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DECOLONIAL PRAXIS AND  
EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE*Andrea J. Pitts*

For our cognitive edge cannot be defined in moralistic terms – that is, we ourselves as intellectuals are not the “victims” of oppression, nor of wicked exploiters, and it is neither our intention to set out to “reclaim the true value” of our “minority” being nor, indeed, to establish a “dictatorship of the Minoriat.” Such a moralistic approach is the logical result of taking our isms as isolated rather than systemic facts. Rather we are constituted as a negative ontological category by the systemically functioning directive signs of an order of discourse generated from the descriptive statement of man on the model of a natural organism, an order of discourse that it is our task to disenchant.

*(Wynter 1987)*

My homeland was desert until they started irrigating and turned the desert into a subtropical paradise, a garden that grows everything from papayas, to avocados, to sugar cane, to . . . whatever . . . all in the space of my lifetime. The straight world, the gay world, the literary world, the world of academia . . . I go in and out of these worlds. I think that’s why I picked this topic tonight, so I could give you a different perspective.

*(Anzaldúa 2009 [1986])*

In a 2009 essay, Walter Mignolo asks his readers to consider “[For whom] and when, why, and where knowledge is generated” (Mignolo 2009, 2). He continues:

Asking these questions means to shift the attention from the enunciated to the enunciation. And by so doing, turning Descartes’s dictum inside out: rather than assuming that thinking comes before being, one assumes instead that it is a racially marked body in a geo-historical marked space that feels the urge or get[s] the call to speak, to articulate, in whatever semiotic system, the urge that makes of living organisms “human” beings.

*(Mignolo 2009, 2)*

For Mignolo, inverting the Cartesian presupposition of rationality as a requirement for knowing the self is an attempt to “de-link” knowledge practices from the dominant macro-narratives of modernity.<sup>1</sup> One such narrative of modernity is common to Anglophone academic philosophy:

that the beginnings of civilization were founded in ancient Greek thought, and accordingly, that distinct intellectual developments and trajectories from this seat of civilization can be tracked through Western Europe and eventually to Anglo-America. The second macro-narrative stems from a critique of capitalism developed by sociologists during the Cold War. Theorists in this vein of sociological critique, such as Immanuel Wallerstein (Wallerstein 1983) and Fernand Braudel (Braudel 1992 [1979]), describe modernity as the rise of a “modern world-system,” developing since the fifteenth century. They propose that it was neither mere national projects nor intellectual developments arising from particular geopolitical locations that came to stand in for the narrative of “civilizing” national identities such as “the Dutch,” “the Portuguese,” “the Belgian,” “the Spanish,” “the French,” and “the English.” Rather it was the emergence of a capitalist world-economy through conquest and imperial expansion that became the basis for a densely interrelated socioeconomic network known as the “modern world-system.” Classical Marxist theory had, according to world-systems theory, an epistemic “blind spot” in the sense that a great deal of Marxist analysis did not view imperial expansion as itself constitutive of modern capitalism. Instead, classical Marxism held that colonialism could be explained “as a collateral effect of global European expansion and was in this sense a necessary route toward the advent of communism” (Castro-Gómez 2008, 260–264). The sociologists of world-systems theory then provided a way to link capital expansion to the expansion of knowledge production, which later thinkers, including Edward Said (1978) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), would take up in their respective writings.

In these critical veins, the subject matter of Western/Global Northern knowledge practices and the disciplinary philosophical discourses of epistemology have never existed merely as forms of abstract argumentation about belief, truth, justification, or cognition. Rather, as is a common theme among decolonial thought and praxis, knowledge production itself – implicating universities, academic presses, research institutes, and the range of other associated networks comprised of those who concern themselves with “intellectual” production – is a materially embedded set of social and historical phenomena. In addition, the wide-ranging practices that concern themselves with the production and dissemination of knowledge are themselves located in differing political and cultural sites of enunciation, each with differing relations to histories and realities of colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism.

This framing of epistemology – what Mignolo refers to as a *geopolitics of knowledge* – will be the starting point for this examination of the relationship between decolonial approaches to “epistemology” and the topic of epistemic injustice. While there are many distinct threads of decolonial thought and praxis,<sup>2</sup> this essay attends primarily to discussions among Latin American, U.S. Latina, and Caribbean decolonial theorists to bring these critical discourses into conversation with the growing body of scholarship in Anglophone academic philosophy that is the organizing theme of this volume. As such, the focus of this chapter is the following problem: how to produce disciplinary discourses from Anglophone North American academic institutions on the topic of a *decolonial* geopolitics of knowledge without perpetuating an Occidentalism and “othering” of communities whose existences require a perpetual struggle against neoliberal economic expansion and epistemic hegemony. For example, Mignolo states this problem in two related ways:

One is the political agenda of those of us (an empty category to be filled) born in North or South America, India, Iran, or Africa but writing and teaching here in the United States who are concerned with colonial discourse. The other issue is the agenda of those (an empty category to be filled) born or writing there in India, Iran, Africa, or South America who are struggling to resist modern colonization, including the academic one from here.

