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# From Dis-Enclosure to Decolonisation: In Dialogue with Nancy and Mbembe on Self-Determination and the Other

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**Abstract:** What might a sense of decolonisation (not)/be? Or, what comes after the logic of the coloniser? This question is at the centre of many debates in South Africa and extends to all countries worldwide who are faced with the challenge of self-determination by rethinking the world we live in after the domination of the world by the so-called “all enclosing Western world-view” incarnated in various oppressive political, economic, social and intellectual practices. The challenge of rethinking the world following the demotion of the West from its centre, as will be argued, is not only for those who are particularly living in a previously colonised world, but also for those who were/ still are in the position of dominance, which is a universal task. It is at this point where the various philosophical traditions meet, more precisely that of continental philosophy of religion and African philosophy. Accordingly, this article seeks to explore the question in two parts by way of an inter-cultural approach. Part one retraces the critique of (a certain) Western metaphysics in terms of its onto-theological constitution. Subsequently, this onto-theological constitution is discussed in relation to the notions of identity and political to outline what a sense of decolonisation might not be, that is a re-enforcement of the *logic of the coloniser*, which denies the full existence of an-other. In part two, four suggestions are made on what a sense of decolonisation might be in dialogue with Jean-Luc Nancy and Achille Mbembe. The suggestions include a two-sided attitude of reticence/dissidence against falling back into the problematic logic. A move to consider decolonisation as the *dis-enclosure* of the world, which in turn, opens up a space for an alternative ontology that acknowledges our existence as always being-in-the-word *with* others. The fourth suggestion concerns the implications of this alternative ontology regarding a non-substantialist notion of identity as *mêlée*, which is the action of constant struggle within the re-opened space for what it means to live in the world. Finally, it is concluded that the alternative ontology of decolonisation as dis-enclosure implies a universal task of taking responsibility for the reparation of the dignity of the whole of humanity within our shared world.

**Keywords:** dis-enclosure; decolonisation; self-determination; identity; onto-theology; African philosophy; continental philosophy of religion; intercultural philosophy; Jean-Luc Nancy; Achille Mbembe

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## 1. Introduction

One of the main themes in post-colonial thought, including the post-apartheid world of South Africa<sup>1</sup> concerns self-determination. Intertwined with the challenge of determining the meaning of the world one lives in is interpreting otherness or making sense of the stranger. This challenge of

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<sup>1</sup> Hermeneutically speaking the article is inspired by the 2015–2016 student protests and the subsequent call for decolonisation of the university and society at large, which for the first time has resulted in the question of decolonisation and

determining the self and at the same time interpreting the other may be formulated into the classic philosophical question that is concerning the relationship between the particular and the universal. Take, for example, the debate outlined in the African philosophical tradition regarding the quest for self-identity. On the one side, as [Fayemi \(2011\)](#) describes, you have the ethnophilosophies<sup>2</sup> that focus on the particularity of African cultures to the point of cultural relativism. On the other side, you have the anti-ethnophilosophies that attempt to account for cultural universalism.<sup>3</sup> Within the South African context, the question concerning self-determination and the interpretation of otherness includes eras of colonisation (an overemphasis of the universal character of Western identity), apartheid (an overemphasis on particular differences), and democracy (the attempt to rethink the relationship between the universal and particular). In short, problems arise when either the universal or the particular is overemphasised and it dictates the meaning for its counterpart.

Important here is to ask how these events have shaped the relationship between the so-called Western subject and the African other? Firstly, through the domination and *enclosure* of the world by the “all enclosing Western worldview”, i.e., a (pseudo) universalist perspective that became incarnated in various oppressive political, economic, social, and intellectual practices and institutions. Secondly, by the call for *decolonisation*, which in South Africa has become a “buzz word”, especially after the 2015–2016 student protest at universities across the country. This call seems to appeal to the particularity of African cultures translated into the ethnocentric ideology<sup>4</sup> advocated as Afrocentrism or Pan-Africanism, which has dominated African philosophy in recent decades<sup>5</sup>, and may be understood as responses that aim to liberate Africa and African personhood from Western epistemic oppression ([Eze 2015](#); [Mudimbe 1988](#); [Appiah 1992](#); [Mbembe 2002a, 2002b](#)). In other words, it is an attempt at self-determination in the midst of a world that is enclosed by a dominating Western worldview. The problem, however, with this position, outlined by [Mbembe \(2002a\)](#) in *African Modes of Self-Writing*, is that often manifests as the logic that it seeks to overcome and thereby it merely reverses or redirects the *logic of the coloniser*. The tables are simply turned, where everything “African” is seen as positive. In turn, everything “Western” is regarded as negative. This leads to a sense of decolonisation as destruction. The *de-* of decolonisation refers to an emptying out or exclusion of anything Western. Moreover, no critique against this position is considered; hence, one is left with cultural relativism ([Wiredu 2004](#), p. 12).

