

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Philosophical challenges of decolonial options, resistance, and combat

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Abstract

This article examines the benefits and challenges of integrating decolonisation into philosophy. Its thesis is that a decolonial approach must address not only what decolonisation entails but also how to implement it methodologically. While the analysis of ethnocentrism in philosophy is crucial, it is insufficient if it remains confined to internal criticism without leading to a methodological introjection of the unfamiliar and the foreign. A solid methodology is essential to prevent superficial approaches to diversity and inclusion that fail to challenge disciplinary practices. This methodology, however, is not an end but a means to encourage ongoing conversations beyond comparative and cross-cultural philosophy. Thus, this article proposes methodological syncretism as a critical approach that embraces a variety of methodologies. The aim is to mitigate the risk of neutralizing the active force of decolonisation by reducing it to a mere theoretical abstraction, which could ultimately lead to a reproduction of colonial appropriation.

KEYWORDS

coloniality of power, comparative philosophy, decoloniality, ethnocentrism, methodological syncretism

1 | INTRODUCTION

The concept of decolonisation has gained significant traction in academia in recent years. The discussion extends from decolonising the academic calendar, curriculum, and research to the decolonisation of entire disciplines, to finally decolonising language, intellect, and the

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imaginary. This debate, however, is quite controversial. For Madina Tlostanova (2023, 145), for instance, “in the last five years [decoloniality] has turned into a new buzzword that is being attached to any hip and at times pretentious intellectual endeavours. Everyone is decolonising everything these days.”

Surprisingly enough, despite this controversial proliferation of the decolonial debate, there is very little discussion on decolonisation in mainstream philosophy. Lewis Gordon (2021, x) rightly claims that, while concepts such as freedom and justice are discussed in professional philosophy, decolonisation “is often avoided in the Global North because of the unfortunate investments in ongoing colonial relations on which that geopolitical designation gained much of its power.” While this is undoubtedly true, many scholars are actively engaged in meaningful philosophical approaches to decolonisation, even if “some of the key figures involved in decolonial thinking are often not recognised as philosophers” (Maldonado-Torres et al. 2018, 82–83). It is also worth noticing that this is not a recent phenomenon. The reflection on philosophical decolonisation can be traced back at least to the work of Frantz Fanon. Gordon himself—along with Nelson Maldonado-Torres and the other members of the Caribbean Philosophical Association—is an important example of the ongoing relevance of Fanon's legacy and the development of decolonial perspectives in philosophy.

Thanks to this substantial body of work, scholars from the Global North are increasingly urged to confront the challenges posed by decolonial philosophy. In this spirit, I engage in the debate: as an academic compelled to address these challenges, which entails a continuous effort at self-decolonisation. By building on the works of, among others, Walter Dignolo, María Lugones, and Nelson Maldonado-Torres (discussed below in sections 2, 4, and 5), I analyse the advantages and disadvantages of adopting the idea of decolonisation in philosophy. As will become evident in the ensuing sections, the primary dangers lie in the appropriation and neutralisation of decolonisation itself.

My thesis is that a decolonial proposition from the perspective of the Global North should consider not only what decolonisation in philosophy entails but also the methodological path through which it can be activated (section 5). This implies that the analysis of ethnocentrism in philosophy (section 3) is necessary but insufficient if it stops at an internal criticism that does not translate in a methodological introjection of the unfamiliar and foreign. Thus, the definition of a methodology is crucial to avoid hollow approaches to diversity and inclusion that do not question the disciplinary and institutional practices of philosophy (section 4). This methodology, however, is not meant to be an end in itself: it is an ongoing endeavour to map and establish multiple conversations. In this sense, I propose a methodological syncretism: that is, a critical syncretism that considers multiple methodologies (section 5). The hope is to minimise the risk of neutralising the active force of decolonisation by reducing it to an empty theoretical formulation, which in turn would reproduce a colonial appropriation.

2 | DEFINING THE ISSUE OF DECOLONISATION

There is considerable confusion surrounding discussions of decolonisation within the context of academic philosophy. One of the most common reactions from colleagues unfamiliar with the concept is to equate decolonisation in philosophy with getting rid of some white, male, racist philosophers. The issue, however, extends beyond the philosophers and philosophical traditions included in or excluded from the canon. From a decolonial perspective, the focus is on understanding how the canon was conceived, its intended purpose, and how to interpret those philosophers and traditions, both within and beyond the canon. Thus, decolonial philosophical thinking wants to assess the material taught by disciplinary philosophy and “critically revise it, reject it, and/or transform it” (Maldonado-Torres 2021, 13) in the wider perspective of

decolonial struggles. Before proceeding in this direction, I need to make some terminological distinctions, defining what decolonisation entails.

The term “decolonisation” can have different meanings depending on the context in which it is used. In its strictest sense (D1), the term refers to the geographically situated reaction to colonialism that brought the political independence of the colonies and the collapse of colonial empires. In its widest sense (D2)—which I aim to discuss here in the context of philosophy—it indicates the analysis of and opposition to new as well as old forms of economic and cultural colonialism. Notwithstanding the importance of historical colonialism, D2 focuses more on what has been variably termed “coloniality,” “neocolonialism,” and “neoimperialism.” In this second sense, scholars discuss the colonisation and decolonisation of the imaginary. As clearly explained by Anibal Quijano (1992/2007, 169), “in spite of the fact that political colonialism has been eliminated, the relationship between the European—also called ‘Western’—culture, and the others, continues to be one of colonial domination.” For Quijano, “[t]his relationship consists, in the first place, of a colonization of the imagination of the dominated.” Two clarifications are in order here.

