# Crossing epistemic boundaries through/in literature: A case study of Mashingaidze Gomo's *A Fine Madness*

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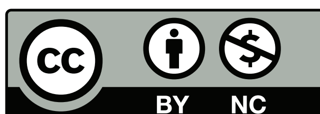
## Abstract

Over the years, knowledge production has been restricted to specific disciplines or epistemic centres. In fact, during the colonial period, European knowledge became the only legitimate knowledge at the expense of other knowledge systems and/or ways of knowing. However, in recent years, there has been a significant shift from narrow, Eurocentric methods of knowledge generation to broader, more inclusive and transcultural approaches. Some scholars have conceptualised this shift as a response to globalization and technological advances that have transformed the world into a virtual space, while others have seen this as signalling the shortcomings of modernity itself. Decoloniality as a framework of knowledge generation has become popular among scholars because it seeks to shift the epistemic centre from its assumed location in the West to other, non-Western locations. Literary studies are broadly concerned with representing, among other things, cultural, economic, and political realities of society and different worldviews of people in different localities. This article offers a reading of the Zimbabwean writer Mashingaidze Gomo's novel *A Fine Madness* as a decolonial text that advocates epistemic freedom for Africa by challenging Western epistemic hegemony.

**Keywords**: Decoloniality, the West, Africa, epistemology, knowledge systems

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## Author biography

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## Introduction: Conceptual framework

In recent years, scholars have started to embrace decoloniality as a framework for research and knowledge production. Some view this move as a response to globalisation and the advent of new technologies that have broken cultural and geopolitical boundaries. Others see it as the only way to deal with new complex problems to which the modern world seems to have no answers. I consider decoloniality an appropriate framework for this analysis because decoloniality seeks to challenge Western epistemic hegemony by, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1993) puts it, "moving the centre" away from its assumed position in the West. In the context of a modern/colonial world that conflates Western rationality with modernity, "decoloniality is needed to clear the way for new intercultural communication" and "for an interchange of experiences and meanings" (Quijano 2007, 177) across the world. Quijano (2007) writes against the grain of Western 'provincial' rationality that masquerades as universal reason. What he calls "new intercultural communication" is in fact "inter-epistemic communication" (Mignolo 2007, 453) which recognises the 'pluri-versality' of knowledge.

While decoloniality is a relatively new phenomenon, which seeks to demystify modernity and the globalisation of Western thought, this article argues that literary artists have always been preoccupied with capturing and representing local ways of knowing. In fact, literature as a field of enquiry is preoccupied with representing diversities of knowledge and experiences in society. Therefore, a close reading of literary texts is likely to not only provide knowledge on particular human stories, but also reveal how people in different geographical locations interact with, and make sense of, their immediate surroundings. A critical reading of literary texts may also reveal "silenced histories, repressed subjectivities, subalternized knowledges and languages" and uncover other-knowledges submerged in "the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality" (Mignolo 2007, 452). In this article I provide a reading of Mashingaidze Gomo's *A Fine Madness* as a decolonial text that seeks to democratise the global epistemic terrain by "deprovincializing Africa and provincializing Europe" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018a, 3).

Decoloniality means different things to different people. This article conceptualises it as an approach that recognises the plurality and interdependence of knowledge. In other words, decoloniality recognises that humanity, in its diversity, has many ways of relating to and interpreting the world. Decoloniality is not only about liberating formerly colonised societies from the shackles of Western thought, but also about the "liberation of intercultural relations from the prison of coloniality" (Quijano 2007, 178). It seeks to open up all centres of knowledge to that which they share and to that which lies beyond them. Decoloniality implies "freedom of all peoples to choose between various cultural orientations" (Quijano 2007, 178) and to appreciate other cultures as legitimate centres of knowledge. Mignolo (2007, 453) conceptualises the "decolonial shift" as involving delinking from Western theocentric and egocentric knowledge systems and moving towards a "geo- and body-politics of knowledge" which recognises the 'contextuality' and 'situatedness' of knowledge. This article argues that the creative process that culminates in a work of art involves transgressing knowledge boundaries and integrating pockets of knowledge from various knowledge centres. Decoloniality springs from a realisation that the world has multiple centres of knowledge that require equal recognition. As Maldonado-Torres (2007, 261) writes, decoloniality aspires for a world where "racialized subjects could give and receive freely in societies founded on the

principle of receptive generosity". The whole discourse of decolonisation is "an invitation to dialogue" because it seeks to reconcile knowledge systems separated by centuries of coloniality/modernity.

