variety of reasons, hence why I stated above that the transmission of an epistemic framework is not guaranteed. The problem with colonization, however, is that change occurs as a result of a power differential that favors an alien way of knowing. *This alien way of knowing is then venerated, lauded, and uplifted by means of the creation of epistemic injustice*, a move that ascribes a sense of superiority to the colonizer's perspective, one that, by means of erasure and elision, aids in the creation of a monopoly on human reason, particularly in the case of the West.

By erasure and elision, I have in mind what Boaventura de Sousa Santos refers to “abyssal thinking.” For Santos, modern Western thinking:

consists of a system of visible and invisible distinctions, the invisible ones being the foundations of the visible ones. The invisible distinctions are established through radical lines that divide social reality into two realms, the realm of “this side of the line” and the realm of “the other side of the line.” The division is such that “the other side of the line” vanishes as reality, becomes nonexistent, and is indeed produced as nonexistent. Nonexistent means not existing in any relevant or comprehensible way of being. Whatever is produced as nonexistent is radically excluded because it lies beyond the realm of what the accepted conception of inclusion considers to be its other. What most fundamentally characterizes abyssal thinking is thus the impossibility of the copresence of the two sides of the line. To extent that it prevails, this side of the line only prevails by exhausting the field of relevant reality. Beyond it, there is only nonexistence, invisibility, nondialectical absence.<sup>19</sup>

While Santos's main focus is on the social sciences, his view helps to explain the formation of the Western episteme and the active forms of ignorance that undergird it. By denying colonized peoples the ability to think from their own vantage point, the colonizing point of view “exhausts the field of relevant reality.” The

perspective of the colonizer becomes the only viable way of reasoning (leading to what I term epistemic despair). From the perspective facing the abyss, which is a standpoint inhabited by the colonizer *and* the colonized (which is why both need to be changed in order for decolonization to come into full effect), there is only a precipice on the other side of the thresholds of “knowledge.” As a basic and invisible line, abyssal thinking creates a false universalism that aims at reproducing and justifying what Santos refers to as the normative dualism of metropolis/colony or colonizer/colonized: “Being on the other, colonial, side of the abyssal line amounts to being prevented by dominant knowledge from representing the world as one’s own and in one’s own terms.”<sup>20</sup> In this context, the global North is the only valid source for knowledge, the South is the realm of ignorance; “the South is the problem; the North is the solution.”<sup>21</sup> To shine the light of reason into “the abyss” would reveal the artifice and historical contingency (not to mention epistemic violence<sup>22</sup>) at the back of the Western philosophical episteme. Through abyssal thinking, however, the artifice behind “this space of knowledge” covers its tracks and is obscured. Notwithstanding supposed “outdated” and “inferior” ways of knowing, there are no viable alternatives outside the colonizer’s purview. Santos’s notion of abyssal thinking reveals the mechanisms and series of injustices that grant certain perspectives a hegemony on knowledge production, especially philosophical wisdom.

Reflecting on the nature of *modern* philosophy can help explain the relationship between the views offered by Bhargava and Santos. With all of the treatises and discourses on the nature of human knowledge that fall within it, what is modern philosophy if not a series of apologia for the epistemic injustice of European colonization? How do concerns and debates over the correct method or normative procedure by which “knowledge” is produced arise out of a cultural milieu concerned with justifying its own advancement and supposed superiority (the very same cultural milieu engaged in colonial violence on the other side of the hemisphere)?

Although metaphysical treatises are abundant during the modern era, epistemology plays a central role in this tradition. One possible reason for this depends upon a defining characteristic of modernity: the concern with and supposed awareness of human progress. In this framework the development of scientific knowledge became linked to the study of knowledge itself, the assumption being that improvements to the enterprise of the acquisition of knowledge would entail that the products of these pursuits become more “certain.” Now, improving epistemological standards for inquiry necessitated a restructuring of the subject enacting these philosophical and scientific analyses. Seeing how this meant that the subject was to become part of inquiry, the science of modernity articulated a theory of humanity (a self-reflective examination) as connected to the furtherance of knowledge. One of the implicit goals of the modern project, when viewed as a whole, is the creation of a humanism grounded on reason or rationality. This understanding of the human being, in turn, became the yardstick for comparing the cultures of the world and the foundation for the sciences that explained these differences in the first place.

