Book Reviews

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Teresia Mbari Hinga, *African, Christian, Feminist: The Enduring Search for What Matters*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017, 244 pp.

Some works hold captive the imagination of their readers while leading them to explore new insights that will shatter previously held beliefs. *African, Christian, Feminist: The Enduring Search for What Matters* by Teresia Mbari Hinga is one such work. The responsibility of a decolonial scholar is to always query all that has been handed down by agents of empire politics and narratives while resisting the bias to take for granted what has been written. In fact, to write is to reduce surplus of meanings to the perspective that is being articulated. As a decolonial scholar, Hinga offers her readers a different narrative worth exploring in the retelling of the complex histories of African societies and peoples. Hinga's work makes a strong case for retrieving the religio-political and cultural roles of African women that have been lost to the annals of history due to the manipulative role of colonialism in the continent of Africa carried out by European colonialists and missionaries.

By beginning this work with the retelling of the contributions of Kimpa Vita (Dona Beatrice), a prophet, mystic, and political figure in the Kingdom of Kongo prior to the transatlantic slave trade,

this work situates itself as an avant-garde for a call to take seriously the intellectual contributions of African women in the area of African feminist theology. Hinga makes a case for a new way of being Christian on the continent of Africa, one that allows for faith expressions to be authentically African and inclusive of all voices, persons and genders. It also calls for African theology to centre its focus on the multiple social, political, religious, economic and cultural issues defining the lives of Africans.

This work is divided into four major parts. Part One engages head-on the colonial traumas experienced by Africans. Such traumas have led to the silencing and erasure of female voices and their creative insights in the theological discourses going on all over the continent. By affirming the relevance of inculturation to the practice of Christianity on the continent, the author traces the grassroots work that is being done by African women in their respective social locations.

Part Two explores pathways for realising expressions of African Christianity and theologies that address the ambiguities, challenges and opportunities faced by many on the continent. Reflecting on the relevance of the Bible to African Christians, the author sheds light on the many ways that biblical exegesis ought to be done by African theologians. Affirming the relevance of diversity and inclusivity, a chapter is dedicated to the various Christological themes that arise while doing theology in Africa. Part Two concludes with a chapter dedicated to how faith in Jesus Christ ought to lead to the liberation of African women. Such liberation ought to affirm the multiple faces of Christ embraced by African women.

Part Three dives into a systematic study of systemic poverty. The crisis of HIV/AIDS; patriarchy and violence against women; and the contemporary crisis of land-grabbing being perpetrated on the continent are addressed with the intent to offer credible solutions to these systemic issues plaguing the African continent and its people. The author concludes this section by retrieving a Gikuyu theology of land that centres ownership and its usage within the domain of communal flourishing as a corrective measure for the individualistic approach introduced by the colonial agents that has led to endemic poverty on the continent.

Part Four provides a pedagogical model for doing transformative theology with the intent to make students of theology become

more aware of the need to embrace a sense of global consciousness. The challenges faced by our world today are mainly caused by the primacy of individualism at the expense of otherness. The author makes a case for the relevance of embracing vulnerability as a pedagogical tool for transforming lives by telling her own story of journeying towards transformation. She explores insights which she has gained from leaving her home in Africa to study religious studies and theology at institutions in the Global North. She sheds light on how her experiences as an academic and scholar-teacher at a Jesuit institution in the United States positions her to act as a bridge of friendship and collaboration for communities in the Global South and the Global North.

How are Africa's stories to be told? In response, Hinga appeals to the polyphonic narratives that define the tapestry of memories defining the imagination and aspirations of Africans. African feminist theology is inherently prophetic. It seeks to decentre the vision of Africa created by religious and secular colonial agents of Europe who seek to reduce African history to a footnote within the larger narrative of European hegemonic posturing on the African continent. Hinga's work offers emerging scholars on African studies a clear path to follow.

Though the work offers concrete steps to follow in addressing the enduring marginalisation of women in contemporary African societies, religious or secular, the work fails to state clearly how a reimagining of gender roles within the context of relational encounters can become a clear means of decentering the rigid gendering of bodies in African societies. This work ought to show how, within the larger context of Africa, one becomes a woman not at the service of patriarchy but rather as a mimesis of resistance to patriarchy itself. Perhaps, this call for centering mimesis in gender performativity can become a new research line that Hinga can pursue in a follow-up to this work.

