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Fractured Universality
Toward a Philosophy That Listens Without Speaking For

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Abstract: This paper argues that philosophy must abandon its traditional ambition of "speaking for everyone" as doing so constitutes an act of epistemic violence, silencing the plurality it claims to represent. Critiquing this universality fantasy through the lenses of Linda Alcoff, Gayatri Spivak, and Iris Young, the paper exposes how speaking for others reinforces colonial hierarchies and forecloses genuine dialogue. In its place, we propose a model of fractured universality—a non-relativist framework that reimagines universality not as a totality to be imposed, but as a shared, agonistic space of encounter, grounded in epistemic humility.

The paper constructs this model by synthesising three key philosophical resources: Frantz Fanon's decolonisation of Western reason, which demands we confront the fractures of colonial history; Édouard Glissant's "right to opacity," which reframes relation as dependent on irreducible difference; and Hannah Arendt's "thinking without a banister," which embraces contradiction as constitutive of political thought. This theoretical foundation is then operationalised through an ethics of listening, drawn from Levinas, Derrida, and Butler, which mandates a methodological shift from speaking for to attentively hosting the Other.

The paper consciously inhabits the performative paradox of proposing a new universal, arguing that this tension must be navigated rather than resolved. Finally, it demonstrates the practical viability of fractured universality by linking it to concrete institutional practices—such as decolonial education, participatory governance, and plural environmental ethics—and defends it against charges of relativism and political paralysis. The conclusion is that fractured universality offers a more viable foundation for global justice by aiming not to speak for all, but to create the conditions for a shared, uneasy agora where many can speak and be heard.

Keywords: *Decolonial Philosophy, Epistemic Violence, Fractured Universality, Listening, Opacity, Plurality, Speaking for.*

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Introduction

The question, "What kind of philosophy can speak for everyone?" is one that carries a powerful and deeply contested ambition. At first glance, it suggests a universalist hope: that philosophy might articulate ideas, principles, or truths that transcend particular contexts and experiences, one that can unite all of humanity and may speak across borders, cultures, and histories. Yet this ambition conceals a profound philosophical problem. To claim the authority to speak *for* everyone risks erasing difference, flattening the complexities of diverse perspectives, and imposing a singular voice where plurality ought to reign. In this paper, I argue that this universalist fantasy must be rejected, not simply because it is impractical or naïve, but because it is ethically and epistemically problematic. Philosophy must relinquish the desire to speak for others and instead create conditions where many can speak, be heard, and listen.

This rejection of universalism is however not a retreat into relativism, which dissolves ethical commitments into an anything-goes pluralism. Rather, it is a call for a *fractured universality*: a plurality grounded in epistemic humility and an ethics of encounter. Fractured universality does not aspire to a seamless or totalising unity but it recognises that difference, contradiction, and opacity are inherent features of the human condition and of knowledge itself. Philosophy, reimagined in this way, becomes a practice that hosts voices instead of replacing them with abstract, universalising concepts. It is a discipline that creates a dialogue between diverse forms of knowledge, where its goal is not conquest but understanding. It is not a practice that speaks for, but one that alternatively aims to listen to, and be enriched by the exchange. It is not one that hosts others perspectives, but allows all perspectives to be heard equally, without the power dynamics of who exactly is *allowing* space for the Other.

The urgency of this reimagining appears starkly when we consider the contemporary global landscape; a world rife with warfare, displacement, genocide, and ever-pressing systemic injustices. Western philosophy, long associated with claims to universal reason and truth, must confront its own historical entanglements with colonialism, imperialism, and epistemic violence. It must ask: What is the role of philosophy when faced with the realities of the Other: the subaltern, the marginalised, those whose voices have been systematically silenced or distorted? Can philosophy continue to claim universality in a way that does not merely perpetuate colonial hierarchies? Or must it radically transform its methods and aims? The arguments that I set forth in this paper indicate that it must change.

Frantz Fanon's methodological project of radically critiquing, expanding and essentially decolonising Western rationality itself, offers a key insight here. Fanon challenges

us to fracture and remake reason itself and to expand and transform Western rationality so that it can account for the fractures produced by colonial histories and ongoing inequalities. This is not a matter of adding marginal perspectives as supplements to an already established canon, but of radically unsettling the epistemic frameworks that produce exclusion and domination. Alongside Fanon, Édouard Glissant's ideas of opacity and relationality reframe universality as a poetic, never-totalising structure that must embrace the right to opacity, the right not to be fully known or assimilated, as a form of epistemic and ethical respect. Hannah Arendt't notion of "thinking without a banister" fosters a stance that welcomes contradiction, incompletion, and uncertainty as pivotal to ethical reflection and political action.

Together, these thinkers suggest a non-universalist yet non-relativist philosophy: one that is contextually responsive, capable of resonating across borders without erasing difference, and ethically committed to justice without imposing totalisation. Such a philosophy demands a shift in posture and method. It must move away from domination, and the desire to comprehend fully and control, toward a way of attentive listening and ethical openness.

This shift in philosophical practice also involves amplifying voices that have been marginalised, not as mere objects of study or tokens of diversity, but as sources of theory and knowledge in their own right. Poetry written on the rubble of conflict, camp debates among the displaced, and suppressed oral traditions, all can potentially become philosophical work. Philosophy, in this model, becomes a practice of intellectual hospitality, responsible for holding friction, contradiction, and opacity without rushing to closure, synthesis, or sweeping generalisations. This willingness, to let thought remain open, unfinished, and porous, challenges the classical ideal of philosophy as a search for definitive answers or a totalising system of knowledge. Instead, it embraces the ethical and political necessity of living with uncertainty and plurality, recognising that the world is never neatly ordered but always in a complex state of contested flux.

I recognise that the argument posited in this paper cannot entirely escape the universal gesture it critiques. To articulate any philosophy of universality, even a fractured one, is already to speak from within a universal register. The point, then, is not to deny this performative paradox but to inhabit it responsibly. This self-awareness is central to its ethics: the paradox cannot be solved or transcended, only lived with integrity. Consequently, fractured universality treats its own assertions as both necessary and provisional. Its prescriptive claims are not dogmatic decrees but disciplined invitations, meta-rules from an engagement that lacks any final foundation. The result is not a finished system but a vigilant practice: an ethics of philosophy aware that its universality is inevitably implicated in the structures it critiques yet

must still be attempted as a gesture of shared responsibility.

In the sections that follow, I aim to develop the preceding ideas in greater detail. The first section explores the ethical and epistemic problems involved in the ambition to "speak for everyone," drawing on key feminist and postcolonial critiques from Alcoff, Spivak, and Young. I will argue that this ambition tends to silence the very voices it claims to represent, and that philosophy could instead become a space that hosts voices without dominating, replacing or speaking over them.

The second section articulates the constructive concept of fractured universality through the thought of Fanon, Arendt, Glissant, and Mignolo. Here, I suggest how universality can be reimagined not as a totalising, homogenising ideal used to consolidate dominating powers, but as a poetic and relational structure, one that is open, plural, and capable of holding contradiction. This fractured universality is not relativism; it is an ethical framework that recognises and requires differences to coexist without being negated or assimilated.

Drawing on the ideas of Levinas, Derrida, and Butler, the third section proposes an ethical model of philosophical practice. Synthesising their ethics of attentive listening, relationality, and hosting I argue that philosophy now conceived as a fractured universalism, should strive to be a receptive, ethical presence rather than an tool of domination. It refuses homogenisation and avoids the temptation to translate opacity into clarity, instead cultivating practices that respect knowledge without domination. Philosophy's role shifts from knowing to listening, from imposing to hosting (whilst remaining vigilant, à la Mignolo, of the power dynamics inherent in the host-guest relationship), and from speaking for others to creating the conditions and space for others to speak for themselves.