Mashingaidze Gomo's novel, *A Fine Madness*, which is the focus of this examination, celebrates African ways of knowing and African ways of being in the world that were considered inferior during the colonial era. It disrupts the hegemony of Western knowledge and inserts Africa as a legitimate centre of knowledge. Karen-Claire (2001) has argued that the burgeoning of transdisciplinary studies in recent years arises from the realisation that "binary logic, the logic underlying most of our social, economic, and political institutions, is not sufficient to encompass or address all human situations". This binary logic is similar to what Maldonado-Torres (2007, 245) has called the "imperial attitude" that excludes others from the domain of reason and condemns them to the domain of irrationality. As Nabudere (2012, 33–34) has observed, there is a growing realisation that science (i.e., Western knowledge) cannot solve all of the world's problems. His notion of "Afrikology" emphasises the interdependence of knowledge and calls for a mode of "knowledge generation that goes beyond the current academic disciplines in the natural sciences as well as in the human and social sciences" (Nabudere 2012, 34).

Decoloniality is an appropriate framework for this analysis because it seeks to restore epistemic balance in a world where the West has, for many centuries, claimed to occupy the centre of the epistemic universe. I see decoloniality as a framework that allows humanity to "touch and feel the other" (Fanon 1968, 231) by facilitating lines of communication across various centres of knowledge. As Musila (2011, 1) has argued, the de-colonial project aims to level the "skewed contours of the African academy's relationship to the global landscape of knowledge production." Similarly, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018a, 3) has proclaimed that, if the problem of the 20th century was the colour line, as the American scholar W.E.B. Dubois has claimed, the problem of the 21st century is the epistemic line. While the colour line designated some races (white European) as better than others (e.g., Asian and African), the epistemic line designates some ideas (Western-American) as superior to others (Asian-African).

In view of the above, this article is three-pronged. First, it offers a reading of Mashingaidze Gomo's *A Fine Madness* as a decolonial text that seeks to challenge the epistemic dominance of the West by writing about Africa as a legitimate epistemic centre. Secondly, it examines the various ways in which *A Fine Madness* seeks to recover and re-centre African ways of knowing and being. Thirdly, it investigates the way Gomo's text debunks the myth of Europe as a progressive continent that seeks to bring light (in the sense of knowledge, aid, development, and democracy) to Africa.

## Challenging the epistemic dominance of the West in Gomo's *A Fine Madness*

*A Fine Madness* was published in 2010 against the background of Zimbabwe's soured relationship with the West as well as the so-called Second Congo War of 1998–2003 in the Democratic Republic of Congo (hereafter DRC). The author himself, now a retired soldier, took part in the war, which pitted the government of Laurent Kabila against rebels supported by Rwanda and Uganda. The novel is not only a narrative of the first-hand experiences of a soldier at war, but also a philosophical interpretation of relations between Africa and the West. In writing *A Fine Madness*, Gomo draws from his experiences of the wars in Mozambique and the DRC. As a Zim-

babwean, he is obviously familiar with Robert Mugabe's anti-imperialist ideology that constructed Zimbabwe as a sovereign land of black people with the right to chart their destiny without Western interference. In the post-2000 period, Robert Mugabe's regime resisted Western interference in Zimbabwean and by extension, African affairs, by adopting Afro-radical policies. The Mugabe regime's quest for self-determination also reflects a quest for epistemic freedom, or "the right to think, theorize, and interpret the world…from where one is located and unencumbered by Eurocentrism" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018a, 3).

As Nyambi (2013, 166) has noted, Gomo's style of writing, which blends poetry and prose, erases the distance between the narrator and the narrative, while simultaneously widening the gap between Zimbabwean/African and Western/European political aesthetics. One can conceptualise *A Fine Madness* as a counter-narrative that speaks against Eurocentrism and the perpetual economic exploitation of Africa in the skewed neo-liberal global order. In Gomo's words, the book constitutes "a refusal to have my experience interpreted for me by Europeans whose kith and kin dispossessed my ancestors" (Gomo 2010, iv).