Finally, reading this work one is compelled to appreciate the depth and breadth of scholarship and multiple interlocutors that the author makes relevant to her vision for how theology ought to be done in Africa. Furthermore, this work speaks to multiple disciplines like African history, missiology, cultural studies, feminist studies, colonial/post-colonial and decolonial studies, and social and cultural ethics, and above all else this work has created a new

pathway for doing African feminist theological studies. Theology ought to be interdisciplinary, and this work has made a strong case for how this can be done.

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Michael Marder, *Political Categories: Thinking Beyond Concepts*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019, 255pp.

When one considers the units of political thought, concepts, ideas and theories are typically the first notions to come to mind, followed by metaphors and symbols that belong to the register of political imagery. Michael Marder, Ikerbasque Research Professor of Philosophy at the University of the Basque Country, proposes in *Political Categories: Thinking beyond Concepts* the addition of the *category* as a further element of the basic building blocks of political thought in terms of political theory and philosophy. Strictly speaking, Marder's approach of 'categorical thinking' aims to run contrary to the 'sovereignty' (1) of the basic unit of the concept, which Marder wants to replace with the basic unit of the category. His claim regarding the construction of a 'theory of political categories' (xi) is complemented by the strong normative claim 'not only ... [to] induce a better, more thorough understanding of political entities and processes, but it would also reciprocally lead to a better politics, adequate to the multifaceted political thing itself' (8). Categorical thinking is according to Marder not merely a theoretical-political operation, but also the preparation of political action *qua* political thinking in categories. So, the bar can hardly be set higher.

To make his case, Marder builds his theoretical and methodological argument for a 'political categorical thinking' over four parts. In the first part, Marder presents the provocative thesis that concepts are rather reductive means of thinking structured according to the subject-object scheme. Categories, in contrast, would rather be understood as 'folds' that are able to subvert precisely 'the artificial subject-object chasm' (2). Furthermore, categories are inherently political, since, according to their ancient Greek origin, they are speech-acts of accusation and assignment (*kategoria*) in a political setting, the *agora* (19–20). In the second and third parts, Marder

introduces the classical systems of categories of Aristotle and Kant from a political point of view. He takes Aristotle's and Kant's categories as different bases for his own approach of political categorial thinking: while Aristotle's categories provide him with a list to grasp political things, Kant's categories and transcendental philosophy provide the basis for a theory of 'political categorial reason' (110). The political interpretation of the category systems is expanded in the two appendices on Aristotle and Kant at the end of the book. In the fourth part, Marder explores how the categorial approaches of Aristotle and Kant assist in a complementary way to clarify basic subjects of politics and to open them up for political practice. Those central political subjects are the state, revolution, power and sovereignty.

A brief review of this book, whose four chapters and two appendices are chock-full of ideas and reminiscences, cannot capture the totality and fundamental complexity of its theorising beyond the traditional approach of political concepts and ideas. The present review is thus restricted to discussing one of the book's prominent features, which goes to the root of political theory and philosophy in general and leads to the heart of Marder's approach of political categorial thinking. This is the principal question about the difference between being political and non-political. How do political concepts and categories and non-political concepts (commonly conceived of as concepts of theoretical philosophy or the natural sciences) relate to each other? And how can the relationship be determined?

While many approaches to the history of political concepts and ideas fail to adequately address this central question by providing weak or indirect answers (e.g. political concepts are concepts *qua* their political discourse and linguistic contexts), Marder's approach of 'categorial thinking' takes this problem as its starting point. This directness of enquiry is certainly one of the most interesting and original features of his approach. The answer he lays out constitutes the negation of 'watertight divisions between theoretical and practical reason, let alone between "general" and "political" categories' (x). This theoretical negation of categorial difference unfolds in a positive programme of enquiry that aims to demonstrate the 'bilateral' influence of political and non-political categories: 'While nonpolitical categories are applicable to politics, political realities

shape the categories that are presumably neutral, non- or apolitical' (x–xi). In the history of thought, lists and tables of categories have, as Marder sees it, been mobilised and thereby politicised. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Carl Schmitt are those who radically mobilised the categories. Hegel did so through the figure of the dialectical leap of the quantitative into the qualitative (here, however, Mader's argument does not stand to reason, because in Hegel's view there is no element more important than the concept). Schmitt, on the other hand, did so through the 'critical point' at which the agonism between friend and foe tips over into political action and, upstream from this, the 'point of the political' at which an interpersonal relationship turns into an antagonism (24). Marder is showing that, behind political and 'politicisable things', the well-known categories are ultimately recumbent: substance, quantity, quality, space (in Aristotle) and relation (Kant). In the sphere of politics, these categories are ways of describing the 'political thing', which in turn can be subsumed by the meta-category of 'res publica' and examined phenomenologically (following Edmund Husserl) (16, 40).