Finally, in the fourth and last section of this paper I address three anticipated objections to fractured universality: the charge of relativism, the risk of political paralysis, and the difficulty of its scalability. I assert that fractured universality is not a retreat from judgement but a reorientation toward it and that its framework and methodology does not forfeit but rather refines our ability to make ethical judgments, act decisively in times of crisis, and expand to a planetary scale.

By reimagining philosophy in this way, my aim for this paper is to contribute to the broader movement within contemporary thought, one that seeks to decentre Western philosophy, engage seriously with decolonial perspectives, and renew philosophy's social and ethical commitments. This is not a call for philosophy to retreat into relativism or silence, but to host and listen to the other whilst adopting a position of humility, attentiveness, and openness. It is a call to imagine a philosophy that no longer speaks for the world but listens,

with care and respect, to the many worlds that constitute it, where it does not seek to dominate certain ideas over others but reimagines the universal not as a totality, but as a shared, uneasy agora.

Section I - The Limits of Speaking For

The ambition for philosophy, or of any discourse, to "speak for everyone" is both compelling and deeply problematic. On the surface, it appears as a noble universalist ideal: to find common ground, to articulate truths or values that transcend particular perspectives, and to give a voice to those who might otherwise remain unheard. However, this ambition often conceals a more troubling dynamic: the imposition of a singular voice *for* others, speaking of and about others, rather than *with* them, and the implications of the power dynamics inherent in "allowing" others to speak and be listened to. Philosophy's claim to universality risks becoming a form of epistemic domination, where speaking *for* others silences the very plurality it purports to represent. This functions as, what is called, an "epistemic violence", the harm inflicted by representing others in ways that distort and subordinate.[1] It is also akin to Miranda Fricker's concept of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice,[2] which involves silencing and failing to provide the interpretive resources for marginalised experiences to be fully understood. The fantasy of universality, in this context, is not simply a benign search for shared meaning, but an exercise in imposing abstraction and generality that erases difference and erodes complexity.[3]

When philosophy assumes the authority to speak *for* the Other: a term here in this sense denoting those systematically positioned outside the dominant frameworks of power and, it risks speaking *over* them. This dominate framework, as articulated by Walter Mignolo, is the "colonial matrix of power"[4]; a pervasive structure forged through European expansion and the ideals of the Enlightenment that universalises its own particular perspective as the only legitimate form of knowledge. Operating from within this framework, even well-intention philosophical speech risks appropriating the voice, knowledge, and experience of the Other in

[1] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 271–313. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988) 280-281.
[2] Fricker, Miranda. Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1, 147-148.
[3] Walter D. Mignolo, "On Pluriversality and Multipolar World Order: Decoloniality after Decolonization; Dewesternization after the Cold War," in *Constructing the Pluriverse: The Geopolitics of Knowledge*, ed. Bernd Reiter (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 90-92.
[4] Mignolo, Walter D. "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom." *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, no. 7–8 (December 2009):19.

a way that replaces rather than respected their lived reality.[5]

This problem is not merely political or practical but also deeply philosophical, as it challenges philosophy's self-understanding as a discipline committed to truth and justice. The call to speak for everyone assumes that there is a single, accessible, and coherent universal voice, a claim that erases the multiplicity of situated knowledges and lived experiences. Instead of fostering dialogue across differences, it often functions as a totalising logic that excludes and marginalises voices that do not fit its framework. This therefore stymies the ability of philosophical inquiry itself, as it cuts the discipline off from a wealth of perspectives and ways of knowing.

The consequence of this is a form of silencing that feminist, disability, and post- and de-colonial thinkers have thoroughly critiqued. It is important for philosophy to confront its own complicity in this epistemic violence and reconsider its methods and aims. Rather than seeking to speak *for* others, philosophy should strive to *host* a plurality of voices, creating spaces where diverse perspectives can surface, resonate, and challenge one another without being absorbed into a unifying, totalising discourse. This shift demands a stance founded in respect, humility, and attentiveness, one that recognises the limits of one's own voice and perspectives, and fosters the necessity of listening to and engaging with others on their own terms.[6]

In what follows, I analyse this problem through the concepts presented by Alcoff, Spivak, and Young, whose work highlights the epistemic and ethical failures embedded in the ambition to speak for others. Their insights lay the groundwork for imagining alternatives to a universalist philosophy, alternatives that respect difference and foster what Iris Young calls "asymmetrical reciprocity" rather than domination.

One of the most insightful critiques of the ambition to speak for others comes from Linda Alcoff, whose analysis exposes the political and epistemic violence embedded in this practice. Alcoff argues that even when done with sincere intentions, such as solidarity or advocacy, speaking *for* others risks making the mistake of replacing the authentic voices of those it claims to represent with a moderated version of what they may say that is shaped by the speaker's own interpretive lens.[7] This is not a mere problem of imperfect translation, it becomes an act of domination that perpetuates hierarchical power relations.[8] The speaker

[5] Alcoff, Linda Martín. "The Problem of Speaking for Others." *Cultural Critique*, no. 20 (Winter 1991): 6-7, 9-10.
[6] Ibid., 25-26.
[7] Ibid., 26.
[8] Ibid., 24.

asserts authority not only over the narrative but over the very right to narrate, thereby silencing rather than amplifying marginalised perspectives.[9]

Following Kirstie Dotson's definition this constitutes epistemic violence: a pernicious ignorance that harms,[10] which is a key mechanism of what Mignolo calls the colonial matrix of power.[11] When a dominant or privileged individual or group speaks on behalf of a marginalised subject, they risk reducing that subject's experiences and knowledge to a set of easily digestible representations, often stripped of complexity, contradiction, and context.[12] The result is a form of intellectual colonisation,[13] where the speaker's framework becomes the only valid lens through which the subaltern or marginalised voice is heard, effectively erasing the possibility of authentic self-expression or self-definition.[14]

Alcoff's critique is particularly important in contexts of cross-cultural or intercultural communication, where differences in language, history, and power complicate representation. The well-meaning desire to "give voice" can paradoxically become a form of epistemic silencing, especially when the speaker is unable or unwilling to recognise the limits of their own understanding or the specificity of the other's standpoint.[15] This silencing is not always overt or intentional; it often occurs through subtle processes of framing, selective interpretation, or the imposition of dominant epistemic norms that delegitimise alternative ways of knowing.[16]

Moreover, Alcoff emphasises that the issue is not only about who is speaking but about how the very act of speaking *for* others structures the relationship itself. It creates a form of epistemic asymmetry[17] where global structure has been formulated so that the Global North is positioned as the speaker, the epistemic authority and the sole producer of "legitimate" knowledge whilst the Global South is relegated to the mere status of consumer, one who is also an object to be interpreted rather than a full subject capable of equally participating in in discourse.[18] This asymmetry rooted in the "complicity between modern knowledge and and modern regimes of power,"[19] perpetuates exclusion and marginalisation, and results in

[9] Ibid., 7.
[10] Dotson, Kristie. "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing." *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 238-239.
[11] Mignolo, Epistemic Disobedience, 12.
[12] Spivak, Subaltern Speak, 285; Alcoff, Problem of Speaking, 20.
[13] Mignolo, Epistemic Disobedience, 2, 163; Mignolo, Walter D. The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), xxv.
[14] Spivak, Subaltern Speak, 3; Alcoff, Problem of Speaking, 7; Alcoff, Linda Martín. *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*. Studies in Feminist Philosophy. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, 95.
[15] Alcoff, Problem of Speaking, 20; Spivak, Subaltern Speak, 284.
[16] Ibid., 23; Alcoff, Visible Identities, 95-96.
[17] Ibid., 24; Mignolo, Epistemic Disobedience, 12.
[18] Ibid., Spivak, Subaltern Speak, 285.
[19] Mignolo, Epistemic Disobedience, 12.

undermining efforts toward genuine epistemic justice.[20]