The impact that the experience of colonization had on the birth of the modern viewpoint can be described in the following way, as put by Leopoldo Zea:

The so-called Modern World emerges—like any new era—from a crisis, from a *disappointment*. The man who commences this world is disillusioned [*un decepcionado*]. He is a man who has encountered a world in which he does not fit. What was familiar to him has now become strange, clarity into obscurity, light into darkness. From henceforth, this man has set out to create clarity where only darkness is found; to search for “*ideas clear and distinct*.” Clarity is order and distinction. To order and distinguish are tasks the modern man sets for himself.<sup>23</sup>

As Zea’s allusion to clarity and distinctiveness indicates, the foundations modern thought can be found in works like René Descartes’s *Discourse on the Method for Knowing for Rightly Using One’s Reason in the World*. For



many decolonial theorists and philosophers like Zea, this work should be read as a response to the epistemic crises engendered by the encounter with a landmass in which (soon to be) modern man was out of place. The crisis that Zea has in mind is primarily epistemological. Modern man, or more generally “modernity,” is a byproduct of overcoming disillusionment and estrangement. Zea means disillusionment in the sense that scientific discoveries and the encounter with America made difficult the maintenance of dogmatic, traditional, faith-based, and unsophisticated ways of knowing that pervaded Christendom prior to the modern era. A new footing or anchor for the edifice of knowledge was required. Estrangement is meant in the sense that modern man is now alien to the world as it is. Like Christopher Columbus, he tries to make the world fit his image and understanding of it. In an incredible feat of the mind, modern man rearranges and organizes the world in ways that conform to his new way of seeing it (the move from “disappointment” to “deception,” from disappointed person to deceiver, to play on Zea's use of *decepcionado*). He therefore *creates* clarity and distinctiveness through his new method for knowing.

Isaiah Berlin noticed something similar about the modern emphasis on method. “The positivist character of the new scientific movement,” he writes, concerned itself with the furtherance of knowledge for its own sake, the goal of which was “to accumulate knowledge, to know more than our predecessors *and to be aware of this.*” This desire, Berlin continues, “leads to the realisation that this can be achieved only if the reputable practitioners in the field recognise the validity of the same principles and methods and can test each other’s conclusions, as has been (and is) the case in physics or mathematics or astronomy and in all the new sciences.”<sup>24</sup> “The new method . . . sought to eliminate everything that could not be justified by the systematic use of rational methods,” Berlin explains.<sup>25</sup> The new method supplies normative conditions for what it means to be a knower, a project that embarks on the articulation of the “humanism” at the base of Western modernity’s inception and lays the foundation for philosophical hegemony, the normative commandeering of humanity’s reasoning abilities. Put in the context of the epistemic injustice of colonialism, the emphasis on method that one finds with the advent of modernity is a direct response to, justification for, and taking on of the coloniality of knowledge and abyssal thinking, or so I contend. In this context, “modernity” is a response to the need for justifying the West’s advancement and supposed superiority (again, the very same cultural milieu which is engaged in colonial violence on the other side of the hemisphere).

Whereas the epistemic injustice of colonization represents limitation, enclosure, or the dwindling of humanity’s epistemic resources, the decolonization of philosophy signals a process that makes room for other ways of knowing, a plurality of philosophical subjectivities and epistemic frameworks. It represents an expansion or opening that allows for other ways of being philosophical in the world to be possible, hopefully making room for the new humanity Fanon has in mind. The problem, however, is that trapped within pernicious forms of social identity—that is to say, starting from an objectified existence—or when forced to assume radical starting points that demonstrate how alternative or “Other” one’s viewpoint is, colonized voices often run the risk of reinforcing caricatures of precolonial thought or raising the bar of incommensurability and “radical difference/alterity” such that the conversation between cultures or traditions ends. Such a move forgets, as Lewis R. Gordon explained, there is more to reason than rationality. Whereas the latter cannot tolerate contradiction and is shaped by the invention of modern epistemology, especially in the guise of instrumental or mean-ends rationality, the former can tolerate ambiguity, contradiction, and even criticism of itself.<sup>26</sup> Liberating reason, in this sense, requires overcoming what I term “epistemic despair”: the feeling that not only is one’s language or way of thinking a byproduct of the facticity of human existence but also the result of a colonial imposition, one that denigrated your “original” language and/or conceptual system and then supplanted it with another from which you are forever estranged; the realization of the possibility of being forever derivative regardless of however intelligent one might be; and the feeling that the price to pay for my usage of reason is the difference that is my-self.

## 2 The Coloniality of Professional Philosophy

For many professional philosophers, the mere suggestion that philosophy stands in need of decolonization is a thought that elicits controversy, confusion, contempt, and even resentment. After all, or so the claim goes, philosophy is one of the last bastions of reason-based inquiry, the type of thinking that, when compared to authority-driven, ideological, prescientific, or myth-based perspectives, should serve as the foundation for human social organization.<sup>27</sup> While I agree with this claim in principle, the central worry driving this essay is the notion that not all people have the same relationship to reason, philosophical reason in particular. Do not get me wrong: I believe that all human beings, regardless of their race, religion, culture, nationality, sexuality, or gender, have more or less the same capacity to reason; reasoning is a critically reflective capacity inherent to human beings that is improved by teaching, training, and intellectual engagement. As mentioned above, there is also more to reason than rationality. Conflating the two strikes me as an overdetermination, one that all too quickly dismisses other aspects of human life and the mind that accompany reasoning processes (i.e., emotions, values, faith, and our embodied existence, and more).

