TOWARDS A DECOLONIAL PLANNING FRAMEWORK FOR SOUTH AFRICA: INVESTIGATING LAND AND LANGUAGE

By

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Authors Declaration:

I, the undersigned, Immanuel Kuti-Alexander, candidate for the BA degree in Culture, Politics and Society, declare herewith that the present thesis titled "Towards a Decolonial Planning Framework for South Africa: Investigating Land and Language" is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright.

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Abstract:

More than 30 years into democracy, South African is still defined by the unequal and unjust power structures left over from its colonial and Apartheid regimes. Despite their efforts, South African planners have failed to address the entrenched inequalities of the built environment. Libby Porter argues that the modern institution of planning has, in addition to its colonial history, a *colonial culture* that must be unlearned. This is key to understanding the planning system's shortcomings. Drawing on decolonial theory, I argue that the discipline's Western epistemic position implicates it in the perpetuation of oppressive colonial structures. Therefore, I argue that the South African institution of planning must embrace a *delinked* and *decolonial* framework. Building on this claim, this paper identifies and investigates two areas of contention wherein the coloniality of the institution becomes evident: Indigenous languages and private property. First, I advocate for the incorporation of Indigenous languages, examining the role of language in shaping land relationalities. Next, I discuss the colonial problems with private property, and why planning should centre alternative conceptions of land rights. Both my recommendations address aspects of epistemic coloniality within the planning system, however, they are intended as steps towards decolonisation rather than as universal answers.

Key words: South Africa, urban planning, decolonial planning, coloniality, language, property, Indigenous epistemology

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Positionality Statement

Having been raised and socialised in an urban and predominantly white environment; I am an outsider to the everyday realities of the people who might benefit from this research. My own understanding of the failures of Western urban planning in South Africa is from observation, not experience. Cape Town, my home, is a tale of two cities—and I am only truly familiar with my one. Furthermore, as someone who is half Hungarian and now studying in Europe, the ideas I advocate for in this thesis often sit in tension with parts of my own identity and onto-epistemic position. Nevertheless, I hope my research can contribute to the emerging and urgent project of decolonial planning.

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Chapter 1: Setting the Scene

More than 30 years into democracy, South African is still defined by the unequal and unjust power structures left over from its colonial and Apartheid regimes. This is especially visible in the urban sphere, where the term *spatial Apartheid* has been used to describe how cities—despite the abolition of the Apartheid system's formal segregation laws—are still divided according to race and class (Govender 2024). This division is not just evident in terms of who lives where, but also in the distribution of services, access to economic opportunities, safety, and overall quality of life. Meanwhile, economic neoliberalisation and an increasingly deregulated property market have compounded inequalities (Harrison et al. 2008). Investment and development continue to benefit historically White, centrally located areas, while the ever-growing urban poor, composed almost entirely of Black and Coloured[1] populations, are confined to city peripheries and largely neglected.

Contemporary South African planning has focused its efforts on reducing spatial Apartheid, and building a more inclusive future for its cities and towns—prioritising in its policies integration, equity, and sustainability (Harrison et al. 2008). Nevertheless, these plans have largely remained on paper, failing to produce the miracle transformation so urgently needed (Harrison et al. 2008).

To understand the problem with South African urban planning, it is important to consider its historical roots. Urban planning is a colonial institution, introduced by European authorities alongside other Western systems such as policing, prisons, and jurisprudence (Demissie 2007). This is not to say that pre-colonial African societies lacked their own systems,

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[1] In the South African context, Coloured refers to the mixed-race Cape Coloured ethnic group, who trace their roots back to the slaves who were brought to the country by the Dutch and British colonial administrations.

but rather that the current structures are based off colonial, and not pre-colonial, models[2]. Local traditions of spatial organisation were largely erased or subordinated in favour of European planning, which established racial segregation, private property, and state control (Harrison et al. 2008). In urban centres, planning was used to consolidate power under colonial administrations, regulate the movement and activities of native populations, and safeguard the interests of European settlers (Njoh 2009).

Scholars have shown how, even in the postcolony, the logics and models of planning imported during the colonial era remain imbedded in the contemporary discipline, perpetuating systemic oppression, segregation and exclusion (Miraftab 2012; Cunningham Bissell 2007). In South Africa, as Vanessa Watson (2009) details, cities continue to rely on planning frameworks that impose a one-size-fits-all approach informed by European contexts, often disregarding the social, cultural, and historical contexts of local communities. She writes that "city governments themselves are producing social and spatial exclusion as a result of the inappropriate laws and regulations which they adopt." (2009, 2262).

Simply put, South African planners face a paradox: they are relying on an institution rooted in colonialism and Apartheid to solve the same problems those systems created. They are, with a nod to Audre Lorde[3], attempting to "dismantle the master's house using the master's tools". Therefore, in order to achieve any meaningful change, I argue that the very foundations of planning must be rethought.

This section has briefly outlined the failures of South African planning in addressing both its colonial past and present. In the following sections, I will explore the writing of scholars who call for the decolonisation of planning—including some writing from within the South African context. While this scholarship is helpful in providing a solid theoretical

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[2] For insights into pre-colonial urbanism in Sub-Saharan Africa, see Asomani-Boateng (2011).
[3] See (Lorde 1984)

foundation, I identify and investigate specific elements of planning which can and should undergo decolonial transformation. Accordingly, this paper will focus on the roles of language and property in the planning institution, and how each might be reimagined through a decolonial lens.