As a decolonial text, *A Fine Madness* seeks to make sense of Africa's postcolonial condition. Why has postcolonial Africa become a theatre of conflict and war? What is the role of Europe in Africa's woes and wars, and how can Africa overcome its political and economic challenges? Why is Africa perpetually dependent on the West? Questions of Africa's development intertwine with questions of decolonisation and epistemic freedom. According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni, all other kinds of freedom, such as economic, political, and cultural, spring from epistemic freedom:

> Epistemic freedom is fundamentally about the right to think, theorize, interpret the world, develop own methodologies and write from where one is located and unencumbered by Eurocentrism (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018a, 3).

The idea of "a fine madness" encapsulates the complexity of reinstating Africa's knowledges into an epistemic universe dominated by Western knowledge. Throughout the colonial period, the West denigrated Africa's knowledge as inferior and primitive, and elevated Western knowledge to the position of universal knowledge. *A Fine Madness* is, therefore, an attempt to reinstate what the West dismissed as "madness". The manner in which the text combines prose and poetry is an attempt to underscore the plurality of forms of knowledge and advocate "a world in which many worlds can co-exist" (Mignolo 2007, 463). In the book's preface, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o characterises the text as "a collage of verse and prose narratives, memories, images, thoughts and characters" (2010, 1). The narrative tells the story of the Congo war while at the same time reflecting on the political and economic crisis in Zimbabwe and its deteriorating relations with the West.

*A Fine Madness* is an intertextual narrative that, as Nyambi (2013, 166) puts it, does not only dismantle "traditional notions of democracy but also 'traditional' Western notions of narrative form and epistemology". In a eulogy for *A Fine Madness*, Memory Chirere (2010, viii) notes that the text "quarrels bitterly" with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* while echoing Aime Cesaire's *A Notebook of My Return to the Native Land*. *A Fine Madness* debunks myths that portray Europe as the citadel of orderliness and Africa as the mother of chaos and disorder. It attempts to dismantle what Santos (2007) has termed "abyssal thinking", which divides social reality into the realm of "this side of the line" and the realm of "the other side of the line". *A Fine Madness* reconstitutes Europeans, not as good Samaritans that bring aid and order to Africa, but as "eco-

nomic rapists" (89)[1], "terrorists" (71), "barbarians" and "murderers" (105) who sponsor wars in Africa and plunder its resources. In the colonial era, Europeans deployed terms such as "primitive" and "barbarian" to mark the temporal and spatial difference between the coloniser and the colonised. Primitives were those Africans and Asians who remained stuck in tradition while barbarians were "those who were located in an inferior space" (Mignolo 2007, 471).

Writing against the grain of narratives that portray Africa as an inherently corrupt and chaotic continent, Gomo puts Europe at the centre of Africa's economic and political woes. In the first poem entitled "Tinyarei", Gomo portrays Europe as a deceptive suitor that entices Africa with money to gain access to its economic resources. In the poem "Divine Abstraction", Europe is not a benefactor that brings aid and democracy to Africa but a "foreign usurper" that repays Africa's generosity with "murder and dispossession" (20). Thus, Gomo pushes back against a narrative that blames Africa for its problems by highlighting that it is Europe that "sponsors gunmen and arms children" (16) in conflict-ridden countries such as the DRC. The "fine madness" of Gomo's title paradoxically speaks of a radical attempt to embrace other forms of knowledge, discarded and overlooked by the West. Madness is a departure from what is normal; hence, the notion of "fine madness" challenges existing Eurocentric knowledge and re-affirms African knowledge and practices often dismissed as magic and superstition. Instead of castigating the unfamiliar as wrong, evil, or primitive, Gomo seems to advocate a 'pluri-versal' way of looking at the world. The kind of 'madness' invoked by Gomo's title is "very fine and enjoyable" because it resists "the racist channels of Western intellect" (8). Juxtaposing two seemingly contradictory terms such as "fine" and "madness", Gomo emphasises the idea that contradictory ways of knowing can co-exist.

## Tinyarei: A poetic rendition of decoloniality

Although *A Fine Madness* is difficult to categorise, one way to approach it is as a collection of poetry. Gomo himself sees the text as a novel, because it has a plot, characters, and a theme. The text fuses genres the same way it advocates multiple centres of knowledge. The title of the first poem "Tinyarei/Give us a break" is an attempt to assert Africa's epistemic freedom and facilitate a dialogue across cultures, in this case between indigenous African (Shona) and Western (English) cultural frameworks. The poem celebrates Africa as a different cosmological space that does not fit into the straitjacket of the Western episteme. It represents Africa as an older woman, Tinyarei, in love with a younger man – the narrator. Under normal circumstances, one would associate the older woman with the symptoms of ageing such as wrinkles and loss of beauty. However, the narrator describes Tinyarei as "a beautiful woman, aged in beauty", with a "smile still disarming" (4).