Nevertheless, the emphasis placed upon reason does not admit of equality of opportunity or equal access. To be more precise, embracing reason, especially in its more philosophical guise, does not exact the same toll out of every person or cultural grouping. Based on one's relationship to a history of colonization, some people pay a steeper price when turning to reason, a price that is often alienating and leaves a person feeling derivative and/or inauthentic. Others, on account of their global privilege and relationship to Western modernity—which is really just another way of saying “based on their [positive] relationship to colonization”—pay a lesser price. For the latter, embracing reason entails strengthening the autonomy of the thinking-subject; for the former, the normative use of reason frequently entails a loss, the type of which I wish to describe in this section. This loss is strange since by embracing reason one might think that the move from the status of colonized object to reason-based “subject” would be welcomed. However, as I argue below, unless philosophy is decolonized, the type of subjectivity formation that accompanies the philosophical process can be oppressive and, in some sense, dehumanizing insofar as one has to give up the particularities of the self all the while philosophizing. In this sense, whereas Western philosophy might not officially be in the business of colonization, the coloniality of knowledge remains ever apparent.

All human beings, one might argue, are forced to use the language(s), ideas, conceptual systems, and cultural mores of those that came before them in the search for individual meaning. Human self-consciousness takes place in a “cultural world,” to draw from Zea again, “created by others, by our fellow humans, a world with their religion, laws, customs, politics, economy, art and many other forms of expression, but a world in the making of which we have not participated, a world about which no one has been consulted, a world that never has to attend to our needs, desires, and dreams, yet nonetheless, a world that we have to accept as our own.”<sup>28</sup> While the facticity of human existence is an unavoidable reality for all, the experience of colonization, especially from the perspective of the colonized, entails a more profound level of “thrownness” than what Zea describes; a second set of hurdles, so to speak, on the path of self-discovery. For not only is it the case that one is condemned to borrow from those that came before you, but because of the series of epistemic injustices that accompany it, a history of colonization imposes an additional barrier, a glass wall of sorts, that prevents one from finding a home in the cultural world they inherit. The master possesses all the tools and only allows one to use them. Worse, to have your own “tools” means you must create them from scratch, a starting point that, as Zea describes above, is untenable since we all start somewhere. All this is to say, “accepting the present as one's own” is no easy task when the normative use of reason reflects the racial, gender, sexual, and even “colonial” hegemony afforded by abyssal thinking.

In such a predicament, colonized peoples find themselves limited to “borrowing” from Western culture in ways that generate feelings of inadequacy, inferiority, and epistemic despair, what I explain as the feeling of having

little control over one's relationship to reason and knowledge production. In his analysis, Bhargava describe this as the feeling of being “derivative,”<sup>29</sup> the sense in which one is a poor copy or imitation of the West. Taking this further (and adding to what was described above), epistemic despair is a loss of hope in terms of speaking or thinking from a unique vantage point, or the feeling of having no other place to turn since no other language of thought or mode of expression is possible. Using Miranda Fricker’s notion of hermeneutical marginality, Linda Martín Alcoff articulated the feelings of alienation or estrangement that accompanies epistemic despair in the following way: “As a Latina in the academic world of North American philosophy, I regularly feel that, indeed, I have lost, or am in the process of losing, my marbles. Neither my general lived experience, nor my reference points in argumentation, nor my routine affective responses to events, nor my philosophical intuitions are shared with most people in my immediate milieu.”<sup>30</sup>

By turning to Fricker's notion of hermeneutical marginality, a state of inequality *viz-à-vis* the creation of social meaning, Alcoff provides insight to the sense of frustration that accompanies epistemic despair. For Fricker, this inequality is produced by interpersonal and structural prejudices and gaps in the economy of collective hermeneutical resources.<sup>31</sup> Medina defines “hermeneutical injustice” as the unfair epistemic treatment of a subject in regard to her intelligibility in communicative dynamics. He writes, “the subject is judged as unintelligible or less intelligible than other subjects; her words and meanings are not taken in their own terms, her capacity for meaning and understanding is undermined, and her agency in meaning-making and meaning-expressing practices is compromised (if not eliminated altogether). [...] [W]hen a subject’s racialized language or accent is perceived as ignorant, less articulate or clear, less reliable or accurate, she is less likely to be asked questions that require cognitive sophistication, her interpretations and perspectives are less likely to be understood in her own terms, and she is more likely to be taken as unable to make full sense of certain areas of experience or to contribute to certain semantic domains.”<sup>32</sup>

