For Us, By Us

Towards a More Just Philosophical Community

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Abstract: This article examines the Australian ‘Continental Philosophy’ community through the lens of the Azanian philosophical tradition. Specifically, it interrogates the series of conversations around race and methodology that arose from the 2017 Australasian Society for Continental Philosophy (ASCP) conference. At the heart of these were questions of place, race, Indigeneity, and the very meaning of ‘Continental Philosophy’ in Australia. The pages that follow pursue those questions, grappling with the relationship between the articulation of disciplinary bounds and the exercise of colonial power. Having struggled with the political and existential cost of participation in the epistemic community that is the ASCP, I argue for disengagement and the exploration of alternative intellectual communities. This is ultimately a call to intellectual work grounded on ethical relations rather than on the furtherance of the status quo. It is a call to take seriously the claim, ‘the land is ours’.

Keywords: colonialism, community, disciplinarity, grounds, indigeneity, myth

I don’t believe they deliberately distorted the story; they simply offered their objective history . . . from an imperialist point of view. (wa Thiong’o 2012: 67)

Before the circus of armies, institutes, researchers and bureaucrats rolled into town, not one person cared to take the time to look and see what was already there. (Bond 2009: 176)

Assertions are philosophically treacherous. Whatever the domain or approach to philosophy, perhaps the most predictable response to an assertion is the question, ‘On what basis do you make that claim?’ This is another way of asking, ‘On what ground does it stand? On what ground are *you* standing as you put forward that idea?’

The question is no mere formality. The simplest way to dismiss a philosophical argument is to pull the rug from underneath it. To undermine a philosopher’s grounds is to render whatever edifice they have constructed baseless, therefore unfit for sustained exploration, let alone habitation. The question of grounds is at the heart of philosophy. For instance, in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes (1984 [1641]) excavates his own grounds and finds himself drowning in groundlessness at the beginning of his second meditation. Nietzsche (2001 [1882]), who is more honest and courageous, resists Descartes’ impulse to counterfeit grounds by illicitly (given the latter’s stated methodology) asserting God. Nietzsche faces the terrifying implications of his groundlessness head on (§125). Jamie Parr’s (forthcoming) *Nietzsche and Pascal* provides a rich exploration of the relationship between courage and coming to terms with the matter of grounds within the European philosophical tradition. Rich as it is, however, the matter gains an otherwise absent depth, weight, and immediacy when viewed from the vantage of those who have borne European colonial violence. This is apparent even at the threshold of the matter. ‘The question of grounds’ is probably most intuitively rendered into chiShona as *nyaya yevhu* and isiNdebele as *indaba yomhlaba*. This returns to the English language as ‘the land question’ (literally: the story, narrative, or account of soil, earth or ground). The ‘land question’ is at the heart of an Azanian critical philosophy that is given to ‘the exposition of on-going un-freedom and its history and philosophy’ (Dladla 2018: 421). It is also at the heart of the Indigenist proposition that First Nations peoples’ ‘ontological relationship to land, the ways that country is constitutive of us, and therefore the inalienable nature of our relation to land, marks a radical, indeed incommensurable, difference between us and the non-Indigenous’ (Moreton-Robinson 2015: 11).

My starting point in this exploration of the question of grounds, following the lead of Kwasi Wiredu (1996), is our embodiment.¹ Philosophers, by virtue of embodiment (corporeality, extension

in space, finitude, and so much more) philosophise in particular places. Our work is grounded in particular traditions and methodologies and occurs in specific geographic sites.² That philosophers may interrogate those grounds from time to time ought to come as no surprise.

For instance, in a note written in his capacity as incoming Chair of the Australasian Society for Continental Philosophy (ASCP), Richard Colledge observes the following:

The notion of Continental Philosophy as a contestably ‘western’ discipline was brought into sharp relief via a series of dialogues during and following our 2017 annual conference concerning race and philosophy, and also concerning the ASCP’s own engagement with non-white and non-European discourses and presences. Reflections on cultural and racial identities in contemporary philosophy, the legacies of coloniality, the meaning of ‘Continental’ Philosophy and its cultural and geographical imaginaries all played into a series of interrogations of this theme on the APA’s ‘Black Issues in Philosophy blog’ by conference delegate Bryan Mukandi with responses by conference Keynote Lewis Gordon and ASCP Chair Simone Bignall. *This is a rich area for further reflection for the ASCP (and our discipline at large) in the months and years to come.* (2018: 3, emphasis added)

This ‘further reflection’ is pursued in the introductory article to a journal special issue devoted to the same 2017 ASCP conference. Three of the conference organisers seek to examine ‘what it means to produce critical continental philosophy in contexts where the label of “continental” may seem increasingly tenuous, if not entirely anachronistic’ (Laurie et al. 2019: 1). That article, while touching on the issue of grounds, focuses on ‘the ways that *familiar debates* around intellectual and institutional biases *might be enhanced* by a closer consideration of process-based aspects of disciplinary self-production’ (1, emphasis added).

