Distinguishing between ontology and 'decolonisation as praxis'
Siseko H. Kumalo

Distinguishing between ontology and 'decolonisation as praxis'

In this review article I closely read the recently published book *African Philosophical and Literary Possibilities: Re-reading the Canon* (2020), edited by Aretha Phiri. I suggest two ways of reading the text. The first levels a critique at some of the conflations we find in the text and the second showcases the useful takeaways that the reader gleans from the book. These takeaways are not—themselves—without criticisms, however. Such criticism is generative in that it shores up the work that still remains to be addressed by those working in the decolonial tradition, both here at home (i.e., in the South Africa academe) and further afield. In sum, I demonstrate that the objectives of decolonisation are clearly discernible when we apply ourselves to scholarship developed in the Indigenous languages of South Africa. **Keywords:** indigenous languages, decolonisation, literature, philosophy, ontological recognition.

Introduction

African Philosophical and Literary Possibilities: Re-reading the Canon (2020), edited by Aretha Phiri, is framed around the consideration of the decolonial question as it relates to these two disciplines, i.e., philosophy and literature (understood in the broader sense of literary theory). The editor suggests that in locating these two disciplines in conversation there is the possibility that the decolonial question might be illumined, a matter framed in the following ways: "[t]his [agential ability of philosophy as discipline to unpack the cumulative parts that give us African literature as a whole] demonstrates not just the limits of approaching African literature with a 'philosophical intent,' but also works to unsettle epistemological assumptions of Africa and African subjectivity" (Phiri xv). The treatment of decoloniality is infused in the implicit work of unsettling "epistemological assumptions of Africa and African subjectivity", which is what gives the reader a central focus of ontology as it is treated in the book; a matter to which I will apply myself momentarily.

The volume attempts to highlight the decolonial component, by way of considering the historicity of what has defined the debate on African literature(s). This consideration is done by way of treating, as example, "the efficacy of African literature written in English" (xii). Once more, the reader is directed to the implicit treatment of some of the decolonial questions, with one of these being the role and function of language. To frame language thusly is rooted in the thinking of Mazisi Kunene (30), when he maintains that "[…] the idea of language imposition as a strategy of power and political control must be kept in mind as a crucial political and social question". He further argues that "[in] short, writers who write in a foreign language are already part of foreign institutions; to one extent or another, they have adopted foreign values and philosophical attitudes, and they variously seek to be a member of that culture" (32). The most poignant observation when it comes to language as a constitutive part of decolonial praxis is found when Kunene (32) asserts, ruminating on the instructions of his grandmother, that "*[t]his language [English] is responsible for the death of many of your Ancestors*" (emphasis added). Phiri does not apply herself to this very complex function of language, whether it be in literature and literary theory or in the philosophical domain. I am pressing for said application, not in the substantive chapter, chapter seven—which the editor contributes as part of the collective set of essays—but rather in the opening and framing text, the introduction, which should have addressed these questions systematically, specifically when the editor and the authors undertake such an enormous task of locating two disciplines in conversation with each other.

Siseko H. Kumalo is reading for a PhD in the Department of Political Science at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. He is the editor of *Decolonisation as Democratisation: Global Insights into the South African Experience* (2021).
Email: s.kumalo@icloud.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6591-5995

The reader does, however, get a slight—again implicit—consideration of the matter (that is language as an inherent component of ontology) in the work of George Hull in chapter three. There is a glaring objection that can be levelled against Hull's analysis, however, on the premise of ontological misrecognition(s). I will attend to this matter shortly when I take up the role and function of ontology in the decolonial mission that is constitutive of complex facets whose aims are clearly definable and discernible, if only the student of decolonial theory and decoloniality (understood doubly as the actual student in the lecture theatre and the intellectual who is engaged in the task of doing, teaching, and conducting research from and through a decolonial approach) were to disabuse themselves of the epistemic and intellectual arrogance that prevails in the South African academe, and learn any of the Indigenous languages of the region. What I am suggesting here is that the claim that decoloniality is indefinable, obscure, and elusive is nonsensical and works to maintain an epistemic hegemony predicated on a white supremacist logic in the knowledge economy of South Africa. I will not recycle the thinking of J. M. Coetzee here, as any self-respecting intellectual of Letters should apply themselves to his seminal treatise in an effort to understand the dangers inherent in and constitutive of the erasures that make up modes of *White Writing*. Put differently, the reader of this collection is privy to these denials in the claim that asserts that the meaning of decoloniality and decolonisation is indiscernible in our context. This claim is not put in such direct format in the introduction, but is rather concealed cleverly when the editor takes up the question of Africanisation: a consideration that is itself concerning in the conflations and reductionist ways in which it reads the decolonial project in South Africa and on the continent, more generally.