Reflecting on my own experience, I argue that epistemic despair goes deeper than “interpersonal and structural prejudices and gaps in the economy of collective hermeneutical resources.” It is not just an inequality or prejudice on account of ethnic or racial difference that drives the coloniality of knowledge. In this sense, colonized peoples are not necessarily lacking access to epistemic resources. As Bhargava explains, the colonizer is very generous in furnishing a plethora of categories and concepts for the colonized to think with (some might say overly generous). Neither is it the case that being recognized as an “equal” in terms of accessing epistemic resources within colonized contexts is the answer. All that would do is facilitate the assimilation of the colonized into the hegemonic viewpoint. The difficulty simultaneously resides in being forced to take up the perspective of the colonizer in ways that lead to feelings inauthenticity and alienation. It also lies in overcoming the methodological borders that deny individuals the ability to think from their own point of view. If Alcoff and myself assimilated into the “mainstream” and assumed the frame of reference that dominates professional philosophy, the feeling of losing one's marbles, as she puts it, would not arise. Thus, bias against one's racial/ethnic or gender identity and difference is at best one of several other factors that generates feelings of alienation and exclusion. The fact that Alcoff wishes to think from her particular lived experience, interests, affective responses, and philosophical intuitions, and yet this is what is precisely denied by hegemonic philosophical practice, reveals that it is not only *who* she is but *how* she thinks that is the problem. The normative use of reason demands that *logos* be race- and gender-free, or so the story goes.

In comparison to other fields such as literature, sociology, or history, argues Charles Mills, philosophy aspires to ask perennial questions that place one on a discursive level where they can think alongside of the great minds of history: “Philosophy is supposed to be abstracting away from the contingent, the corporeal, the temporal, the material, to get at necessary, spiritual, eternal, ideal truths.”<sup>33</sup> From a perspective that views philosophy as a universal science of thought, the range of questions that fall into its domain ought not include those lacking broad appeal. Questions devoted to race and processes of racialization, therefore, are of limited relevance to

philosophers since they are “local,” particular, *too* corporeal (as it were), and mostly of interest to “minorities.” For Mills, a major reason for this type of marginalization experienced by people of color in philosophy is the fact that the hegemonic group of individuals traditionally associated with being “philosophers” lack the range of perspective or experiences often shared by people of color. To make matters worse, this group also inhabits positions of racialized normativity in philosophy.

Using political philosophy as example, Mills argues that the experiential starting point for people of color, generally speaking (of course), runs contrary to the basic assumptions about political subjectivity maintained by most professional thinkers: “Your moral equality and personhood are certainly *not* recognized; you are *not* equal before the law; and the state is *not* seeking to protect but to encroach upon your interests in the interests of the white population.”<sup>34</sup> In the contexts of the United States racial imaginary, African Americans are fundamentally viewed as criminal and dangerous, and the existence of Latinx peoples is predicated on tropes of “illegality.” While the rights of Blacks and Hispanics might be protected nominally, these protections are not automatically granted in our society but must be continuously fought for and asserted, a point that gives new meaning to the idea of racial privilege. All this is to say, a metaphysically stable and legally secure political subjectivity is something political philosophers can take for granted only when the class of individuals who make up professional philosophy are treated the same by the law, show up in similar ways in terms of political representation, and also share a similar range of normative concerns. Thus, when relying upon one’s (white racial) self as a frame of reference for discussion of rights or political organization, it is quite possible that, in academic contexts where a majority of peers inhabit more or less the same circle of privilege as you, the particularity of your view is obscured and the experience of “unraced” whites becomes the norm.

Mills’s overall point is that many of the assumptions that “mainstream” philosophy rest upon reflect a rather particular perspective committed to a specific set of normative concerns. When this happens in the aggregate, adding things like prestige and pedigree, canon formation, the weight of tradition, and the “need for rigor” into the mix, one can easily see how many of those intellectual endeavors that might attract and welcome more nonwhite people into the philosophy are relegated to ethnic studies, area studies, women and gender studies, etc.

It is important to underscore that what I am saying does not imply that philosophers of color are *only* interested in so-called projects of color nor is it the case that white philosophers altogether lack interest in any of the above concerns; many do work on and find such topics interesting. I also do not intend on suggesting that all minorities in philosophy think in essentialized ways that correspond with race, gender, or sexuality. To make such an assumption would be as oppressive and totalizing as the other injustices nonwhite philosophers put up with. Nevertheless, my concern is with those individuals who would argue that race, gender, or sexuality has nothing to do with philosophy or with those who dismiss the epistemic salience of social identity in philosophy altogether. This is precisely the feeling that Alcoff articulates above, one that stems from the sterilized method inherited from Western modernity.

Connecting with the sections above, Bhargava's understanding of epistemic injustice, conjoined with Santos's abyssal thinking, allows me to extend my account of philosophy's colonization to the methodological abstractionism that undergirds most professional philosophical practice today. This abstractionism is at the root of feelings of alienation that make the mere “diversification” of philosophy inadequate. While attempts at increasing the number of women, people of color, and individuals from a wide range of gender expressions, sexual preferences, and varying degrees of ability into professional philosophy are important and worthwhile, these demographic shifts, by themselves, are not enough to disrupt the (geo-)politics of knowledge production or to bring about the decolonization of the field.