First: this imaginary is not an abstract entity but a plexus of concrete experiences related to economy, race, gender, sexuality, ability. For María Lugones (2010, 747), the coloniality of gender defines the “racialized, capitalist, gender oppression” that can be overcome by “decolonial feminism.” This decolonial activity is necessarily a “praxical task” of resistance in which the “theoriser” is placed “in the midst of people in a historical, peopled, subjective/intersubjective understanding of the oppressing $\leftrightarrow$ resisting relation at the intersection of complex systems of oppression” (746–47). Lugones (2003, x) conceives of resistance as both “an ongoing activity from which to understand liberatory possibilities” and “the active state from which to seek collectivity and coalition.” Drawing from Fanon, Maldonado-Torres (2024, 23) proposes a similar intersection between theoretical and practical collective activities. He defines the idea of “combative decoloniality”—taking place “at the combative level of intellectual activity and decolonial struggle”—to suggest that “[i]n the combat zones, philosophy becomes a collective activity of and for actual liberation, rather than a professional exploration of authenticity and inauthenticity.” In this sense, “the decolonization of the mind could not take place without the decolonization of the body schema.”

Second: the emphasis D2 puts on these aspects does not mean in the least that the colonisation of the imaginary was not already present in the historical colonialism; instead, it means that, despite the collapse of the colonial empires, the projection of economic and epistemic asymmetries survives colonialism—producing neocolonialism or internal colonialism.¹ Hence, D2 calls for a counteraction that goes beyond political independence and avoids being entangled in post-colonial nationalism and nativism. And yet, some scholars are critical of D2.

As a case in point, Olúfemi Táíwò (2022, 3) is “convinced of the fruitlessness of extending the scope of decolonisation beyond its original meaning.” He refuses the idea of decolonisation as “forcing an ex-colony to forswear, on pain of being forever under the yoke of colonisation, any and every cultural, political, intellectual, social and linguistic artefact, idea, process, institution and practice that retains even the slightest whiff of the colonial past.” Táíwò's primary aim is to caution against defining African philosophy solely in relation to European colonialism, as this undermines the agency of African people. He argues that they can legitimately

¹Already Frantz Fanon (1961/2004, 11) explained how “[i]n its narcissistic monologue the colonialist bourgeoisie, by way of its academics, had implanted in the minds of the colonized that the essential values—meaning Western values—remain eternal despite all errors attributable to man. The colonized intellectual accepted the cogency of these ideas and there in the back of his mind stood a sentinel on duty guarding the Greco-Roman pedestal.”

domesticate “many ideas, processes, institutions and practices that are routinely attributed to colonialism” (Táiwò 2022, 7).

Aimé Césaire (1956/2010, 150) already affirmed the function of this agency in relation to Marxism and communism by stating that “no doctrine is worthwhile unless rethought by us, rethought for us, converted to us.” In a similar vein, Kwasi Wiredu (1996, 136) talks about a “conceptual decolonization,” which seeks to avoid or reverse “through a critical conceptual self-awareness the unexamined assimilation of the conceptual frameworks embedded in the foreign philosophical traditions that have had an impact on African life and thought.” Contrary to Táiwò's reading of the issue, however, this conceptual decolonisation does not aim to remove all foreign influences; instead, it advocates for a critical evaluation of them. Wiredu (1998, 17) himself explains this clearly in an updated formulation of his idea. Thus, the crucial point is the “unexamined assimilation” of foreign philosophical frameworks. And yet, for Táiwò (2022, 130), this is not decolonisation but only “what good scholarship should entail.”

Although I agree with Táiwò that decolonialisation should not become a “catch-all idea,” I find his analysis of the concept too uncharitable, especially when he rhetorically asks whether “the decolonization trope in philosophy is due for a rethinking, maybe even abandonment” (Táiwò 2019, 137). Rethinking decolonisation is undoubtedly valuable; abandoning it entirely, however, would risk throwing the baby out with the bathwater. For Táiwò (2022, 12), decolonisation seems to be a choice between either “broadening our horizons of what counts as significant ideas” or getting “rid of anything that smacks of ‘colonial’ inspiration in our intellectual works, even when some of us have so domesticated these syntaxes as to make them our own.” But decolonising philosophy may be more than just the former and less than the latter: broadening the philosophical horizons would not be enough for a critical analysis of the colonial elements rooted in the discipline (as I discuss in sections 4 and 5); and rejecting every colonial element is simply unrealistic, for the past cannot—and should not—be erased.

More important, Táiwò overlooks the fact that, in some parts of the world, decolonial scholars and activists are shaping theoretical and practical tools for resisting subtle yet powerful forms of neocolonialism. Therefore, he rejects more complex and developed ideas such as decoloniality in Latin America. This rejection does not come from a critical analysis of the concept: he simply does not have “a solid understanding of the discourse” (Táiwò 2019, 149). And in his more recent work, Táiwò (2022, xvii) avoids the analysis of decoloniality altogether because he is “unimpressed” by it. But what is decoloniality?

The concept of decoloniality (*decolonialidad*) was developed by the modernity/coloniality collective of Latin American scholars who built upon ideas such as Enrique Dussel's (1980/1985) philosophy of liberation and Anibal Quijano's (1992/2007) coloniality (*colonialidad*). Dussel (1998/2013, 47) summarises the meaning of philosophy of liberation as “a counterdiscourse, a critical philosophy born in the periphery (from the perspective of the victims, the excluded), which has the intention of being relevant on a global scale.” He conceives of it as the philosophical, metaphysical, and ethical foundation of the *giro decolonial* (decolonial turn) (Dussel 2020, 9).² In his effort to define the foundation of this turn, Dussel (2020, 36–37) links the most recent experiences of epistemological decolonisation to the critical consciousness of Eurocentrism. He indicates five moments for its development that correspond to five generations of thinkers: from the first generation of *grandes historiadores* (great historians) at the beginning of the twentieth century, to the last generation of scholars such as Aníbal Quijano, Walter Dignolo, and Ramón Grosfoguel. A key aspect of this development is the gradual emergence of an explicit critique of Eurocentrism. Indeed, in his formulation of “coloniality of power,” Quijano (1992/2007, 171–72) unequivocally

²On “decolonial turn,” see also Maldonado-Torres (2018). For a critical reading of the origin of decoloniality, see Cusicanqui (2012).

links it to the “European paradigm of rational knowledge” and adds that “Eurocentered coloniality of power has proved to be longer lasting than Eurocentered colonialism.”