1.1 Introduction to Decolonial Planning

First, what exactly makes urban planning a colonial practice—and how might it be decolonised? Libby Porter argues that planning has, in addition to its colonial history, a colonial *culture* which must be unlearned. What we call planning, she contends, is in fact just one tradition of spatial organisation among others. She frames planning as a cultural practice, in the sense of it "being embedded within as well as creating its own meanings" (Porter 2016, 2). In other words, it is not made up of objective truths, but rather of vast systems of constructed and situated knowledge. To better understand the colonial problems with knowledge, this essay turns to the robust body of scholarship that is decolonial theory.

Decolonial theory asserts that the modern world continues to be shaped by a colonial matrix of power, or *coloniality*: a complex global system of control established by the West during the colonial era (Quijano 2000). Coloniality is what has allowed the West to maintain its dominance, through its imposed structures of global capitalism and Eurocentric modernity (Quijano 2000). Unlike colonialism, coloniality does not require the direct occupation of one people by another, but instead perpetuates and justifies Western domination of global economic, political, and socio-cultural life (Quijano 2007). It is a colonial relationality that regards the West as fundamentally superior in all aspects and subjugates the Other—variously referred to as the primitive; the exotic; the undeveloped; the Orient; the Third World; and now, the Global South (Mignolo 2009).

In their effort to understand the ways in which coloniality is reproduced, many decolonial scholars have focused on ways of knowing, or *epistemology* (Mignolo 2017; Quijano 2007; de Sousa Santos 2016). They assert that knowledge is never neutral, for knowledge is deeply rooted in space and time. Knowledge assumes a knower, and all knowers have inherent biases shaped by their particular contexts. And yet, they claim, through processes of colonialism and now coloniality, the West has manufactured an understanding that their worldview is objective and universal, detached from any geo-political context (Mignolo 2009).

From this privileged position, the West continues to dictate what knowledge counts as valid, or scientifically sound—i.e., resembles its own worldview—and imposes its rules, informed by its own (specific and not global) understandings, throughout its sphere of influence. The result is that non-Western and Indigenous modes of reasoning and knowing are forcibly subjugated in a colonial and oppressive relationality, discarded as a form of "ignorance", in a destructive act that Sousa Santos names *epistemicide* (2016).

In their effort to adhere to modern[4] standards, institutions of knowledge production (such as schools and universities, professional bodies, government agencies, and international organisations) enforce frameworks and models fundamentally grounded in Western epistemology. It is in large part through this mechanism that the Global North's dominance is upheld, and colonial structures are maintained (Mignolo 2009). Thus, true decolonisation, according to decolonial theorists, requires more than the mere withdrawal of a foreign power; it must include *epistemic delinking* and *disobedience*—breaking from Eurocentric traditions and centring Indigenous and local knowledge (Mignolo 2009).

The institution of planning (comprised of actors such as planning schools, municipal planning departments, private planning and development firms, professional associations, think

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[4] Also read "Western"

tanks and policy institutes, international organisations and conferences) is equally complicit in epistemicide. Like any Western institution of knowledge production, it functions as an enforcer of the colonial matrix of power, with two main responsibilities: "training of new (epistemic obedient) members, and control of who enters and what knowledge-making is allowed, disavowed, devalued or celebrated." (Mignolo 2009, 176). Rooted in Western ideas of "science" and "best-practice", modern planning marginalises and discards non-Western and Indigenous traditions of spatial organisation in the interest of maintaining its authority. This is key to the colonial culture that Porter (2016) speaks of.

In this context, I introduce *decolonial planning*—a response by planning scholars to the emergence of decolonial theory. This approach begins with the understanding that "planning's own genealogy is colonial, and its work a fundamental activity to the ongoing colonial settlement of territory" (Porter 2016, 12). However, rather than abandoning it altogether[5], it asks, *where do we go from here?* Cities are rapidly evolving and expanding—particularly in the Global South, where the majority of global population growth is now concentrated (Watson 2009). Given the enduring nature of the built environment, urban planning as an institution is likely here to stay. This is not a dead end, but rather an urgent call to decoloniality.

After all, planning itself is not a colonial practice. As Hirini Matunga (2013) reminds us, planning is a natural and universal human activity which Indigenous peoples have always been involved in. Even if the modern discipline of planning is colonial, there may be ways that it can be done "according to Indigenous analyses, frameworks, values, and processes." (Matunga 2013, 6).

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[5] Note: this sentiment does exist among certain radical and abolitionist planners, see (Dozier 2018).