The concern here is not merely with the numerical overrepresentation of whites that leads to the alienation of minorities in philosophy. Mills's ultimate concern is with gatekeeping methodological constraints and "border-building" tactics that simultaneously curtail the diversification of philosophy as well as obscure *the particularity* of those concerns passing themselves off as "universal." Through this process, professional philosophy remains overpopulated by white people (men in particular) and dominated by white interests passing themselves off as raceless philosophical concerns. From here, philosophers of color not only have to confront implicit and explicit racial/gender biases, microaggressions, double standards, forms of tokenization, and outright hostility or animosity in professional philosophy, but also a series of metaphilosophical commitments and specific ideals about the end goal of philosophical thought that stifle any real engagement with diversity.

Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Rafael Vizcaíno, Jasmine Wallace, and Jeong Eun Annabel We describe the situation as this: "In face of the eternal return of crisis and the perverse circle of Eurocentrism and white normativity, it becomes all the more necessary not simply to diversify philosophy, but to decolonise it."<sup>35</sup> For Maldonado-Torres et al., decolonizing philosophy means "addressing the Eurocentrism and the white male heteronormative foundations of the field, as well as the attitudes, institutional orders and day-to-day practices that allow Eurocentrism and white male heteronormativity to dominate the discipline."<sup>36</sup> Beyond the attitudinal, interpersonal, and structural practices that Maldonado-Torres et al. have in mind, there exist a series of methodological and metaphilosophical assumptions that allow Eurocentrism and white male heteronormativity to persist in philosophy. While some might suggest that these methodological and metaphilosophical assumptions are held nonconsciously, as even Foucault's use of *episteme* suggests, I think academic philosophers quickly become aware of these assumptions and commitments when confronted by a claim to knowledge or philosophical practice that they disagree with. Addressing these methodological and metaphilosophical assumptions, as Mills suggests, would not only facilitate the diversification of professional philosophy, but insofar as its academic guise has some sway over the normative use of reason, this can help decolonize philosophy itself.

As epistemic injustice, colonization robbed many non-Western peoples of historically derived cognitive resources and supplanted them with either the perspective of the colonizer or a series of inferiority complexes that perpetuate the coloniality of knowledge. In turn, the agents of reason, philosophers, become the primary authorities on matters connected to its usage. Their pronouncements become reason's words. As such, they assume the mantle of mouthpiece and mind for all of humanity. This status grants philosophers the discursive breadth that allows their thought to transcend the confines of their particular time and place, thereby assisting in the construction of what Santos terms a "knowledge empire." To say that philosophy needs to be decolonized, then, is to liberate reason, a task that requires a reconfiguration of humanity's epistemic horizons and "the end of the cognitive empire."<sup>37</sup> Ending this empire means rethinking long-held assumptions and convictions about the locales, cultures, range of experience, and subjectivities from which philosophical thought emanates. I do not just mean the promotion of philosophy from the "post-" colonial world, but also a reconsideration of exceptionalism that undergirds Western philosophy, an exceptionalism derived in part from the false universalism afforded through conquest and cultural imposition.

Ultimately, colonization robs the colonized of the ability to think for themselves. It does this by means of either replacement, as Bhargava explains, or by alienating the colonized from the language of thought itself, that is, reason. As epistemic injustice, colonization denies that the colonized can "think deeply," where such profound contemplation is the byproduct of *particularized* standards articulated by the colonizer. Worse, this inability to think deeply is internalized and self-regulation kicks in. Once reason is colored (white), to embrace reason is to sell out, self-whiten, or assimilate. Altogether, the epistemic injustice of colonialism constitutes a form of heteronomy imposed from the outside (and to some extent within).

Philosophy decolonized would allow individuals and communities to be themselves when engaged in philosophical reflection, that is to say, nonalienated philosophical practice. As Alfred explains, decolonization does not necessarily end with national independence or the achievement of statehood. Instead, as he notes, it is a process through which his sons can be more “Indian,” more Mohawk, than himself. Decolonization is not just diversification, but the creation of the cognitive infrastructure that allows subsequent generations to be more “Indian.” Put this way, decolonization is a lifelong and intergenerational endeavor that is about providing the conditions that make being indigenous or “Other” possible.<sup>38</sup> Again, this does not mean the return to prequest or precolonial ways of thinking, nor do I intend on dismissing those indigenous peoples alive and practicing their own forms of “philosophy” today. While alternative epistemologies and indigenous conceptual schemes are out there, escaping the gravitational pull and totalizing dimensions of Western colonialism, and being more oneself whilst philosophizing, is what decolonizing looks like. Decolonization, therefore, is not marked by a definitive point or the achievement of a specific bar but a process by which individuals and communities are free to think from their “own” point of view. While, as Zea notes, nobody begins from nowhere, the liberation of reason allows one to overcome internalized feelings of inferiority or inadequacy that accompany epistemic despair. Opening up humanity to other ways of being reasonable requires engagement with (and the embodiment of) difference. Yet, as I explain below, sometimes the engagement with difference can become ideological and reinforce the Western episteme rather than promote an episteme of difference.