A central thesis of *Political Categories* is that political reality can be better understood through political categories rather than concepts, which resemble iron cages of thought. The elaboration of political categories within a comprehensive approach of political categorial thinking is a worthwhile approach to the methods of political thinking. Nonetheless, it is striking that Marder, in his rejection of the concept, refers only to the Kantian understanding of the concept and neglects the fact that there are also alternative and experimental theories of the concept, such as that of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Indeed, the approach of 'categorial thinking' combines several enquiries simultaneously: a phenomenological theory of politics as a 'thing', a theory of political reality, a heuristic for grasping political reality, a post-metaphysical theory of political categories and a critical project that seeks to explore the limits of political reason. In this way, a number of theoretical set pieces are invoked, but more as a form of montage (to borrow a term from the fine arts) and less as a form of argumentation. Its montage-like flow places the book more in the genre of 'methodological essay' than 'study'. A creeping suspicion thus arises that the many theoretical components cannot be joined together as smoothly as Marder's

theory of political categories insinuates. Whether or not they can be so seamlessly interwoven, however, is worth scrutinising and determining for oneself.

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António Tomás, *Amílcar Cabral: The Life of a Reluctant Nationalist*. London: Hurst, 2021, 272 pp.

This is a beautiful book. It is elegant. It is elegiac. It is exciting: readers are on the verge of historical unearthings *and* historiographical revelations every time the pages turn. Tomás demands that we dump all our presumptions and received truths about this life that was much larger than life – yet extinguished (by more complex means than popular wisdom has it) far too soon – but does so with an understated grace. It is sad, but matter of fact. It is much more than a biography of perhaps the best political theoretician-practitioner of his cohort of African leaders lost in their youth before state power tested them, including Patrice Lumumba, Edward Mondlane, and Hebert Chitepo. The book is a chronicle of what is often called the ‘most successful liberation struggle’ in 1960s and 1970s Africa, but also of its many devastating contradictions.

And it is with facts that Tomás plays: not that he plays with them with us. He knows through writing this book that ‘a great deal of what we know about nationalism in Lusophone Africa may have been fabricated’ (4), partly because those in the business of international propaganda had to advertise their success while also playing to both sides in the Cold War, and to the less dogmatic but impressible Scandinavians. Also, as indicated by Cabral’s haunting script of his imminent death ‘as if the mere act of writing about this plot . . . would ward off [that] possibility’ (22) and by his fantastical belief that Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau could ever unite, it seems as if the ‘political’ side of such leaders forces a certain utopianism upon them. This is not to belabour the point of whether powerful classes can really ‘commit suicide’, as Cabral is famous for proposing (about 1,210,000 results on a Google search). Rather than bury themselves with the poor in the struggle, his corrupt comrades murdered him. However, Tomás does play us with Cabral’s even more

cited phrase: 'Tell no lies and claim no easy victories' (Google finds 3,240,000 results). He does not cite it; he does not need to. All readers should know the line and will certainly catch the irony here. Perhaps though, he does not believe it, because it may have just been propaganda. Tomás wonders: 'What kind of description of the past can be produced if one disregards propaganda in favour of the real events?' (14). He writes as if one could describe such a history and comes very close to his aim.

Here is where theory comes in: even a fleeting acquaintance with liberation struggles other than those of the Portuguese colonies tells us that such struggles are strewn with lies. Their narratives come from the colonisers, the freedom fighters, the secular missionaries from the enlightened 'West', the CIA and MI6, the Stalinists and the Maoists. Where would 'truth' lead? At most, it would lead to the School of Oriental and African Studies' modes of 'melancholic optimism' born in the long and uncertain trajectories of Marxian transformations of modes of production and Weberian models of authority. You will not win a revolution if you can only promise the travails of primitive accumulation.