1.2 South African Planning and Colonial Epistemology

Porter's call to unlearn the colonial culture of planning (2016) is echoed by South African decolonial theorist Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018), who argues that, in order to truly liberate itself from colonial oppression, Africa must "learn to unlearn in order to re-learn." Specifically, he describes this as learning to unlearn the dominant Eurocentric frameworks imposed by colonialism, and re-learning its own knowledge systems that have been excluded and devalued. Such an intellectual and cultural reorientation is not simply additive, but transformative: it allows the rethinking of planning itself.[6]

However, before such a process can be attempted, the coloniality within the institution must be identified. Porter (2016) demands an "archaeological" investigation into planning's culture and structures, while South African decolonial planner Tanja Winkler (2024) argues that the institution must undergo a "meta-ethical enquiry". Both emphasise the importance of understanding its epistemic roots. Vanessa Watson (2009) provides context:

> Remarkably, much of the global South, as well as parts of the North, still use variations of an approach to urban planning which emerged in Europe and the US in the early part of the 20th century, adapted to forms of government and urban conditions which have changed significantly. This early 20th-century approach to urban land management usually comprises a detailed land use plan depicting the desired future of an urban area some 20 years hence and it is underpinned by a regulatory system (zoning) which assigns use rights in land, and manages any alteration of these, in conformance with what is called a 'master plan'. (p.2261)

This passage sheds light on some of the specific worldviews and discursive rationalities that inform contemporary planning. Focusing on master plans for example, Watson explains that these technocratic models are based on 1930's and 40's Modernist ideas of what the "good city" should look like – and thus have little in common with the non-European realities in which

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[6] This is what I advocated for on Page 2.

they are implemented. Watson argues that even in Europe, these master plans worked in the favour of capital and cemented urban exclusion, noting how they were "enthusiastically adopted by middle and commercial classes who were able to use them as a way of maintaining property prices and preventing the invasion of less desirable lower-income residents, ethnic minorities and traders." (Watson 2009, 2261).

In South Africa specifically, the planning institution has equally failed to unshackle itself from Western epistemologies. In their book, *Planning and Transformation: Learning from the Post-Apartheid Experience*, Harrison et al. (2008) discuss the core values that continue to inform the discipline post-Apartheid, claiming that the institution today primarily represents the norms and priorities of the market and private developers, also revealing clear connections to the Modernist approaches of the past. They add that "strong continuities are present from the Apartheid to the post-Apartheid period in terms of a belief in modernization and progress (defined in Western liberal terms), and that this belief informs planning, perhaps even more strongly, at the present time" (Harrison et al. 2008, 212). Given such a cultural disconnect, modern planning's inability to solve South Africa's spatial issues comes as less of a surprise.

These examples amplify Porter's call to unlearning. As decolonial planner Carlos Vainer (2014) contends, the West's epistemic dominance in planning has direct implications, actively privileging Western ways of life, and simultaneously forcing Indigenous peoples to live at the margins. Epistemic delinking in praxis involves unsettling this dominance. As an example of this, Vainer suggests removing Western ideas of "best practice" from planning, both because they are inappropriate (as previously shown), and also due to what he calls their *colonial power-alignment*—in other words, their tendency to reproduce colonial relationalities. Instead, he calls for the discipline to make way for "multiple, open dialogues", especially among citizens, who are best equipped to communicate their own experiences, and thus help planners develop new ways of thinking about and studying cities (Vainer 2014, 54).

But how should such dialogues take place when Indigenous knowledge, and also ways of sharing knowledge, are not respected? It is important to clarify that this essay does not simply argue for the inclusion of people from non-Western and Indigenous backgrounds, but rather the total decolonisation of the discipline, starting with its epistemology. As Porter argues, "Forgetting to theorize planning's own cultural position can render the 'inclusion' of indigenous people in land management decisions a new form of colonial oppression." (2016, 12). This oppression is not only unjust but even violent, if we consider Pierre Bourdieu's definition of symbolic violence: "The coercion which is set up through the consent that the dominated cannot fail to give to the dominator (and therefore to the domination) when their understanding of the situation and relation can only use instruments of knowledge that they have in common with the dominator" (2000, 170).

Following from these discussions of coloniality, decoloniality, epistemic delinking, and examining how such concepts relate to planning, this essay presents decolonial planning as its answer[7] to South Africa's urban crises. This means rejecting the historical and present colonial power-alignment of the institution; challenging the epistemic hegemony of the West; uplifting Indigenous knowledge systems; and being grounded in local knowledge, needs, and reality. Of course, this reorientation will require demand and collaboration across various sectors of society, and willingness from the institution itself. Some will be sceptical of such a possibility, but the reward that such a transformation could offer South Africa must be considered: a new planning practice truly dedicated to appropriate, equitable, and just custodianship of land.

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[7] I use this word tentatively for the purpose of building an argument, with awareness of its universalising connotations and consequent limitations within a decolonial framework.

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Chapter 2: Structure and Methodology

In the first chapter, I argued that South African planning has failed to create meaningful transformation in large part due to its colonial epistemology. Thus, I explained the need for a decolonial approach to planning in South Africa. In the following two chapters, I make two suggestions to the South African planning institution that aim to contribute to its epistemic and cultural decolonisation. Chapter 3 advocates for the incorporation of Indigenous languages and examines the role of language in shaping land relationalities. Chapter 4 discusses the colonial problems with private property, and why planning should centre alternative conceptions of land rights. Both recommendations address aspects of epistemic coloniality within the planning system, and seek to recognise and uplift marginalised epistemologies. Importantly, these proposals are not intended as all-encompassing solutions, but rather as steps in the journey towards true decolonisation. I present my final thoughts in Chapter 5.