By revealing the dangers of speaking for others, Alcoff's work calls for a rethinking of how philosophy can engage with the alterity; it demands that we move away from appropriation and representation towards forms of engagement that respect epistemic sovereignty.[21] Instead of always attempting to speak on behalf of others, philosophy must develop ways to host diverse voices by creating spaces where perspectives coexist, challenge one another, and contribute to a more pluralistic discourse. This change requires an ethic of listening and humility, and a recognition that speaking with others, rather than for them, is essential to countering epistemic violence.[22]

To build on Alcoff's critique, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal work on the politics of representation deepens our understanding of the structural impossibility and ethical dangers inherent in speaking for the subaltern: those who are doubly marginalised by colonial and postcolonial power structures.[23] In her essay *"Can the Subaltern Speak?"*, Spivak critiques Foucault and Deleuze and argues that the subaltern cannot speak in a way that is heard or recognised as authoritative within existing hegemonic structures, since those structures often leads to the reconfiguration and silence of their voices.[24] Her critique targets the naïve assumption that good intentions or representational acts can simply rectify historical and ongoing forms of exclusion without addressing the underlying epistemic and political asymmetries.[25] Importantly, Spivak does not imply that the subaltern are literally voiceless, but rather that their speech is systematically disallowed or unreadable within dominant discourses.[26]

Spivak highlights that speaking for the subaltern often involves co-opting their narratives and translating them into the dominant language of power, whether colonial, academic, or political. This translation is never neutral but distorts, displaces, or erases subaltern modes of expression and knowledge.[27] The subaltern's speech is thus not absent but actively suppressed by structural conditions of power that determine who can speak and be heard.[28] The act of advocating, of representing the subaltern thus risks reinforcing colonial epistemic violence by reproducing the very silencing and marginalisation it claims to

[20] Alcoff, Visible Identities, 95; Ibid.
[21] Alcoff, Problem of Speaking, 28-29.
[22] Alcoff, Visible Identities, 91-92.
[23] Spivak, Subaltern Speak, 284.
[24] Spivak, Subaltern Speak, 275-277.
[25] Ibid., 275; Mignolo, Epistemic Disobedience, 159, 165.
[26] Spivak, Subaltern Speak, 308.
[27] Ibid., 285.
[28] Ibid., 283.

overcome.[29] This creates a paradox, those who seek to advocate for or speak on behalf of the subaltern may inadvertently reinforce the subaltern's invisibility by failing to recognise these structural limitations. Without a systemic overhaul, the notion of "giving a voice to the voiceless" merely reinforces the dominant frameworks, founded on European enlightenment ideals, that caused the silencing in the first place.[30]

Consequently, Spivak's analysis calls for a radical rethinking of representation. Rather than speaking for the subaltern, she encourages those engaged in philosophical or political work to first recognise the limits of their own positionality, to tackle the conditions that foreclose speech, and to foster spaces where the subaltern can their assert agency and epistemic authority on their own terms.[31] It also means acknowledging the enduring opacity and incompleteness of such encounters by recognising that the subaltern's voice may not always be fully translatable or comprehensible within existing paradigms.

In this way, Spivak resonates with Alcoff by underscoring the ethical imperative to avoid appropriation.[32] Yet she also pushes the discussion further by revealing the structural challenges that complicate the very possibility of speaking *with* the Other, especially when the Other is subaltern. This demands a humility and a critical reflexivity that resists imposing coherence or universality on fragmented, marginalised, and often silenced experiences.[33]

For the challenges posed by Alcoff and Spivak, Iris Marion Young offers a constructive alternative through her concept of asymmetrical reciprocity. This reframes the ethics of dialogue without erasing difference or imposing unity.[34] Young recognises that traditional models of reciprocity, based on symmetrical exchange and mutual recognition fail to sufficiently address the profound power imbalances and structural inequalities that characterise many social relations, especially those involving marginalised groups.[35] Instead, she advocates for an ethics of asymmetrical relations that embraces difference whilst cultivating respect and openness.

Asymmetrical reciprocity acknowledges the irreducibility of the Other's experience without demanding of it assimilation or full, mutual understanding. It recognises that the Other's perspective may remain partial, fragmented, or not fully translatable within one's own

[29] Ibid., 295; Mignolo, Epistemic Disobedience, 177.
[30] Ibid., 291; Mignolo, Darker Side, xxv.
[31] Ibid., 295; Alcoff, Problem of Speaking, 24.
[32] Alcoff, Problem of Speaking, 7.
[33] Spivak, Subaltern Speak, 295; Mignolo, Epistemic Disobedience, 163.
[34] Young, Iris Marion. Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 341.
[35] Ibid., 343.

framework, but this does not diminish their legitimacy or ethical claim to be heard.[36] This model thus preserves the integrity of marginalised voices and resists the urge to dominate or replace them with universalising abstractions.[37]

Young emphasises that this ethical stance requires active listening as a form of responsiveness, one that accepts that one cannot fully grasp the Other's experience but nonetheless remains open to being affected and transformed by it.[38] This openness calls for a humility that counters the epistemic arrogance implicit in speaking for others and instead fosters spaces where different voices can coexist without hierarchies of interpretation or authority.[39]

Young's asymmetrical reciprocity does not demand that philosophers or interlocutors fully comprehend or resolve the contradictions that crop up in dialogue. Rather, it encourages sustaining these contradictions as productive sites for ethical engagement and political solidarity. By valuing partial encounters and the process of forming "an enlarged mentality" that represents to oneself the "multiplicity of viewpoints" and "variety of perspectives,"[40] philosophy can move beyond the extractive logic of imposing coherence and instead cultivate a pluralist ethos that honours diverse ways of being and knowing.

Young's approach aligns with the broader argument of this paper, that it is important to *host* voices rather than *speak for* them. It points toward a mode of social and philosophical interaction grounded not in domination but in ethical attentiveness, one that creates room for subaltern and marginalised subjects to assert their agency without being absorbed or silenced.[41] In this way, Young's asymmetrical reciprocity offers a viable framework for engaging with difference ethically and respectfully, forming the foundation for the fractured universality proposed in later sections.

The problem of speaking for others, as outlined through the critiques of Alcoff, Spivak, and Young, is fundamentally a philosophical one that calls into question the very limits and ambitions of universality. The ambition to speak for everyone rests on the universalist fantasy that philosophy can achieve a transcendent, all-encompassing standpoint from which it can represent the totality of human experience.[42] Although, as these thinkers reveal, such universality often functions as an imposition rooted in Eurocentric and colonial epistemologies:

[36] Ibid., 341.
[37] Alcoff, Problem of Speaking, 24.
[38] Young, Intersecting Voices, 355.
[39] Ibid., 357.
[40] Ibid., 350.
[41] Spivak, Subaltern Speech, 295.
[42] Mignolo, On Pluriversality, 90-92.

it erases difference, marginalises subaltern voices, and enacts epistemic violence through exclusion, silencing, abstraction, and appropriation.[43]

This challenges the traditional role of philosophy as not merely a pursuit of knowledge but as a practice bound up with power, voice, and ethical responsibility. Philosophy could instead reconfigure its role as a host that creates conditions where diverse voices can emerge, be heard, and stand on their own terms without being reinterpreted or overwritten through dominant discourses.[44] This hosting rather than dominating entails rejecting the authority of colonial and Eurocentric thought as the sole arbiter of universality, opening the way for epistemic plurality.[45]

The ethical task that follows is to open space for contested and fractured knowledges to coexist, to curate rather than conquer, and to respect the irreducibility of difference without forcing synthesis.[46] This shift would move philosophy away from the paradigm of conquest or comprehension toward one of *attentive listening* and *ethical responsiveness*.[47] It is an approach that would acknowledge that thought may remain incomplete, that dialogue may be unresolved, and that ambiguity and contradiction are not failures, but essential conditions for engagement with plural realities.[48]

Fundamentally, the imperative that philosophy host voices rather than speak for them reframes universality not as totality or assimilation but as a plural space where multiple epistemic positions can interact without dominance.[49] This sets the stage for the proposal developed in the next section: a model of fractured universality that embraces multiplicity without dissolving difference into relativism.