The challenge thus may be formulated in the following question: What comes after the logical of the coloniser? Or, put differently, what might a sense decolonisation be, that does not reinforce the same dominating and oppressive thought system it proclaims to overcome? Attempts at formulating an alternative sense of decolonisation<sup>6</sup> to that of destruction only, are to be found. These attempts have a double *modus operandi*. First, to critique the negative aspects of the colonial heritage. Second,

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self-determination within South Africa taking centre stage. Although the discourse concerning decolonisation itself is not new, nor is it restricted the South African context, the engagement thereof within the broader South African philosophical tradition has only recently been taken seriously—twenty plus years after the fall of apartheid. Hence, these events act as the background and rationale to take up the question concerning decolonisation once more by learning from the established discourse and imagining possible steps forward by being based in the particular, and in conversation with the universal project.

<sup>2</sup> Scholars that form part of this group according to [Fayemi \(2011, p. 260\)](#) include: [Abraham \(1966\)](#); [Mbiti \(1969\)](#); [Sodipo \(1973\)](#); [Anyanwu \(1983\)](#); [Tempels \(1959\)](#); and [Senghor \(1991\)](#).

<sup>3</sup> Philosophers that are included in this classification according to [Fayemi \(2011, p. 260\)](#) are: [Bodunrin \(1985\)](#); [Hountondji \(1983\)](#); [Appiah \(1992\)](#); [Towa \(1991\)](#); and [Wiredu \(1980\)](#). Although Mbembe has a complex relationship with African philosophy and is influenced by a wide range of authors from Fanon and Césaire to Foucault and Nancy, for the purpose of this paper Mbembe could also be placed among these thinkers that aim at rethinking the relation of the universal and the particular. See [Mbembe \(2017\)](#).

<sup>4</sup> Ideology understood here according to [Hutchens' \(Hutchens 2005, p. 40\)](#) definition: “thought that does not critique or think through its own provenance and its relation to reality”.

<sup>5</sup> For a brief outline of the history of the African intellectual development and some of its important figures, see [Eze \(2015, p. 408\)](#). For a brief outline of the history of the African intellectual development and some of its important figures, see [Eze \(2015, p. 408\)](#); [Ramose \(2005, pp. 1–9\)](#); and [Wiredu \(2004, p. 1–28\)](#).

<sup>6</sup> Other forms and themes within the decolonisation and broader African discourse include not only the conceptual decolonisation but also religion, politics, literature and gender. For an overview of the different themes see [Wiredu \(2004\)](#).

to attempt to engage with aspects of the colonial past and the rest of the world that may be beneficial to humankind. A notable thinker in this category is Wiredu (1998, p. 17) who defines decolonisation as follows:

By decolonisation, I mean divesting African philosophical thinking of all undue influences emanating from our colonial past. The crucial word in this formulation is “undue”. Obviously, it would not be rational to try to reject everything of a colonial ancestry. Conceivably, a thought or a mode of inquiry spearheaded by our erstwhile colonisers may be valid or in some way beneficial to humankind. Are we called upon to reject or ignore it? That would be a madness having neither rhyme nor reason.

For Wiredu (1998, p. 17), the “emptying out” lies especially with the conceptual heritage of the colonial past with its binary categories that are promoted by language, for instance, English. But, at the same time, there is also an element of self-critique. Another thinker that takes up this position is Ramón Grosfoguel. Grosfoguel (2011, p. 3) holds that the aim of decolonisation that is not only an essentialist and fundamentalist anti-European critique, but “it is a perspective that is critical of both Eurocentric and Third World fundamentalisms, colonialism and nationalism”. It is in this line of thought that aims at a double critique, which the current piece aims to engage with the question in an inter-cultural fashion addressing the problem on an ontological level.

Accordingly, the article is divided into two parts. Part one will attempt to outline what a sense of decolonisation might not be, by firstly formulating the problem concerning colonisation in terms of the critique of the so-called Western world-view, i.e., Western metaphysics, which will also be called *the logic of the coloniser*. More specifically, the discussion will focus on what is meant by the end or closure of (a certain) Western metaphysics<sup>7</sup> by referring to Martin Heidegger’s (Heidegger [1956] 2006b) analysis of the onto-theological constitution of this system of thought and the implications and critique thereof relating to the notion of identity. Next, the question concerning the political that is intertwined with this system of thought will be explicated via the writings of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy (1997a, 1997b). Subsequently, with the help of Mbembe (2002a, 2002b), these critiques of the political and identity may be translated in terms of the question concerning African subjectivity, or *the colonised*, in this instance. The final remarks in the first part consider the challenge of rethinking what it means to live in South Africa, where decolonisation would not mean a reinforcement of the logic of the coloniser through an African world-view that simply aims to replace that of the West as the ultimate reference point. Part two of this paper will explore what a sense of decolonisation might be. Firstly, a two-sided attitude of reticence and dissidence following the analyses in part one will be suggested. Next, Mbembe’s (Mbembe 2010) use of Nancy’s (Nancy 2008) notion of *dis-enclosure* as decolonisation will be investigated. Additionally, the discussion of dis-enclosure as decolonisation will be expanded in terms of Nancy’s rethinking of the question of being as being-*with* or what Mbembe advocates as the complexity and plurality of reality, which is an alternative ontology and way of creating the world, as the shared world we live in, anew. This section will also consider the implications of the alternative ontology for a notion of identity that is non-substantialist to counter the metaphysical notion of identity as  $A = A$ . Finally, the implications of the alternative ontology are considered as the universal task of taking responsibility for the reparation of humanity as a whole in the one world that we share.