My two recommendations were not chosen arbitrarily, but reflect recurring themes that emerged throughout my research into decoloniality and planning in the Global South. I credit my initial interest in decolonial planning to an online webinar hosted by the Columbia Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, titled *Decolonizing Planning*, in which the question of private property was repeatedly raised (Columbia GSAPP 2021). This theme remained prominent in my subsequent reading (e.g. Watson 2009; Harrison et al. 2008; Winkler 2018; 2024; Miraftab 2012), and was addressed extensively in Porter's work (2016). Simultaneously, the role of language emerged as a key concern not only in planning discourse (Vainer 2014; Winkler 2018), but also as a central theme within decolonial theory itself (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018; Mignolo 2009; de Sousa Santos 2016).

To build my arguments and research, I engaged in further reading of decolonial theory, planning theory, and especially looked for academics writing in the South African context. I

also had the privilege of speaking with three South African planners: Nobukhosi Ngwenya is a researcher and lecturer at the African Centre for Cities; Tanja Winkler is a professor of planning at the University of Cape Town; and Kathy Kay is an independent consultant who has spent much of her career as a planner on both national and municipal projects. My conversations with them were not structured as formal interviews—I sought to cultivate a reciprocal dialogue by also sharing my own perspectives and stories, following ethical considerations promoted by the likes of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999). This allowed me to engage with the topic of decolonial planning through a more personal and relational lens.

Nevertheless, aside from this consideration, I acknowledge that the research presented in my thesis remains framed within conventional Western academic norms and logics. This tension reflects the significant challenge of pursuing decolonial work within institutions still shaped by colonial epistemologies. Therefore, I ask apologies from the reader. As Winkler writes, "I am still learning to decolonise my mind." (2018, 591)

2.1 A Note on Southern Planning

Before continuing, I want to acknowledge that decolonial planning is not the only framework proposed to address the shortcomings of South African planning. Vanessa Watson's essay, *Seeing from the South: Refocusing Urban Planning on the Globe's Central Urban Issues* (2009), which I have also made use of in this paper, is seen as a foundational work of *Southern* planning. This approach also critiques the universalisation of Western planning theory, arguing that cities in the Global South face unique challenges that need to be addressed *from* the South. For example, Watson calls on planning scholars to account for issues like informality, inequality, and state failure, which are often systemic in Southern contexts. There is no denying the vital contribution of Southern planning theory, which remain widely respected and taught at South African universities.

Nevertheless, I have chosen to work within a decolonial rather than a Southern planning framework. Although both approaches challenge Western dominance in shaping spatial organisation, Southern planning makes limited effort towards epistemic delinking, continuing to operate, as Tanja Winkler writes, within Western "onto-epistemological and axiological foundations of how we know and interpret the world" (2018, 591). As such, it does not fully interrogate the colonial matrix of power imbedded in the planning institution—which I have argued is its failure: the "master's tools". Certain Southern planners might even critique decolonial planning's emphasis on delinking, arguing instead that "the poor have been marginalised less by planning visions, than by the failure to implement them" (Harrison et al. 2008, 15). While the issue of implementation is of course real, these arguments ignore epistemicide, and risk further marginalising Indigenous and non-Western worldviews.

My core argument is that planning must interrogate its colonial cultural position, and engage in epistemic delinking and disobedience. This can only be done within a decolonial framework. However, it should be noted that the end goal advanced by decolonial scholars is *pluriversality*, in which all epistemologies can co-exist on equal footing (Winkler 2024). Decolonial planning should not blindly accept a theory simply because it is Indigenous, nor reject a theory as inherently evil just because it is Western. Each planning theory must be critically examined through questions such as: How appropriate is this for the specific community, and culture? How does it support justice, sustainability, and freedom? And most importantly, how does it unsettle the enduring structures of coloniality?

Particularly within the South African context, I view this embrace of pluriversal thinking as a necessity. There are two key reasons for this, which arose out of my conversation with Nobukhosi.[8] First, significant parts of Indigenous knowledge and practice have been

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[8] Nobukhosi Ngwenya, on-line video call, May 15, 2025.

violently erased by European colonialism and subsequent epistemicide. Second, Indigenous communities may no longer see certain elements of pre-colonial epistemology as relevant or just. Nobukhosi warned against romanticising the pre-colonial era, which as she pointed out was not without its own problems—such as its deeply entrenched patriarchy.[9] Pluriversality nurtures both ancient and newly emerging Indigenous knowledges, while also allowing for the (consensual) incorporation of other ideas from diverse intellectual traditions, when they better serve present-day needs.

There is a just future for planning on the horizon. It will not come from adapting the existing frameworks, but from rethinking the very foundations of planning. The decolonial approach offers this possibility: not by perfecting old tools, but by challenging the colonial logics beneath them, and making room for more diverse, relational, and grounded ways of knowing.