Falling in love with Tinyarei is "madness" to (mainly European) characters who do not share the narrator's ideological values. Yet, for the narrator, Tinyarei is "the perfect thing" (4) because she represents African virtues. Portraying Africa as a woman whose beauty "demands that one should look again" (60), Gomo destabilises the Eurocentric views that associate Africa with all that is negative. The Shona name, Tinyarei, which translates as "leave us alone" or "don't interfere in our affairs", is an affirmation of African sovereignty and a refusal to bow down to the dictates of the West. To give a Shona title to a poem written in English is, however, not only to openly

[1] All citations with page numbers only are from the primary text- *A Fine Madness*

challenge Western epistemic hegemony, but also to recognise other non-European systems of thought. Tinyarei stands for Africa, a prostitute of Western interests whose beauty is "too good for an African" (4). In view of popular representations, in the Western imaginary of Africa as war-torn and disease ridden, the name Tinyarei encapsulates the spirit of resistance to the neo-colonial domination and marginalisation of African knowledge systems. It is an indictment of unfair economic relations between Africa and Europe, and an affirmation of Africa's quest for epistemic freedom.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018a, 3) has characterised "epistemological decolonization as a double task of 'provincializing Europe' and 'deprovincializing Africa'". To provincialize Europe is to "'de-Europeanise' the world", while to 'de-provincialize' Africa is to centre Africa as "a legitimate historical unit of analysis and epistemic site from which to interpret the world" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018a, 4). Gomo's narrator in "Tinyarei" affirms Africa's epistemic freedom by refusing to enter skewed economic deals that benefit Europe and impoverish Africa. The narrator insists that "an African woman should be as beautiful as she wants to be and yet not be shared or sustained by men" (5).

Gomo condemns the current global order that has reduced Africa to an economic prostitute "walking the streets of London and Paris, signing contracts that shackle her to European commerce" (5). The word "shackle" suggests self-imprisonment rather than economic freedom. The route to freedom for Africa, as implied here, is to learn to stand on its own feet, like Tinyarei who refuses to be enticed by rich European suitors. Gomo's use of gendered symbolism resonates with what Lugones (2010) has called the "coloniality of gender", referring to the way in which colonised men and women were dehumanised and erased by the colonial/capitalist/modern project. If the colonised man is not human because he is not a man, the colonised woman is not human because she is not a woman (Lugones 2010, 744). In "Tinyarei", the narrator dismisses the Western representation of Africa as a poor man who does not have the means to provide for his fiancée. The question "*kuti, Unomupei*?"/What will you give her?" implies that the African man is so poor that he cannot "afford the things that sustain" his woman's "beauty and style" (5).

In most African communities, it is the responsibility of a man to provide for his wife. The European suitor manipulates African culture to gain access to Tinyarei and her resources. The question, "*kuti unomupei*?/What can you give her?" mimics the Western attitude towards Africa: Europe sees Africa as a poor lover that cannot take care of his fiancée. However, the narrator insists that Africa does not need to rely on the handouts from the West. Tinyarei's beauty derives from Africa and does not need any affirmation from the West.

Epistemic freedom begins with appreciating Africa as a place of virtue, just as the narrator does when describing his love for Tinyarei as "a deep and powerful thing…deep and powerful as a bottomless sea" (5). The narrator affirms his epistemological centredness in Africa by metaphorically falling in love with an old woman (Africa), something that some readers may see as embarrassing. Tinyarei knows what she wants; therefore, she does not need the West to tell her who to love and why.

The narrator's deep feelings for Tinyarei suggest an organic and intimate relationship. The implication is that Africans have their own way of relating to their universe:

> And at Boende, I missed her with a nostalgia that was like madness/In the solitude of war, in which men marched in battalions and flew in helicopters, gigantic aircraft and other quick birds of

> war…sometimes in combat formations and sometimes solo, I wandered in the loneliness of memory…missing her (6)

Boende is a physical and metaphorical place of deep reflection. Geographically, it is located in the DRC, the place where the soldier-narrator lives during the war. It symbolises a vantage point from which to evaluate the war situation and the role of the West in it. Boende is also a place of intellectual illumination from which only the narrator can speak based on his experiences of loneliness and potential loss of his life. This experience highlights the value of Tinyarei in his life and shapes his overall perspective on what Africa needs to be, in the future.