(Mignolo 1993, 122)

Given North American Anglophone and Western European institutional dominance, a decolonial geopolitics of knowledge from such centralized sites will require a careful set of strategies to de-link it from the homogenizing and totalizing trends of neocolonial expansion that characterize so much academic production in the U.S., Canada, and Europe.

In what follows, in the first two sections, I provide a brief history of decolonial thought and several related fields of study, including dependency theory and subaltern studies. This history importantly demonstrates that the concern with just and ethical knowing, as well as resistance to colonial epistemic violence predates the contemporary literature on epistemic injustice within academic Anglophone philosophy. Accordingly, in the final section of the chapter, I examine how the contemporary discourse of epistemic injustices might converge with the aims of a decolonial praxis in the Anglophone Western/Global Northern academy.

### 1. Colonialism, postcolonialism, coloniality, and the Bandung Era

Edward Said's groundbreaking 1978 work *Orientalism* emerged out of what David Scott and Samir Amin describe as the "Bandung Era." The Bandung Era was the period of roughly 1955 to 1977 when many newly independent nations and collective nationalist movements struggling for independence in Asia and Africa began collaborating with other global movements in the hope of developing tools for anticolonial and anti-imperial resistance (Amin 1994; Scott 1999). In this vein, the Bandung Conference of 1955 and the Cuban Revolution of 1959 marked the beginnings of various efforts by world leaders in the newly labeled "Third World" to undertake anti-capitalist paths toward socialism (Young 2005). However, despite the national projects of Salvador Allendé in Chile, Michael Manley in Jamaica, or Sirimavo Bandaranaike in Sri Lanka, efforts to combat capitalism during this era were confronted with a number of obstacles. Scott attributes the "failure" of these projects to the dismantling of the Soviet Union and to the rise of global neoliberalism, including the structural adjustment programs of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. As such, the anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist momentum springing from these historical junctures gradually waned after the 1970s (Scott 1999, 144).

Also emerging from this era was a series of intellectual debates about knowledge and knowledge production that sought to question the significance and challenges of the various anticolonial and anti-capitalist movements that circulated throughout the twentieth century. The work of Edward Said, in this sense, serves as a landmark piece in the development of a rich theoretical discourse on the epistemic and disciplinary implications of imperialism, colonialism, and economic globalization. Said's main contribution in *Orientalism*, according to Scott, is his criticism of "the Orient's special place in European Western experience" (Said 1978, 1). He refers not merely to the geographic location of various Asian nations relative to Western European nations, but primarily to the Orient as one of Western Europe's "deepest and most recurring images of the Other" (Said 1978, 1). Orientalism, for Said, refers to three aspects of this construction of this "Other" to Occidental Europe: 1) European intellectual institutions are dedicated to the mastery and dissemination of information about "the Orient," 2) such institutions maintain a commitment to an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and "the Occident," and 3) this distinction functions through "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 1978, 2–3).

These features of Orientalism also come with three important qualifications according to Said. The first is that the Orient is not merely an idea with no corresponding reality. Said states "There were – and are – cultures and nations whose location is in the East, and their lives, histories, and customs have a brute reality obviously greater than anything that could be said about them in

the West” (Said 1978, 5). However, Said states that he has little to contribute to that fact. Second, Orientalism requires an implicit analysis of the configurations of power between the West and non-Western geopolitical contexts, i.e. such analyses of power enable the treatment of the Orient as an object of study. Finally, Said states that Orientalism is not a mere “structure of lies and myths, which, were the truth about them to be told, would simply blow away” (Said 1978, 6). Instead, Said locates Orientalism within various socioeconomic and political institutions that retain a vested socioeconomic interest in preserving the validity and relevance of the placement of “the East” or “the Orient” as the Other to “the West.”