### 3 Comparative Philosophy as a Solution to Philosophy’s Colonization?

In light of the above discussion, how does one traverse or “compare” philosophical traditions where histories of colonialism (and the persistence of coloniality) produce various forms of cultural, geopolitical, and economic asymmetry? How does one compare ideas, thinkers, and traditions across cultures without reinforcing Western philosophy’s self-serving narrative of historical progress? Whereas I do not purport to offer an exhaustive list, this essay concludes by pointing toward some of what is necessary for comparative philosophy to assist in the decolonial struggle.

Whereas most comparative efforts typically occur between “East” and “West,” ripe comparisons await exploration not only between the global North and South but also, and perhaps more importantly, from “South to South.” Insofar as one part of the historical justification for colonization was the denial of wisdom traditions and philosophical perspectives outside the West (or even the “East”), comparative efforts that move contrary to the sense of historical progress that undergirds Western philosophy’s self-understanding are attempts at rectifying the epistemic injustices of European colonialism. The radicalization of comparative philosophy requires dispensing with de facto conceptualizations of this subfield as consisting of “philosophy: East meets West.” I do not mean to dismiss or disregard comparative studies that juxtapose, for instance, Confucian thought and Aristotelian virtue ethics. Nevertheless, as a site of intellectual, linguistic and cultural interaction, “comparative philosophy” ought to be understood as more than just code for disciplinarily-vetted manifestations of “Asian philosophy.” There are a plethora of cultures, philosophical schools, and wisdom traditions throughout the global South awaiting comparison and investigation.

The problem is, however, that taking such traditions seriously, especially in terms of analyzing their philosophical value, constitutes a political statement: it is to say, contrary to some of the most hallowed voices of the Western philosophical canon, that Africa is not a continent devoid of reason; that mestiza ways of knowing constitute real philosophy; that Nahuatl-speaking peoples, amidst the fact that some might have engaged in human sacrifice, were capable of practicing formal philosophical investigation. Not all comparative philosophers are willing to make such a statement. Indeed, many have investment in a specified directionality when it comes to their comparative efforts. As a consequence, and in effort to avoid such politicized gestures, comparative endeavors often tread within the confines of preestablished and well-paved philosophical

crossroads offered by self-styled understandings of the historical development of Western thought. Moreover, such efforts are rewarded by escaping the types of criticism levied against those comparisons that not only move beyond the horizontal binary of “East meets East” but also traverse time, as is the case when studying a tradition long covered over by histories of colonization and laden with the types of concerns engendered by having to contend with “modernity” from the perspective of its underside, that is, coloniality. Whereas for some peoples time is an asset, which is why the *ancient* wisdom traditions of the East are so fascinating to many, for others it results in totalization or a historicized existence.

Because indigenous epistemic frameworks have been hollowed out in ways Bhargava described above, they are often and easily reduced to the status of “worldviews” (mere *Weltanschauung*), “life philosophies,” “sage knowledge,” or even “myth,” anything but refined, critical, reflective, and creative thought. Besides challenging the exceptionalism and epistemological hubris that one typically finds in colonizing cultures, decolonizing an epistemic framework requires an incredible amount of reconstruction, re-valuation, and, to some extent, the “dis-covering” of colonized ways of thinking. In Bhargava’s words,

It is doubtful if “original epistemic frameworks” can ever be recovered. There is a sense in which there is no going back to pure indigenous cultures because every rediscovery is at least partly a reinvention. We know that every revival of a tradition has turned out to be its reinvention. Restoration may be possible for cultural artefacts that are physically embodied, but for artefacts such as conceptual frameworks that are largely disembodied, this is extremely difficult. Yet the slow, painstaking process of a partial recovery of the voice and history of the colonized can begin by putting together and reinterpreting traces of evidence and meaning present in largely forgotten texts.<sup>39</sup>

As important as such reconstructions might be, they are vulnerable to multiple forms of criticism, especially in terms of the authenticity of their representation of colonized views. “Is that really how the Aztecs thought?” or “Might there be aspects of Incan culture that we do not fully grasp?” are the types of questions one frequently encounters when resuscitating a tradition long colonized and covered over. Here, the move is not one of true engagement, but an attempt to undercut such comparative endeavors.

Rather than engage in these kind of battles, comparative efforts should be appreciated for their decentering and displacing capabilities. Embarking on debates about the authenticity of the viewpoint presented serves little use and casts doubt on the entire field of study. It is a tactic used to obviate engagement with the philosophical Other altogether. Instead, I suggest, how does the tradition as it is presented challenge preconceived notions about the nature of philosophy, truth, beauty, life, death, etc.? As Eduardo Mendieta writes, “The possibility of and need for a Latin American philosophy is a meta-philosophical question, one that puts the very forms of crystallization of philosophy in jeopardy not just in Latin America, but also in the Western world.”<sup>40</sup> My point is that comparative endeavors should be a bit more charitable when dealing with a tradition that been devastated by the reality of colonization. Rather than pick it apart, the first move should be to examine what challenges it presents. In part, this is why certain types of comparisons are welcomed more than others. Professional philosophers seek out diverse viewpoints, but only insofar as they do not disrupt the philosophical status quo. To put this differently, most of what passes for “comparative philosophy” challenges Western thought in ways permitted by Western thinkers: the move from orthodoxy to orthopraxy; from essentialist, substantialist, or static metaphysics to process ontologies; from philosophy as love of wisdom to contemplative and esoteric understandings of “philosophy”; and more. All of these take place within a range of intellectual development in which, although different enough to make possible points of differentiation, there remain enough overlap such that comparisons can be made. When confronted with “radical difference,” the type of difference that runs counter to the narrative of historical development, one can start to view the dangers and risks involved in comparative endeavors.