The narrator's war experience generates the knowledge that enriches his understanding of the complexity of Africa's problems. The soldier-narrator's perspective provides a practical real-life dimension to Africa's developmental woes. Madness, which is normally associated with mental disorder, can also be a fine and enjoyable state of being. The narrator's experience emboldens his stance against the West. He uses the term "barbarians" (8) to refer to the Western countries that pretend to be friends of Africa even as they finance war in the DRC. Colonial discourse characterised barbarians as "those who 'lacked' something in the area of government, knowledge of Latin and alphabetic writing because they lived in state of nature, had the wrong religion (like Jews, Moors, Chinese) or had no 'religion' at all (like Indigenous people in the Americas and Black Africans)" (Mignolo 2007, 471). However, the narrator uses the term 'barbarians' to refer to Europeans who arm children in some war-torn African countries. The narrator also "stands at variance" (5) to the binary logic of Eurocentric thought that excludes other forms of knowledge and stereotypes Africa as an "invalid" (5) that constantly needs validation from the West.

Present-day neo-liberal relations put Africa in the position of a child who perpetually depends on the West for daily sustenance. In the poem "The Nightmare", African puppets of Western interests "cannot defy the donor's will" (71) even when it is evident that the donors are destroying African communities by fostering an aid dependency syndrome. Unlike the African funeral men (puppets of Western interests), traditional men and spirits of the first Chimurenga (custodians of African knowledge) cannot see the reason for "consulting white men" to deal with "African ailments" (71). The narrator recalls how, in colonial Zimbabwe, a British priest demanded that he change his name, from Muchineripi to an English name, thinking it was "pagan":

> He had said Muchineripi was too pagan and suggested some such name as Amos, Joel or Peter, all of which I had refused for fear of offending old grandfather who had given me the name/and when I chose to leave his flock instead, the priest had thought I was mad (8)

The British priest symbolises Eurocentrism, which cannot accommodate alternative knowledge systems. As far as the priest is concerned, African names are not adequate to identify a human being. Moreover, Africans ought to be grateful for European names, and so, to refuse a European name is madness. Yet, the narrator's name Muchineripi stands for an African experience that the West cannot name. Takawira Muchineripi, the narrator's full name, carries the burden of harsh experiences that Africans endured in the colonial era. Takawira literally means, "we fell into colonial bondage", while Muchineripi means "what else can you say", a verbal challenge to a defeated enemy. The full name speaks of the history of colonial bondage and the wars of resistance that Africans waged against colonialism. What the British priest fails to realise is that changing the name

is tantamount to erasing the narrator and his people's experiences of colonialism:

> … Muchineripi, like most African names, and for that matter Jewish names was a social statement… A slap… /A slap into the face of someone my grandfather had wanted to spite… (9)

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018b, 16-17) has argued that, in colonialism, Africans were not only "victims of genocides, epistemicides, linguicides, and culturecides" but also of the "theft of history". The narrator makes a point that naming is a systematic process that expresses people's worldviews. To name is to represent a worldview and express an identity. The name Muchineripi speaks of the colonial and neo-colonial challenges into which the narrator was born particularly because "no black person born into the colonial era was born into peaceful settings" (10). Similarly, the British priest Father Dion's name comes from "Dionysus the pagan Greek god of wine and fertility" (9), reflecting his own cultural heritage. Both names represent peculiar historical experiences and invite the reader to understand that the point is not to choose one over the other, but to appreciate both as embodiments of different worldviews.

## Transgressing epistemic boundaries

In the poem "Divine Abstraction", the narrator advances the notion of interdependence of knowledge, by exploring the close connection between man and nature. Decoloniality entails an epistemic shift that "brings to the foreground other epistemologies, other principles of knowledge and understanding and, consequently, other economy, other politics, other ethics" (Mignolo 2007, 453). During the Congo war, the narrator realises that different components of the universe intricately interlink in a symbiotic relationship. The distinction between objects (things in nature) and subjects (human beings) becomes blurred when human beings begin to recognise humanity in nature and bestiality in humanity. Nicolescu's (2010) notion of 'inseparability' explains that reality has different interdependent levels, which implies, as Santos (2007) has put it, that all knowledge is inter-knowledge. Similarly, the narrator realises the interdependency among humans and between humans and nature.