Having critically examined the pitfalls and ethical dangers inherent in the ambition to "speak for everyone," it suggests that the problem is not merely a failure of execution but a fundamental limitation of universalist philosophy itself. The critiques of Alcoff, Spivak, and Young reveal how traditional models of universality tend to erase difference, impose dominant perspectives, and even perpetuate epistemic violence under the guise of inclusion.[50] Yet, this

[43] Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington. New York: Grove Press, 1963, 37; Mignolo, Epistemic Disobedience, 160.
[44] Young, Intersecting Voices, 352; Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 189.
[45] Mignolo, On Pluriversality, 90-92.
[46] Glissant, Poetics, 194; Young, Intersecting Voices, 355.
[47] Young, Intersecting Voices, 355.
[48] Arendt, Hannah. *Thinking Without a Banister: Essays in Understanding, 1953-1975*. Edited by Jerome Kohn. (New York: Schocken Books, 2018), 13.
[49] Mignolo, On Pluriversality, 90-92.
[50] Alcoff, Problem of Speaking, 24; Spivak Subaltern Speak, 285; Mignolo, Epistemic Disobedience, 169.

rejection of universalist aspirations need not lead us to a retreat into relativism or fragmentation without coherence. Rather, it opens a vital space for reimagining what universality might mean, perhaps a universality that does not aim to absorb or replace diverse voices, but one that acknowledges and preserves their irreducible plurality.[51]

This calls for a new philosophical paradigm: a fractured universality that embraces multiplicity and asymmetry without dissolving into relativism, grounded instead in epistemic humility and openness to the ongoing strains of difference.[52] Such a model refuses the fantasy of totalising knowledge or synthesis, accepting instead that thought, and the world it engages with, are always incomplete, contradictory, and permeable.[53] To develop this positive vision, it is wise to draw upon the insights of thinkers who grapple with these antagonisms in different ways. Frantz Fanon challenges the colonial limits of Western rationality and urges the transformation of reason itself to accommodate fracture.[54] Mignolo calls for pluriversality that insists on a global epistemic shift away from coloniality.[55] Édouard Glissant's philosophy of opacity and relationality offers a vision of universality as a shared but uneasy space of co-existence rather than homogeneity.[56] Hannah Arendt's notion of "thinking without a banister" invites an acceptance of contradiction and unresolved reflection as intrinsic to philosophical thought.[57]

In the following section, I will articulate how various thinkers collectively provide the philosophical foundations for a model of fractured universality: one that reconfigures the ambition of philosophy not as speaking for others but as curating a wide-scale rational dialogue that respects difference, nurtures epistemic encounters, and remains ethically and politically responsive to the conditions of our fractured world without dissolving difference into relativism.

Section II - Towards Fractured Universality

The persuasive critiques of speaking for others, as advanced by Alcoff, Spivak, and Young, perform the essential work of dismantling the philosophical foundations of universalism. They reveal the practice and ambition to "speak for everyone," is not a benign oversight but a form

[51] Glissant, Poetics, 190.
[52] Young, Intersecting Voices, 341.
[53] Arendt, Thinking Without, 13.
[54] Fanon, Wretched of the Earth, 315.
[55] Mignolo, On Pluriversality, 92.
[56] Glissant, Poetics, 11, 113.
[57] Arendt, Thinking Without, 13.

of epistemic domination, often enacting the very violence it purports to overcome through exclusion, silencing, and appropriation.[58] This critical dismantling, however, leaves us at a precipice. To abandon the universalist project entirely, and thus to retreat into a pure particularism or relativism, is an intellectually and politically untenable position. It leaves us without a shared language or ethical ground to address collective and wholesale planetary crises such as climate collapse, global inequality, or again the rise of authoritarianism.[59] The challenge, therefore, is not to discard the concept of the universal but to radically reconfigure it away from its totalising, Eurocentric instantiation. It is necessary to forge a universal that is not imposed from above but instead built from the ground up, one that does not erase difference but is constituted through it. This is the aims for the project of fractured universality.

Fractured universality is a philosophical model that consciously refuses the fantasy of totalising knowledge yet resists the conclusion that perspectives are isolated, incommensurable, and immune to critique. It cautiously steers a course between the danger of homogenising universalism and the trap of relativism that makes moral judgement impossible.

1. The unequivocal acceptance of radical plurality: This is the recognition that human experience is fundamentally plural. No single standpoint, no matter how seemingly thorough, can exhaust the reality of the world. Our understanding must therefore be built through sustained, ethical engagement across differences that may never fully dissolve into consensus.[60]
2. Epistemic humility: This is the willing and active stance of acknowledging the limits and situatedness of one's own knowledge. It is a commitment to remaining open to revision, to being transformed by encounter, and to accepting that contradiction and tension are not problems to be solved but enduring conditions of ethical and political life.[61]

In this model, universality is not an abstract, pre-given framework to which all must conform. Rather, it is a provisional and evolving space of encounter, a shared horizon that is continually shaped and reshaped by the ongoing negotiation of diverse voices. Philosophy's role, consequently, shifts from that of an architect designing a grand system to that of a host or

[58] Alcoff, Problem of Speaking, 7; Spivak Subaltern Speak, 285; Mignolo, Epistemic Disobedience, 163.
[59] Butler, Judith. *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 71.
[60] Arendt, Thinking Without, 7; Young, Intersecting Voices, 350.
[61] Butler, Judith. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 42.

curator, tasked with holding open a space where the many can speak to each other without being erased or assimilated. The value of a universal claim lies not in its finality or stability, but in its capacity to sustain dialogue, accommodate opacity, and remain responsive to the shifting conditions of the world.

This reconceptualisation finds one of its most profound and poetic articulations in the work of Martinican philosopher and poet Édouard Glissant. His work provides the relational ontology that underpins fractured universality.

For Glissant, the Western philosophical "requirement for transparency" is the epistemological engine of domination. This is the demand that the Other be fully knowable, legible, and translatable into the familiar terms of the dominant framework to be granted recognition or legitimacy.[62] In his seminal work, *Poetics of Relation*, he argues that this impulse to reduce, measure, and compare against a single "ideal scale" is the antithesis of true encounter. "I understand your difference," he writes, "or in other words, without creating a hierarchy, I relate it to my norm. I admit you to existence, within my system. I create you afresh."[63] This is a perfect description of the epistemic violence inherent in speaking for others: the act of recreating the other in one's own image.

Against this, Glissant proposes the ethical and political value of opacity, which he defines as "the right to opacity that is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity."[64] Opacity is not a defensive withdrawal from the world; it is a positive claim to exist on one's own terms, without being required to justify or explain one's entire being to a dominant power. It is the right to be partially unknowable, to have depths that cannot be plumbed by an outsider's gaze.

Crucially, and this is Glissant's revolutionary insight, opacity is not a barrier to relation but its very condition. We can only truly connect with others when we relinquish the desire to fully comprehend and master them. "Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics," he argues. "To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components."[65] This shifts the entire goal of engagement from one of decoding and assimilation to one of appreciating pattern, connection, and movement. His poetics of relation thus replaces the model of universality-as-assimilation with one of universality-as-relation, or Glissant may say universality-as-archipelago. Connection depends on recognising

[62] Glissant, Poetics, 190.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Glissant, Poetics, 194.
[65] Glissant, Poetics, 190.

that difference is irreducible and that this irreducibility actively enriches the entire field of interaction.