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[9] We will briefly return to this issue in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: On Incorporating Indigenous Languages

While researching the ways that knowledge and power interact, I was particularly influenced by Miranda Fricker's theory of *epistemic injustice*, which she defines as "a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower" (Fricker 2007, 1). Within her theory, I found her concept of hermeneutical injustice especially relevant. This occurs when a system does not afford knowers the effective tools of interpretation to communicate their knowledge and experiences (Fricker 2007). Such a gap in tools silences the knower and reinforces the dominance of the system, especially when the knower's epistemology is not linked/obedient to the system. Placed within a justice framework, Fricker introduces a moral imperative to address the marginalisation of Indigenous knowers and knowledge.

In this chapter, I aim to explain how South African planning, as a distinctly Western system, engages in epistemic injustice of the hermeneutical kind through its exclusion of African Indigenous languages. This exclusion, as I will show, also marginalises Indigenous understandings of land and spatial organisation, and perpetuates the coloniality of the institution. Therefore, I argue that the incorporation of Indigenous languages is essential to the project of decolonising planning.

3.1 Language, Power, and Planning

Language is a communicator of knowledge, or in Fricker's terms, a tool of interpretation. Language has a social origin, a *locus of enunciation*, just like knowledge itself (Mignolo 2009). It is fundamentally *grounded*—developing as people see, name, and relate to their environment (Chiblow and Meighan 2022). Simultaneously, onto-epistemologies embedded in language shape our worldview. In their paper *Language is Land, Land is Language*, Chiblow and Meighan (2022), who are of Indigenous Anishinaabe and Gàidheal background respectively, argue that Indigenous languages are deeply embedded with an

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intimate knowledge of the lands from which they emerge. Their languages, they contend, are grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing and being, reflecting unique understandings of "connections, reciprocity, and responsibility" to land (2022, 208). They note that language learning in Indigenous communities often occurs in close contact with nature, through participation in land-based activities.

This, Vainer (2014) argues, is key to understanding the differing approaches of Western and non-Western planning. He discusses the difficulties of translating Western planning frameworks into non-Western languages, highlighting the emergence of "irreducible issues, ideas, perspectives, and concepts that may only be partially or imperfectly transmitter and received" (Vainer 2014, 54). Similarly, Chiblow and Meighan caution any individual interested in learning Indigenous languages not to learn through translation, "to avoid reducing Indigenous worldviews and ideas into ill-fitting English words, binaries, or colonial mindsets (such as viewing the land as a resource)" (2022, 209). Both these works teach us the importance of Indigenous languages in planning, and indeed in all land-based disciplines, as carriers of grounded Indigenous epistemology—which colonial languages lack.

Although English is just one of South Africa's twelve official languages, it enjoys a position of privilege in government, business, teaching, and wider society (Du Plessis 2022). This is despite how, according to Statistics SA, only 8.1% of South Africans speak English as their home language (2018). English was brought to the region by British colonisers, and remained enforced throughout the Apartheid regime, which required civil servants to be fluent in English and Afrikaans, the two "white" languages (Giliomee 2004). The linguistic hegemony of English is equally present in planning. In my conversation with Kathy,[10] I asked if there had been any institutional effort since the end of Apartheid to incorporate Indigenous languages or

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[10] Kathy Kay, on-line video call, May 9, 2025.

encourage planners to learn them. The idea seemed to her so far-fetched that she immediately burst into laughter, finally responding "No, no, no, absolutely not!"

The result of this, Kathy explained, is that individuals and communities with limited English proficiency continue to be systematically disadvantaged and excluded. "It's horrendous," she said. She recalled instances in which people signed documents and agreements without fully understanding their contents or implications. She also criticised the various community participation events she had attended, predominantly conducted in English, describing them as a "ridiculous, total waste of time and money". In her opinion, they had failed to adequately represent and empower those most affected by planning decisions. Instead, they were dominated by the planners themselves, and occasionally a loud minority with greater confidence and fluency in English.

Nobukhosi however informed me that in processes of participatory planning, South African law requires that there be translation from English into the local language of the specific area. People must also be able to respond or submit comments in their local language. Kathy also told me that she always works with an interpreter when engaging with non-English-speaking communities. Nevertheless, my conversation with Nobukhosi confirmed Vainer's prior argument, that translation does not necessarily create common ground between the community and the planner. Interpreters are still bound by the limits of language, and oftentimes the nuances of the language will be lost.

To complicate things further, the institution of planning (like many Western institutions) has in addition to a dominant language its very own specialised jargon. Porter credits her formal planning qualification for giving her access to the "vernacular of planning" (2016, 6). But this language, as Nobukhosi reiterated, is informed by Western worldviews, often without equivalents in Indigenous languages and knowledge systems. Thus, people of Indigenous

backgrounds may struggle to master the vernacular or may be altogether uninterested in such an endeavour. Such limitations to the participation of Indigenous knowers surely constitute a hermeneutical injustice.

Working with a community in their own language can offer immense benefits to planning. Nobukhosi recalled that during her work with informal communities in Cape Town, she could elicit more meaningful and considered contributions from community members by speaking with them in isiXhosa. This approach also helped to create a much more relational and reciprocal interaction. Although isiXhosa is not Nobukhosi's first language, community members appreciated her efforts to engage with them so personally, often assisting and gently correcting her when necessary. This dynamic emphasised the mutual exchange of knowledge, showing that both she and the community possessed valuable insights and could learn from one another.