The Second Congo War was in fact not only a physically exerting experience, but also an intellectually stimulating one. What Chakrabarty (2000) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018a) call "provincializing Europe" is a process of de-universalising European knowledge. In other words, to provincialize Europe is to "confront the problem of overrepresentation of European thought in knowledge, social theory and education" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018a, 17). In his formulation of the notion of 'provincializing Europe' Chakrabarty (2000, 43) was interested in understanding the historical process through which Enlightenment reason has been made to seem "obvious" in different parts of the modern world. To provincialize Europe is, for him, "to see the modern as inevitably contested" (Chakrabarty 2000, 46), by recognising other narratives that have been subsumed under the umbrella of European modernity. In the same vein, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1993, xvi) has advocated moving the centre "from its assumed location in the West to a multiplicity of spheres in all the cultures of the world." The narrator's experiences during the war help him to understand not only the multiplicity of knowledge centres, but also the interconnectedness of knowledge:

> At Boende, I looked into the abstract beauty of creation and saw that the universe is alive/I saw that nature is the same activity replicated on different levels of a universal hierarchy, from the micro-

> world of amoeba, to the celestial explosions of the universe giving birth to new galaxies/It is love, it is hate, it is restlessness and it is conflict/I saw that nature is beautifully mad and that its madness surpasses all the madness of mankind rolled into one (12)

The narrator harmonises man and nature by drawing parallels between natural and human experiences. The different "levels of a universal hierarchy" (13) to which the narrator alludes can be compared to Nicolescu's levels of Reality. According to Nicolescu, Reality (with a capital R) is not one but multiple. Instead of separating man from nature, the narrator seems to prefer to see the two as intertwined. The "explosions" usually associated with war and destruction ironically produce new life. The narrator also describes nature as "beautifully mad" to underscore the view that opposites can co-exist without contradiction. This explains Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2018a, 3) argument about how "the processes of 'provincializing' and 'deprovincializing' are inextricably linked as they speak to how what appears on a global scale as European thought could be claimed as human heritage rather than a thought from one geographical centre." In other words, knowledge is interlinked to the extent that it is impossible to parcel it out as either African or European. This interconnectedness of knowledge and reality is reflected in the way in which the narrator uses military discourse to describe events in the natural environment:

> And squadrons of smaller clouds joined the main body in a rapid falling-in of the forces of nature into a battle formation against the belligerent children of the earth (12)

> And the cloud closed in and gave chase/And then the storm was upon the town/A dark and violent mob of nature's hooligans/Blind and savage rain, wind, thunder and lightning in violent mass demonstration, throwing hailstones, pulling down homes, felling trees, flooding and blocking roads (13)

Placing the material and the human world next to each other, the narrator comes to realise that the two are inseparable. In the same way that the storm wreaks havoc on earth, destroying homes and uprooting trees, man inflicts destruction on the earth by waging wars. The interdependence evident in the relationship between man and nature resonates with Mignolo's (2007, 499) vision of "a world in which many worlds will co-exist". European thought does not have to erase and disqualify other knowledge systems because it can coexist with other epistemic centres. The idea that the universe is "alive" demands sustainable human activity that leads to ecological balance. Similarly, epistemic balance is only possible through a perspectival "orientation toward pluri-versality as universal project" (Mignolo 2007, 499). At the end of the poem "Divine Abstraction", the narrator reiterates the multi-layered nature of reality. The destruction caused by nature is, in fact, "creative anarchy":

> Which though blind and brutal is life giving because the rainstorm is water/And water is life/A life that burst into the land with death in its wake/A paradox? (22)

This paradox speaks to the complexity of the plurality of life itself. There is no such thing as universal knowledge, as every society has its own forms of knowledge that are just as legitimate as the forms of knowledge in other societies.

The poem "Impeccable English and French" is a radical attempt to reposition Africa as an independent linguistic universe. As

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018a, 3) has argued, decolonisation is about "epistemic justice", or the "liberation of reason itself from coloniality". This invites new questions about ways of doing things, which have become normalised, although they are not perceived as meaningful in African contexts. The narrator asks probing questions that seek to de-provincialize Africa, such as the following one:

> Is it democratic that everything meaningful to the people should be done in the alien language of the minority adversary? ... Are people free if language inhibits them from filling a medical form or sitting a business interview? (56)