Tracy Llanera takes a different approach. Reflecting on her experience as ‘an intersectional philosopher in Australia’ (2019: 2), this now US-based Filipino woman attempts to convey and think through the challenges, strictures, and impediments faced across philosophy departments in Australia by those of us who do not conform to the dominant image of philosopher in this country.³ Perhaps because her interests extend beyond enhancing the

status quo, Llanera directly addresses the ‘interrogations’ raised by Colledge:

after the 2017 conference of the [ASCP] . . . Bryan Mukandi, an African philosopher from the University of Queensland, wrote about what he observed as the neglect of a localized philosophical reflection of “place” in Australian continental philosophy in favor of a white, colonial, Euro-Australian way of philosophizing. He also noted with embarrassment how the conference has not had an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander keynote speaker since its inception. Unsurprisingly, his post generated commentary and rigorous fact-checking. . . . I want to point out two things. First, bringing these controversial issues up required admirable courage from Mukandi, given his status as an early-career philosopher and as a person residing at the margins of Australian philosophy. . . . Second, it is not clear to me that the response in defense of the ASCP was productive. For example, the suggested remedy to the whiteness of continental philosophy in Australia is “for Black and Indigenous philosophers who are interested in European Thought to take seriously the ASCP’s formal and publicly expressed commitments to equity and diversity; to hold the Society accountable to these principles; and to become actively involved in its governance and development.” But is it fair to place this burden primarily on people who are already finding the professional culture of philosophy alienating? (Llanera 2019: 377)

In the pages that follow, I attempt to respond to Llanera as an entry point into the broader discussion around ‘The Azanian Philosophical Tradition Today’. In so doing, I write as someone in the diaspora – an African settler in Australia – on the topic, *izwe elethu*, ‘the land is ours’. My social contract with the Australian nation-state notwithstanding, this place on which I write is not my country; not in the sense in which Irene Watson (2015) explains that ‘ruwe is an extension of our-selves; to take land from us, and to develop and damage the ruwe is also to damage our relationship to country’ (20); or ‘Nunga laws acknowledge ownership in terms of ancestral and spiritual connection to the land’ (22). My home, home (*kumusha; ekhaya*) in the sense that for me most resonates with Watson’s *ruwe*, is elsewhere. Although I draw parallels (and at times implicitly conflate) my situation as an African in relation to academic philosophy in Australia with that of other racialised philosophers, including First Nations colleagues, I maintain in what follows that

Indigenous peoples ought to have a privileged place in fashioning, setting, and sitting at the philosophical table.

Frank Talk

Let us begin with Llanera's suggestion that courage is required to publicly discuss the racial and colonial underpinnings of academic philosophy in contemporary Australia. If that is the case, why embark on that perilous exercise? Could it be that there is a comfort, for the marginalised, in believing that those who marginalise us do so primarily out of ignorance? Might that especially be so for the philosopher for whom faith in the power of reason might equate to the promise that one can outperform oppression – that what is needed for institutions to be made just is to have some reasonable representative of the marginalised speak and present a compelling argument?

Véronique Tadjó describes a marginalised group of people who hold this belief, who 'were persuaded that, in the end, justice would prevail. All they needed to do was to explain, convince, find the right words even if, in the beginning, no one listened to them. Even if some people tried to silence their voices' (2008: 74). But Tadjó also has one of their number ask, 'where was the fire they needed to make their words burn deep? . . . Where was the strength they needed to give to their words some cutting edge, the power of weapons?' (74). What power, in other words, authorises speech?

In one sense, the question of the 'authorisation' of speech is moot. During the period of *de jure* apartheid in South Africa, Steve Biko (1987 [1978]) wrote under the pseudonym 'Frank Talk'. The brutal circumstances surrounding his death suggest that even when imprisoned, Biko may have continued to engage in *frank talk* despite the predicable response of his gaolers (Biko 1979). Thus, even under the darkest clouds of colonial violence, one needs no authorisation to speak. One 'merely' needs to choose to do so. In fact, Costica Bradatan goes so far as to suggest that philosophy may have to do with making oneself 'fundamentally vulnerable' (2015: 6); walking on tightrope without a safety net. He claims that 'ultimately philosophizing is not about thinking, speaking or writing – *not even*

about performing them in bold, courageous fashion – but about something else: deciding to put your body on the line’ (7, emphasis added). As philosophers, we are enjoined to choose – to make the decision to speak.

Yet, the question of the authorisation of speech does not go away if by speech one means what Gayatri Spivak means when she asks after the subaltern (Morris 2010). That is, I can commit to frank talk all I like, to saying and writing what I like, but the power to have my words do things, the ability to perform successful illocutionary acts lies beyond one’s force of will (Hornsby and Langton 1998; Austin 2011; Dotson 2011). The ability of the Black philosopher, for example, to point out the contradictions of academic philosophy in the colonial context is constrained by one’s situation within the colony.

For many of us, the initial response to this state of affairs is to perform for the powers that be. Ours are performances in which the speaker’s first task is to assure those in the audience who are presumed to be the legitimate heirs of Plato and Aristotle that this child of Ham ought to be listened to and heeded.⁴ It is not necessarily, not for the most part, the content that is delivered that demonstrates one’s credibility. Rather, one’s credibility lends credence to the content that one delivers. The right sort of performance can augment credibility and add credence to the content of a paper. Students, early career academics, and minorities know this only too well. We tend to sing and dance; we go over and perfect our routines with particular rigour. And if we are honest, our performances are aimed at reassuring the establishment, and perhaps ourselves, that we are just like them; that we are safe; that what we are saying follows from the hallowed traditions on which the establishment is built; that taking us seriously will enrich it.