For Mignolo (2011, 53–54), towards “the end of the Cold War, decolonization mutated into decoloniality (without, of course, losing its historical meaning), to highlight ‘decolonization of knowledge’ and to cast Eurocentrism as an epistemic rather than a geographical issue.” In this formulation, decoloniality focuses on a specific epistemic decolonisation that finds the source of an ongoing coloniality in the Eurocentric matrix of power—which, according to Mignolo, forms the colonial matrix of power (CMP).³ A crucial element of Mignolo's (2007, 500) decoloniality is the idea of delinking, which is derived from Quijano's notion of *desprendimiento*. This involves the ability to detach from the modern belief in abstract universals. Thus, for Mignolo (2021, 442), to decolonise means “first, to understand how CMP is controlling all of us, including its creators, managers, and those who dispute its management, and, second, to delink from its tentacles.” If everyone is involved in this matrix, then everyone is also responsible for it, as will become clearer in the next section.

Mignolo (2011, 54–55) is aware of the “many contexts and universes of meaning in which ‘decolonization’ is today used” and clarifies that his “attempt is not to propose the ‘right one’” but to be clear on the one he embodies. For Mignolo (2011, 54), decoloniality “means both the analytic task of unveiling the logic of coloniality and the prospective task of contributing to build a world in which many worlds will coexist.” In this sense, decoloniality is “an option” that implies many options, as I discuss in more detail later. For the moment, let me conclude this section on the terminology of decolonisation.

In considering the term “coloniality,” Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2018, 110) sees “no need for a new term to point out the historical mutations of colonialism and the possible horizons of decolonization.” According to Santos, “instead of distinguishing colonialism from coloniality, we should rather characterize the different forms that colonialism and decolonization assume over the course of time.” Although one might agree with him, his remark implicitly confirms that different forms of colonialism and decolonisation do exist; this makes understandable the need to use different terms for different phenomena. As affirmed by Maldonado-Torres (2016, 10), it is helpful to differentiate between these terms. On the one hand, “colonialism and decolonization are for the most part taken as ontic concepts that specifically refer to specific empirical episodes of socio-historical and geopolitical conditions.” As such, they “are locked in the past, located elsewhere, or confined to specific empirical dimensions. They become objects for a subject that is considered to be already beyond the influence of colonialism and the imperative of decolonization.” On the other hand, “coloniality and decoloniality refer to the logic, metaphysics, ontology, and matrix of power created by the massive processes of colonization and decolonization.” Hence, decoloniality defines an ongoing struggle that cannot be confined to the past. For this reason, Maldonado-Torres (2021, 13) considers decolonisation a “historical and still unfinished struggle.”

As a confirmation of the need to distinguish between concepts that refer to different aspects of broader historical events, Santos (2018, 1) himself suggests his own idea of the “anti-imperial South.” This term designates “an epistemological, nongeographical South, composed of many epistemological souths having in common the fact that they are all knowledges born in struggles against capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy” and are “produced wherever such struggles occur, in both the geographical North and the geographical South.” These anti-imperial epistemologies of the South have a similar function of what Mignolo terms “decolonisation of knowledge” and “border thinking”: they signal a clear

³Mignolo (2021, 34) explains that CMP is his way of translating Quijano's idea of “*patrón colonial de poder*” and reminds us that “the patriarchal dimension implied in ‘*patrón*’ was lost [in his translation] and has to be added and remembered when we use ‘matrix.’” For a detailed analysis of Mignolo's epistemology of coloniality, see Alcoff (2007). For a critique of Mignolo's work, see Michaelsen and Shershow (2007).

shift from the geographical issue to the epistemic one. I interpret Santo's nongeographical South as complementary to Mignolo's nongeographical Eurocentrism. For Mignolo (2018, 125), "Eurocentrism is not a geographical issue, but an epistemic and aesthetic one (e.g., control of knowledge and subjectivities)." As we have seen, for Mignolo a necessary condition for decoloniality is to recognise and delink from CMP as the underlying structure of Eurocentrism—wherever this structure presents itself.

And yet, recognising the logic of coloniality that undermines and silences peripheral epistemologies is only part of the process; it constitutes the analytical task. The other crucial part is the prospective task of envisaging other possibilities, either as epistemological alternatives or as decolonial options. When Santos (2018, 5–6) defines the epistemologies of the South as epistemological alternatives—the "alternative thinking of alternatives" that moves beyond the mere criticism within the logic of what he calls the "cognitive empire"—this does not seem to be far from Mignolo's idea of "decolonial option" (2018, 225; 2011, 21). In both cases, the emphasis is on the plurality of alternatives: not a single alternative that replaces one form of epistemic control with another form of domination but a spectrum of options that encompass multiple possibilities. Clearly, this does not mean that these options are mere choices to be pursued or disregarded, as if they were not fundamental. Rather, it means the necessary prospective task of creating alternative spaces for living in a world composed of many diverse realities. In simpler terms, it means being part of communities that embrace multiplicities and conflicts, rendering them meaningful rather than silencing them. If it is true that "[c]ommunities rather than individuals enable the doing" and that "one does with someone else, not in individualist isolation" (Lugones 2010, 754), then this doing must be a collective endeavour that deals meaningfully with multiplicities and conflicts. This principle also applies to academia: it is through collaborative communities that analytical and perspective tasks can converge and give rise to a plurality of alternatives to the "cognitive empire."

Kuan-Hsing Chen (2010, 112) defines these two moments of the decolonial process as the need to "deconstruct, decenter, and disarticulate the colonial cultural imaginary, and to reconstruct and rearticulate new imaginations." What is more important in Chen's analysis, however, is that decolonisation "cannot be completed without a corresponding deimperialization movement in the imperial center" (200). Santos (2018, 14) points in the same direction by considering colonialism as a "cocreation" of the coloniser and colonised and by suggesting that decolonisation "entails decolonizing the knowledge of the colonized as much as the knowledge of the colonizer." Yet, neither Chen nor Santos outlines a clear approach for decolonising the knowledge of the imperial centre—a daunting task in a globalised world where the imperial centre has lost its geographical location.