In the wrong hands, the reconstructions that Bhargava has in mind run the risk of overlying upon essential formulations, exoticized notions, or romanticized ideals. To make matters worse, the reconstruction of indigenous philosophies or epistemic frameworks typically requires that one upend historical narratives that colonizing cultures, especially the West, depend upon. Acknowledging the advanced reasoning skills of tribal peoples necessarily undermines the narrative of historical progress that undergirds Western culture, a narrative that subsumes indigenous peoples into “universal” (read European) history. Vine Deloria Jr. put it this way:

Tribal people have traditionally been understood by Westerners as the last remnants of a hypothetical earlier stage of cultural evolution, and this so-called “primitive stage” of human development is a necessary preamble to any discussion of human beings and the meaning of their lives. Indeed, the stereotype of primitive peoples anchors the whole edifice of Western social thought. We need the primitive so that we can distinguish Western civilization from it and congratulate ourselves on the progress we have made.[41](#)

Part of the stereotypic image Deloria has in mind is that of native peoples as closer to the earth or more in tune with nature. From “modern” Western points of view, alternative knowledge systems and ontologies, for instance those that are grounded in myth and assign agency to nonhuman animals or even the environment, reinscribe the image of native peoples as more simplistic and perhaps even “savage” and premodern. While indigenous ways of knowing might have actually be more “pantheistic” and not predicated on the subject/object divide that allows for the exploitation and denigration of nature, the ideals of civility and “culture” depended upon images of savagery, laziness, and backwardness or lack of historical progress, all of which were conveniently identified in the ways of living and knowing of non-European/indigenous peoples. Amy Allen refers to this as “progress as a ‘fact,’” a backwards-looking sense of historical progress “bound up with complex relations of domination, exclusion, and silencing of colonized and racialized subjects.”[42](#)

As an example, take Miguel León-Portilla’s seminal *La filosofía náhuatl* (1956) in which he used the hallowed and revered Western category of “philosophy” to describe the critical reflective capacities of the group of people often referred to as the Aztecs, and thereby “brought upon himself a firestorm of calumny and condemnation,” as Jim Maffie put it.[43](#) This type of philosophical recovery stirred the ire of those who are invested in the primitive status of indigenous peoples. How could these savages and heathens, who worship a feathered serpent and practiced human sacrifice, be said to practice philosophy? In light of this controversy, the English translation of León-Portilla’s book became *Aztec Thought and Culture: A Study of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind* (1963).[44](#) Notice the absence of “philosophy.”

How is it that under the guise of “non-Western philosophy,” Asian philosophical traditions escape the above traps? How does the practice of comparative philosophy, when falling in line with the movement and trajectory of world history, perpetuate such ways of thinking? Before I continue, however, let me be clear. I realize that many of the same debates regarding whether or not “Asian thought” satisfies the bar of Eurocentric conceptualizations of philosophy often plague contemporary comparative endeavors. Comparative endeavors that move Eastward face much intellectual prejudice and suffer from forms of cultural chauvinism, perennialism, exoticism, and orientalism. Nevertheless, and this is my point, the idea of “Asian philosophy” fits more readily within, and I would add reifies, the supposed historical development of Western culture. Professional philosophical practice is not problematized as easily or provoked as much by the inclusion of Asian thinkers into the mainstream. Why?

Part of the answer is due to the fact that Asia, especially the far East, maintains a different colonial relationship with the West as do the Americas. Zea writes “We do not feel, as Asians do, the heirs of our own autochthonous culture.” He continues, “There was, yes, an indigenous culture—Aztec, Maya, Inca, etc.—but this culture does



not represent, for us contemporary Latin Americans, the same thing that ancient Oriental cultures represents for contemporary Asians." Speaking in broad terms, Zea explains that the colonial impositions placed upon Asia were primarily technological, a point that an expert on colonialism in the East might take issue with. In the Americas, however, colonization was not limited to material, technological impositions. Instead, one confronts a complete and thorough colonization, one of both body and mind. Throughout the Americas, colonization eliminated or denigrated indigenous cultures altogether. There is no, or little, historical continuity of culture such that one can "compare" traditions without generating the dismissive skepticism noted above. This is not to say that elements of pre-contact culture do not exist or that there are no indigenous peoples left. But from within the point of view Zea is referencing, the lack of cultural continuity poses a serious problem to cross-cultural comparison. One can study classics in the Confucian tradition, for example, without having to constantly prove that such a rich history of thought existed. As León-Portilla's case demonstrates, such is not the case when doing Aztec philosophy.