Of course, the contemporary manufacturing of alternative facts to fit powerful efforts at ordering reality (Santiago Zabala's *Being at Large* being a fine analysis) reminds us that, during long and fraught interregna *à la* Gramsci's 'morbid conditions', truth is one of the primary casualties too. Cabral's condition was universal and by no means restricted to colonial and post-colonial proclivities.

The truth-telling of history (and anthropology) arrives alongside theory: Tomás tells us enough of how the historical imbrication of varied ethnic groups in Guinea-Bissau and the 'subaltern colonialism' that most Cape Verdeans practised betrayed Cabral's dreams. Even in the deepest 'liberated zones' of Africa's liberation struggles, the former were not united. The latter barely considered immersion in the cleansing waters of struggle.

Yet amidst these bitter veracities, Tomás leaves us with some questions. The very title of his book keeps a Cabral myth living: was he really an unenthusiastic soldier (5)? It did not take him long to join and lead radical groups while studying in Portugal, nor did he hesitate, too, to have militant soldiers killed. Politicians wanting to have politics, not guns, rule, relied on the latter to gain the former. He was certainly not alone amongst African liberation leaders

having problems resolving that conundrum. Robert Mugabe, for example, wondered after a coup helped him retire (at the age of 93) why his soldiers did not respect the thin liberal line between politics and the gun: he forgot how many times he had crossed it. Perhaps this still unresolved theoretical paradox will keep us lying forever.

In the meantime, it is hard to understand how a man who 'had been the only guarantee of the unity between the Cape Verdeans and Guineans [but] ... was incorrect in his explanation of the social process in Guinea' and his belief that the 'cultural osmosis would make [them] ... a community' (199, 201) could have been reluctant to do so. How he was so successful for so long must be a testament to Cabral's tenacity, strategic wisdom and very near success. To his credit, Tomás never loses sight of this, moderating excessive praise with objective yet never pessimistic realism.

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Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization*. London: Routledge, 2018, 282pp.

In *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization*, the historian and decolonial theorist Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni advances a provocative and stubborn theoretical and conceptual manner of understanding how at the level of thought and knowledge production Africans have been conquered, dominated and marginalised in Western regimes of thinking and knowledge production that find body and expression in Eurocentrism. Confronting Eurocentrism is not a new struggle amongst African scholars that in the previous decades have raised issues such as African economic and intellectual dependency on Europe and the need for academic freedom in Africa. Equipped with the conceptual and theoretical apparatus of decoloniality, Ndlovu-Gatsheni enters the debate to demand 'cognitive justice' and 'epistemic freedom' that Africans have been dispossessed of in the long history of colonial domination in Africa.

It is Ndlovu-Gatsheni's observation that in actuality, in the decolonisation of African countries from the 1950s to the 1990s,

colonialism 'faked its death' and only yielded reforms to its monstrosity and did not deliver the revolution that Africans desired and also deserved after long years of economic and political domination. In his fleshing out of coloniality, Ndlovu-Gatsheni uses his typical argumentative stamina to illustrate colonial violence in Africa as a present tragedy and not a thing of the past. Where decoloniality itself distinguishes itself from post-colonial theory is in its observation that colonial domination at the political, economic and epistemic levels is an injustice that is still taking place in Africa and the entire Global South. Ndlovu-Gatsheni could have added to the wealth of this book's contributions if he dedicated more space and clarity to an explication of how decoloniality adds to and expands exhausted post-colonial theory.

Epistemic Freedom is a book that joins an extended family of books by African scholars that valorise the independence of Africans to think unencumbered by hegemonic European ideas. Without romanticising Africans as superior thinkers and producers of knowledge as some radical Afrocentrists do, the book strongly affirms Africans as members of the global human family who are legitimate thinkers and inventors. The book militantly debunks the racist colonial propaganda of Africans as superstitious and emotional objects that can only consume knowledges produced for them by some European masters.