In concert with Said’s critical interventions on these epistemic issues, a rich set of theoretical resources on the relationship between knowledge practices and colonialism has been circulating in various Latin American disciplinary trajectories as well.<sup>3</sup> Many of these theories connected various philosophical notions of modernity and scientific progress with emerging global networks of economic and political development. Through the work of theorists such as Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto (1969), Andre Gunder Frank (1969), and Anibal Quijano (1977), dependency theory, for example, offered critical positions against narratives about the so-called “Third World” that had been circulating extensively throughout the Cold War period. These authors, through various means, sought to explain conceptions of “development” and “underdevelopment” through relational theories of imperial and economic expansion from Western Europe and later through the economic and political expansion of the United States. According to dependency theorists, center-periphery relations of economic and political influence that functioned through the colonization of the Americas, Asia, and Africa (via the extraction and exploitation of labor and natural resources) were responsible for the demarcation of the boundaries that supported the logic of “stages of development” and the current global political situation.

However, as Ramón Grosfoguel has argued regarding the *dependentistas*, “most dependentista analyses privileged the economic and political aspects of social processes at the expense of cultural and ideological determinations” (Grosfoguel 2008, 326). Rather than relegating the explanation of colonialism to the expanding dynamics of capitalism as classical Marxism had, many dependentistas relegated colonialism solely to the machinations of political and economic processes. One notable exception Grosfoguel mentions is the work of Anibal Quijano, whose writings foreground both political and economic dependency relations, as well as the racial and sexual hierarchies that functioned through capitalist and colonial cultural expansion (Grosfoguel 2008, 326–327). As I will elaborate below, this understanding of the relationship between modernity and coloniality refers to an understanding of modern conceptualizations of freedom, progress, civilization, development, and democratic capitalism as themselves epistemic products of the subjugation and exploitation of colonized and enslaved peoples (Mignolo 2016, 2–3).

## 2. Articulating an academic geopolitics of knowledge

Here, following dependency theory and theories of modernity/coloniality, including understandings of racial, sexual, and gendered dimensions of coloniality, we can begin to link the current discourse of epistemic injustices to decolonial theory. First, as Mignolo notes, Quijano’s notion of the “coloniality of power” should be distinguished from the notion of “colonialism.” Mignolo writes:

Colonialism is a concept that inscribes coloniality as a derivative of modernity. In this conception modernity comes first, with colonialism following it. On the other hand, the colonial period implies that, in the Americas, colonialism ended toward the first

quarter of the nineteenth century. Instead coloniality assumes, first, that coloniality constitutes modernity. As a consequence, we are still living under the same regime.

*(Mignolo 2008 [2002], 248–249)*

This conception of coloniality thus establishes the onto-epistemic dimensions of racial hierarchies that functioned through conquest narratives for European imperial expansion and that remain entrenched within contemporary philosophical discourses today. While dependency theory offered conceptual and pragmatic resources for articulating the workings of “the underside of modernity” (Dussel 1996), theories of race and racial hierarchy, as well as some variants of gender and sexual theory (Lugones 2007; Mohanty 1984; Wynter 1990), are thus able to enrich academic understandings of the social field of coloniality. Moreover, if the modern/colonial world system has required the homogenization of vast numbers of distinct cultural histories as racialized non-Europeans (e.g. “Indians,” “Blacks,” and “Orientals”) for the purposes of global capital, this entails a number of complex interrelated patterns of knowledge production and distribution to sustain those prevailing conceptualizations. Such patterns, according to both decolonial theory and the epistemic injustice literature as well, need to be analyzed, resisted, and overturned.

However, this insight, regarding the intimate relationship between capital expansion and the homogenization of distinct histories and ways of being, speaks to the imbrications of the coloniality of power within Anglophone academia in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe. In this vein, Mario Roberto Morales has argued that the initial invocation of “subalterity” into academic discourses in the 1980s through the writings of the South Asian Subaltern Studies Group was a “‘strategic’ intellectual construct” employed by theorists to articulate an outside to the intellectual hegemony of “Western lettered culture” (Morales 2008, 482). This strategic set of maneuvers, Morales proposes, was thereby a temporary effort to place a limit onto academic discourses in the Western world until a more “emancipatory” end could be met. This goal would be “to free not only the oppressed from his chains, but also the oppressor from his power, so as to not just limit ourselves to flipping the coin of authoritarianism and thus lose the emancipatory nature of the struggle” (Morales 2008, 483). The irony was that many academicians in the United States did not interpret subalterity as a strategy or temporary maneuver. Rather, through “subaltern” figurations such as the debate surrounding the testimonial credibility of Rigoberta Menchú, Anglophone theorists in Latin American area studies began seeking ways to “provide a voice” to subaltern subjectivities in the academy.<sup>4</sup> Morales describes this shift in the following passage:

What had been a political act of national democratic transformation in the view of Third World intellectuals . . . was, when appropriated by North American professors, made into a careerist dilemma regarding how to deal with the budgetary cuts that neo-liberalism was perpetuating against the humanities.