For fractured universality, Glissant's work is foundational. It provides the conceptual tools to imagine a whole that does not rely on the parts becoming identical. The fractures and differences are not weaknesses to be repaired; they are the openings through which genuine dialogue, solidarity, and co-creation become possible. The beauty and coherence of this mosaic-like universal arise precisely from the fact that it is composed of fragments that do not fit together seamlessly. However, this ontological ground must be understood within the historical struggle that makes it necessary.

If Glissant provides the serene, ontological groundwork for fractured universality, Frantz Fanon provides its urgent, decolonising imperative and its historical consciousness. Fanon's work is the necessary critique that prevents Glissant's poetics from becoming an abstract metaphor; it grounds the theory in the brutal history of colonial violence and the fierce struggle for liberation.

In both *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Fanon performs a ruthless dissection of the European "universal." He demonstrates with searing clarity how Enlightenment reason, humanism, and its philosophical categories, while presenting themselves as neutral and transcendent, were in fact forged in the crucible of colonial conquest and racial hierarchy.[66] This universal was not universal at all; it was what Dipesh Chakrabarty would later call a "hyper-real Europe," a provincial experience masquerading as a global norm.[67] The violence of this false universal was not just physical but epistemological: it systematically pathologises non-Western ways of being and knowing, rendering them incorrect, irrational, primitive, or simply invisible.[68]

As scholars like Lewis Gordon and Homi Bhabha have argued, Fanon's response to this violent universalism is not a retreat into nativism but the pursuit of a new humanism,[69] achieved through a radical methodological innovation. He takes the tools of Western reason (psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and philosophy) that had failed him and, as Bhabha notes, stretches, extends, and ultimately breaks them against the reality of the colonial experience.[70]

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[66] Fanon, Wretched of the Earth, 36-37.
[67] Chakrabarty, Dipesh. Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000, 42-43.
[68] Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 18.
[69] Gordon, Lewis R. What Fanon Said: A Philosophical Introduction to His Life and Thought. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015, 135.
[70] Bhabha, Homi K. "Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition." *Foreword to* Black Skin, White Masks *by Frantz Fanon*, Pluto Press, 1986, xx.

He moulds what can be understood as a stretched reason, a rationality that has been remade by the experience of the colonised.[71] This is a reason that is capable of confronting and integrating the colonial fracture rather than smoothing it over or denying its existence. It is a reason that acknowledges its own historical complicity and is therefore humble, open-ended, and perpetually unfinished. The final result, as Sylvia Wynter contends, is an epistemological break that moves towards a new 'sociogenic principle'[72] and a more liberating forms of knowledge.

This process is not a quiet intellectual exercise; it is born from the heat of political struggle. As Fanon argues in *The Wretched of the Earth*, liberation is a transformative event that creates new "habits of thought" and forges a new humanity in the process.[73] This aligns directly with Walter Mignolo's concept of "epistemic disobedience", which is the deliberate decoupling from the dominant frameworks of the "colonial matrix of power" to make space for alternative forms of knowledge and being.[74] Mignolo argues that the universalist claims of Western philosophy are a key feature of this matrix, and that true liberation entails a "decolonial option" that thinks from the margins and fractures of the modern world system.[75]

Fanon's reimagined reason thus demands the epistemic humility central to fractured universality. It invites the West to recognise that its philosophical categories are not adequate to all human experience and that other ways of knowing may profoundly unsettle and transform its own. His call is for a universality that emerges through mutual, though often agonistic, transformation: a horizon continually reshaped by the encounter with voices and histories previously silenced. In the terms of fractured universality, this means accepting that universality, if it is to be legitimate, must be porous to contradiction, grounded in historical accountability, and continually reconstituted through political struggle.

If Fanon provides the *why* (the decolonising imperative) and Glissant the *what* (the relational ontology), then Hannah Arendt provides the *how*: a methodological blueprint for the practice of thinking within a fractured landscape. Her work offers a way to conceptualise the activity of philosophy once the false comfort of traditional universalism has been withdrawn.

Arendt's powerful concept of "thinking without a banister" (*denken ohne Geländer*) is the cornerstone of this methodology. For Arendt, to think without a banister is to navigate the world without the support of inherited certainties, fixed ideological systems, or transcendental

[71] Gordon, What Fanon Said, 55.
[72] Wynter, Sylvia. "Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, The Puzzle of Conscious Experience, and What It Is Like to Be 'Black'." *National Identities and Sociopolitical Changes in Latin America*, edited by Mercedes F. Durán-Cogan and Antonio Gómez-Moriana, Routledge, 2001, 49.
[73] Fanon, The Wretched, 246.
[74] Mignolo, Epistemic Disobedience, 160.
[75] Mignolo, Darker Side, xxv.

guarantees.[76] This is not an abdication of responsibility but more truly its highest form: it is the willingness to engage with reality in all its complexity and contradiction, to judge without pre-existing rules, and to resist the powerful urge to resolve conflicting conditions prematurely for the sake of intellectual comfort. This stance embraces the vertigo of freedom and accepts that meaning must be generated, through human interaction and discourse, rather than discovered in pre-ordained doctrines.

This methodology is rooted in her foundational ontological commitment to plurality. For Arendt, plurality is "the law of the earth" and "the condition of political life."[77] It is the fact that not one human, but humans, inhabit the world, and that each is capable of initiating new beginnings and offering new perspectives. From this axiom, it follows that universality can never be the product of a single, sovereign mind. It can only come forth, fragilely and provisionally, in the public realm through dialogue and debate among distinct, irreplaceable perspectives. The goal of this dialogue is not consensus-as-unanimity, which would signal the end of plurality, but a form of agreement that preserves difference. This aligns perfectly with what Iris Young would later theorise as asymmetrical reciprocity, where agreement is reached not through finding common ground but through being open to transformation by the other's distinct perspective.[78]

Arendt's approach, therefore, is inherently anti-totalising. Just as Glissant resists the erasure of opacity and Fanon calls for a remaking of reason from the fractures of history, Arendt warns against the "banister" of any totalising system that would claim to have all the answers. For Arendt, to live and think politically is to accept that meaning will remain open-ended and contingent upon the ongoing presence and speech of others. The world is not a puzzle to be solved but instead a complex web of relationships to be navigated with judgment and care.

For fractured universality, Arendt provides the key ethos of thinking without a banister. She models a form of thinking that is both courageous enough to face a world without ultimate foundations, and humble enough to recognise that one's own perspective is always partial and must be tested against the perspectives of others. This makes her work an essential bridge between the critique of universalism and the practice of building a new, fractured common world. The dialogue among Fanon, Glissant, and Arendt is unresolved. Fanon's revolutionary demand to remake reason collides with Arendt's defence of plurality as the ground of

[76] Arendt, Thinking Without, 13, 178; Mahrdt Helgard, "Hannah Arendt: To Think 'Without Banisters'," in *Feminist Philosophy: Time, History and the Transformation of Thought*, ed. Synne Myrebøe, Valgerður Pálmadóttir, and Johan Sjöstedt (Huddinge: Södertörn University, 2023), 125.
[77] Arendt, The Human Condition, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 7.
[78] Young, Intersecting Voices, 349.

judgement, whilst Glissant's poetics of relation resists both systematic coherence and final reconciliation. These divergences are not weaknesses but demonstrations of fracture as method: they reveal how universality can survive only through the friction of incompatible truths. To hold these tensions without closure is itself the practice of fractured universality: a philosophy that finds coherence in contradiction and integrity in incompletion. Taken together, Glissant's right to opacity, Fanon's reformulated reason**,** and Arendt's thinking without a banister converge to form a robust and coherent model of fractured universality. This is not a universality in the traditional sense but a shared, uneasy agora**;** a space of encounters that is more akin to Glissant's archipelagic thinking than to a continental landmass.