This is not to say, however, that engagement with Asian or Eastern traditions is problem free. I have seen and heard arguments made in favor of hiring specialists in "Asian philosophy" on account of it being "religiously" inspired and capable of promoting "spirituality" without the traps of organized religion. From this point of view, "Eastern" traditions conveniently blur the line between religious, mystical, and philosophical knowledge (or so they do from Western eyes). Such a way of thinking, without a doubt, is obviously the product of much orientalism and cultural exotification. Thus, even while "included," rarely are these inclusions cost free.

And yet, neither do they come without benefit. Comparing "Eastern" traditions with Indigenous American, African, or some other "postcolonial" perspective runs the risks of sullyng, perhaps even dragging down, the tradition one seeks to uplift. To this day, the idea of philosophy evokes a certain aura of sophistication and elitism. "Philosophy" commands a certain level of veneration, one that historically served as an effective means of measuring the supposed advancement of Western culture. To compare Eastern philosophy to, say, Nahuatl thought runs the risk of lumping the two traditions together, and if the latter's status as real philosophy is dubious, why should one use it as a comparable frame of reference for the former? Another reason why I think pay attention to the directionality of philosophical comparisons yields interesting insights about the colonality of knowledge. Diversity initiatives in professional philosophy do not often have in mind the promotion of what I term epistemes of difference. The promotion of epistemes of difference, which can be achieved by broadening the range of perspective typically at play in comparative endeavors, in addition to recognizing (for lack of a better word) the epistemic salience of things such as race, gender, sexuality, the intersection of these and more, leads to the creation of a variety of different ways of being philosophical in the world.

I view the decolonization of philosophy as the expansion or broadening of the range of perspective from which philosophical reflection can take place. By suggesting a new landscape for the philosophical anthropology at the heart of philosophical practice, it heralds the possibility of rigorous philosophical knowledge arising from multiple subjectivities, cultures, and locales throughout the world, not all of which depend upon the alienating and imperial methodological constraints that make possible "Western" thought. Once decolonized, philosophy (and philosophers) strives to find points of view and ways of thinking different from itself, a plurality of ways of using reason in the world rather than a reduction or simplification of ways of knowing. Enrique Dussel refers to this as pluriversal reason.<sup>45</sup> In light of a lingering skepticism about whether or not transcultural meanings exist, comparative philosophers are better off gaining a sense for how the comparative process challenges one's preconceived views for what constitutes philosophy in the first place. Comparative philosophy, when performed well, ought to assist more in decentering or destabilizing the self rather than understanding the Other, as counterintuitive as this might seem to those who are committed to a global philosophical community. While I do not mean to obviate the importance of or dismiss the possibility of cross-cultural communication, one jeopardizes the significance of this methodological approach if they seek to get inside the mind of "the Other."

This act of decentering displaces “the self” in the hopes of providing space for the Other. In a more decolonized setting, not only would qualifiers such as “African,” “Latin American,” or “Amerindian” make sense in front of the word “philosophy,” but also such things as race, gender, sexuality, and more would become epistemically salient since these have been axes of domination through which the coloniality of knowledge occurs. In short, the decolonization of philosophy—an idea that signifies more of a process rather than an easily achievable goal—occurs when being a woman, or nonwhite, or gay, for that matter, acquires value within the philosophical process. In saying this, I do not mean to make a spectacle or objectify one’s racial, gender, or sexual difference by assuming all women, all Black people, or all lesbians think in essentialized ways. Instead, the decolonization of philosophy will allow one to be themselves whilst philosophizing, particular those persons who fall outside the range of the dominant hegemonic group of persons typically viewed as philosophers. Returning to Alfred, it allows one to be more “Indian” when philosophizing.

## Biography

**Grant J. Silva** is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Marquette University. He works in Latin American/Latinx philosophy, the philosophy of race, and social/political philosophy. He writes on racism, immigration ethics, decolonial philosophy, the diversification of philosophy, and liberatory thought.

## Notes

- 1 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 1.
- 2 Fanon, 2.
- 3 It should be clear that “colonization” and “coloniality” do not necessarily reference the same thing. While the former is a political arrangement that may or may not end with national independence or the establishment of formal equality, that latter is the power dynamic operative within social structures shaped by colonialism, a power dynamic that can outlive, and in fact thrive amidst, the end of formal colonization. See Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2 (2007): 243–4.
- 4 Fanon, 2.
- 5 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 2002), xxii.
- 6 Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 118.
- 7 José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance* (New York: Oxford, 2013), 47; Rajeev Bhargava, “Overcoming the Epistemic Injustice of Colonialism,” *Global Policy* 4, no. 4 (2013): 413–17.
- 8 David Hall, “Just How Provincial is Western Philosophy? ‘Truth’ in Comparative Contexts,” *Social Epistemology: A Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Policy* 15, no. 4 (2001): 285–98.
- 9 Bhargava, 413.
- 10 Bhargava, 414.
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