Why do this to ourselves? ‘Whiteness is an unassailable fortress,’ warns Houria Bouteldja (2016: 42), one which holds its occupants captive to fear.

Fear is undefinable. It’s the malaise of whiteness. The mind suppresses but the heart races. It recognises in any non-white face . . . a survivor of the colonial enterprise, at the same time as it recognises the *possibility* of vengeance. This is why you are afraid. Must you be reassured? It would be futile, since your military arsenals haven’t done the job. (Bouteldja 2016: 40–41, emphasis in original)

Most of us know that it is not only with police officers, immigration officials, and the media that we must move in slow, deliberate motions. Most of us know that we must also be careful with our white counterparts because too much truth, too much of ourselves, too much frankness will terrify them, and that to our detriment. So, we perform in certain ways. We translate ourselves in ways that we hope will both be palatable yet mostly true to whatever it is we hope to communicate. Alexis Wright puts it this way:

We try not to become or appear too emotional lest we offend non-Aboriginal people who do not like to be confronted by emotional and angry Aboriginals. We speak in a polite language that has been invented for talking about Aboriginal people and how non-Aboriginal people want to hear us. Sadly too, some of us are immune to or unaware of our own loss, and rush to emulate the oppressor to oppress our own people, and censor our thinking and feelings in the act of compromise. (2016: 62)

Too often, we go so far as to submit to initiation into the white fortress that is the community of practice that is academic philosophy in Australia. And to varying degrees, our induction demands that we play the part of the child at the cusp of initiation into adulthood, as described in Camara Laye's novel, *L'Enfant Noir*:

Who could believe that only a few hours ago a whole herd of lions, led by Kondén Diara himself, had been angrily roaring among these tall reeds and grasses, separated from us only by a wood fire which now was almost dead? No one would have believed it, and I should have doubted the evidence of my own ears and thought I was waking up from a bad dream, if one or the other of my companions had not now and then cast a suspicious glance at the tallest grasses. (1974 [1954]: 86–87)

This passage calls for further thinking – thinking which is beyond the scope of this article. It calls for a conversation with Descartes regarding dreams, thinking and sociality, perhaps revolving around Kyoo Lee's suggestion that 'philosophy is the dream of the philosopher passingly unfolding itself' (2013: 119). Be that as it may, our immediate concern is that Laye could come to *know* that Kondén Diara is a mythic being who was never present and that the 'herd' of lions was actually a group of the village elders. He could *learn*. However, an inductee who would maintain an untroubled faith must choose to hold the implausible as true – they must will

the implausible beyond even possibility and into actuality – because such faith is the price of admission required.⁵ A similar submission is demanded of the philosopher of colour asked not only to take seriously, but take to be true the idea that the ASCP ‘is expressly and publicly committed to “the development of a pluralistic Australasian philosophical community”’ (Bignall 2018).

The Price of Admission

Myth is important. Bradatan goes as far as to suggest that ‘the formation of intellectual and philosophical traditions is not governed by strictly rational patterns, but sometimes by forms of mythical thinking and imagination’ (2015: 11). Omid Tofighian elaborates: ‘in specific cases myth cooperates with philosophy within interdependent unity rather than as two separate genres with their own meanings, aims, and agendas’ (2016: xii). What sort of philosophical tradition cooperates and is intertwined with the pretence of a racial egalitarianism that does not exist, a homogeneity willed into plurality? A colonial one. What price is paid by the Black philosopher who chooses to inhabit that fortress? A dear one, claims to the contrary notwithstanding:

Obviously there is far more for the ASCP to do, and whiteness remains a significant issue for our Society and for Australian society more generally, but I think it misrepresents the nature of the problem and obscures the potential for remedy when this effort remains unacknowledged or is denied. It conveys the (false) impression that the ASCP is self-unaware of its defining Eurocentrism and its place in a world indelibly marked by European imperialism, *and is hostile to diversity and so perhaps is not a place Black academics can ever occupy happily, or even would want to inhabit.* (Bignall 2018, emphasis added)

Despite problems with the film (Ramphele 1996; Ngugi 2003), there is an instructive scene in *Cry Freedom* (Attenborough 1987). Donald Woods, a ‘white liberal’ newspaper editor, is invited to spend time with Steve Biko in a Black township. Sitting at a table with several people, the Woods character, the only white person among those gathered, takes exception to the fact that the efforts of white South Africans to better the situation of their black counterparts has

gone unnoticed in all of the criticism levelled by the latter against the former. The Biko character explains his position by stating, ‘We don’t want to be forced into your society. I’m going to be me as I am, and you can beat me, or jail me, or even kill me. But I’m not going to be what you want me to be’.

Another guest at this symposium then chimes in, ‘The best you want for us, is to be allowed to sit at your table, using your silver and your china. And if we can learn to use it like you do, then you will kindly let us stay. We want to wipe the whole table clean. It’s an African table, and we will sit at it in our own right’ (Attenborough 1987, transcription mine).