This planetary agora is not a serene parliament of ideas but a vibrant, often contentious, space where difference and tension are not resolved but sustained. On a global scale, this means resisting the pressure to reduce the world's multiplicity to a single set of norms, and instead cultivating the material and conceptual infrastructures that can host contestation without sliding into either domination or fragmentation. The "right to opacity" here becomes the right to participate in this agora without being made transparent to another's categories.

This model fully acknowledges that the conditions of our knowing are partial, situated, and historically shaped. Ethical and political life depends on making room for those conditions to speak and be heard, rather than be overwritten by a dominating normativity. Here, universality is not a singular viewpoint from a specific place and time looking down upon the world from above, but a shared horizon of co-presence, sustained without fusion or erasure. It is a horizon that moves as we move, expanding through the unpredictable and often difficult encounters between perspectives that may never fully translate into one another.

Fractured universality, therefore, demands a dual commitment: epistemic humility, which is the vigilant acknowledgment of the incompleteness and situatedness of one's own position; and political courage, which is the willingness to inhabit a world where common ground is built not by erasing fractures, but by living with them as the very conditions of our common life. It is the philosophical embodiment of the insight that our strength lies in our differences, not in spite of them.

Section III - Ethics and Method of Listening

If fractured universality is to be more than a theoretical critique, it must formulate a new philosophical method. In this model, philosophy is not the architect of an overarching system but the host of a shared, conflicted space of thought. Its task is to foster conversation, without

seeking to force resolution on incommensurable positions. This entails rejecting the extractive tendencies that have historically defined academic engagement with non-dominant traditions; the proclivity to mine concepts from marginalised worlds for use in theory while ignoring the voices that generated them.[79] Instead, philosophy becomes an art of hosting, of making room for multiple ways of knowing, speaking, being, and co-existing without erasure. In doing so, it reclaims its ethical dimension, not as a legislator of universals, but as a custodian of the conditions under which plurality can flourish.

The conditions for this flourishing may be found with Emmanuel Levinas, who places ethics before epistemology. He proposes that the encounter with the Other as the primal philosophical event, and argues for ethics as a relation of infinite responsibility to the Other that precedes any conscious knowledge.[80] It is important to distinguish Levinas' Other from the systematically marginalised Other of Spivak and Fanon. Whilst the later is concerned with epistemic violence and political (mis)representation, Levinas proposes an ethical and metaphysical Other; an absolute, infinite alterity that precedes any political categorisation and constitutes the very foundation of ethical subjectivity.[81] His philosophy issues an essential command: to preserve the openness in which the Other can appear without being restrained or incorporated under categories of knowledge.[82] For fractured universality, this therefore means that plurality is not just a fact but an ethical condition demanding humility.

If Levinas orients philosophy toward the primacy of the ethical encounter, then fractured universality requires a methodology in which to practice it. Philosophy could shift from systematising to hosting and from conquering to curating. The task of philosophy becomes to arrange spaces where differences can speak, actively resisting closure and viewing opacity and tension as resources for thought rather than problems to be solved.[83]

Yet, if philosophy is to host, it needs to confront the inherent power in that role. Jacques Derrida's paradox of hospitality is essential here. He distinguishes between conditional hospitality (mediated by the host's laws and sovereignty) and unconditional hospitality (a radical, impossible openness to the stranger without any conditions).[84] This antinomy exposes

[79] Mignolo, Epistemic Disobedience, 163.
[80] Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. The (Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979), 79; Bernasconi, Robert, and Simon Critchley, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 8.
[81] Levinas Totality and Infinity, 33–34; Bernasconi & Critchley, Cambridge Levinas, 6-7.
[82] Levinas, Emmanuel. *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Translated by Richard A. Cohen. (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 86.
[83] Derrida, Of Hospitality, 81.
[84] Derrida, Jacques. *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*. Translated by Rachel Bowlby. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 25.

the risk that even hosting can be a form of assimilation: welcoming others only on one's own terms. For Derrida, the ethical labor lies in *refusing* to resolve this strained contradiction. Genuine hospitality is the perpetual, unsettled effort to approximate the unconditional while acknowledging the conditional rules that necessarily frame the encounter.[85] For our method, this means philosophy's task is not to perfect its terms of entry but to remain perpetually vigilant and unsettled by its own limits, ensuring the role of host does not subtly become another form of domination.

This vigilance must remain perpetual because the very language of hosting already presupposes possession, space, and power. As Derrida reminds us, every invitation contains the possibility of exclusion: to offer hospitality is also to decide who may enter. Fractured universality therefore seeks to undo this privilege embedded into the host's position by distributing the conditions of hospitality themselves. The goal is not a perfect symmetry, which is an impossibility, but instead a continual recalibration of power through responsiveness. To "host" in this sense is to accept that one may, at any moment, become the guest, dependent on another's welcome. Ethical relation thus becomes reciprocal vulnerability rather than benevolent control.

This Derridean vigilance leads us to the kind of epistemic labor required. Édouard Glissant offers a model in his concept of the poétique: a mode of thinking and creating that rejects the "requirement for transparency" and honours the "right to opacity."[86] This labor focuses on the "texture of the weave" rather than reducing components to a universal scale. It is found beyond academic protocols: in the campfire debate, the protest graffiti, the street-corner exchange, where knowledge is exchanged through story, humour, and embodied disagreement. It is a philosophy that embraces the fragmentary, the metaphorical, and the interruptive.

To engage in this *poétique* responsibly requires the pivotal reflexive step offered by Antonio Gramsci. His call for a critical self-inventory is a foundational methodological practice. It is necessary for us to understand ourselves as products of history, tasked with tracing the "infinity of traces" that constitute our desires, instincts, and blind spots.[87] Before one can ethically host others, one must critically catalogue the historical and social forces that have shaped one's own capacity to speak and listen. This Gramscian imperative grounds the abstract

[85] Derrida Of Hospitality, 77-81
[86] Glissant, Poetics, 190.
[87] Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited and Translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 324.

ethics of Levinas and Derrida in the concrete reality of our situatedness within power structures.

This movement from the ethical (Levinas), to the methodological (Derrida), to the epistemic (Glissant), and finally to the reflexive (Gramsci) finds its synthesis in the political philosophy of Judith Butler. Butler provides a powerful framework for how it could operate at both individual and collective levels.

Butler's work on responsiveness and vulnerability bridges the metaphysical and the political. She argues that the self is not solitary but constituted through its opaque relations to others; "I cannot muster the 'we' except by finding the way in which I am tied to 'you'".[88] This interdependence is not a choice but an ethical condition that demands response, particularly in contexts of animosity. Her reflections on public mourning after 9/11 is astutely exemplifies the negation of this principle, as she examines how a shared vulnerability was mobilised to delineate exclusionary boundaries around whose lives were deemed worthy of mourning and whose were not, consequently highlighting how a collective "we" is often formed through a disavowal of shared human fragility.[89]

Furthermore, Butler scales this ethic up to the collective. In her work on assembly, she frames protests and vigils as "plural performatives".[90] The very act of gathering enacts a shared practice of attention and vulnerability, cultivating relational awareness and registering shared and separate histories. These assemblies are not just delivering a message they are *being* the method of fractured universality; embodied philosophy that nurtures justice through responsive co-presence.

Butler's focus on unchosen interdependence and shared precarity deepens the political dimension of fractured universality. It insists on a shared ethical commitment to one another's fragility and opacity, aligning perfectly with Glissant's right to opacity and Arendt's pluralistic agonism. Together, they provide a nuanced foundation for a philosophy defined by care, responsiveness, and humility.