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For a discussion of the link between decolonisation and feminism in South Africa see Wilkinson (2005): *South African women and the ties that bind*.

<sup>7</sup> With the notion of ‘a certain Western metaphysics’, the author aims to acknowledge the debate concerning the onto-theological constitution of metaphysics within contemporary continental philosophy of religion and that one should be hesitant to simply place the whole tradition in one group. See, for instance, the work of Marion (2001) and Smith (2014) on the Radical Orthodoxy movement. Both claim that onto-theology is a modern phenomenon only, see also Schrijvers (2011, p. 188) for an outline of the different positions.

## 2. What a Sense of Decolonisation Might Not Be: The Reinforcement of the Enclosure

Adorno (2005, p. 365) once stated that the task of thinking should aim not to repeat what happened in Auschwitz. In order to do so, one has to understand the thought system that constituted it. It is in this spirit that I suggest turning to Heidegger to attempt to outline the problem concerning colonisation in terms of identity and the political by rehearsing his analysis of the question concerning the constitution of (a certain) Western metaphysics, as outlined by Gerber and Van der Merwe (2017). For Heidegger (Heidegger [1956] 2006b, p. 64), this system of thought asks two questions, namely: What are beings? and How do they fit into a greater whole? This system has however not asked the question of Being—what it means to exist (Heidegger [1956] 2006b, p. 3). Meaning as the *Being* of beings has instead been conceptualised as a double ground: a grounding, or German: *ergründenden*, ground of the general unity of things that accounts for the *onto-* of the phrase onto-theology. Simultaneously, a grounding, or German: *begründenden*, ground that signifies the highest principle or first ground that unifies the whole and accounts for the *theo-* of onto-theology. Hence, it is this logic or onto-theo-logic, which accounts for the figuration of the *Being* of beings. Moreover, the space of the figure named and held by the *Being* of beings in this schema have in the history of Western thought subsequently been held and replaced by figurations like God, History, the Subject, Man, and most recently National Identities and Race. Restated, the figure, also being understood as substance or essence, acts as the double ground that provides meaning to beings and the system they fit into as a whole.<sup>8</sup>

How, then, does the notion of identity—or what may be better named as the metaphysical identity of the subject; or as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy (1997a, p. 111) formulate identity as the homogenisation of the social body that operates in the same manner—relate to the logic of onto-theology? Heidegger (Heidegger [1956] 2006b, p. 33) helps to start unpacking this question in *Identity and Difference*. Herein, Heidegger explicates that the metaphysical formulation of identity that reads  $A = A$ , reformulated by Fichte in the Enlightenment period as  $I = I$ , and in turn, by Schelling as “the indifference of subject and object” (Stambaugh 2001, p. 10), is constituted by the mediating syntheses of object to subject according to, of course, onto-theo-logic. In other words, concurring with the onto-theo-logic of the Subject, the world including objects and others, are synthesised back into the unity of the Subject as highest and grounding reference point. The world is understood according to the categories of the Subject<sup>9</sup>. Once more, the colonised other is synthesised into the categories of the Western Subject. Mbembe (2017, p. 1) re-emphasises this point when he writes in the introduction of *Critique of Black Reason*: “[...] we need first to remember that, throughout its history, European thought has tended to conceive of identity less in terms of mutual belonging (cobelonging) to a common world than in terms of a relation between similar beings—of being itself emerging and manifesting itself in its own state, or its own mirror”.

Next, we may ask: How does the metaphysical or onto-theological constitution of identity relate to the question concerning the political (French: *Le politique* in contrast to *La politique*, translated as politics)? Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy outline the result of the Western metaphysical tradition in what they term the domination of the political and the loss of transcendence as alterity<sup>10</sup>, as incarnated in the various totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, including apartheid. Which, echoing Sartre’s formulation of Marxism, is the unsurpassable horizon of our times (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1997b, p. 126). Totalitarianism, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy (1997b, p. 126) argue, may be understood here in two senses. Firstly, following the analysis of Arendt (1966, pp. 437–59) regarding the term, totalitarianism is a state where no political question has any chance to emerge that may correspond to the transformation of the world. Political questions may only arise from within the

<sup>8</sup> See also Derrida’s (Derrida [1978] 2005) critique of Western metaphysics the plots an *archai* point of reference at the centre of the structure, which relation to colonisation would be the Western identity.

<sup>9</sup> See also Emmanuel Levinas’ critique of Western Metaphysics, wherein he argues that the other is synthesised into the Same, i.e., the knowing subject par excellence (le Moi connaissant) (Levinas 1996, p. 89).

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion on the relation of transcendence and the political, see Gerber and Van der Merwe (2017).

ideological phraseology that is accepted, for example, from within the ideology of class; the nation; the State; the meaning of history; or in our instance the West.