Nobukhosi told me that language, as the basis of communication, is essential in building trust and mutual understanding between planners and communities. Interestingly, she added that effective communication extends beyond spoken language, also including body language, respectful conduct, and sensitivity. Without effective communication, she argued that planners might as well remain in their offices, working solely on technocratic master plans, without any meaningful community engagement. Additionally, she noted that English-speaking planners who are outsiders to an Indigenous community will likely be treated with suspicion, regardless of the presence of a translator. While trust can also be built over time through integration, we discussed that this can be difficult given the set timeframes typical of municipal projects.

3.2 Linguistic Decolonisation

Planning's colonial cultural position cannot be transformed if Indigenous people are not participating in and reshaping institutional knowledge production. Mignolo argues that

knowledge-making depends on a *semiotic code* shared between users in spoken and written exchanges (2009, 176). The coloniality of the planning institution lies also, as shown, in its reliance on a semiotic code that is itself colonial: English, but also a specific kind of English imported from the Anglo-American tradition; grounded in the Western context; disconnected from Indigenous ways of knowing; and purposefully inaccessible to those outside the discipline. Therefore, I assert that epistemic delinking necessarily includes a shift away from English, towards a plurilingual system.

But why is it that South African planning schools continue to teach in English? In a global knowledge economy, universities are concerned with their global impact, and Winkler (2018) explains that English serves the purpose of *worlding*—allowing research to be read, and students to be employed, all around the world. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) critiques this mentality:

> "African scholars continue to seek affirmation and validation of their knowledge in Europe and North America. This affirmation and validation take the form of publication in the so-called international, high-impact and peer-reviewed journals. Europe and North America constitute the 'international' and the rest of the world is 'local'. Consequently, international, high-impact, and peer-reviewed journals and internationally respected publishing houses and presses are those located in Europe and North America. Highly ranked universities are located in Europe and North America. Taken together, these realities confirm the existence of epistemic hegemony." (p. 20-21)

Ndlovu-Gatsheni's text emphasises the colonial power-alignment of Western institutions, like planning. The incorporation of Indigenous languages poses a challenge to this, instead centring South Africa's here and now. In our conversation, Nobukhosi also lamented the loss of many of her students to other countries. Perhaps, such a reorientation will help curtail this brain drain.

English is difficult to dethrone however, since it is not just a legacy of colonialism, but an active agent of modern coloniality. Robert Phillipson offers a biting critique: "we can see global English as the capitalist neoimperial language that serves the interests of the corporate world and the governments that it influences so as to consolidate state and empire worldwide"

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(2008, 33). He connects the growing use of English as an international *lingua franca* to the West's expansionist aspirations, and their consolidation of global political, economic, and socio-cultural power. Drawing on Bourdieu's theories, he argues that the acceptance of English increases the West's cultural capital, while simultaneously, people are told that English will increase their own cultural capital. (Phillipson 2008).

That being said, our much-celebrated constitution should in theory encourage such linguistic shifts across institutions of knowledge production. In practice however, Makhanya and Zibane (2020) emphasise how little has changed:

> "After the demise of apartheid in 1994, South Africa through its constitution boldly recognised and promoted parity of all official languages in public education institutions. Section 29 (2) of the Bill of Rights explicitly stipulates that "everyone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public institutions where that education is reasonably practicable" (South Africa 1996). Twenty-five years later, African students are still calling for linguistic diversity in higher education institutions (HEIs). Indigenous languages remain on the periphery, not at the centre, of learning and teaching in South African HEIs." (p.22)

Nobukhosi highlighted the complexity of the words "reasonably practicable." While she supports the incorporation of Indigenous languages into the planning institution (and especially into the education of planners), she was concerned about the lack of textbooks and research, the shortage of professors who could teach in Indigenous languages, and the lack of external examiners who could mark planning exams and dissertations. Likely, this linguistic shift would need to take place gradually.

In sum, while acknowledging the challenge of the task, I argue that there is a pressing need to incorporate Indigenous languages into South African planning. I advocate for this as a means to engage meaningfully with Indigenous African worldviews, philosophy, and spirituality, and to unsettle the coloniality of the institution. To be sure, this must go beyond

superficial and extractive uses of African words—such as *Ubuntu*, which McDonald (2010) argues may have now become irretrievably compromised by capitalist market ideology and discourse. Rather, I advocate for a return to the Indigenous languages of the land. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) famously argued, this is essential in *decolonising the mind*. Through their own languages, Indigenous people will be able to (re)assert their sovereignty, and better articulate their unique epistemology and land relationalities.

Chapter 4: On Decentring Private Property

Having addressed the coloniality of planning's language, I now turn to one of its most basic organising principles: private property. In this chapter, I argue that private property is neither a neutral nor a universal concept, but a colonial social construct. The present configuration of the system, which includes planning, is structured around this logic of ownership, and discourages us from imagining anything different. However, Indigenous communities have long challenged these concepts with their *altogether different* ways of knowing and being with the land (Winkler 2018; 2024). I argue that decolonising planning requires decentring private property, and embracing alternative and Indigenous land relationalities.