The point is that language is a vehicle for conveying ideas. Epistemic freedom is not possible without a language because it "draws our attention to the content of what it is that we are free to express and on whose terms" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018a, 4). Decoloniality, as Mignolo (2007, 459) puts it, is also about determining "the terms of the conversation", which may include the language question. In the poem "Impeccable English and French", the narrator ponders over the extent to which dominance of foreign languages have slowed Africa's development. The narrator is a foreigner in the DRC, but when he begins to learn the local language, Lingala, he realises that there are similarities between Lingala and his own language, Shona. The similarities suggest that Africans have a "common linguistic and ancestral origin" (54) and conflicts that haunt Africa have little to do with Africans and their interests. The marginalisation of indigenous languages is not an accident of history but a colonial design:

> ensuring that even if Africans were to ever remove the shackles of slavery from their ankles and waists and wrists and necks they would still be shackled in the mind…/ Shackles that some would wear like gold and diamond jewellery to be shown off by speaking impeccable English and French right down to accents on the streets of African capitals, in homes, in business, in parliament, in schools and everywhere, even if it distorted and inhibited effective communication since it is language that bears the mind and identity of a people (55)

This excerpt articulates what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018a, 3) has characterised as "linguicide," or "killing of indigenous people's languages". As long as there is no epistemic shift, in the form of speaking one's own language, it will be difficult for Africa to deal with its problems effectively. In the poem, Gomo suggests that Africa cannot solve its problems because it is epistemologically dependent on the West. Regaining the epistemic centre begins by articulating African problems in African languages so that the majority of its population can understand. Language is crucial to the production of knowledge. On this note, the narrator poses an important question:

> Is effective thought, communication and human developmental cooperation effectively possible without a language? (55)

In Africa, this implies that the lack of a local episteme compromises creativity. The narrator also questions the fairness of the co-operation between Africa and the West in a case where Africa remains an ideological and epistemological imitation of the latter:

> Is it therefore not tragic to development and the wellbeing of a nation to give instruction and to run business and government in subversive foreign languages, which are alien to and cannot be functionally used by the majority of the people…? (56)

Western epistemology extended its influence around the world "by means of the six imperial and vernacular European languages of modernity" (Mignolo 2007, 493) namely English, German, Spanish, French, Portuguese, and Italian. The extermination of African languages which Ndovu-Gatsheni (2018a) has characterised as linguicide is an imperial project of eradicating other-systems of knowledge. What the "Impeccable English and French" seems to argue is that epistemological dependency is partially responsible for Africa's sluggish development. The narrator mocks the neoliberal notion of 'democracy' by asking if it is "democratic" for formerly colonised countries to value foreign languages more than local ones, or for African liberators to negotiate the terms of peace in the language of their former colonisers:

> knowing exactly what they want to say, but unable to say it with precision because the colonialist language is not equipped to express the anguish of African dispossession. And they have to look up to the conquerors for the precise interpretation of their desires. (56)

Different languages represent and articulate different worldviews. Therefore, it is counterproductive to undermine African languages in favour of foreign ones. In the poem, African liberators who negotiate terms of peace in foreign languages end up surrendering their bargaining powers to their colonisers. This underscores the importance of embracing Africa as a legitimate centre of knowledge. In other words, Africa cannot expect Europe to interpret its problems. Western frameworks of thought are not suitable instruments for conceptualising African problems. Therefore, the idea of freedom for Africa ought to include epistemic freedom that, according to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018a), speaks to "cognitive justice". Freedom is incomplete without the ability to express one's views on one's own terms. As the narrator in the poem "Impeccable English and French" claims, people are not free if the language inhibits them from doing mundane things such as "filling a medical form or sitting a business interview" (56):

> If the concepts that make us one and therefore strong are founded and carved in our mother tongues, then, woe to the day those mother tongues are allowed to die, because the concepts would be gone too / And in a world where nature hates vacuums… it surely must be tragic to be an African blank and writable CD. …just there, available for any programme, even to self-destruct (57)

The narrator compares Africans without a language to a blank, writable compact disc, an empty space that offers itself to any new ideas. Africa's developmental predicament, the narrator suggests, requires a holistic framework of thinking that incorporates the political, economic, cultural, and other such peculiarities of Africa.