Conceptual conflations—Africanisation, transformation, and decolonisation
While the book suggests that it applies itself to the decolonial question, its constitutive methodology is silent—in the most part—on questions that concern decoloniality. What I intend by the notion of 'constitutive methodology' is the ways in which the book has been brought together and the kinds of questions it considers in the constitutive chapters that make up the collection. Simply, through a systematic engagement with the book, I am not convinced that it applies itself sufficiently to decolonial questions. This concern aims to address a grave limitation of the book, but said limitation should not be seen as undermining the collective efforts of the book as there are some useful takeaways that assist the student of philosophy and literature (and/or literary theory) who is considering decolonial questions. My qualm lies in the obfuscating claim we find, ever so repeated, in the South African academe—this being the elusive nature of decolonisation and its meanings. In the case of *African Philosophical and Literary Possibilities*, this indefinability is seen as the lack of clarity vis-à-vis Africanisation.

The editor sums this up as follows: "[w]hat precisely constitutes pedagogical, curriculum [Africanisation] remains unclear" (Phiri xiii). To interrupt myself and my critique, it might be useful to note that the editor does not say that decolonisation remains unclear—rather it is suggested that "[w]hat precisely constitutes pedagogical, curriculum [*Africanisation*] *remains unclear*" (xiii, emphasis added). My critique, as detailed (even cursorily) above, might be misplaced, as I take issue with the obfuscation of decolonisation which is the sum-total of the movements we've witnessed in the country to date. What I am possibly pressing the editor for is an acknowledgement of the distinctions that accrue to this sum-total that is decolonisation. Simply, while I acknowledge that my critique might be misplaced—an acknowledgement that is only extended to the extent that the editor should have anticipated this objection—were the objectives of the volume a serious and not merely a fashionable, and thus superficial, engagement with decoloniality, it would seem to me that the editor has conflated decolonisation with Africanisation. This conflation also elides the nuances of the decolonial tradition as developed by scholars of the Latin American school of thought, whose work has been immeasurably useful in the thinking of those situated in Africa who are treating similar questions and concerns.

My request is that there be a clear distinction drawn by anyone who applies themselves to decolonisation, with respect to its historical course and its permutations. Such a distinction would recognise that the call for decolonisation in South Africa—which is a context that the editor and the contributors focus their attentions on, owing to the unprecedented student movements of 2015–2017—began in the years leading up to the democratic dispensation as a charge for the recognition of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS; read 'Africanisation'). Put simply, the first iteration was a call for Africanisation in the desire to include IKS as part of curricula and the process of reimagining the university in South Africa at the dawn of democracy. This first iteration was constitutive of voices such as Mabogo More, whom the editor cites in her introduction, Mogobe Ramose, Kunene, and many others. The second iterative moment was the call for transformation, a matter that was systematically treated by

Lis Lange when she considered "Rethinking Transformation and its Knowledge(s)". These two preceding moments gave us the rupture that was led by the student movements and became known as the demand for decolonisation. Thus, to conflate Africanisation and decolonisation flattens the topography—while rendering the nuance that is constitutive of this area of scholarship mute—that makes up the oeuvre of Black/Indigenous intellectuals who have applied themselves (even in the English language, in recent years) to this question. To therefore claim that the meaning—or less pretentiously what is intended by the charge for decolonisation—is elusive, unclear, and undefined, smacks of curious arrogance(s) that are denotative of symbolic violence in the continued erasure of the writings of Black/Indigenous thinkers. It is useful to note, however, that this fact of recognition (a recognition of what I have termed 'ontological legitimacy') is taken up by Marzia Milazzo in chapter eight of the book.