The second sense is to be understood against Lefort (1988, p. 17) definition of democracy, that denotes “the empty space of power”, which was previously occupied by a figuration and results in the so-called “democratic crisis” (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1997b, p. 127), through, for instance, the disembodiment of power. “In a word: totalitarianism is here each time thought as the attempt at a frenzied re-substantialisation—a re-incorporation or re-incarnation, a re-organisation in the strongest and most differentiated sense—of the ‘social body’” (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1997b, p. 127). Democracy is accordingly understood as keeping empty, or in tension, the space that was previously held by the onto-theological figuration. This will-to-figure, which is a defining characteristic of the Western metaphysical tradition, comprises, on the one hand, the effacement of the figure of God, Man, History, etc., and on the other, the constant urge to replace the empty space with another figure, most recently, that of the National identity, or in terms of colonisation, the Western identity. The figuration of the identity of the “social body”, of course, operates in the same fashion as the metaphysical identity of the subject, i.e., all other areas of reference are excluded and the world is synthesized into the figuration of the “social body”, with the renewed telos and utopia of a homogenous society. One voice dictates the meaning for society, and thereby we have the completion or closure as the enclosure of the world. Mbembe (2017, p. 35) also outlines how the formation of race<sup>11</sup> is a product of this logic: “Historically, race has always been a more or less coded way of dividing and organizing a multiplicity, of fixing and distributing it according to a hierarchy, of allocating it to more or less impermeable spaces according to a *logic of enclosure*. Such was the case under the regimes of segregation”.

More importantly, the overhanging consequence of such an onto-theological figuration of the subject or the social body is a matter of exclusion (Nancy 2000a, p. 24). That is the exclusion of everything that does not fit into the identity of the Subject or Social body, or in a reversal of terms, included as excluded. The exclusion proceeds ultimately in the denial of alterity, of difference, i.e., the existence of the other. Restated in terms of colonisation, according to the onto-theo-logical figuration of the Western identity as the highest and grounding reference point, which constitutes the logic of the coloniser, the colonised other is excluded and their existence regarded as a problem to justify in the same manner as that of the coloniser.

In the same vein of thought, Mbembe (2002b) discusses the critique of Western metaphysics and the effects of the denial of the African subjectivity most famously in *On the Post-Colony*. One might understand the effects of colonisation as described by Mbembe as the experience of the excluded other in a state of totalitarianism—“colonial discourse ends up producing a closed, solitary totality that it elevates to the rank of a generality. So reality becomes enclosed within a pre-ordained madness” (p. 178)—where the existence of the African subject, who is the other of the Western metaphysical subject or social body, is a problem to justify. Or as Mbembe (p. 2) writes:

We should first remind ourselves that, as a general rule, the experience of the Other, or the *problem of the “I” of others and of human beings we perceive as foreign to us*, has almost always posed virtually insurmountable difficulties to the Western philosophical and political tradition. Whether dealing with Africa or with other non-European worlds, this tradition long denied the existence of any “self” but its own.

Hence, in this specific instance, the African subject, who is the other to the Western metaphysical subject, is thought of in two ways. Firstly, as the negative or opposite of the Western identity forming a binary opposition through the synthesis into the categories of the Western subject. Here, Mbembe

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<sup>11</sup> For a discussion on the creation of race and Blackness see Mbembe (2017, pp. 10–77) and Eliav-Feldon et al. (2009) *The origins of racism in the west*. Important to note is that Blackness has not always had a fixed meaning. For a discussion on how Blackness has been rethought in a liberating sense within the African philosophical tradition see Mbembe (2017, pp. 151–78).

evokes the thematic of the animal, which stands in opposition to the rational human, exemplified in, for example, the text of Hegel, dealing with Africa in his *Reason in History* (Mbembe 2002b, p. 173).

Secondly, if the Western metaphysical identity of the subject constitutes the existence of a human being, or in Heidegger's words, *Dasein*, then what is excluded and denied is correspondingly seen as less than a non-being, an empty figure (Mbembe 2002b, p. 173). Restated, the other, or African subject, is nothing:

In the colonial principle of rationality, however, there is a clear difference between being and existing. Only the human exists, since the human alone can represent the self as existent, and have a consciousness of what is so represented. From the standpoint of colonialism, the colonised does not truly exist, as person or as subject (Mbembe 2002b, p. 187).

This denial according to Mbembe (2002b, p. 182), defines the violence *par excellence* of colonisation.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, it is the role that language plays in constituting reality through constant repetition that allows the coloniser to deny the existence of the colonised and the colonised's subjectivity (Mbembe 2002b, p. 181). These identities are also linked to the creation of race, that is the creation of being black and being white. Ultimately, the creation and categorising of peoples were fuelled by capitalism<sup>13</sup> to serve the purpose of producing a relation of subjugation. The African subject, or "Black man", was resultantly only exploited for his/her labour, and was not allowed to take part in creating the world amongst other humans.