*(2008, 483)*

Speaking here of the early markings of the impact of austerity measures across U.S. and Canadian campuses, Morales pinpoints an important lesson that should be linked to the development of the discourse of epistemic injustices in the Anglophone world. Namely, as the epigraphs that frame this essay suggest, Western academia has never been at a loss for how to reproduce itself and its own mirror-image through displacing an Other. In this sense, bringing the literature of epistemic injustices into conversation with a decolonial geopolitics of knowledge must not seek to merely add another layer to epistemology-qua-philosophy as an already-dominant set of institutional practices in the Western academy. As we outline below, drawing from the writings of several

intellectuals who have existed both in the liminal spaces of “minority discourse” in the U.S. and as critics of their own placement within academia of the global North, I propose in the following section a cautionary note regarding the potential recentering of the geopolitics of knowledge in academic Anglophone philosophy through the discourse of epistemic injustices.

### 3. Decentering epistemic injustices as decolonial praxis

Before attempting to connect epistemic injustice literature in academic philosophy with decolonial thought and praxis, in the spirit of decolonial critique we may ask: toward what end or for whom is this theoretical collaboration a performative invocation? We may, on the one hand, situate the unification of these disparate fields of study as a disciplinary hail that seeks to find points of contact between literatures in the hope of giving rise to new ideas and areas of study for both fields. However, to move behind the invocation of “innovation,” we can return to the two epigraphs above. The “disenchantment” heralded by Sylvia Wynter’s disapprobation of the proliferation of minority literatures is a call to reject the temptation to merely add one’s “truer” voice to the already circumscribed set of hermeneutical possibilities for writing in a new field of study (Wynter 1987, 237–238). Moreover, Wynter guides our attention to the role of the figure of “intellectuals” within our social spaces and the various onto-epistemic stances that we occupy as such. In this vein, in an afterword to the first edited collection of its kind in Anglophone literature dedicated to critical essays written by Caribbean women (*Out of the Kumbla* 1990), Wynter urges her readers that more work must be done to shift the sedimented layers of historical degradation and “existential weightlessness” that have reified perceptions of Caribbean and Black women (Wynter 1990, 365). For those who are invested in revaluing and resituating Caribbean and Black women authors within a literary canon, she states that “all theoretical models function both as “knowledge” and as the water-with-berries strategy sets of specific groups” (Wynter 1990, 370 n. 53). Wynter offers an endnote referring to the following lines delivered by Caliban to Prospero in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*:

This island’s mine, by Sycorax my mother,  
Which thou takest from me. When thou camest first,  
Thou strokedst me and madest much of me, wouldst give me  
Water with berries in’t, and teach me how  
To name the bigger light, and how the less,  
That burn by day and night: and then I loved thee  
And show’d thee all the qualities o’ the isle,  
The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and fertile:  
Cursed be I that did so!

(Shakespeare, 1.2.332–340)<sup>5</sup>

In effect, Caliban’s enchantment with Prospero’s offerings was his self-described downfall. By providing the knowledge necessary for survival on the island, Caliban became subject to the ordering constraints and laboral demands of Prospero. In this sense, Wynter is calling her readers, through figurations of *The Tempest* to resist the “‘water with berries’ strategy sets, of all our present hegemonic, theoretical models in their ‘pure’ forms” (Wynter 1990).<sup>6</sup>

For our present concerns with the call to explore points of convergence among decolonial discourses and the recent literatures of epistemic injustices, such “water-with-berries” strategies are enacted by relatively centralized discourses that offer an opening in their respective discursive spaces for non-Western or non-white intellectuals working toward decolonial politics and praxis.

Yet, Wynter's suggestion is to refuse "present hegemonic models in their 'pure' forms" and to seek "demonic grounds" which can reexamine how the absences of specific forms of "knowledge" and "experience" structure the functioning of already-existent discourses. This point thus connects us to other writings, primarily by women of color and other marginalized and "existentially weightless" authors who have been attempting, from epistemic positions *within* various Anglophone academic and literary discourses, to mark the limits of disciplinary fields of meaning.