The image of the table here is not incidental. Biko himself had written the following:

Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda was still a militant and used to be a hero of a friend of mine. His often quoted statement was, “This is a black man’s country; any white man who does not like it must pack up and go”. . . . When fellow Africans were talking like that how could we still be harbouring ideas of continued servitude? We knew he [the white] had no right to be there; we wanted to remove him from our table, strip the table of all trappings put on by him, decorate it in true African style, settle down and then ask him to join us on our own terms if he liked. (1987 [1978]: 69)

The ASCP is not an African table, nor should it be. Should it not, however, be a table at which First Nations peoples sit first? Unfortunately, ‘Eurocentric canons and racialised perceptions of Indigenous scholarship are deployed to designate this work as politicised or limited to questions of coloniality and perspective’ (Macoun et al. 2019: 384). Hence the following characterisation of Goenpul scholar, Aileen Moreton-Robinson: ‘an undisputed leader in the field of critical race and whiteness studies. . . . But Professor Moreton-Robinson’s work, though philosophical in nature, does not engage deeply with Continental European thought and for this reason she has not so far been invited as an ASCP keynote’ (Bignall 2018).

We return to the matter of the power to speak. What philosophy is, what Continental Philosophy in Australia ought to be, these things are not fixed, nor did they fall from the heavens on tablets of stone. The question then of who ought to have a say on what

philosophy *here* looks like, is political. It has to do with power.⁶ The idea that one's work may be philosophical yet deemed inadmissible because it has been determined to engage insufficiently with European thought, in a discipline that prides itself on its reflexivity, openness, and democratic leanings, is troubling. It is an affirmation of diversity predicated on 'the diverse' having sworn allegiance to the status quo. Hence:

While I admire her [Moreton-Robinson's] work and reference it in my own scholarship, it is evident that she considers "Western thought" in its entirety as party to the colonial enterprise of individualist white possession. She is not herself interested in exploring how Western thought is actually a very diverse affair including significant traditions of non-possession and anti-imperialist concepts of non-sovereign and relational being. (Bignall 2018)

There is an unwitting irony in this admission of drawing on the author of *The White Possessive*. At the outset of that book, Aileen Moreton-Robinson states:

I use the concept "possessive logics" to denote a mode of rationalization . . . that is underpinned by an excessive desire to invest in reproducing and reaffirming the nation-state's ownership, control and domination. As such, *white possessive logics are operationalised within discourses to circulate sets of meanings about ownership of the nation, as part of commonsense knowledge, decision making, and socially produced conventions*. (2015: xii, emphasis added)

We thus fall into *mise-en-abîme*, white possessive logics potentially deployed even on the text describing and decrying white possessive logics, with no apparent effect on the operation of white possessive logics within the formal structures of Continental Philosophy in Australia. If nothing else, it is another instructive scene on the limits of reason and deliberation within the colony. Limits which extend to and beyond philosophy departments. Limits which recall Fanon's frustration: 'I had rationalized the world and the world had rejected me in the name of color prejudice. Since there was no way we could agree on the basis of reason, I resorted to irrationality. . . . For the sake of the cause, I had adopted the process of regression. . . . Irrational up to my neck' (2008: 102). Yet the outcome is predictable: 'they were countering my irrationality

with rationality, my rationality with “true rationality.” I couldn’t hope to win’ (111).

The fact that Descartes takes the pineal gland to be the seat of the soul does not preclude serious study of his work, nor does it detract from his position as a leading figure in the canon of philosophy in Australia. The problem with a view of ‘Western thought’ in its entirety as party to the colonial enterprise of individualist white possession’ cannot be that such a view may be wrong, given that demonstrably wrong views are still taught, debated, and taken seriously in Australian philosophy departments. The problem has to do with how that view positions ‘Western thought’, and by implication, white Australia. The failure to pay fealty to those in the fortress makes one inadmissible. The rendering of the unadmitted as inadmissible leads to the palimpsest described by Evelyn Araluen Corr: ‘Living within the temporal and spatial dispossessions of colonialism, Aboriginal realities are shadowed and concealed by projections of settler colonial archives onto unceded lands and bodies’ (2018: 487).

Biko’s assessment of white attempts at ‘integration’ has a sobering relevance to the process of establishing a plural philosophical society in Australia: ‘The myth of integration as propounded under the banner of liberal ideology must be cracked and killed because it makes people believe that something is being done when in actual fact the artificial integrated circles are a soporific on the blacks and provide a vague satisfaction for the guilty-stricken whites’ (1987 [1978]: 22). Biko rejects this integration myth – this invitation to enter and sit at a table that has already been set on condition of one’s submission and subjection to the role ascribed by the dominant group:

Does this mean that I am against integration? If by integration you understand a breakthrough into white society by blacks, an assimilation and acceptance of blacks into an already established set of norms and code of behaviour set up by and maintained by whites, then YES I am against it. I am against the superior-inferior white-black stratification that makes the white a perpetual teacher and the black a perpetual pupil (and a poor one at that). I am against the intellectual arrogance of white people that makes them believe that white leadership is *sine qua non* in this country and that whites are the divinely appointed pace-setters in progress. I am against the fact that a settler minority should impose an entire system of values on an indigenous people. (24)

I imagine someone protesting, ‘But in Australia, we settlers are the majority and therefore it goes without saying that our system will be the dominant one’. My response is threefold. First, it was not always the case that settlers were the majority of the inhabitants over this landmass, today known as Australia. I invite my imaginary questioner to consider how it came to be that settlers make up the vast majority of Australia’s population. The lasting lesson that I took from study of Robert Nozick’s (2010) political philosophy is the idea that ahistorical conceptions of justice are inadequate. Second, Biko was writing in a particular context, hence his specificity. Nothing in his written work or court transcripts suggests that he would have been comfortable with a settler *majority* imposing an entire system of values on Indigenous peoples. Finally, even if a pollster were to show that the majority of Australians are comfortable with Anglo-Celtic values being imposed on First Nations peoples, an acceptance of that view by philosophers would reflect a grievously sorry state of affairs.