To recapitulate, the problem of the logic of the coloniser in terms of identity and the political becomes apparent when unpacking the critique of Western metaphysics as a system of thought that is constituted by onto-theo-logy that produces figurations, such as the Subject or Social body, which serve as ultimate reference point. The consequence of these figurations is the exclusion and ultimate denial of the existence of the other as human, who becomes categorised as nothing or less than human. The problem is situated on an ontological level, producing a negative epistemology concerning the other or African colonised subject. *Injustice* as the denial of the existence of the other as fully human.

To briefly then sketch what a sense of decolonisation would not be: If at the heart of the problem of colonisation lies the logic of the coloniser that constitutes the Western worldview and forms the enclosure as the closed totality for the colonised, thereby not permitting or acknowledging the existence of anything that may contradict this totality, then decolonisation would not aim to reinforce the logic of the coloniser. In other words, a sense of decolonisation would not be a re-figuration of a highest and grounding reference point, even that of an African worldview or identity, which would, in turn, deny the existence of anything that contradicts the totality structured around this viewpoint or identity as the centre in a totalitarian fashion. Put more plainly, decolonisation thought along these lines, would not be more just than that which it aims to replace. Paradoxically, it would rather reinforce the logic of the coloniser. Injustice will be followed by more injustice.

Restated: In endeavouring the task of decolonisation, one might aim to avoid simply falling back into the temptation of a new onto-theological figuration. For even if the African identity may take the place of its Western counterpart as the highest and grounding reference point for making sense of the world, it has still not, Mbembe argues, addressed the question of what it means to be an African, i.e., the lived everyday experience of what it means to live in Africa. It is falling back into the same onto-theo-logic that constituted the original binary oppositions of difference, which Mbembe (2002a) calls the falling back into the *metaphysics of difference*, which has not been overcome thus far in the struggle concerning the question of African identity, but rather reinforced. Moreover, according to Mbembe, the violence sprouting from this logic of subjugation, i.e., the logic of the coloniser, is thereby re-appropriated by post-colonial regimes after Independence. In Syrotinski's (Syrotinski 2012, p. 415) words:

<sup>12</sup> See also Césaire (2000) and Fanon (1967).

<sup>13</sup> See Mbembe (2017, pp. 10–37, 179) for a discussion of the birth of the racial subject as constituted by capitalism.

The relations of subjection are perpetuated by a process of the indigenization of the State that colonialism had set in motion. This can be seen, for example, in the ways in which elements of ancestral tradition are appropriated and “reinvented” by African potentates in order to consolidate their power. Governance and the exercise of violent power are thus indissociable, and a logical extension of the violent origins from which they have emerged.

In post-colonial Africa, there are plenty examples of this phenomena. The attempts of Africanism, Afrocentrism, and most prevalently, Pan-Africanism seem to fall prey to the temptation of onto-theological figuration. Or, as [Nganang \(2007, p. 45\)](#), writing on the Rwandan genocide states, this kind of essentialist or “identitarian thinking” informed the rationale for motivating mass killing. This is nothing other than the injustice of the denial of the existence of the other. Specifically in the South African context, one might consider that apartheid, itself being the result of a project of decolonisation and self-determination, took over the logic of the coloniser with the difference that the world was not structured around the imposed universal identity as with British colonialism. But, rather on the particular differences with the White Afrikaner Christian identity forming the highest reference point and double ground. The problem with this variety of discourses from Afrocentrism to Afrikaner Nationalism is not the desire for self-determination itself, but rather, as I attempted to outline above, how the conception of a particular identity in this process is constituted in relation to the totality or the universal and the ethical and political consequences of such a move.

### 3. What a Sense of Decolonisation Might Be: The Dis-Enclosure of the World

We now turn to the second part of the article, as an attempt to outline what is to be done at the closure of this Western metaphysical tradition, or what a sense of decolonisation might be. If the analysis of the problem holds, that is we are faced with the challenge of rethinking the ontological status of the self in relation to the other, and more specifically here, the colonised other, then I would like to suggest the following remarks on what a sense of decolonisation might be.

(1) Decolonisation would entail the act or attempt to avoid an onto-theo-logical re-figuration or re-substantialisation, thereby keeping open “the empty space of power”. This attempt at eluding totalitarian thinking may be translated into a two-sided attitude. On the one side, the attitude of reticence ([Nancy 1991, p. 83](#)), of reserve and generosity not to choose to fill the “empty space of power” with a new figuration. For instance, with a new myth of a lost African identity, which is detached from lived experience. On the other side, the attitude of dissidence ([Syrotinski 2014](#)), which is to fight and resist the prevailing enclosure of the world, which takes the form of a nostalgic remanence of the lost mythologies of Afrikaner identity with its distinction between “God’s chosen people” versus the “*goddeloses*” (godless), or the British colonial distinction between the civilised and barbarians. The two-sided attitude echoes the modus operandi of the double critique regarding thinkers like Wiredu and Grosfoguel discussed above.