4.1 Private Property as a Tool of Dispossession

Nobukhosi explained that the private property system was brought to South Africa as early as the 1600s, and violently imposed by various groups of European settler-colonialists who used it to confiscate land from Indigenous peoples. The ensuing "Scramble for Africa", during which the colonial powers competed for control over the continent, culminated in the 1884 Berlin Conference, described by Boisen (2017) essentially as a meeting to divide up property. While Africa was far from empty, Europeans saw it as *terra nullius*, or "nobody's land." Indigenous land relationalities were unrecognised within Western frameworks of ownership, and the land was therefore free to take. (Boisen 2017)

Later measures in the British-ruled Cape Colony, inspired by the spread of European liberalism, gave non-White South Africans the right to *buy* land, but this were short lived. The *Natives Land Act* passed in 1913, created the basis for segregation in South Africa. It established "native areas," covering only 7%, and later 13% of the country, where Black South Africans could live. This resulted in a mass displacement of Indigenous peoples from the rest

of the country, designated for Whites, and severing long-established land relationships and community tenure systems (Cousins 2007). Under the Apartheid regime, these areas became the infamous *Bantustans*, or "native homelands," which despite what their name implied, remained the property of the state. Within the Bantustans, administrative authority was exercised by government-appointed chiefs, who, as Tanja explained in our conversation,[11] colluded with the regime, and failed to provide secure tenure for their people.

After the fall of Apartheid, the democratic government was faced with the monumental task of restructuring land rights in a way that would address historical injustices. The 1996 Constitution, however, included the right to property, which effectively enshrined a "capitalist-liberalist concept of ownership" into law (Lewis 1992, 390). This provision was criticised because it would protect the very logic of property from critique (Lewis 1992). The passing of the Community Land Rights Act (CLARA) in 2004 aimed to demonstrate the transformative potential of private property, by transferring land titles in the former Bantustans from the state to local communities. In practice, however, the Act concentrated power in the hands of a few traditional leaders, often to the detriment of women, who were discriminated against within traditional systems (Cousins 2007).[12]

While CLARA was overturned by the Constitutional Court in 2010, the conversation over land justice has continued, with various proposals including restitution, expropriation, and title transfers. The problem, as Tanja explained to me, is that none of these solutions speak to Indigenous land relationality. To assert their rights, Indigenous people are forced to engage with Western legal and institutional structures. Tanja raised the example of the Ingonyama Trust, which manages nearly three million hectares of communal land on behalf of the Zulu

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[11] Tanja Winkler, on-line video call, April 4, 2025.
[12] Here is a good example of why decolonial theory advocates for pluriversality, and not simply the replacement of one hegemonic worldview with another.

Nation. The Trust was established to secure the land rights of the Zulu people, and functions as a corporate entity. Indigenous communities even pay rent to the Trust, effectively converting their customary land rights into Western leases. Tanja argued that all this is completely antithetical to Indigenous ways of life, and incompatible with decolonial values.

4.2 Indigenous Land Relations as Epistemic Disobedience

Indigenous ways of knowing and being reject the property system's commodification of land. Instead, they emphasise a relational ontology, in which land is inseparable from people and community. Nobukhosi articulated this powerfully, telling me, "You are part and parcel of nature. You cannot speak of land, trees, soil, without speaking of yourself." This intimate and entangled relationality, she argued, challenges Western Cartesian dualism, which puts humans and nature on two sides of a spectrum. It is this alienation that has allowed the Global North to view land in terms of exchange value. Following this, Kathy lamented the success of Apartheid planning, not only in managing to racially segregate the country, but also in how it forced so many Indigenous people out of their relations with land, and into the Western topology of "a single house on a single piece of land".

Tanja described how, during her time on communal landholdings in the Eastern Cape, she began to understand the *altogether different* Indigenous relationship to land. Their onto-epistemology centres their ancestors and heritage, and draws from African spirituality and folklore. She explained to me that rather than valuing ownership, Indigenous communities are concerned with how best to care for the land, respect the land, and be part of the land. In a recent paper on Indigenous land laws, Winkler writes that access to land is provided to all members of a community, purely on account of their membership. She argues that this is maintained "through active participation in the spiritual, socio-political, economic, environmental, and spatial activities of the community as a whole" (2024, 13).

Though in no way perfect, communal landholdings represent a decolonial alternative to private property, delinked from Western epistemology. Planning must engage with these structures as valuable repositories of knowledge regarding Indigenous spatial organisation. Meanwhile, in contexts where formal planning and property systems have yet to dominate, Home writes that "withholding land from titling processes may be seen as a means of preserving cultural identity and family and community cohesion" (2013, 417). Reflecting on the shortcomings of CLARA, Cousins (2005, 438) suggests exploring "an alternative approach that seeks to secure existing rights of occupation and use, but without requiring transfer of private ownership." As we will see now, South African peri-urban communities have already been challenging and playing with the conventional property system.

4.3 Townships as Sites of Indigenous Planning Praxis

Many South African citizens live in *townships*—informal settlements typically located on the borders of cities. They are not "nice" places to live, characterised by poorly built shacks, and a lack of access to essential services. Importantly, many of these settlements are deemed *illegal* by the state, as residents do not have formal ownership over the land or permission to be there (Harrison et al. 2008). Some advocates support formalising the townships—integrating them into the city grid and granting property rights to the residents—on the basis that, viewing land is an "asset," equal access to property ownership would lead to a more equal and participatory economy (Roy 2005). However, some planners have pushed back at this, arguing that formalisation would dismantle the unique and complex social systems that have developed organically (Roy 2005; Winkler 2018).