While Chen (2010, 99) proposes the elegant idea of "critical syncretism" as a "cultural strategy of identification for subaltern subject groups" (the identification of the colonised with other subaltern subjectivities), this strategy remains outside the imperial centre.⁴ Moreover, this identification among subaltern subject groups is not necessarily immune from being adopted by academia as an edulcorated form of combative decoloniality—in the sense seen above. According to Maldonado-Torres (2024, 11), this happens because the combative character of decoloniality "must be contained, delimited, and ideally removed in liberal and neoliberal settings," such as those represented by the "globalized modern Western liberal university." For this reason, Maldonado-Torres (2024, 13) refers to a "precombat" attitude that can easily lapse into non- or anti-combative approaches—as I explore in more detail in the next section. The neoliberal values within academia use these commodified versions of decoloniality to "keep combative decolonial thinking/pedagogy/praxis at bay." Clearly, this is a significant issue that affects anyone engaging with decoloniality within disciplinary philosophy and beyond.

⁴Fanon (1961/2004, 236–39) expressed something similar at the end of *The Wretched of the Earth* by urging his "comrades" to stop being tempted by European achievements, technology, and lifestyles, and to start creating a new humanity.

While I argue that a revised concept of critical syncretism can serve as a philosophical strategy for the imperial centre, the challenge lies in determining how to achieve this—if it is indeed possible. The problem is to understand how one can develop a non-Eurocentric critique of Eurocentrism within the imperial centre without the risk of appropriating and neutralising this very critique: that is, without reproducing a colonial imposition that only revises Eurocentrism in order to reaffirm it. A solution in this direction is offered by Dussel (1998/2013, 46), who affirms that “when the discourse at issue is not Eurocentric it is already virtually a counterdiscourse in itself, built upon the basis of that which is peripheral or dominated within the world system, and grounded in the affirmation of the exteriority of the excluded.” For Dussel, “the study of thought (traditions and philosophy) in Latin America, Asia, and Africa is not a task that is anecdotal or parallel to the study of philosophy *as such* (which would be that which is European in character) but instead involves the *recovery* of a history that incorporates the counterdiscourse that is nonhegemonic and that has been dominated, silenced, forgotten, and virtually excluded” (46). Consequently, the challenge is not merely to overcome Eurocentrism but to reposition the hegemonic discourse in relation to the non-hegemonic other, thereby preventing any form of imperialism that may take its place. This repositioning is facilitated by the very presence of a counterdiscourse that highlights where hegemonic power asserts its influence. As Dussel concludes, the “recognition of the discourses of the Other, of the victims who have been oppressed and excluded, is in fact the first constitutive moment of the ethical process which is necessary in order to undertake the liberation of philosophy” (52). Therefore, the decolonial repositioning of the hegemonic discourse seems to be both a prerequisite and an outcome of engaging with the other. To explore this issue further and identify where the hegemonic discourse dwells, I examine the problem of ethnocentrism in the next section.⁵

3 | PHILOSOPHY AND ETHNOCENTRISM

Robert Bernasconi (1997, 185) asserts that “[t]he Eurocentric view of philosophy is still largely intact, both in the institutional presentation of philosophy and in the declarations of some of Western philosophy's finest minds.” Bernasconi gives the example of Emmanuel Levinas, who despite “the pluralism that his thought celebrates, . . . was not willing to look beyond the Bible and the Greeks as models of excellence.” For Levinas (1986, 74), even the end of Eurocentrism would be “l'ultime sagesse de l'Europe” (the ultimate wisdom of Europe). What's more, Europe itself invented the idea of “déseuropéanisation” (de-Europeanisation), which is “une conquête de la générosité européenne” (a conquest of European generosity) (Lévinas and Descamps 1984, 147).⁶ One may object that Levinas belonged to a different generation of philosophers and that circumstances have evolved in recent decades. Others may contend that Levinas's views represent a facet of Continental philosophy, suggesting that Analytic philosophy does not encounter the same pitfalls. Unfortunately, little has changed in recent years, and ethnocentrism remains a pervasive feature across various philosophical traditions in the West.

In a recent essay, Robert Cummings Neville (2022, 18–19) argues that most Continental and Analytic philosophers in the West do not consider “non-Western philosophies” to be part of philosophy proper. Whether or not this is true, the expression “non-Western philosophies” already betrays the idea that Western philosophy is the touchstone for judging other

⁵This brief overview of decolonisation is not by any means exhaustive. For a detailed account of the different ways decolonisation has been employed in different parts of the world, see Santos (2018, 111–16).

⁶On this and similar statements made by Levinas—who also commented on decolonisation (Levinas 1986, 74)—see Bernasconi (1992, 15–16).

philosophical traditions, thus producing an implicit hierarchical and racist structure of values. Peter Park (2013) gives a detailed account of the racist roots of the philosophical canon. He explains that in the late eighteenth century philosophy began to perceive itself as a universal enterprise while simultaneously tracing back its roots to its purported Greek origin. Consequently, the concept of universal reasoning legitimised colonial authority by asserting philosophical claims of rational superiority. I am not interested in revisiting the development of this idea of philosophy here.⁷ What is crucial in this context is to understand why a substantial portion of academic philosophy continues to adhere to this narrative.