(2) In turn, this two-sided attitude opens a space where the category of being “nothing” or less than human that denoted the colonised, may be rethought, and one’s place as a being in the world can be reclaimed through an alternative ontology. In one of Mbembe’s more recent writings namely, *Sortir de la grande nuit: Essai sur l’Afrique décolonisée (Emerging from the Dark Night: Essay on Decolonized Africa)*, he takes up the question by exploiting Nancy’s lexical innovations, most notably the notion that is translated as *dis-enclosure*<sup>14</sup> (of the world), from the French *la décloison*, which [Nancy \(2008\)](#) articulates in the book entitled *The Deconstruction of Christianity* ([Syrotinski 2012, p. 410](#)). The notion of *dis-enclosure* for Nancy indicates “the act of opening up something that is not only closed but also enclosed, such as an enclosure” ([Syrotinski 2012, p. 416](#)). What is enclosed, at the closure of the political, is of course, the other, or in this case, the colonised. Enclosed in the enclosure of Western metaphysics. The action

<sup>14</sup> The German translation of the term *dis-enclosure* taken over by [Mbembe \(2016, p. 85\)](#) is *Welterschließung*, which includes the reference to world, hence making it the *dis-closure of the world*.

of dis-enclosure is, and I again quote Syrotinski (p. 416): “thus a profoundly transformative action, that is at the same time a coming into being, or *eclosión* (literally: hatching)”. Or, as Mbembe (2010) puts it: “The idea of *déclousion* includes that of *eclosión*, of an eruption, or advent of something new, of an opening out” (p. 68). Here, “the term *déclousion* is thus adopted by Mbembe as a paronomastic link-word joining together *eclosión*, *déclousion* and *décolonisation*”<sup>15</sup> (Syrotinski 2012, p. 416). Thus, the hatching of something new, that is the dis-enclosure of Western metaphysics, is the second remark concerning what a sense of decolonisation might be taken in contrast to a sense of decolonisation as only destructive.

(3) What may be thought as the dis-enclosure? As analysed in part one, what is to be thought is an alternative ontological status of and relation to the other as colonised that breaks with the onto-theological tradition. Keeping in mind the two-sided attitude mentioned above, one may turn to Nancy’s reformulation of Heidegger’s *Dasein* analyses, as renewing the analyses where *Dasein*, that is to be in the world, is to be thought as *Mitsein*, or being in the world *with* others. For Nancy (2000a), “Philosophy is, in sum, the thinking of being-with; because of this, it is also thinking-with as such” (p. 31). Consequently, the existence of the other in relation to the metaphysical subject or even *Dasein* does not need justification and escapes the synthesis into the categories of the knowing Western subject, because it is given before the constitution of the subject. In other words, the Subject as the onto-theological figuration of modernity is decentred, and it is no longer considered as the highest and grounding reference point. However, Nancy does not uncritically follow Heidegger’s analysis in 1927 of *Dasein* in *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*). Although Heidegger aimed to break with the Western metaphysical tradition by asking what it means to exist in the world, which means always already existing with others, Heidegger’s *Dasein* is critiqued as constituting a solipsistic subject whose relation to others is still problematic. Accordingly, for Nancy, the analysis of *Mitsein* (being-with) in *Sein und Zeit* remains nothing more than a sketch, and although *Mitsein* is coessential with *Dasein*, it remains in a subordinate position (p. 93). *Mitsein* is subordinate due to the focus that falls on *Dasein*’s choice of being authentic or inauthentic, resulting in the dissimulation of *Mitsein* under the notion of *Das Man*. Hence, “as such, the whole existential analytic still harbours some principle by which what it opens up is immediately closed off” (Nancy 2000a, p. 93). Nancy calls for a re-opening of the analysis of *Mitsein*, which would neither lead to a completion thereof nor setting up *Mitsein* as a principle. For, in principle, being-with escapes completion and the taking up of the place of a principle.

What is necessary, then, according to Nancy “is that we retrace the outline of its analysis and push it to the point where it becomes apparent that the coessentiality of being-with is nothing less than a matter of the co-originary of meaning—and that the ‘meaning of Being’ is only what it is (either ‘meaning’ or, primarily, its own ‘precomprehension’ as the constitution of existence) when it is given as with” (Nancy 2000a, p. 93). Hence, differing from Levinas<sup>16</sup>, Nancy does not place the emphasis on a reversal of the position of the preoccupation from the Subject to the Other. Or, for that matter, the replacement of the Western with the African. Rather, the decentering of the subject lies in the move to co-originary of the subject and the other, in being-*with*. The essence of *Being*, re-appropriating Heidegger (Heidegger [1927] 2006a, p. 42), is not a substance but rather “to exist” (*Zu-sein*), which for Nancy is being-with, existing with others as *being singular plural*.

To re-emphasise the point: With this re-appropriation of Heidegger into his own terminology, Nancy aims to avoid onto-theology, “because none of these three terms precedes or grounds the other, each designates the co-essence of the others” (Nancy 2000a, p. 37). Correspondingly, every other is seen as an origin, from where the world is co-created; the world occurs at each moment of the world, as each time of Being in the realm of being-with of each time with every other time (Nancy 2000a, p. 20). Consequently, there is no set example, origin, or identity, according to which to model others. What it means to exist is not given or enforced on someone by another in reference to an abstract

<sup>15</sup> Apart from identifying the task of thinking the dis-enclosure of the world within in Nancy’s thought, Mbembe (2016, p. 86) also outlines how the thought Franz Fanon is an attempt dis-enclosure of the world as self-determination.