As a way of summing up the first entry point into the book, that is the ways in which the editor conceals and obfuscates their treatment of decolonisation by way of conflating it with Africanisation (a flattening of the topography, as it were), we do get a generative take away from this blunder that is derivative of fashionable engagements with decolonisation. A superficial, yet positive take away, is the popularisation of decolonisation as a thematic area of engagement. The shortcomings with this approach, however, are a rendering of the movement—both in its theoretical and praxis-based analyses—as a vapid and empty signifier that continues the project of colonial violence, which was predicated on the erasure of native (Black/Indigenous) subjectivity. Such popularisations are what allow for the claim that 'we don't know what is intended by decolonisation' not only to go unchallenged but to derive its substantiations in such concealments and ways of writing that continue the *Culture of Letters in South Africa* (as in the subtitle of Coetzee's *White Writing*), a culture that was analysed and critiqued by Coetzee systematically for its part in the sustained infantilisation of Black/Indigenous subjectivity by white superiorist thinking. It is unclear to me whether this is an honest oversight or a very insidious and directed project at the systematic burial (concealment) of the knowledge produced by Black/Indigenous intellectuals of South Africa. More dangerously, however, is the derivative result that is the miseducation of the majority in the country. This is a continuance of colonial violence that is predicated in the claim that "knowledge is *valid* only insofar as it is developed by white scholars" (Kumalo, "Curriculating from the Black Archive—Marginality as Novelty" 111) and, more importantly, only insofar as it is developed in the English language. So, while the reader unperceptively sees value in the popularisation of decoloniality as discourse through fleeting engagements, the more attentive reader will flag a series of challenges that we get from the ways in which Phiri has chosen to frame her introduction to the text as a collective.

It seems apt here to quote a poem by Lebo Mashile, performed on 20 March 2021 in Newtown in Solidarity with the protesters who had been staging a sit in, led by Sibongile Mngoma:

> Things that go unnamed,
> Wander through the world
> not knowing where to look,
> or where to go!
> In Africa, Names are asked for,
> Prayed for,
> Blood is spilt in the name of NAMING!
> Warm red liquid
> Seeping into dust
> Fills the dead with life.
> Our names are the dead speaking!

Ontological analyses as augmenting decolonial theory development

I now elect to take up, as promised, the consideration of ontology in a systematic and sustained manner, as it is engaged and treated in the collection. The more substantive and useful take away from the text is a sustained engagement with ontology which infuses the entire text and gives an impression of what was possibly intended in the book by the idea of a treatment of decolonial questions. This is to say that, in engaging the ways in which African literature(s) has treated African subjectivity, the book does indeed challenge the prevailing epistemological fads that are the invention of white supremacist thinking. In chapter one, and in considering the idea of philosophical method as inherently defined by disagreement, Oritsegbubemi Oyowe (3) suggests that the philosopher ought to be attentive to their immediate surroundings when he writes: "[the] above objection [the idea that

a philosopher betrays their disciplinary allegiance when they take up a position and defend that position while allowing room for disagreement] seems to me to originate from a rather poor grasp of what African philosophy is about and what African philosophers have been and are doing". In this respect, Oyowe (5) takes the position that has been developed by a series of decolonial thinkers who contest the falsehoods of western philosophical traditions that ascribe to themselves the august function of considering universal questions when he writes, "[as] it turns out, the charge that doing philosophy with an African conscience will lead to the tribalization of philosophy is best levelled at Euro-American philosophers who fail to recognize other traditions of thought".

This framework as developed by Oyowe seeks to suggest that there is an inherent value in paying attention to the ways in which African philosophers treat the harsh phenomenological realities that define the lives of Africans and that this attention should not be viewed as some parochial application in how it functions to dislodge the centrality of Eurocentric considerations in an African context. In demonstrating the usefulness of paying attention to how Africans have treated continuing questions that define the human condition, in chapter three Hull pays attention to three fictional texts developed by Africans. Two of these are done by Black/Indigenous intellectuals/literati: S. E. K. Mqhayi's *Ityala Lamawele* (1914) and A. C. Jordan's *The Wrath of the Ancestors* (1940) respectively, with the third text being J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999). The idea is that these two disciplines (i.e., philosophy and literary studies) are generatively compatible, specifically when we assume the position that "value conflict is an area where philosophical theory and creative fiction can helpfully inform one another" (Hull 33).