Consider Gloria E. Anzaldúa's discussion of varying "modes of consciousness" that allow for differing forms of cognition, creativity, and feeling.<sup>7</sup> In a 1986 lecture given at Vermont College, Anzaldúa outlines her thinking on the topic of the imagination. She offers brief autobiographical excerpts from her life to sketch how shifting modes of consciousness displace and place our creative capacities and stability within a given social order. In the epigraph I mention above, Anzaldúa's location both within and outside of various social orders – i.e. the straight world, the gay world, the literary world, the world of academia – provide her the ability to critically shift through differing modes of consciousness. Much like her notion of the *borderlands* or *nepantla*, Anzaldúa points to the often uncomfortable and precarious positioning of herself within these varying discourses. Moreover, by describing her homeland as an agriculturally developed space that produces non-native and mass-produced food products, she notes the rich and tempting ways in which the manipulations of coloniality can offer modes of being/feeling/knowing that may nourish and delight us.<sup>8</sup>

As Anzaldúa, Wynter, and Mignolo each point out through their respective works, however, it is the possibility of producing counter-knowledges and critiques from these liminal loci of enunciation that differentiate them from dominant racial, gendered, classed, able-bodied, sexual, and religious ways of being/feeling/knowing. This liminality, however, will fail to trace an onto-aesthetic mark within academic philosophy if the discourse of epistemic injustices does not engage primarily through the writings of marginalized and subjugated authorial positionings. Thus, the test for how such an emergent discourse in academic philosophy will converge with decolonial theory, and praxis will be how it de-centers, what Catherine Walsh describes as, "the white racialized intellectual paradigm – of who intellectuals are and who are intellectuals – and the intellectual authority of the academy and its ties to the State" (Walsh 2010, 209). Accordingly, many of the theorists in this volume, whose work draws from spaces of liminality and who thereby attempt to push philosophy's disciplinary production beyond its intellectualized circulations in the academy, are developing the possibility for connecting decolonial praxis to the terrain of epistemic injustices. Yes, such a proposal is grand and invariably invokes a novel form of transnational and pluriversal being/feeling/knowing. However, to view the intellectual struggles of academia as isolated rather than systemic runs the risk of enchanting us once again by Prospero's pleasures. Rather, as Anzaldúa suggests, perhaps it is the memory's imagination of a non-irrigated desert that will endow us with the perspective of disenchantment for our academic pursuits today.

**Related chapters:** 9, 10, 11, 12, 34, 37

## Notes

- 1 "Delinking" refers to the attempts to shift away from the presumed universality of a dominant hegemonic frame of reference (e.g. "modernization," "the West," etc.) and shift toward the universality of non-dominant worldviews with a pluralized conception of being/knowing as a universal project (Mignolo 2007, 543).
- 2 Other trajectories of decolonial thought and praxis include those of African, African-American, Arabic, Caribbean, First Nations, Native American, Muslim, and South Asian knowledge traditions.
- 3 These include notable works by Orlando Fals-Borda (1971), Enrique Dussel (1977), Edmundo O'Gorman (1991 [1958]), and Leopoldo Zea (1957).

- 4 The academic controversy surrounding Rigoberta Menchú erupted following David Stoll's publication of a series of criticisms about the factual accuracy of Menchú's autobiographical account or *testimonio*. In Stoll's work, he proposed both a critique of the truth of Menchú's recounting of events affecting her and her family in *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú* (1983), and a critique of leftist academic attempts to commodify and recirculate her testimonio as an example of subaltern literature. Defenders of her work, however, such as John Beverley, have argued that *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú* is not an attempt to make present a subaltern voice in the academia, but rather that the appropriate target of critique should be the multicultural politics within academia that have presumed a form of epistemic egalitarianism that minimizes the authorial agency of Menchú (See Arias 2001; Beverley 2004; Menchú Tum 1985; Morales 1999; Stoll 1999).
- 5 Wynter may have also been indirectly calling to mind with this reference George Lamming's (1971) novel *Water with Berries*, although her footnote makes reference to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.
- 6 Wynter's primary focus in this piece is the absence of "Caliban's woman" in *The Tempest*. Wynter figures the absence of a desirous native feminine counterpart to Caliban as a consequence of the dominance of Miranda's onto-aesthetic presence in the play. According to this reading, Miranda dramatically enacts the dynamics of white feminism's displacement of women of color.
- 7 Mignolo also cites Anzaldúa as a pivotal figure exhibiting a method of decolonial praxis (Mignolo 2000).
- 8 The phrase "being/feeling/knowing" is derived from Wynter's articulation of the ontological, aesthetic, and epistemic dimensions of articulating "the self." See, for example, Wynter (1987).

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