In their introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of World Philosophy*, Jay Garfield and William Edelglass (2011, 5) state: “[T]he current global dominance of Western discourse in philosophical debates is due in no small part to the Western dominance of non-Western peoples over the last four centuries. . . . In today’s multicultural world, the neglect and occlusion of non-Western thought hence constitute a kind of neocolonialism. Complicity in this occlusion of a wide range of philosophical traditions—which itself could be regarded as constituting and legitimizing violence by suppressing the perspectives of others—even if it is passive complicity, is morally unacceptable.” There are several elements that are worth considering here. First and foremost, although Garfield and Edelglass have edited a significant book on world philosophies, they argue that we are still far from achieving widespread acceptance of these philosophies. World philosophies remain within the hierarchical divide of Western and non-Western philosophy. And although these philosophies have an audience that justifies a number of academic publications, they are often marginalised or entirely overlooked within philosophy departments.⁸ Consequently, the global dominance of Western philosophy contributes to the neocolonial exclusion of a wide range of cultural traditions from philosophical discourse. But the main point made by Garfield and Edelglass is the idea of complicity in this exclusion. The suppression of other philosophical perspectives cannot be condoned, even if it stems from passive complicity. This means that ignoring the problem—or failing to take action to address it—does not make one less responsible for the endurance of the problem. I take the position expressed by Garfield and Edelglass as an invitation to acknowledge the blind spots that, when replicated on a large scale—even if only passively—obscure significant portions of philosophical traditions and methodologies. Hence, when Brian Leiter (2014) admits that “most Anglophone philosophers have *no opinion at all* about non-Western philosophy because they are simply ignorant of it,” this cannot serve as an excuse for neglecting the issue. On the contrary, it clearly demonstrates how pre- or non-combativity works in function of anti-combativity, as we saw earlier.

Nevertheless, there are more explicit anti-combative arguments used to avoid responsibilities, such as the claim that there are insufficient resources to research and teach underrepresented philosophical traditions or to supervise students interested in them. Thus, the argument suggests, the issue is not a reluctance to engage with these philosophies; rather, it is an inability to do so. Its justification creates a vicious circle: because there is not enough knowledge of non-Western languages and cultural traditions, it is not possible to judge their philosophical relevance; because it is not possible to judge the relevance of non-Western philosophical traditions, there is no ground to invest resources in their research and teaching.⁹

This disguised gatekeeping approach makes the exploration of underrepresented philosophical traditions or philosophies from marginalised groups seem like an impossible task. Consequently, while Western philosophy remains hegemonic, it is also limited and racist: it

⁷On this, see Alcoff (2017).

⁸Roger Ames (2022, 58) gives the example of Chinese philosophy, which is almost completely absent in departments of philosophy and generally taught in religion or Asian studies departments. For an account of the exclusionary tendency in Western philosophy, see the discussion in the special issue of *Philosophy East and West* 67, no. 4 (October 2017).

⁹This is also part of the wider problem of how philosophy departments (and universities at large) invest in the perspective of ranking criteria. On this, see Mbembe (2016, 38), Bruya (2015), and the discussion in *Daily Nous* <https://dailynous.com/2015/12/18/criticism-of-the-philosophical-gourmet-report/>.

is limited because without a serious engagement with other philosophical traditions it can progress only within its own boundaries, often failing to recognise those boundaries (see Struhl 2010, 290); it is racist because excluding entire philosophical traditions from the canon suggests that they are either of lesser value or not philosophies at all.

I can already anticipate two critiques. The first concerns the potentially misleading and oversimplified portrayal of Western philosophy as a monolithic discipline driven by an impersonal, imperialistic, and Eurocentric agenda. True, Western philosophy cannot be reduced to a single language, form, or method; nor does it possess an independent will disjoined from the people who produce it. There are indeed diverse voices and perspectives within Western philosophy, including those that critically examine their own traditions. Notable figures in this regard include Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida. Although these authors are not exempt from criticism within and outside the canon, they certainly provide alternative interpretations of the Western philosophical tradition. The challenge, however, is that internal criticism and plurality do not necessarily equate to a genuine openness to the unfamiliar and foreign—let alone decolonial resistance and combat. Although I am convinced that critically engaging with these authors—and with the Western philosophical tradition more generally—is crucial for decolonising the imperial centre, this engagement must not be self-referential. While internal diversification has its merits, it is insufficient on its own; processes of learning and unlearning must be established to open a space for methodological syncretism. I deal with this possibility later. For the time being, let me turn to the second critique.

Someone may argue that characterising philosophy departments as closed and unwilling to engage with philosophies from marginalised groups and other cultural traditions is inaccurate and does a great disservice to the discipline. To be sure, the call for diversity and inclusion is gaining momentum in philosophy departments and universities more broadly. And yet, the focus is primarily on diversity and inclusion of staff and student populations. I am not suggesting by any means that these are not absolute priorities in teaching and learning environments. My concern is that there is insufficient effort to critically examine the philosophy curriculum. And even when attempts are made to include underrepresented philosophical traditions, they often amount to mere box-ticking exercises that fail to challenge the overall narrative of philosophy. Moreover, this approach to diversity and inclusion may ultimately become a significant obstacle to achieving genuine plurality. I consider this issue in more detail in the next section before addressing methodological syncretism.

4 | DIVERSIFYING PHILOSOPHY?

In the previous section, we saw how the neglect of philosophies outside the canon not only is a remnant of the colonial past but also reflects a neocolonial mindset that assesses the quality and even the legitimacy of different philosophical traditions. One possible solution would be to reduce ethnocentrism in philosophy by diversifying the curriculum and by incorporating a broader range of philosophical traditions into the canon. The problem with this add-and-stir approach is that it may become a façade that obstructs a deeper rethinking of the discipline.

As Linda Martín Alcoff (2017, 399) rightly argues, in women's studies “one cannot simply add women and stir as a way to introduce scholarship and research on women into the academy”; similarly, one cannot “add non-Western philosophy or topics such as race and colonialism to the existing field of philosophy, its canon and curriculum, without subverting the mainstream periodization, the existing canon, even questioning what is meant by ‘philosophy.’” Alcoff cautions that without careful questioning and subversion, we risk ending up with an empty pluralism that merely appears inclusive. For Alcoff, “what is required is a decolonizing of the way in which we interpret, and teach, Western philosophy and, indeed, every form of philosophical thought.” Similarly, for Maldonado-Torres et al. (2018, 82–83) “any effort towards diversifying

the discipline needs to be prefaced by serious consideration of the complex, non-binary inter-relations between subject positions (e.g. race, gender, sexuality, ability) and their entanglement in modernity/coloniality,” which means that “diversification cannot take place without decolonisation.” In other words, writes Maldonado-Torres (2021, 13) “[p]laying attention to the culture of the colonized without addressing colonialism is as problematic as incorporating texts written by colonized subjects to the canon without seriously addressing the ways in which the discipline of Philosophy, its scope, and its pedagogy reproduce coloniality.” I could not agree more. Nonetheless, as mentioned, even the very idea of decolonisation may be neutralised by and incorporated into a diluted and ineffective version of multiculturalism, which can be seen as yet another “conquest of European generosity”—to use Levinas’s phrasing above.

Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2012, 100) points in this direction by discussing the problem of “conditional inclusion” (“inclusión condicionada”): that is, “a mitigated and second-class citizenship that molds subaltern imaginaries and identities into the role of ornaments through which the anonymous masses play out the theatricality of their own identity.” For Cusicanqui (99), this theatrical representation of multiculturalism “has been the concealing mechanism par excellence for new forms of colonization.” More important, she includes decoloniality in this neutralising multiculturalism. In her view, “the multiculturalism of Mignolo and company neutralizes the practices of decolonization by enthroning within the academy a limited and illusory discussion regarding modernity and decolonization” (104). Cusicanqui is critical of decolonisation and post-colonial thinking as sterile theories that do not produce decolonising practices and only add more variations to the theatrical spectacle of postmodern multiculturalism.¹⁰

This critique is particularly important in this context, as it discredits not only the rhetoric of diversity and inclusion but also any academic efforts to decolonise philosophy. If we take Cusicanqui’s criticism seriously—and I think we should—we must recognise that “there can be no discourse of decolonization, no theory of decolonization, without a decolonizing practice” (Cusicanqui 2012, 100). This implies that, to prevent neutralising the combative force of decolonial philosophy, it is essential to continually adapt the methods of resistance. For this reason, Lugones views resistance as an “ongoing activity” or “praxical task,” while Maldonado-Torres stresses the “unfinished” nature of the decolonial struggle. Likewise, Gordon (2021, 134–35) recognises that “the imperial reach of capitalism is such that even revolution, decoloniality, and shifting the geography of reason could be commodified”; yet this too, he writes, can be contrasted by “engaging in necessary practices.” Building on these insights, I submit that a methodological syncretism can serve as one of these ongoing practices that reduce the risk of neutralising the force of decolonial resistance and combat. I discuss this possibility in the next section before concluding.

5 | METHODOLOGICAL SYNCRETISM

One way to address the issue of methodological syncretism in philosophy is through the concrete practice of comparative philosophy. It is no coincidence that some of the most compelling critiques of philosophical ethnocentrism (as discussed in section 3) come from authors engaged in intercultural conversations. Through exposure to other philosophical traditions, these scholars may perceive the resistance of mainstream philosophy towards the unfamiliar and foreign. This awareness, in turn, enables them to develop methodologies that resist reducing or assimilating the other into the same. Still, this does not necessarily mean they are actively engaged in a decolonial struggle. While some comparativists may share concerns about

¹⁰Mignolo (2021, 65) is aware that there are “critics who claim that decoloniality has become an academic discipline detached from action.” In his opinion, however, “[w]hile it is an open decision not to be involved in institutional decolonial undertakings, to withdraw the decolonial from research and educational institutions would facilitate the tasks of academics and administrators that are already fighting to prevent and/or expel the decolonial from the academy and contain its spread in the museums.”

philosophical ethnocentrism with decolonial scholars, their focus is not primarily on colonialism or neocolonialism. And although their comparative philosophies may, in some instances, lead to epistemic decolonisation, this is typically an indirect outcome. It is not surprising, therefore, that Bryan Van Norden (2017, 35)—whose work I highly appreciate—writes: “I have been warned that linking the call to study non-Western philosophy to issues of diversity and identity politics will politicize it in ways that may lead to outcomes I would not prefer.” Van Norden does not indicate these undesired outcomes, but the point is clear: he prefers to keep the two issues separate. I believe it is crucial to keep them together, not because they address the same problem but because they can mutually enrich a methodological syncretism.¹¹ Unfortunately, this has rarely been the case thus far.

Amy Donahue and Rohan Kalyan (2015, 132) express concern over the lack of engagement with postcolonial or decolonial studies among comparative philosophers. Moreover, this indifference is reciprocal: “[D]ecolonial theorists have demonstrated scant interest in comparative philosophy.” Donahue and Kalyan state that “regardless of the specific roots of each field’s disinterest, the separation of non-Western theoretical and philosophical scholarship into isolated fields despite a shared interest in disrupting the material and discursive hegemony of the West is itself a further legacy of colonialism.” Indeed, this reciprocal indifference is not confined to comparative philosophy and decolonial studies; it extends to other theories and methodologies as well.

Chela Sandoval (2000, 69) defines this problem as “theoretical apartheid.” Sandoval focuses on a wider set of critical and cultural studies (“white male poststructuralist theory,” “Euro-American white feminist theory,” “postcolonial cultural theory,” “U.S. third world feminist theory and method,” and “queer theory”) to explain how they highlight their reciprocal differences despite having theoretical and methodological similarities. This, however, is only the reflection of the wider phenomenon of social fragmentation. As Lugones (2003, 223) has clearly explained, this fragmentation “in its individual and collective inhabitations is the accomplishment of the interlocking of oppressions.” Lugones emphasises the importance of multiple worlds of sense and their diverse ways of resisting oppressions, suggesting that social fragmentation can be countered by forming coalitions “from within a complex interrelation of differences” (222). Consequently, focusing on differences is not inherently problematic. The issue arises when defining differences is an end rather than a means: when differences are not employed as epistemological and methodological tools that expand one’s understanding of other worlds of meaning, they turn into oppressive barriers that classify and compartmentalise knowledges. When this occurs in academia, it leads to what Gordon (2006) describes as “disciplinary decadence.”