The poem "The wasp is corrupt" appropriates a simple incident in nature to explain the exploitative relations between Africa and the West. At Boende, the narrator witnesses a wasp killing a caterpillar. The West, like the wasp that kills the caterpillar to nourish her young ones, exploits Africa's resources for the sake of its own development. It is important for the caterpillar (Africa) to realise that the wasp (the West) has her own interests at heart and that the wasp never does anything for the good of the caterpillar. In less metaphoric terms, Africa does not need to depend on Europe because it is a legitimate epistemic centre in its own right. The narrator realises, through the way humans, pigs, and wasps perceive puddles, that the same thing can mean different things in different contexts. While humans see puddles as a breeding ground for

mosquitoes and, therefore, a health hazard, pigs see puddles as "skin lotion" that provides the "protection from insects and the sun" (58). Wasps, on the other hand, see puddles as a "quarry, providing material for nurseries" (58). These multiple ways of seeing symbolise the diversity of knowledge and ways of knowing.

Decolonising knowledge creates spaces for inter-epistemic communication and appreciation of differences across knowledge systems. The same mud that protects the pig from the sun and provides the building material to the wasp is a health hazard to human beings. Just like the wasp that sees the puddles as a source of raw materials, the West sees Africa as a source of natural resources. In this case, it is not prudent that Africa embraces Western epistemologies uncritically because they are not necessarily relevant to the African context. Like the caterpillar, the narrator understands Africa as a victim of Western projects of self-aggrandizement. The manner in which the wasp attacks the caterpillar is symbolic of the way in which Africa was colonised and injected with inferiority complexes:

> The big wasp landed on the caterpillar, which wriggled vigorously as she pumped venom into it… A subversive venom that paralysed the caterpillar's fighting systems… undermining its will to struggle and it went limp. (59)

The subversive venom that the wasp injects into the caterpillar symbolises Western education and foreign languages that paralyse African initiatives. As highlighted in the poem "Impeccable English and French", the adoption of Western languages compromises Africa's capacity to relate to the rest of the world on equal terms.

The story of the wasp and the caterpillar also shows that all knowledge is inter-knowledge. This tells us that it is important to see the whole of creation as inter-related rather than separate. The same logic applies to international relations: the West should understand that it needs the rest of the world, including Africa, if it wants to solve the world's complex problems. A comment by a Congolese man at the end of "The wasp is corrupt" is quite informative. After watching the wasp inject venom into the caterpillar, the man says in his language "the wasp is corrupt" (59). The man's comment suggests that the West is corrupt because it supports instability in Africa in order to exploit the latter's resources for its own benefit. In modern neo-liberal discourse, corruption has been designated as an African/Third World problem. Yet in this poem, the narrator debunks this myth by demonstrating that the West (the wasp) is equally corrupt, if not worse. The narrator draws from different knowledge centres in order to get a clearer understanding of the relations between Africa and the West. The story of the wasp and its relationship with nature is appropriated as a means to better understand the human world (corruption). A decolonial perspective allows the narrator to see humanity in nature and nature in humanity. Therefore, an injury to one is an injury to both. This position challenges what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018a, 4) speaks of as the "overrepresentation of European thought in knowledge, social theory and education" while de-provincializing African knowledge systems. While the story of the wasp and the caterpillar provides literal knowledge on what happens in the world of wasps and caterpillars, it also sheds light on the skewed relations (epistemic, economic, political, and cultural) between Africa and the West. More importantly, it underscores the idea of interdependence of knowledges, of man and nature, and of the developed and the developing world. These binaries (developed–developing, North–South, West–East) are constructs of colonial modernity, which decoloniality seeks to dismantle to create space for other-cultures and other-ways of knowing.

## Conclusion

This article has argued for a reading of *A Fine Madness* that understands it as a decolonial text interrogating the relations between Africa and the West, particularly in the context of conflict and underdevelopment in Africa. It has also argued Gomo's text to advocate the reconstitution of Africa as a legitimate epistemic centre, thus challenging the dominant notion of the West as centre. *A Fine Madness*, however, as was shown, also refuses to adhere to the conventions of a single literary genre; hence, it represents a flexible narrative that integrates poetry, prose, diary notes, fantasy, and so forth as means to capture the complex nature of Africa's postcolonial predicament. To understand the problems facing the African continent, it is important to embrace different epistemological frameworks, among them the African ones that have suffered years of neglect. In that sense, Gomo's work concurs with Nabudere's (2012, 87) notion of Afrikology, "a principle which emphasises the interdependence and complementarity of all phenomena into a wholesome relationship". As Santos (2007) insists, all knowledge is inter-knowledge. Therefore, instead of depending on Western thought, which for centuries has masqueraded as universal thought, Africa needs to establish itself as a legitimate centre of knowledge.

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