Caliban, Suubi, and Amo

In *Disciplinary Decadence*, Lewis Gordon calls on philosophers to think about the academy in light of Caliban’s situation, rather than from the perspective of the ‘historical, global tale of Prospero’ (2016 [2006]: 117). Shakespeare’s (2015 [1623]) Caliban is a monster of colonialism’s imagining, monstrous enough to be considered more animal than human. Aimé Césaire retells the story in a manner that takes seriously Caliban’s humanity. This human Caliban lays a grave charge at Prospero’s feet: ‘You have taught me nothing at all. Except, of course smatterings of your language in order to understand your orders: chop wood, do the dishes, fish, plant vegetables, because you are far too idle to do it yourself’ (Césaire 1969, 25, translation mine).

Césaire points out that typical of colonial education, Prospero’s tutelage has to do with establishing relations of servitude. This same pattern can be seen in the following contemporary appeal to Black philosophers to follow the example of Toussaint L’Ouverture:

In 1801 he held the thinkers and architects of the Continent [Europe] to account when he claimed for colonized Haitians the humanist principles

of liberty, equality and fraternity enshrined in the French Revolutionary doctrine of the Rights of Man. In this spirit, I would like to take this opportunity to encourage readers of this forum who are involved in the study of Continental Philosophy to take up membership of the ASCP, to become actively involved in the Society's activities, and *to share with current ASCP members in the ongoing task* of the decolonization of European thought. (Bignall 2018, emphasis added)

Note that the lesson that is being put forward – the position that the racialised and colonised are implored to take – is not that of an assertion of sovereignty or independence; nor a recognition of the utility of insurrection; nor is it directed at encouraging the confidence needed to separate from an unjust order. There is no acknowledgement that ‘the slave-trade and slavery were the economic basis of the French revolution’ (James 1989 [1963]: 47). Nor is there a recognition of L’Overture’s skilful political negotiation of his position:

He uses the prestige of his position as general of the armies of the King, but he calls on the Negroes in the name of liberty and equality, the watchwords of the French revolution, of which royalty was the sworn enemy. Neither would help his aims, so he was using both. (James 1989 [1963]: 126)

The attempted domestication of L’Overture encourages the Black philosopher, contra L’Overture’s example, to stay within the fold, colouring as loudly and emphatically as one likes, within the lines drawn by one’s ‘tutors’.⁷ At its very best this offers the ‘pupil’ the sort of ambiguous position that Tshepo Madlingozi (2018) points to among *amaRespectables*: whatever is achieved is achieved on the coloniser’s grounds (see also Modiri 2018). What Madlingozi must excavate around South Africa’s Black legal elite is made explicit here: we are called on to ‘share . . . in the ongoing task’. Consider that this ongoing task has thus far operated as though there were no philosophy here prior to European settlement. This ongoing task has turned a blind eye to the fact that First Nations peoples have a privileged insight into European thought by virtue of bearing the brunt of colonialism in every facet of life, including academia. Does not the person of colour who joins this enterprise enlist into a colonial project? If Madlingozi is correct and *amaRespectables* are ambiguous figures, what of those who heed Bignall’s call?

Hence Césaire's Caliban, who asserts his sovereignty in another language, conceptual and linguistic: 'You speak of history . . . you have stolen everything . . . Uhuru!' (Césaire 1969: 28, translation mine). *Uhuru* is the KiSwahili term for freedom in which East African anti-colonial demands were articulated during the struggle for political independence.⁸ It is a term which Caliban knew Prospero did not understand.⁹ Caliban uses it nonetheless as an expression of his sovereignty, recognising as does Bouteldja, the imperative for rupture:

We will be beggars so long as we do not break with our tutors, those who decide for us, without us, and against us. . . . We will be beggars so long as we remain prisoners of their philosophy, of their aesthetic, and of their art. We will be beggars so long as we do not call into question their version of History. Let's accept rupture, discord, discordance. Let's ruin the landscape and announce a new era. Let's decide not to imitate them, to invent and draw from other sources. (Bouteldja 2016: 117)

Referring to the Black writer in apartheid South Africa, Mark Sanders raises the 'complicity of being a beggar, pandering to white authority and thereby reinforcing collective subordination' (2002: 106). Sanders also refers to Jacques Derrida's *Given Time*, in which the latter points out that the 'beggar occupies *a determined place* in a social, politico-economic, and symbolic topology' (1992: 134, emphasis added). Derrida goes on to note that this place 'delineates the pocket of an indispensable internal exclusion. According to a structure analogous to the *pharmakos*, of incorporation without introjection and without assimilation, the expulsion of the beggar keeps the outside within and assures an identity by exclusion, the exception made (*fors*) for an interior closure or cleft' (135).