The ontological focus here, as per my own reading, is highlighted when we consider the historical factuality of colonialism (read colonisation), which is a matter that Blackness/Indigeneity had to confront; and by 'confront' I mean a reality with which we had to contend as a matter of survival. In confronting this violence there was and continues to be the reality of competing modes of life, the first of which is predicated on Black/Indigenous ontology and our ways of understanding the world, and another being this imposition that is critiqued by Oyowe. What Hull showcases for the reader by conducting his analysis using the works of Mqhayi and Jordan—as the first two conceptual moves in developing his argument—is that Blackness/Indigeneity applied itself to these competing ways of life (a matter that is still the case to this very day, seen in the very fact of language that I discussed as my entry point into this review article). To demonstrate the historicity of this application, I invite the reader to consider the composition we find in William Wellington Gqoba's (148) sustained treatment of the role and function of education in his epic poem "*Ingxoxo Enkulu nge Mfundo*" (A Great Debate on Education: A Parable). He writes:

Tina oko ib'isiti,
U Laulo lusenati,
Bezingeko ez'ikiti,
Ezi tola, nezi pasi.
Sabayeka, sabamkela,
Bagawula, bakusara
Komihlaba babelima,
Amadlelo babenawo,
Lawo nati sasinawo.

When we were independent,
responsible for our governance,
there were no pounds for stray stock,
there were no tolls, no passes.
We left them alone, we welcomed them,
they cut down trees, cursing you,
they tilled and worked their land,
possessed pastures of their own
and we for our part had ours. (Gqoba 149)

I draw the reader's attention to this matter as a way of demonstrating that there has always been a sustained consideration of the effects of colonialism and coloniality, which focuses the matter of constant compromise that Hull writes about. Pointedly, the aim lies in demonstrating that, owing to colonial violence and as a matter of securing our survival (as Black/Indigenous people), the matter of compromise has been considered by and is a constitutive part of Black ontology for at least 200 years now. At a secondary level, my demonstration here seeks

to undergird Oyowe's critique of the totalising effects of western philosophical traditions that assumed centre stage and styled (even to this day) themselves as the intellectual traditions that are most worthy of study. This demonstration underscores the usefulness in locating the two disciplines (philosophy and African literary study) in conversation with each other.

While Hull's chapter is integral to shoring up the decolonial understanding (which is informed by the two recent treatises of decolonisation as intellectual tradition, i.e., Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni's *Epistemic Freedom in Africa* and the collection *Decolonisation as Democratisation* edited by myself) in the text, he commits a grave ontological misrecognition in his translation of the names of Mqhayi's characters in *Ityala Lamawele*. The reader might inquire as to why I stake such a strong claim. My objection is predicated on the function of naming, in what can be understood as Black ontology (but what we can zero in on, as Xhosa ways of naming, in the case of *Ityala Lamawele*). This is to say that names are sacred and central, and their meaning ought not to be translated but can possibly be interpreted. To demonstrate the point, I draw the reader's attention to Kunene once again when he writes, "[yet], it was always with a certain sense of seriousness that my father discussed with me the genealogy of our Royal Clan, the histories of past wars, and the general truths of our African philosophy and values" (28). Kunene does not come to attach these three components (i.e., the genealogy of the Royal Clan, histories of past wars, and the general truths of African philosophy and values) without unjustified understanding. It is for this reason that I use his work to elaborate on the point. The function of the genealogy of the Royal Clan demonstrates the point raised by Coetzee in his observation of an 'Adamic language' (9), "in which Africa will naturally express itself, that is to say, a language in which there is no split between signifier and signified, and things are their names". An Adamic language is subsequently evinced in Kumalo's ("Defining an African Vocabulary for the Exploration of Possibilities in Higher Education") analysis of the role of names and their functionality in the context of *kwaBulawayo* in Zimbabwe wherein *kwaBulawayo* becomes 'the place of death' (in the literal translation), owing to the actions of Mzilikazi in his establishment of the Ndebele royal house in Zimbabwe and in the erection of *isizwe sika Mthwakazi*. In this example, the reader is privy to the challenge of translating names, specifically in a case where a name, as rigid designator, is derived from the clan names of the named subject. A translation in such a context misses the nuances of history as attached to that name—and the subsequent significance of that name within the broader "genealogy of the Royal Clan" as Kunene indicates.