Having argued for a rationality of fractured universality and proposed its methodology as one of an ethics of attentive, responsive listening, it is of course necessary to anticipate some possibly anticipated criticisms and challenges. The following and final section of this paper addresses three anticipated objections that fractured universality risks collapsing into relativism, leads to political paralysis, or cannot be enacted at scale, as well as the foundational, performative paradox of proposing a new universal framework at all. Rather than treating these

[88] Butler, Giving an Account, 49.
[89] Butler, Judith. Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence. (London: Verso, 2004), 32-35.
[90] Butler, Notes Toward, 71.

as external threats, the section approaches them as internal tensions that, when examined, reveal the distinctive strength and resilience of the framework. By showing how it generates a viable, action-guided ethos, this final section of hosting difference without domination or erasure, this final section illustrates the practical stakes of hosting difference without domination or erasure.

Section IV - Objections

The vision of philosophy I have proposed is one grounded in listening that receptivity strongly rejects the traditional drive for mastery and a totalising knowledge. This rejection, however, invites serious challenges. Any framework that privileges opacity and rejects a single, authoritative standpoint must demonstrate its capacity to guide action, provide grounds for critique, and function at a planetary scale. Engaging with these objections is a necessary step in clarifying the theory and praxis of fractured universality. The resources for its defence, I will argue, are found within the framework itself.

The first major objection is the charge of relativism. By emphasising plural epistemologies, opacity, and context-specific engagement, fractured universality risks collapsing into a facile relativism. If no standpoint is ultimate and all knowledge is situated, does this therefore not imply an "anything goes" characteristic that undermines the possibility of ethical judgment from critiques of collective justice? The response to this criticism is that it is one founded in misinterpretation. Fractured universality is not moral or epistemic relativism; it is a reorientation of ethical source and method. Where relativism often denies the possibility of multi-contextual judgement, fractured universality asserts that ethical obligation is both universal and binding.

Its central claim is that the application of this obligation must be attentive, responsive, and negotiated within specific contexts. We can find a universal normative anchor,[91] following Judith Butler, in the shared human condition of precarity and vulnerability. We are universally obligated to respond to the suffering and claims of others. This obligation is a constant. What must vary is how we fulfil it across different contexts. The response must be carefully tailored to the specific situation. Critically, acknowledging opacity does not mean forfeiting the capacity for critique. It means that critique must be earned through listening and grounded in evidence of harm, not launched simply because others fail to conform to one's own parochial standards.

[91] Butler, Precarious Life, 30.

As Linda Alcoff argues, ethical engagement requires a careful negotiation of positional authority.[92] We can and must critique systemic injustice, such as the colonial matrix of power described by Mignolo, precisely because it violates the core principles of relationality and epistemic justice that fractured universality upholds. In this way, the universal is relocated from a set of predefined substantive truths to a procedural ethic.

Our universal commitments become those of humility, listening, and relational accountability. This offers a stable, cross cultural foundation for judgment. Actions or structures that silence, erase, or dominate are thereby rendered illegitimate, while those that foster dialogue and preserve dignity are to be promoted. In short, fractured universality retains its critical force by combining radical ethical openness with rigorous accountability. It refuses not judgment itself, but the arrogance of presuming one has a monopoly on its terms.

A second major objection concerns the risk of political paralysis. By complicating certainty and emphasising what might seem like endless listening, does this model not lead to moral hesitation in moments when decisive action is urgently required? This objection, while understandable, conflates haste with decisiveness and mistakes necessary reflexivity for passive inaction. Fractured universality seeks to orient action away from imperialistic certainty and toward a relational responsiveness.

Drawing on Arendt's concept of thinking without a banister, action within this fractured universal is not based on pre-existing dogma. It is instead a situated judgment that embraces full responsibility for its consequences.[93] This is the courage to act without absolute guarantees, yet to do so from a place informed by the best understanding achievable through attentive engagement. Fanon's praxis stands as the ultimate example here. His call for a decolonised humanism did not emerge from passive contemplation. It was forged in the urgent, transformative heat of anti-colonial struggle, demonstrating how action and thought are dialectically linked.

This model champions a responsiveness over prescription. Here, Judith Butler's framework of "responsiveness to vulnerability" becomes key. Moral action within fractured universality does not proceed from applying predetermined rules, but from a fundamental openness to being affected by the world and a committed drive to mitigate harm.[94] A decision to intervene in an urgent crisis is not less decisive because it is taken with an awareness of one's limited perspective and the potential for unintended consequences; on the contrary, this

[92] Alcoff, Problem of Speaking, 29.
[93] Arendt, Thinking Without,13, 123-124.
[94] Butler, Precarious Life, 147.

awareness renders the action more ethically serious and considered.

Furthermore, Glissant's right to opacity is too often misread as a command to ignore others. Its true meaning is quite the opposite. It mandates a deep relational attentiveness that refuses to simplify the other for one's own cognitive or political convenience. In a context of oppression, respecting opacity does not mean refusing to help. It means intervening in a manner that consciously preserves the agency and dignity of those being helped, working collaboratively *with* them rather than paternalistically imposing a solution *upon* them. Far from causing paralysis, this model helps prevent the kind of reckless, often violent action that historically stems from the false confidence of traditional universalism.

The third objection targets the problem of scalability: can the practices of attentive listening and hosting difference possibly function at the planetary scale required to govern complex societies or to address crises like climate change? The sceptic may justifiable wonder how one may listen to billions.

This objection, however, conflates an ethical principle with a literal prescription. Fractured universality does not aim or hope for a single, global conversation. Instead, it provides a generative framework for institutional design: a blueprint for building political and epistemic structures that are designed with humility, openness, and a capacity to host plural voices. Scaling this ethos, therefore, means turning from the paradigm of individual listening to that of institutional listening. As Iris Young argues in the context of structural injustice, large-scale justice requires institutions that enable representation and participation across difference.[95] Fractured universality puts this insight into use and moves from theory to praxis by informing the design of our shared systems.

In global environmental politics, this orientation is visible in polycentric approaches to climate governance, where authority is distributed across multiple, interacting centres as explained by Ostrom's work on institutional design.[96] Within such systems, international frameworks such as the UNFCCC engage collaboratively with Indigenous stewardship networks and local adaptation initiatives, allowing climate action to emerge from what Dryzek and Pickering term "negotiated engagement" rather than centralised decree.[97] The universal aspiration of sustainability thus becomes a dynamic and relational practice, continuously reshaped by diverse forms of ecological knowledge.

[95] Young, Intersecting Voices, 52.
[96] Elinor Ostrom, Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 1.
[97] John S. Dryzek and Jonathan Pickering, The Politics of the Anthropocene (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 41.

In higher education, the decolonised classroom can be reconfigured as a pluralist agora, transforming spaces of knowledge transmission into one of contested encounter. This shift would be driven by the implementation of decolonial and intercultural curricula, which deliberately places European philosophical traditions into sustained dialogue with African, Asian, and Indigenous systems of thought. This pedagogical practice is a direct enactment of what Boaventure de Sousa Santos theorises as the necessary move from a "university" to a "pluriversity".[98] The classical university model, he argues, is founded on an "abyssal line" that segregates valid, scientific knowledge from subaltern, intuitive or local knowledges, which renders the latter invisible.[99] In sharp contrast, the pluriversity is structured as an ecology of knowledges, a system where no single tradition holds a monopoly. This model of intellectual hospitality, where knowledge is hosted rather than assimilated, aligns with Achille Mbembe's call for a "future-orientated politics of knowledge" that is no longer centred on the Western canon.[100] Mbembe insists that the goal is to de-centre Europe and engage in a "planetary conversation," thereby enacting a fundamental rebalancing of epistemic authority within the very architecture of learning.[101]

Political design also illustrates the principle, through its shaping into, what Chantal Mouffe calls "agnostic democracy" and what Iris Young calls "inclusive democracy." Institutional experiments such as citizens' assemblies, participatory budgeting, and truth and reconciliation commissions demonstrate how structured disagreement and institutionalised dissent can produce legitimacy without erasing difference.[102] These forums are structures that enact the ethics of listening at scale and convert contestation into a source of political vitality and legitimacy rather than a threat to order.