It is not so much exclusion that is troubling here. We can go and work and think elsewhere. What is troubling is the partial inclusion that is 'the pocket of an indispensable internal exclusion'. Worse than mere tolerance, this is a need of us to sustain or uphold the structure that is Continental Philosophy in Australia. Minority philosophers are needed to testify to the community's good conscience; to the virtue of its members. We are part of the architecture, integral elements in its self-image. The danger for us is in succumbing to the same wishful thinking that tempts Suubi, in Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's magnificent *Kintu*:

Inspect the house: make sure everything is perfect before they return. Dishes washed and put away in the pantry, the sink is empty and dry, lunch is ready and the floor is spotless. Close the kitchen door behind you. The dining table is laid for lunch. . . . Ah, the peace and quiet when they're not here: this becomes your home then. When there is no one to remind you who you are, then you belong. It's a great feeling. This could be your home, they could be your mother and father; they are your siblings. . . . Their father calls you Kaama, niece of him. Close the dining-room door behind you.' (2018: 123)

Suubi is delusional, in the strict sense of the term. She holds a false, fixed belief regarding her place in this family. Yet tragic as Suubi's situation may be, the lot of the servant who wins a place among the masters may be even worse. Consider the following assessment of the eighteenth-century African philosopher, Anton-Wilhelm Amo:

But there you are: throughout his long intellectual odyssey Amo the African could find no other partners but Europeans. Cut off from his people at the age of four, thrown into a world which inevitably saw him as different, he was unable to appeal to any but the European scientific tradition, unable to measure himself against other classics or debate interlocutors other than those put forward by Western society. Amo the African wrote in Latin for a European public, could be read and possibly appreciated, discussed, criticized only by that European public. He forged his own problematic from themes and concepts integral to the history of European philosophy and contributed by his work to the enrichment of that history at a time when there was no comparable theoretical tradition in his own country. (Hountondji 1996: 129)

From the vantage of the call 'to share with current ASCP members in the ongoing task' . . . Amo was successful. Incredibly and unusually so for a man of his circumstances in those times. But Hountondji's sadness and Madlingozi's ambivalence overshadow that success. This goes beyond mere sentimentality. Not only does Hountondji lament 'the monstrous extraversion of our theoretical discourse' (130) that accompanies this sort of 'success' – the manner in which the fruits of our intellectual labour are directed elsewhere, away from our communities; he also comes to the sober and sobering assessment that:

within the framework of European philosophy, and given that he was conscious of belonging to another civilization, Amo could not but be an author of the second rank – that is to say not an original thinker but a

honest professor of philosophy whose sole merit may have been at most that, like a mirror, he reflected the thought of his time in terms of his theoretical choices within it. (112)

Some might argue that Hountondji goes too far here. I think it is enough that he might not. It is enough that the danger with agreeing to sit at the coloniser's table, at which one's standing is predicated on acquiring *savoir faire* as understood by those sitting at the head of the table, is akin to a tutelage or servitude in which at best one might graduate into a mirror.

Interrogating Desire

Uncritically submitting to the coloniser's supposedly revolutionary ideals is inadvisable. The problems with acquiescence should now be apparent. Rebellion and revolt, however, may seem attractive to some. James Baldwin helpfully explains their limitation in his 'Everybody's Protest Novel'. Regarding appeals for inclusion directed to the white establishment, even those appeals that take the form of protest, Baldwin observes the danger of reinscribing the status quo, all the while offering the reassurance that something is being done, that progress is being made, that there is hope. He views this advocacy as 'a mirror of our confusion, dishonesty, panic, trapped and immobilized in the sunlit prison of the American dream' (2012: 19). Biko comes to a similar conclusion: 'Their protests are directed at and appeal to white conscience, everything they do is directed at finally convincing the white electorate that the black man is also a man and that at some future date he should be given a place at the white man's table' (1987 [1978]: 21–22).

When we appeal to white recognition of our humanity, even when that appeal takes the form of direct confrontation, we are in so doing engaged in a reinscription that is acquiescence. What does this mean for the Black philosopher; for the Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, African, Asian, or other 'other' philosopher in Australia, or indeed in South Africa? I think it cautions against acquiescence and direct confrontation with the status quo, which too easily slips into and too easily marks an already present desire for that status quo. Baldwin expresses this better than I can:

Below the surface of the [protest] there lies, as it seems to me, a continuation, a complement of that monstrous legend it was written to destroy. . . . [The two] are locked together in a deadly, timeless battle; the one uttering merciless exhortations, the other shouting curses. And, indeed, within this web of lust and fury, black and white can only thrust and counter-thrust, long for each other's slow, exquisite death; death by torture, acid, knives and burning; the thrust, the counter-thrust, the long-ing making heavier that cloud which blinds and suffocates them both, so that they go down to the pit together. Thus has the cage betrayed us all. (2012: 22)

Let us resist the urge to lock horns. Let us recognise what too often animates it: desire. Let us instead focus on grounds, and in so doing, exit this cage. 'Does philosophy answer a need? How is it to be understood? Philosophy? The need?', Derrida asks (1982: x). He then goes on: 'Can one violently penetrate philosophy's field of listening without its immediately . . . making the penetration resonate within itself between the middle and inner ear, following the path of a tube or inner opening, be it round or oval? In other words, can one puncture the tympanum of a philosopher and still be heard and understood by him?' (xii).