<sup>16</sup> See Gerber and Van der Merwe (2017).



principle or identity. Rather, each time of Being constitutes a singularly unique origin of the world, making up the plurality of origins.

Furthermore, the *with* of being-*with*, which lies between the I (subject) and the other, belongs to neither. No one possesses the monopoly on the question of existence with others. The *with*, instead, exposes one to an-other. The *with* or *cum* in Latin is nothing as in no-thing (Nancy 2000a, p. 36), not a substance; identity; history; value; and, so on, that may be made into a figuration. Nor is it a category of the subject. It is rather the exposure to our ontological mode of existence as *Mitsein*, of one to an-other.<sup>17</sup> This program of re-opening ontology to its complexity is also to be traced in the agenda Mbembe (2002b), which is formulated on thinking in the post-colony:

What a certain rationality, claiming to be universal but in reality mired in the contingent and the particular, has never understood is that all human societies participate in a complex order, rich in unexpected turns, meanders, and changes of course, without this, implying their necessary abolition in an absence of centre (p. 8).

It is this complexity of what it means to exist that Mbembe (p. 17) seeks to address in what he, in turn, names the *emerging subject*, and I quote him in full:

[ ... ] the *subject* emerging, acting effectively, withdrawing, or being removed in the act and context of *displacement* refers to two things: first, to the forms of “living in the concrete world,” then to the subjective forms that make possible any validation of its contents—that objectify it. In Africa today, the subject who *accomplishes the age* and validates it, who lives and espouses his/her contemporaneity—that is, what is “distinctive” or “particular” to his/her present real world—is first a subject who has an *experience* of “living in the concrete world.” She/he is a subject of experience and a validating subject, not only in the sense that she/he is a conscious existence or has a perceptive consciousness of things, but to the extent that his/her “living in the concrete world” involves, and is evaluated by, his/her eyes, ears, mouth—in short, his/her flesh, his/her body.<sup>18</sup>

The *emerging subject* is a subject that understands who he/she is in relation to the world, in participation in the creation of the meaning of that world, not isolated, nor by subjugation. But, in relation to the other.

(4) The notion of identity after the decentring of the metaphysical subject as the reference point—understood according to the alternative ontology of Nancy, or the emerging subject of Mbembe—would no longer be a search for an essence, an identity that is reduced to a fixed set of attributes a person should possess. Rather, identity is to be thought according to the plurality of singular beings, that is the complex reality of the context that we live in. Identity, hence, may be thought of in terms of what Nancy (2000b) refers to as a *mêlée*<sup>19</sup> (French), also *melee* in English, which is an action rather than in substantive terms from where attributes may be named and collected. Moreover, the *mêlée* has a double meaning or form, namely “that of combat and that of love”—“the *melee* of Ares to that of Aphrodite” (Secomb 2006, p. 456), which emphasises that *both need each other*.

<sup>17</sup> One may also compare this ontological move to the exposure of being-with, to Magobe Ramose’s (Ramose 2003) discussion of Ubuntu, which “disposes every person to encounter every other person as human” (Eze 2015, p. 416).

<sup>18</sup> In this citation, Mbembe introduces the question of embodiment that regretfully cannot be addressed here. For an overview of the question of embodiment and its various interpretations in the contemporary phenomenological tradition see (Fotiade et al. (2014); Kearney (2015); Manoussakis (2015); Pretorius (2016)).

<sup>19</sup> To understand the difficulties of translating the word from French to English and comprehending its full meaning, I refer here to the translators of Nancy’s text, namely Robert D. Richardson’s and Anne E. O’Byrne’s footnote on the translation of *mêlée*: “The French word *mêlée* has entered the English language in an impoverished form. Throughout this piece, it should not be read as meaning only a confused fight, a fray, scrap, skirmish, or scuffle, that is, as a word in English. Rather, it remains an untranslated French word meaning a fight, but also a mingling of a more sexual nature. In addition, as its connection to the verbs *mêler* and *se mêler* (‘to mix’) make clear, the ideas of mixture, mixing, motley, and variegation are also implied” (Nancy 2000b, p. 205).

Thus, the idea of a “pure” identity is challenged (p. 149). There is no such thing as a “pure” Western, nor “pure” African identity, which somehow exists apart from other identities in a vacuum, or outside the world from where it then mixes with the other. Rather, as Nancy argues, identities need each other: “Identity is by definition not an absolute distinction, removed from everything and, therefore, distinct from nothing: it is always the other of an-other identity” (Nancy 2000b, p. 149). Furthermore, this move from substance to action implies that there is no absolute origin from where a pure identity could sprout (Nancy 2000b, p. 151). Instead, each identity is always already a multi-identity, each culture a multi-culture, that is in a continuous *mêlée* not only within the space its own identity demarcates, but also with other identities or cultures that form each other, and need each other, to be an-other. Or, again in Nancy’s words:

Cultures, or what are known as cultures, do not mix. They encounter each another, mingle, modify each other, reconfigure each other. They cultivate one another; they irrigate or drain each other; they work over and plough through each other, or graft one onto the other. (Nancy 2000b, p. 151).