As example, consider this phrase, "Wele's complaint has already been heard in the court of his local headman, *Lucangwana* (meaning 'small door')" (Hull 35, emphasis added). The reasons behind an objection of the translation of our names are manyfold but I will pay attention to only two as a way of demonstrating the point. In the first instance, our names might be derived from our clan name's praise poetry (which is a mode of encoding history by way of inflecting historical events with the names of those whose actions are worthy of being remembered). In this case, the name "Lucangwana" might have been given to the character as a way of recognising or informing his moral character within the broader scheme of his lineage and ancestry. To translate the name as "small door" (35) misreads and ontologically obliterates the context in which said name is given, while side-stepping the complexity that is engineered by Mqhayi in his composition and writing of the dramatic novel. Moreover, it undermines the philosophical nuance that is embedded in the meaning-making processes through naming, a process that is bound-up with how we (Blackness/Indigeneity) understand being as it relates to the world; an understanding that is mediated by our names and how they inform our moral character as named beings.

The second matter is to say that the name (Lucangwana) might be given as a way of remembering an historical event that is synonymous with the birth of the person—in this case, the character as developed by Mqhayi. The objection holds again, as per the explanation given above, which is to say that in translating the name the translator not only disrespects but completely erases the very being of the person whose name is translated, as said translation (as Hull does in chapter three) does not adequately account for these possibilities that are only accessible if the reader is conversant with the linguistic textile that informs Mqhayi's composition. It is for this reason that Kunene gives language such a central focus, exclaiming—even—that this language has been the cause of the death of our ancestors. It is useful to note that said deaths are not only physical but are connotative of these forms of death that are inscribed through ontological misrecognitions.

The salvaging chapter—salvaging in the sense of an adequate engagement with Black ontology—to the extent that the treatment is deferentially sustained, is Milazzo's chapter eight, which is also the final chapter in the book. Analysing Miriam Tlali's *Between Two Worlds* (originally published as *Muriel at the Metropolitan*, 1975), Milazzo demonstrates and traces the historicity of the continued disregard of writing developed by Black/Indigenous

intellectuals in our context. This dismissal is framed most starkly in these ways by Milazzo (133): "one would be hard-pressed to find Tlali's work taught in philosophy courses, despite the fact that Black South African fiction provides invaluable lenses through which students can grapple with pressing social and ethical issues". This assertion serves two functions, which is possibly another reason why I frame the chapter as a salvaging chapter in the book. The first function is to overtly state the aims of decolonisation as it pertains to the higher education sector of South Africa, which the editor sets out to engage, but the book functions as an inadequate treatment of—at least, explicitly. This decolonial engagement is found in chapter eight in the way Milazzo (133) confronts the project of curriculum revision, which remains unattained owing to how "[white] supremacy […] continues to be a collective affair and operate[s] in ways that testify to the significance of Biko and Tlali's works for grappling with the current racial moment". Additionally, "[despite] a growing proliferation of criticism on South African writing, Black South African literature across genres and time periods remains chronically understudied" (134). This observation underscores the question I posed with my inquiry into the possibility of whether said concealment is a directed effort at the continued relegation of scholarship developed by Black/Indigenous intellectuals in our context. From the argument we find in Milazzo's chapter, the answer to my question might be in agreement with the latter position, that this is indeed an insidious and directed affront that aims at the orchestrated concealment of Black/Indigenous thought. In this way, the book lives up to a very ambitious promise—at least one of them—as set out by the editor, which is an analysis that attempts to explore the possibilities of locating literature and philosophy in conversation.

The fulfilment of this promise is seen in how, through such an act of locating the two disciplines in conversation, we unearth persistent challenges that necessitate the decolonial project in our context. While the book could have done more to overtly indicate how it is addressing decolonial questions so as to not render itself the target of such criticism(s)—a matter that possibly might have required more tactful editorial curation—it does nonetheless shore up the areas that still require our collective attentions as a way of adequately responding to the fundamental request that was staked by the students of #MustFall movements who were begging to be seen in a system that ought to, in principle, serve them in their context and not some myopic agenda that continues to valorise Eurocentric notions of what it means to read at a university.