In a critical way, Ndlovu-Gatsheni is able to illuminate and expand the work of some iconic African thinkers of the past while reflecting on their limitations and potentials. To W. E. B Dubois' observation that the capital problem of the twentieth century was the problem of the 'colour line' Ndlovu-Gatsheni adds that the problem of the present is that of the 'epistemic line' that is deployed in the Eurocentric scheme of things to remove Africans from the common human family and expel them from the global community of thinkers. Kwame Nkrumah's call that Africans should seek and find the political kingdom so that all other kingdoms and freedoms will be added unto them is critically revised by Ndlovu-Gatsheni to suggest that Africans should 'seek first epistemic freedom' so that elusive economic and political freedom can logically follow. That this economic freedom and political liberation of the African continent and its people remain a dream that has turned into a nightmare because epistemic freedom has not been found is an observation

that is central in this book. The decolonisation and liberation of Africa, Ndlovu-Gatsheni suggests, may not be fully achieved without 'epistemic freedom', which is the 'cognitive justice' and the freedom that can illuminate the achievement of other freedoms, including economic and political freedom. In that recognition of previous thinkers on African liberation and critical expansion of their thoughts, Ndlovu-Gatsheni uses decoloniality to not only stand on the shoulders of some giants but also seek to complement their work by reflecting on some fresh insights on what is to be thought and done to confront coloniality in Africa. Besides the stubborn argument on the centrality of epistemic freedom, this book fleshes out what decoloniality itself is as a philosophy of liberation whose origins are not only in Latin America but also in Africa. This book proves that decolonial thinking and decolonial practices existed in African academies and liberation movements long before the term 'decoloniality' itself was coined. In that way, theory and practice can precede language.

One of the bold insights that are circulated in this book is that Europe should be provincialised while Africa must be deprovincialised as a measure towards asserting the full humanity of Africans and the legitimacy of their thoughts, histories and knowledges. The Eurocentric myth and colonial fiction that Europe is the centre of humanity and reason are exploded in this book, which, much like the work of Ngugi wa Thiongo, advances the thinking that the centre must be moved from Europe towards a recognition of places and peoples of the Global South as full human beings and producers of knowledge who can contribute to the 'strong answers to the strong questions' that confront humanity and the planet. That thought and knowledge, and wisdom and culture, are from Europe and that tradition and superstition are the properties of Africa is tersely collapsed into the racial myth and colonial fiction that it has always been. It is in this way that this book is not only decolonial but also iconoclastic in the manner in which it dethrones some of the most durable and monumental colonial and imperialist assumptions about Africa and Africans. Over and above its decoloniality, theoretically and philosophically, this book resists the temptation to become a simple tantrum against Eurocentrism and coloniality by standing its ground as a manifesto of epistemic liberation in the Global South.

In this book, Ndlovu-Gatsheni takes full advantage of his background in history to illustrate how over time the genocidal violence of conquest, colonialism and imperialism was accompanied by epistemic violence that has been deployed to dispossess Africans of their belonging to the human family and to dismiss their freedom to think and to know. Student activists of the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements are recognised in the book as agents of change that have demanded an epistemic revolution beyond cosmetic changes made in different efforts to transform and Africanise the university in Africa. In the opinion of Ndlovu-Gatsheni, a decolonised African university will be one that boasts human diversity as well as epistemic plurality and multilingualism. Such a university will be locally rooted but still globally competitive. Part of the propaganda against decoloniality has been that it proposes a kind of political nativism that would expel European peoples and knowledges from the African university. Ndlovu-Gatsheni negates this propaganda by illustrating that a decolonised university will be a centre of human and epistemic diversity that will combine excellence and relevance and valorise intellectual rigour. The valorisation of rigour and excellence negates another form of propaganda that gives people the impression that the decolonisation of the university in Africa would compromise quality in higher education.

Some of the punchy gestures of the book include a conversation that Ndlovu-Gatsheni has with other scholars on the significance of unlearning colonial concepts in order to relearn decolonial theories and philosophies. Unlearning things colonial in order to relearn things decolonial and liberatory involves ‘rethinking thinking’ itself and at long last thinking and knowing with our feet firmly and proudly planted on the African soil that is a legitimate ground for thinking and knowing. Alone, that Africa is legitimate ground for thought and that Africans are producers of legitimate knowledge is one of the book’s decolonial defiances that negate colonial political propaganda and intellectual mythology, one of the most prominent myths being that Africa was a dark night that Western civilisation and modernisation saved from darkness.

The book is multi-vocal and multi-perspectival in the creative way in which Ndlovu-Gatsheni does not monopolise the pages but thinks with other thinkers, previous and present, African and European, whose works are recognised and used in the book. Thought

and knowledge are described in the book as the property of the human family of the world and not a monopoly of one race and a preserve of one geographic location. The book is rendered in lucid prose that is transparent and simple without being simplistic.

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