Derrida grants the cage that is philosophy as inscribed by the Western academy to date a status or concreteness that I do not think is warranted. If philosophy is some defined or 'concrete' entity, is that not because those most invested in the cage bars remaining intact desire just that: an intact cage? Put another way, is philosophy some bounded territory bequeathed by the gods, or an a priori entity with markers and boundaries that precede this particular philosopher or that? Belief in either of those options justifies the disregard of Indigenous peoples' philosophies by settlers, who proclaim themselves either agents of the divine or discoverers and chroniclers of what is. Yet surely 'philosophy' actually lies somewhere beyond the walls of the cage asserted by the conquerors. Surely the fear of an epistemic abyss that lies beyond those bars is akin to old European fears of abyss beyond the waters that they had charted. Would 'braving' the abyss, seeking other grounds on which to philosophise, really be worse than the seduction or erotics of assimilation suggested by Derrida? 'Consequently, to luxate the philosophical ear, to set the *loxōs* in the *logos* to work, is to avoid frontal and symmetrical protest, opposition in all the forms of *anti*-,

or in any case to inscribe *antism* and overturning, domestic denigration, in an entirely other form of ambush, of *lokhos*, of textual maneuvers' (xv).

I want to do with neither the dance that is 'frontal and symmetrical protest' nor the more oblique seduction to which Derrida gestures. Nor do I want to invest any hope in that status quo softening, pausing long enough to be struck by my humanity, and in response, behaving towards me with the justice that my humanity demands.¹⁰ Prospero's are not the only grounds on which one can think nor are they necessarily the best site on which to do meaningful work.

Here is a Tree

Dladla's (2017) conception of philosophy that emerges around a table fashioned from the African tree is instructive. We can debate the degree to which that table has already been fashioned and laid out; whether or not it is still to be carved; whether there is one African tree or there are many; what aspects of that raw material we should make use of and what we ought to discard. Those deliberations should be our grounds – the place from which we think, we pursue wisdom, we cultivate a sociality and an epistemic community that more adequately meets our needs and to which our desires are more fruitfully directed.¹¹

But this place, the land on which I write, Turrbal and Jagera country, is not mine. These lands have their own trees, from which tables have and continue to be fashioned and refurbished. Recall Biko's comments on the arrangement and seating plan at the African table. Consider also Wiredu's suggestion that 'philosophy is, and has been, culture-relative in various subtle ways. . . . One of the hallmarks of an African orientation in philosophy must surely be a sensitivity to what is specific to the African situation' (2009: 33). A non-parochial reading of this, a just reading, points to an Azanian ethic which privileges the preoccupations, methods, and insights of the First Nations peoples who precede the settler philosopher's arrival to the table. That is, both Biko and Wiredu can be read as arguing for the priority of the African situation to Africans on the basis of our heritage but also implicitly arguing for the ethical priority of Indigenous peoples in any given place. A result of human movement today is that many

of us will find ourselves in countries or on country not our own. One need not divest oneself of one's heritage but only of the authority to set terms in other jurisdictions. As the Shona proverb states, *mwana wamambo muranda kumwe*. This can be rendered into English as 'the ruler's child has the status of a servant when elsewhere'. It is the expression of a fluid, relational ethic, one which has the effect of cultivating an ability to relinquish the arrogance that can accompany authority, and an openness to learn. There is much to learn here, at tables that predate the Australian academy and that persist, often despite rather than with the aid of that academy. There is much to learn about other ways to grapple with and try to make sense of what is. For instance, Irene Watson writes:

The utopian ideal is one in which we are able to participate on our own terms as First Nations Peoples. . . . A muldarbi-free place is a place to love the ruwe and its song law. Love of ruwe and its song law is the ground, which needs to be revitalised, before any meaningful dialogue can begin. . . .

How to speak to each other, with the dominance of the muldarbi way of knowing is marred by gaps in understanding. The groundwork is yet to be done, the muldarbi is yet to shed its clothes and come to a place where we can begin to consider how we might move on, away from the colonial project. (2005: 153)

I confess a poor understanding of what that means. However, there was a time, not very long ago, when I had a poor understanding of Kant's first critique; a time when I would not have known what was meant by 'Kant's first critique'; and a time when words like *Dasein* and *différance* were completely opaque to me. It was, however, made clear to me that proficiency demanded that I learn these things, so I did.

Outside the cage of colonial philosophy is a tree. There is a forest. There are tables around which a multitude of symposia are in progress. Alongside our embodiment, I take as given that *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*; that a person is a person among, by virtue of, and in concert with other people. What sort of a person is cultivated in an epistemic cage or colonial fortress? What manner of philosophy emerges on those grounds?

Thankfully, here, outside the cage, is a tree. There is a forest. There are tables around which a multitude of symposia are in progress.