To prevent this drift, I propose the idea of methodological syncretism: a critical syncretism that considers multiple methodologies. This does not mean simply adding decoloniality to comparative philosophy, or vice versa—as if they were two monolithic methodologies.¹² Rather, it means to multiply their intersections in light of what Maldonado-Torres (2024, 14) terms “decolonial transdisciplinarity.” This concept goes beyond a mere pluralistic approach to academic disciplines; it entails “the critical interrogation of disciplines on the basis of the problems, questions, aspirations, and lived experiences of . . . the condemned of the earth.”¹³ This necessitates embodying and performing—through a mutually critical assessment—various methodologies that emerge from one’s relationship to the issue at hand and its specific

¹¹For a critical and insightful reading of identity politics, see Alcoff et al. 2006.

¹²Mahmoud Al-Zayed (2024) defines “decolonialities” in the plural to emphasise the multitude of decolonial projects. Similarly, Burik, Smid, and Weber (2022) highlight not only the diversity of methodologies in comparative philosophy but also the variety of future theoretical avenues. The aim, therefore, is to foreground this multidimensionality rather than reduce it to disciplinary constraints, ultimately pushing further to question the very function of the discipline itself.

¹³On this, see also Maldonado-Torres 2015.

context. This context invariably involves the power relations that define it—or, using Lugones's terminology, the oppressing $\leftrightarrow$ resisting relation.

More precisely, I take the idea of critical syncretism in two different but connected senses: on the one hand, it entails the critical awareness of considering multiple reference systems in the analysis of a defined issue; on the other hand, it indicates the syncretic adoption of critical approaches and methodologies to that issue. The former pertains to the theoretical and analytic task of understanding the relations between one's own ground and the grounds of the others; the latter proposes the practical endeavour of finding fertile applications at the intersections of the different grounds. This approach means critically highlighting both differences and similarities, as well as delineating the methodological pathways that explore the relations between those grounds. Yet, these relationships are never fixed, and mapping these methodological pathways becomes an ongoing practice.

Differences and similarities, therefore, are not ends in themselves but rather means to constantly reorient oneself through these paths and their power structures. While this methodological syncretism opens itself up to different practices and critical approaches, methodologies such as conceptual or historical analyses are not merely employed in mutual counterbalance; they are also scrutinised to ask: What is the implicit logic of the conceptual analysis employed? Is it compatible with the implicit logic of what is analysed? Is conceptual analysis itself uncontroversial? What is the history at stake? Is it a linear, universal history? Who has defined this narrative, and who is silenced by it? Where do I stand in relation to these logics and histories? And what language do I use in this relation? And so on. Thus, methodological syncretism questions fields of relations instead of cutting up bodies of knowledge.

I distinguish between the two aspects of methodological syncretism (the theoretical and the practical) for the sake of clarity, but they are inherently simultaneous, as one naturally leads to the other: reflecting on how one does philosophy informs the conception of a particular form of philosophy, and vice versa. As carefully explained by the editors of *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Methodology* (Cappelen, Gendler, and Hawthorne 2016, v), “what you think counts as (a significant part of) methodology (or how you draw the distinction between first- and second-order philosophy) and will depend in large part on your philosophical views—in much the same way as what you count as philosophy does.” They could not have been more explicit: theories and methods are interdependent. For this reason, they consider their book “not merely a work about how philosophy is done, but also a work of philosophy.” I agree; theirs is certainly an excellent work of philosophy. Nonetheless, it is disappointing to see that all the entries of the book deal with “what we can coarsely describe as the ‘Western tradition’ of philosophy, and are largely Anglo-American in approach” (vi). The editors admit that this is a limitation of the book. I do not see it as a mere limitation. If their book is not just a work about methodology but also a work of philosophy, then being “largely Anglo-American in approach” represents a clear philosophical stance rather than a limitation. As a result, the extreme richness of this book (thirty-six entries, 752 pages) shows an internal diversity that does not go beyond the Anglo-American approach—that is, it does not extend beyond a singular philosophical methodology. Consequently, it is not surprising that comparative philosophy is excluded both as a methodology and as a way of thinking about philosophy. What is surprising, however, is to find “Feminisms” and “Critical Philosophy of Race” as the last two entries of the book in the section entitled “Philosophy and Its Neighbours.” This sounds like a perfect example of what Cusicanqui considers “conditional inclusion.”

Methodological syncretism is both an idea of philosophy and a way of doing it: not as a singular approach that dictates its course but as an opportunity to engage with what the hegemonic mindset puts out of sight or reduces to the same. This entails not only unlearning one's implicit assumptions and biases to gain insights from other philosophical traditions and marginalised groups, but also moving beyond a pre-combative stage to actively resist the non- and anti-combative approaches to decoloniality. Once again, these elements are mutually entailing

and propulsive. In this sense, the decolonial repositioning of the hegemonic discourse is both the prerequisite of the encounter with the other and the result of the encounter—as anticipated at the end of section 2 in relation to Dussel.

To be clear, I do not aim to merely update existing methodologies through the superficial inclusion of decolonial perspectives. Nor do I intend to replace one methodology with another, or one conception of philosophy with another. Rather, my intention is to avoid what Odo Marquard (1981/1989, 93) terms “monomythical thinking,” which defines and restricts the possibilities for philosophy. Thus, unlearning means not discarding knowledge but rather repositioning one's approach to learning. This repositioning entails the “fundamental reorientation of the ways of conceiving knowledge production and creation” suggested by Maldonado-Torres (2021, 14). It also means to acknowledge, for instance, the “scholarly forgetfulness of Kant's racial theories,” which is due “to the overwhelming desire to see Kant only as a ‘pure’ philosopher, preoccupied only with ‘pure’ culture- and color-blind philosophical themes in the sanctum sanctorum of the traditions of Western philosophy” (Eze 1997, 103). If one brings Kant “down from the pedestal on which he has stood for so long” and looks at him “at the eye level”—as Huaping Lu-Adler (2023, 336) suggests—one is already beginning to hear the voices silenced by the monomythical assumption of a pure philosophy. This necessarily entails a rethinking of the view from above—or from nowhere—as the ultimate objective philosophical method. To illustrate this point, let me provide an example before concluding.