Therefore, when we would speak, for instance, about the South African culture, following Nancy (Nancy 2000b, p. 153), we would speak about the different voices that make up style or tone of the culture and “the various different voices and aptitudes (*portées*) for interpreting this tone” (Nancy 2000b, pp. 152–53). But, this style or tone is nowhere present in a person, or subject. One would rather say that it is between persons. Moreover, breaking with the Western-metaphysical notion of identity, i.e.,  $A = A$ , identity is never simply identical with itself in terms of time duration. Again, this line of reasoning resonates in Mbembe’s thought on African identity:

There is no African identity that could be designated by a single term, or that could be named by a single word; or that could be subsumed under a single category. [ . . . ] Neither the forms of this identity nor its idioms are always self-identical. And these forms and idioms are mobile, reversible, and unstable. Given this, they cannot be reduced to a purely biological order based on blood, race, or geography. Nor can they be reduced to custom, to the extent that the latter is constantly being reinvented. (Mbembe 2002a, p. 33).

#### 4. Towards a Universal Task of Responsibility and Reparation

To summarise, what a sense of decolonisation as the quest for self-determination might not be, is simply reinforcing the same logic of the coloniser, i.e., taking an essentialised identity ( $A = A$ ) and making it the ultimate reference point that transcends our lived experience and ontological condition of existing with others. According to this logic, the identity of the self that is taken as the highest reference point dictates the meaning for the other. The construction of race and the Black man as less than human in relation to slavery, the colony, and apartheid (Mbembe 2017, p. 78) is an example of this logic. A variety of decolonising projects from Afrikaner Nationalism to Pan-Africanism also fall into the trap of reinforcing the logic of the coloniser.

To ask then what comes after the logic of the coloniser and its construction of racial identities is to attempt to open a space where responsibility for both the past and the future can be taken and wherein reparation can be enabled. For if the logic is continuous, one construction replaced by another, it simply leads to the perpetuation of oppression through the misrecognition of our given ontological condition of being-with others, and the other as fully human. But, the space that may be opened by the (1) double attitude of reticence and dissidence allows for one to (2) rethink anew therein what it means to (3) co-exist in our shared world, and conceive of (4) identity beyond race. The space can only be kept open if the responsibility for reparation is taken up by all in the *mêlée*. Hence, if we need each other to be an-other, then the task of reparation is not only that of a particular context that is doomed to self-determination in a vacuum, but rather a universal one.

Or, to turn around the order of discussion, by rethinking our sense of identity in terms of an ontology of a shared world would entail taking responsibility for both the past, and also making sure

that this kind of logic regarding race and the ontological status of the other does not continue in new forms in the future. It is then that the question of reparation can start to take place, of restoring the dignity of the other who co-exists in our shared world. To take responsibility for the past then is to take part in the reparation of the other in relation to the self in the future by thinking what it means to share the world, of being-in-the-world *with* others. According to the ontological given of being-with, this may also entail the reparation of the self, itself an-other. Stated differently, we all share the desire to be a full human being. In order for this desire to be met in our shared world, “we must restore the humanity stolen from those who have historically been subjected to processes of abstraction and objectification” (Mbembe 2017, p. 187).

In conclusion: With no abstract, transcendental, or otherworldly starting point, like a substantialised Western or African subject, identity or worldview, which implies standing outside of the world in an onto-theological fashion, our thought rather extends from the concrete world itself, i.e., from being-in-the-world. In other words, it starts from the *mêlée* as a struggle between all of the various voices that make up the style and tone of the world that we find ourselves in. It is the struggle for self-determination itself that is important, and therefore the space for this struggle should be kept open and not be filled. There is not one voice that may impersonate and fill-up the space that is named South Africa, but rather there exists the plurality of singular voices that make up the South African melody. Restated, self-determination would thus take place within the *mêlée*, in the struggle for meaning, that allows for a new emerging subject, rather than being imposed from the outside by the other misrecognising your being-with in the world. Again, as Mbembe (2017, p. 183) reminds us, the desire for self-determination that is the “proclamation of difference is not necessarily the opposite of the project of the *in-common*”. Rather, the particular is to be thought in relation to the universal project, that is the project of what Mbembe (2017, p. 162) finds in Fanon, called *the rise of humanity*. Justice would then be co-creating the meaning of the world we live in. Once more, in the words of Mbembe (2017, p. 177):

Until we have eliminated racism [the logic of the coloniser] from our current lives and imaginations, we will have to continue to struggle for the creation of a world-beyond-race. But to achieve it, to sit down at a table to which everyone has been invited, we must undertake an exacting political and ethical critique of racism and of the ideologies of difference. The celebration of difference will be meaningful only if it opens onto the fundamental question of our time, that of sharing, of the common, of the expansion of our horizon.

We are thus called to think our being-with in the world, or again: to take up the universal responsibility for reparation in the active struggle, with the attitude of reticence and dissidence, for the creation of a world dis-enclosed and decolonised.

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