Although informal settlements are not considered communal landholdings, Nobukhosi argued that certain values and practices traditionally associated with rural areas are noticeable in township planning. Given the peri-urban environment, there is an attached importance to the individual allotment of land, but as the areas are not formally integrated into Western systems

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of property, there are different processes connected to community planning. Tanja writes about her interview with a community leader who explained how land is obtained through extra-legal means:

> "Obtaining this form of ownership entails various stages of negotiation amongst *all* residents until a consensus is reached by *all*, before community elders grant individual land-use rights. Land-use rights are also only granted with the spiritual blessing from ancestors. Necessitating consensus amongst all, in addition to necessitating spiritual guidance, before planning decisions are made speak of an axiological position that prioritises the needs of the community over the needs of the individual." (2018, 597)

Nobukhosi described land management in informal settlements as a communal project, contrasting this with the technocratic tendencies of city planners. She emphasised the ingenuity of township planning, which includes detailed mapping of settlements and community-led public safety projects. Such examples demonstrate that informality is not the absence of a system, but rather an alternative system. There is a distinctly Indigenous onto-epistemology in the townships that, although adapting to the new context, still resists colonial planning logics.

4.4 Unsettling Property in Planning

The planning institution has plenty of opportunities to engage with alternative systems of spatial organisation. Yet, even Tanja acknowledged that despite her deep commitment to decolonial planning, she often feels the pressure to align her teaching with the discipline's dominant Western norms and expectations. Nevertheless, aware of her influence as a professor, she encourages her students to engage with communities in Cape Town that directly challenge colonial frameworks of property and profit, such as the occupations led by housing activists— mentioning the former Helen Bowden Nurses' Home (renamed Ahmed Kathrada House), and the old Woodstock Hospital (now Cissie Gool House) as examples.

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These occupations, townships, and communal lands are testament to the ongoing resistance to coloniality. In Sub-Saharan Africa, we have the highest proportion of tribal/communal land of any region of the world (Home 2013). These lands and communities—human and nonhuman—have resiliently survived centuries of colonial dispossession and epistemicide, which continues in the modern disciplines today. Likewise, the colonial culture of planning remains visible today in how the institution "assumes a relationship between humans and land that is constructed entirely around property relations" (Porter 2016, 40). Private property, as I have shown in this chapter, cannot be used to solve the injustices of the past. It is one of the master's tools, a colonial import which stands in opposition to Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

Importantly, I do not advocate for the abolition of private property in a Marxist sense, which is surely informed by Marx's own 19th century European context. Rather, I argue that private property be unseated from its systemic position of privilege. Decolonial planning entails relational and grounded approaches to spatial organisation, which are incompatible with property's objectification of land. Such a reorientation would not only challenge the market forces that continue to control the institution (Harrison et al. 2008), but would also constitute an act of epistemic disobedience against the colonial matrix of power—that is, if we consider Porter's view of colonialism as "the violent imposition of a dominant European conceived space upon the lived spaces of Indigenous peoples" (2016, 45).

Chapter 5: Conclusion

With this paper, I have aimed to contribute to the theory backing the decolonial planning movement, especially in South Africa. I identified and investigated two areas of contention, where I showed that the coloniality of the planning institution is unmistakeable. Through the privileging of colonial languages, specifically English, the discipline of planning cements the exclusion of Indigenous peoples, denying them the tools to contribute their unique epistemologies towards meaningful and transformative change. By organising itself around the colonial concept of private property, the planning institution denies Indigenous peoples the right to their *altogether different* relationalities to the land and all the life that calls it home. Therefore, I make the following recommendations towards the formation of a decolonial planning framework for South Africa: the incorporation of Indigenous languages, and the decentring of private property.

Although my recommendations are grounded in extensive research, there can never be one framework for decolonial planning in South Africa. Not only does this go against decolonial theory's ideas of pluriversality and multiple truths, but it is also unrealistic given the diversity of South African Indigenous communities. Tanja explained to me that in her fieldwork in the Eastern Cape, she found important nuances even between neighbouring chieftaincies. This needs to be accounted for in planning approaches. Indigenous communities must be collaborated with to understand their needs, and exactly how a decolonial approach would affect (and hopefully help) them.

Further research should identify other aspects of coloniality within the planning system. It could also engage deeper with my suggestions, and the practicalities of their implementation. The decentring of private property, for example, also raises questions for the discipline of architecture about how South Africans should design and build houses to nurture communal

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ways of living. Asomani-Boateng (2011) suggests a shift towards African compound architecture, instead of individualised detached houses. He core argument is that pre-colonial and Indigenous forms of urbanism may hold the answers to contemporary urban problems. Ultimately, it is clear that decolonial theory is still developing on the African continent. Nobukhosi warned me that before any radical transformations are undertaken, South Africa must first understand what decoloniality means for itself. It is my hope that I will have contributed towards this with my paper.

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