The instruction in this respect, that is to say how we create an African university that is responsive to African problems, is gleaned in the advisory analysis we get from chapter five as penned by Pier Paolo Frassinelli and Lisa Treffry-Goatley. In an argument that adequately eschews the rigid conception of the Digital Humanities in Africa (or the African Digital Humanities), Frassinelli and Treffry-Goatley demonstrate how the democratisation of access to knowledge (a democratisation that happens by way of the younger generation engaging with literature in a mixed media format on their smart devices) can be seen as a subversive move that works towards decolonial ends. Again, this is an implicit connection that the reader is forced to make of their own volition, a connection that the reader comes to make as a result of being conversant with decolonial struggles and debates. Overall, the reader must come to *African Philosophical and Literary Possibilities* as an informed student of decoloniality and decolonial theory as the collective tapestry—in the form of most of the chapters that make up the book—does not apply itself to treating, with sufficient attention, the requisite conceptual connecting dots that show us how this book contributes to decolonial debates as they have been developed in the South African university.

Works Cited

Coetzee, J. M. *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*. Yale U P, 1988.

____. *Disgrace*. Vintage, 1999.

Frassinelli, Pier P. & Lisa Treffry-Goatley. "Digital Media, Literacies, Literature and the African Humanities." *African Philosophical and Literary Possibilities: Re-reading the Canon*, edited by Aretha Phiri. Rowman Littlefield, 2020, pp. 33–58.

Gqoba, William W. *William Wellington Gqoba: Isizwe Esinembali: Xhosa Histories and Poetry (1873–1888)*, edited by Jeff Opland, Wandile Kuse & Pamela Maseko. UKZN P, 2015.

Hull, George. "Conflict and Compromise in Three Novels of the Eastern Cape." *African Philosophical and Literary Possibilities: Re-reading the Canon*, edited by Aretha Phiri. Rowman Littlefield, 2020, pp. 33–58.

Jordan, A. C. *The Wrath of the Ancestors (A Novel)*. Trans. A. C. Jordan & Priscilla P. Jordan. Lovedale, 1980.

Kumalo, Siseko H. "Curriculating from the Black Archive—Marginality as Novelty." *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning* vol. 8, no. 1, 2020, pp. 111–32. DOI: https://doi.org/10.14426/cristal.v8i1.252.

____. "Defining an African Vocabulary for the Exploration of Possibilities in Higher Education." *Alternation* vol. 23, 2018, pp. 197–223. DOI: https://doi.org/10.29086/2519-5476/2018/sp23a9.

Kumalo, Siseko H., ed. *Decolonisation as Democratisation: Global Insights into the South African Experience*. HSRC, 2021.

Kunene, Mazisi. "Problems in African Literature." *Research in African Literatures* vol. 23, no. 1, 1992, pp. 27–44.

Lange, Lis. "Rethinking Transformation and its Knowledge(s): The Case of South African Higher Education." *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning (CriSTaL)* vol. 2, no. 1, 2014, pp. 1–24. DOI: https://doi.org/10.14426/cristal.v2i1.24.

Mashile, Lebo. "Public Performance at the Newtown." https://www.instagram.com/p/CMonf0tDVTB/.

Milazzo, Marzia. "'The Whims of the White Masters:' Miriam Tlali's *Between Two Worlds* and the Totality of White Power." *African Philosophical and Literary Possibilities: Re-reading the Canon*, edited by Aretha Phiri. Rowman Littlefield, 2020, pp. 131–48.

Mqhayi, S. E. K. *Ityala Lamawele*. Lovedale, 1914.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Sabelo J. *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization*. Routledge, 2018.

Oyowe, Oritsegbubemi A. "Philosophy and an African Conscience." *African Philosophical and Literary Possibilities: Re-reading the Canon*, edited by Aretha Phiri. Rowman Littlefield, 2020, pp. 1–16.

Phiri, Aretha, ed. *African Philosophical and Literary Possibilities: Re-reading the Canon*. Rowman Littlefield, 2020.

Tlali, Miriam. *Between Two Worlds*. Broadview, 2004.