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Notes

1. 'What is it that unifies us? The beginning, at least, of an answer is easy. It is our biologico-cultural identity as *homines sapientes*' (Wiredu 1996: 22). On these grounds – 'the underlying idea being that the possibility of cultural universals is predicated on our common biological identity' (1) – Wiredu builds his complex, philosophical edifice.
2. 'I wish to emphasise that the philosophical exposition here is written from somewhere, the "raced" regions of the Earth sharing a common collective experience because of our supposed doom to servitude just because we are "black" or "peoples of colour". . . . Despite the geographic distance between us, "we" are still heirs to the collective historical experience of racism and racialism. Memory conjoins and consolidates our experiences, past and present. It cannot be over-emphasised that the body is the medium of the insertion of all entities into the world as well as their mode of being in the world' (Ramose 2017: 24).
3. Perspective (in chiShona *munhu paamire*, literally 'where a person stands') is intimately related to identity and grounds. From their perspective, the question that Laurie et al. see regarding the situation of the Australian philosophical community is this: 'if continental philosophy in this region has failed to sufficiently centre and attend to vital questions of gender, colonialism, and ecology, what is to be learned from this failure' (2019: 10)?

NoViolet Bulawayo suggests that 'it's the wound that knows the texture of the pain' (2013: 285). From the perspective of the wounded, the abstract interrogation

of the process of wounding takes a back seat to the imperative to prevent further insult and injury.

4. 'By and large . . . the Negro was seen as a descendant of Ham, bearing the stigma of Noah's curse' (Sanders 1969: 523). I ask that the reader keep this in mind, and with that, the following insights from Edmond Mbiafu's reading of Mongo Beti:

'The discourse of the curse of blacks is articulated shortly after independence, in terms of a *double subjection*: on the one hand, allegiance to the neocolonial authorities . . . and on the other hand, *obedience to all that represents the West in its dominant Japhetic whiteness, that is, white missionaries and their religion, then the Western mentors of the young African dictatorships*. Blacks must understand that they are cursed, and must accept their destiny as slaves: "*Je suis le potier, et vous êtes la glaise. C'est Dieu qui l'a voulu ainsi*" "I am the potter, and you are the clay. God willed it thus"' (Mbiafu 2002: 25, emphasis mine).

5. I recognise the hermeneutic harm that I have done to Laye's text through this reading. It is a reading conducted on my own, contemporary grounds. There may have been a time and place in which Kondén Diara was no mythic being nor article of faith. There may still be places today where that is the case. To be clear, mine is a judgement regarding my situation. It is not normative, as in the case of Wiredu's valorization of 'the scientific spirit' over what I suspect he would read as an example of 'the backward aspects of our culture' (2009: 41).
6. Nicole Watson's analysis of law in the Australian academy resonates here: 'The above criticisms are not to suggest that those employed within QUT School of Law are a pack of hateful racists, who deserve to be condemned to the pits of academic purgatory. However, they do counter any claims of objective legal education. Decisions to exclude Indigenous voices from both the makeup of the faculty and the curriculum are deliberate and political' (2005: 6).

It is also worth dwelling on Mark Sanders' observation at the outset of his *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid*: '*After apartheid, the question of complicity is unavoidable* – not simply because it is necessary to know whose resources gave apartheid life, nourished and defended it, but also because apartheid . . . occasions a questioning of and thinking about complicity itself' (2002: 1, emphasis mine).

How much more urgent is the question of complicity in Australia, which has yet to mark a comparable transfer of power, hence has yet to enter into an equivalent of Saunders' 'after'?

7. For in-depth analysis of the imperative to move onto on the conceptual terms of the powerful in order to be intelligible to the powerful, see my discussions around 'inescapable colonialism' (Mukandi 2015); South-South dialogue (Mukandi 2017); and 'The North African Syndrome' (Mukandi 2019).
8. Julius Nyerere explains his recourse to the vernacular for articulating social and political terms as indicative of the decision to build 'on the foundation of our past, and building also to our own design. We are not importing a foreign ideology . . . and trying to smother our distinct social patterns with it. We have deliberately decided to grow, as a society, out of our own roots, but in a particular direction and towards a particular kind of objective' (1971: 2).
9. In their May 1943 editorial response to Lieutenant de Vaisseau Bayle's characterisation of the journal *Tropiques*, Aimé Césaire, et al. wrote: "'Racists", "sectarians", "revolutionaries", "ingrates and traitors to the country", "poisoners of souls", none of these epithets really offends us. . . . Don't expect us to plead our case, or to launch into vain recriminations, or discussion. We do not speak the same language' (cited in Kelley 2000: 14). In this case, Caliban decides that it is not worth their time to bother with Prospero. See Amir Jaima (2019) for a philosophical exploration of this stance.

10. When Alia Al-Saji asks whether hesitation might ‘be a means for interrupting’ or even ‘healing philosophical disregard’ (2018: 338), I read her as providing those within fortresses a way out. My refusal, on the other hand, is of the deployment of hesitation as a means of burrowing into that prison.
11. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie paints a stunning picture of this community: ‘The meetings were held in the basement of Wharton Hall, a harshly lit, windowless room, paper plates, pizza cartons and soda bottles piled on a metal table, folding chairs arranged in a limp semi-circle. Nigerians, Ugandans, Kenyans, Ghanaians, South Africans, Tanzanians, Zimbabweans, one Congolese and one Guinean sat around eating, talking, fuelling spirits, and their different accents formed meshes of solacing sounds. . . . Here Ifemelu felt a gentle, swaying sense of renewal. Here, she did not have to explain herself’ (2014: 139).

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