In an article on comparative philosophy, Jessica Frazier (2020, 32) asks: “What if doing philosophy across cultures is always implicitly a matter of metaphilosophy—of articulating more clearly the nature of philosophy itself?” I take this as a rhetorical question that defines the methodological issue of doing philosophy in conversation with other traditions. It is evident that the same issue regarding the nature of philosophy emerges when engaging in philosophical discourse with traditions from marginalised groups—whether interculturally, intraculturally, or transculturally. So far, so good.

Frazier's second rhetorical question, however, is more problematic. She asks whether the metaphilosophical issue that implicitly arises within the methodology of comparative philosophy “forces us to ‘stand back’ hermeneutically and map out a ‘view from above’ of the underlying fabric of ideas.” Frazier refers to Pierre Hadot's (1987/1995, 242) chapter “The View from Above,” where he explains that, with the exception of Scepticism, in all schools of the ancient Western tradition “philosophy was held to be an exercise consisting in learning to regard both society and the individuals who comprise it from the point of view of universality. . . . [W]ithin each school, philosophy signified the attempt to raise up mankind from individuality and particularity to universality and objectivity. Thus, in each philosophical school we encounter one and the same conception of philosophy. Similarly, in each philosophical school we find the same conception of the cosmic flight and the view from above as the philosophical way par excellence of looking at things.” Hadot is extremely clear: all these philosophical schools shared one conception of philosophy—the rejection of individuality and particularity in favour of universality and objectivity—and one methodology to put it into practice—the view from above.

I have no doubt that Frazier is motivated by the best intentions and seeks to broaden the understanding of philosophy to encompass a wide range of ideas. And yet, by resorting to the view from above, would the comparativist not end up reaffirming the same conception of philosophy as universal and objective, detached from individuality and particularity? Why is this methodology preferable to contextualism or relationalism? Why should the comparativist adopt the view from above as the “overarching theoretical model” (Frazier 2020, 40) instead of recognising it as just one methodology among many?

For Maldonado-Torres (2024, 12), despite the “declarations of allegiance to one or another form of non-western culture or thought, . . . non-, pre-, and anti-combative intellectuals tend to see themselves and/or behave primarily as individuals and maintain an ‘outsider's relationship’ with struggles in combat zones of decolonial activity.” I believe this largely stems from the

methodological detachment inherent in the view from above. Lugones (2003, 210) provides the evocative image of “streetwalker theorizing” to emphasise the importance of a grounded, pedestrian approach to the other that resists detachment and indifference. This street-level, face-to-face theorising is made of concrete bodies, it needs physical proximity, it “requires focusing one’s attention on people’s moving their hands, using and speaking signs, cooking, walking, and all that constitutes their lives as done from a different logic and meaning” (Lugones 2012, 83). Travelling to other worlds of sense (Lugones 2003, 97–98) also involves shifting the perspective from viewing philosophy as a way of life to understanding various ways of living as philosophies. This, in turn, necessitates going beyond the academic setting to engage with communities and activist organizations, where decolonial thinking is often more effectively articulated (Maldonado-Torres 2021, 14).

If the point is doing philosophy across cultures or cultural groups, it is necessary to approach different methodologies and ideas of philosophy on the same ground, instead of putting one above the others. Thus, methodologies themselves should draw dynamic patterns of interactions in which theoretical configurations stem from the very actors of the conversation. Methodological syncretism seeks to achieve this. In contrast, by deciding in advance that the view from above is the best methodological approach, one reaffirms a single idea of philosophy under which the other philosophical traditions and groups must conform. It is not by chance that Frazier resorts to the authority of Plato and Gadamer to support her theoretical position, which is precisely this: a position firmly grounded in the Western philosophical tradition. There is nothing wrong with this, provided that one acknowledges how the “overarching theoretical model” originates from a specific perspective and not from a universal nowhere that stands above everything else.¹⁴

6 | CONCLUSIONS

Methodological syncretism brings back to the ground the view from above, so to speak: it acknowledges not only the soil where one stands face-to-face with others but also the grounds that support different perspectives. This implies constantly repositioning oneself in relation with others and critically engaging with their methodologies, which are not objects of analysis but living epistemological realities. By unlearning the authority of a disembodied single voice—or single language, monochromatic logic, monomythical philosophy—methodological syncretism opens a space that blurs the self-other dichotomy: not as assimilation and neutralisation but as transformation. In this sense methodological syncretism accepts the invitation of Gloria Anzaldúa (1987, 88) when she writes: “Here we are weaponless with open arms, with only our magic. Let’s try it our way, the mestiza way, the Chicana way, the woman way.” There is no imposition of a single way of doing here. Those open arms are already a plurality of possibilities: “the mestiza way, the Chicana way, the woman way” are places of multiplicity. Accepting Anzaldúa’s invitation to be held in those arms means being weaponless and open to the magic of multiplicity. By accepting their ways, I start travelling to the worlds of sense that the mestiza, Chicana, and woman embody. One step further and I may start hearing, from very far away, the voice of Zhuangzi 莊子:

Without praises, without curses,
Now a dragon, now a snake,
You transform together with the times.
And never consent to be one thing alone. (Graham 1981/1989, 121)

無譽無訾，一龍一蛇，與時俱化，而無肯專為 (Hung et al. 1947, 51/20/6)

¹⁴I explore the normative implications of adopting overarching metatheories in greater detail in Lacertosa 2023, chap. 2.

On this journey, other voices begin to emerge. The more I listen to them, learn their languages, and understand their methodologies, the more I appreciate their philosophical value. The more I recognise their philosophical value, the more I listen to them, and so on. And then, when a conversation is in place, I may be able to exit the pre-combat stage by asking: Who am I? Who or what stops me from becoming something else? Who or what stops you?

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