A powerful illustration of this institutional scalability within a national context is the Australian Bringing Them Home report, the landmark result of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families.[103] This inquiry did not function as a judicial body handing down a verdict, but rather operationalised

[98] Boaventura de Sousa Santos, The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), p. 127-129.
[99] Santos, The End of Cognitive Empire, 118-120.
[100] Achille Mbembe, "Decolonizing the University: New Directions," Arts and Humanities in Higher Education 15, no. 1 (2016): p. 37.
[101] Mbembe, Decolonizing the University, 34.
[102] Mouffe, Chantal, *Agnostics: Thinking the World Politically*. (London: Verso, 2013), 1-9; Young, Iris, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 52-58, 118-122.
[103] National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families (Australia). Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families. Sydney: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997.

the core tenets of fractured universality at a national level. It created an official, structured space, a national agora, specifically designed to host the voices of the Stolen Generations, whose testimonies had been systematically erased from the country's dominant historical narrative. The inquiry's methodology was fundamentally grounded in an ethics of listening; its authority derived not from imposing a judgment, but from its meticulous, respectful recording of personal testimonies. It honoured the right to opacity by allowing survivors to share their stories on their own terms, without demanding that their trauma be made fully transparent or comprehensible to the state that inflicted it. The process was inherently agonistic, challenging the foundational myth of a benign Australian settlement by revealing a fractured national history, without offering a facile resolution. It is a tension that continues to define the unresolved political landscape long after the report's release. Thus, the Bringing Them Home inquiry stands as a concrete example of an institution whose legitimacy and power flowed from its capacity to enact a shared, difficult practice of hosting painful difference, precisely the work of a fractured universality in practice.

In each of these areas: environmental, educational, and political, the core demand is identical: to build systems capable of hosting plurality without homogenisation. The scalability of fractured universality is thus proven not in a single instance but in the very proliferation of institutional forms that already exist and that treat universality not as an imposed uniformity, but as a continuously negotiated relation among unequal and yet interdependent voices.

A final objection must be considered further, one that strikes at the very possibility of this project: that in proposing 'fractured universality,' this paper itself performs the universalising gesture it seeks to dismantle. This is not a flaw to be solved, but the constitutive tension the framework is designed to hold. Fractured universality does not claim a position completely outside of universality; rather, it advocates for a self-aware and humble practice within it. This stance finds its philosophical grounding in the very aporia that Derrida identifies: the experience of a necessary impossibility that nonetheless demands an ethical response.[104] The argument made here is therefore offered not as a new dogma, but as a provisional and performative claim. Just a Butler argues that the self is constituted by a 'fundamental interruption' and must narrate itself through external, impersonal norms, this framework of fractured universality acknowledges its own formation within the very structure it critiques. It is an iterative, contingent re-enactment, a narrative of the universal that is necessarily 'circuited through an externality' and is thus inherently subject to the same listening and contestation it

[104] Derrida, Of Hospitality, 77.

demands.

Sense as an iterative, contingent re-enactment that is itself subject to the same listening and contestation it demands.[105] Its prescriptive force is not a dogmatic 'must' but, in the spirit of Arendt's 'thinking without a banister,' a disciplined openness to continual rethinking (Arendt, 1978, p. 336). To inhabit this paradox is the very practice of the epistemic humility it prescribes.

Glissant himself envisioned relation at this global scale. His poetics is not small. It is a model for imagining planetary coexistence without the need for totalising control, a world where global interconnection thrives precisely through the respect for local and cultural particularities. The macro level of institutions and the micro level of personal practice are not opposed. They are mutually constitutive. The macro enables the micro, and the micro informs and vitalises the macro. The true practicality of fractured universality lies in its potential to generate more resilient, adaptive, and legitimate large scale systems than those built upon the brittle and exclusionary myth of a homogenising universal.

By working through these objections in this way, the framework of fractured universality reveals its distinctive strength. The challenges of relativism, paralysis, and scale are not fatal flaws but the very conditions that a responsible philosophy for a plural world must engage. Having demonstrated that its commitments generate a viable, action-guiding ethos rather than an abstract posture, we can now fully appreciate its significance. The conclusion will reflect on how this reorientation allows philosophy to meet the demands of our fractured world without resorting to the violent simplifications of the past.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper I have attempted to answer a deceptively simple yet profound question: What kind of philosophy can speak for everyone? The consistent answer is, none. No single framework, voice, or epistemic stance can claim universal authority without erasing difference, appropriating experience, or suppressing the particularity of others' knowledge. The very impulse to find a single voice for humanity, however noble its initial appeal, has been revealed as a dangerous fantasy. It is a fantasy that masks a will to power, an epistemological engine of domination that has historically served to silence the very pluralities it claims to represent. Through the critiques of Alcoff, Spivak, and Young, we have seen how this universalist ambition essentially sanctions epistemic violence, appropriates experience, imposes a false

[105] Butler, Giving an Account, 52-53, 63.

consensus, and perpetuates the very colonial hierarchies it often claims to overcome.

The rejection of this model, however, is not a descent into silence or a defeatist relativism. It is the necessary precondition for a more ethically serious and epistemologically sound philosophy. In the space cleared by this critique, we have constructed the framework of a fractured universality. This is not a weaker form of the old universal but a radical transformation: from a noun to a verb, it is a dynamic process. It is a universality understood as a shared, debated, and endlessly negotiated horizon, built on the irreducible pluralism put forth by Arendt, the right to opacity demanded by Glissant, and the decolonised, reconstituted reason called for by Fanon. Its condition of possibility is not sameness, but difference; not transparency, but a respectful and ethical acknowledgment of the opaque.

To inhabit this fractured universality a necessary shift in philosophical method is called for. We have moved from a paradigm of comprehension: a desire to master, subdue, and incorporate, to one of engagement: a willingness to grasp, engage, and be transformed. At its core, this is a practice of listening drawn from the ethical instruction of Levinas, the impossible hospitality of Derrida, and the responsive vulnerability of Butler. The philosopher's role might now be reimagined as that of a custodian of discursive space, a facilitator whose primary ethical duty is to hold open a forum where many worlds can co-exist, contend, and interact without the imperative of final synthesis. This is the hard work of hosting without dominating, a practice perpetually vigilant of the power dynamics inherent in the host-guest relation, as cautioned by Mignolo.

The urgency of this reimagining extends far beyond academic debate. The ethical stakes are planetary. In the face of interconnected crises, from climate collapse and mass migration to resurgent authoritarianism and deep structural inequality; the old model of imposing a single, monolithic solution from above has catastrophically failed. A fractured universality offers a different path. It provides the philosophical groundwork for forms of global cooperation that are not based on assimilation but on coordination across difference. It informs how we might build institutions that listen as much as they dictate, that value indigenous knowledge, scientific data, and local experience as complementary rather than hierarchical modes of knowing. It is, ultimately, a call for a new form of political and ethical life: one that finds its strength not in a spurious and coercive unity, but in the resilient, adaptive, and vibrant weave of a pluralised world.

The paper has also confronted its own performative paradox: to speak of universality at all is to inhabit the very register it questions. Fractured universality embraces this tension as constitutive of its ethical stance. Its reflexivity prevents it from hardening into doctrine while

keeping philosophy answerable to the plural realities it addresses. The framework's viability is shown not only conceptually but through its application to institutional forms like truth commissions, pluriversities, and polycentric governance, each offering laboratories for a listening, responsive universalism.

Therefore, the task of philosophy is no longer to seek a voice that speaks for everyone, but to cultivate an ear that listens to the many ones within it. This is not a retreat from universality but its maturation, which is an understanding that the only common ground we can possibly share is the ground that is continually made and remade through the humble, attentive, and unwavering practice of listening to each other's differences. The conclusion is not an answer, but an invitation into the unresolved and generative dialogue of the agora.

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