

# Global Ethics, Epistemic Colonialism, and Paths to More Democratic Knowledges

*Shari Stone-Mediatore*

*Abstract: Please provide an abstract of up to 150 words for your article.*

Westerners must learn how to make ourselves fit, and to be perceived to be fit, to enter into the democratic, pluricentric global dialogues from which global futures will emerge.—Sandra Harding<sup>1</sup>

In 1997, Charles Mills observed that philosophy was “both demographically and conceptually . . . one of the ‘whitest’ of the humanities.”<sup>2</sup> The demographic imbalance is evident. Despite efforts by the American Philosophical Association and other professional organizations to encourage a greater diversity of individuals to enter the profession, academic philosophy in the United States remains overwhelmingly “white.”<sup>3</sup> The claim about conceptual whiteness is more complex. According to conventional views, the ethnic identity of philosophers has no bearing on the substance of their analysis. Mills, however, provokes us to consider how the predominantly Euro-American background of U.S. philosophers has distorted philosophy’s content.

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1. Harding *Sciences from Below*, 5.

2. Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 2.

3. By “white,” I refer to people of Western-European, Judeo-Christian, liberal-capitalist backgrounds who have been racialized as “white” in the contemporary United States. On the demographics of professional philosophy, see, for instance, an American Philosophical Association 2014–2016 member survey in which 2,356 of 2,908 regular members identified as “white/Caucasian.” <http://dailynous.com/2016/10/14/data-on-diversity-us-philosophy/>

This essay responds to Mills's provocation to examine the deeper implications of philosophy's "whiteness." It does so in relation to the field of global ethics. Since the 1970s, a growing body of literature in global ethics has extended the scope of Anglophone moral philosophy to transnational and transcultural moral problems.<sup>4</sup> Like the rest of academic philosophy, however, the literature remains dominated by Western-European- and Euro-American-oriented scholars. I here link this lopsided demographics to deep-rooted biases in the literature that hamper efforts to build more ethical transnational relationships. Eurocentric biases may not be explicit or intended, I argue, but they are carried in the intellectual approaches that many of us in the white global North have taken for granted. As a result, even when we theorize conditions for a more just world, biases implicit in our knowledge practices can entangle us in longstanding tendencies to detach from and dehumanize people on the other side of global hierarchies.<sup>5</sup>

*Coloniality scholarship*, that is, scholarship that seeks to understand and resist the continuing impact of colonialism on our lives, is particularly useful for examining the ethnocentrism of popular global-ethics texts. Coloniality scholarship shares with global-ethics scholarship a concern with transnational moral problems; however, whereas global-ethics scholarship has developed within Anglophone moral philosophy and has tended to present itself as neutral and unlocated, coloniality scholarship has grounded itself in the voices and struggles of globally marginalized communities. In particular, it has embraced the efforts of many of these communities to unbury and resist colonialist legacies. To this end, coloniality scholarship has traced echoes of colonialism in multiple dimensions of contemporary life,

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4. By "the literature of global ethics," I refer to texts in English-language philosophy and political theory that have emerged since the 1970s that address transnational moral problems. I include here texts that identify as "global ethics," "global justice," and "global citizenship." "Global ethics" is sometimes distinguished from "global justice," with the former focused on individual and the latter on institutional responsibilities. In practice, however, the literature overlaps because most transnational moral problems and philosophical texts on these problems do not "fall squarely on one or the other side of this divide" (Pogge, "Preface," xxiii).
  5. I address this essay to fellow scholars and educators in the affluent world. By "affluent world," I refer to economically and culturally privileged sectors of the world, notably, privileged sectors of the United States, Canada, Australia, and Western Europe. Notwithstanding substantial diversity within this group, the term "affluent world" nonetheless registers the persistence of global hierarchies of wealth and privilege. These hierarchies are often identified by the terms "global North" and "global South." The term "affluent world," however, helps to distinguish the more socially and culturally privileged sectors of both "North" and "South" from socially and culturally marginalized populations within these regions.

including economic processes, processes of identity formation, and knowledge practices. I focus here on the latter while keeping in mind its complicity with more psychological and material aspects of coloniality. I begin by reviewing the insights of Enrique Dussel, Anibal Quijano, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, and other scholars of coloniality into ways that colonialism has left its mark on received knowledge practices.<sup>6</sup> I then examine how this epistemic colonialism has found expression in prominent global-ethics anthologies. I trace colonialist legacies not only in the demographics of the authors but also in deep structures of the texts, which can foster attitudes of superiority, aloofness, and detachment from grassroots struggles, even when the texts argue for aid to the poor. Finally, I sketch some preliminary ideas for how those of us who study and teach global ethics in the affluent world might better unsettle colonialist baggage and cultivate skills more conducive to ethical global communities.<sup>7</sup>

### Colonialism of Modern Knowledge Practices

Coloniality scholars join feminist, postmodern, and Marxist critics in analyzing modern knowledge practices in relation to political power. According to now well-known criticisms of modern epistemology, the epistemic model that emerged in seventeenth-century Europe masks its own political content. It presents certain epistemic traits—objectivity, certainty, and transcendence of everyday life—as if they were timeless norms of knowledge-making. In so doing, the model obscures how these norms have arisen from and supported the hierarchies of industrial capitalist society. The argument is not that strivings for objectivity and certainty can never serve progressive

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6. For the purposes of this paper, I understand coloniality scholarship broadly, so as to capture the work of a range of scholars who have investigated colonialist legacies with an aim to transforming them. I include work that has been foundational to critical studies of colonialism, notably Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*; also Latin American-oriented *decolonial* scholarship that has brought fresh academic attention to colonialism in the Americas, notably Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas*, and Quijano, “Coloniality of Power”; and also engaged thinkers from various fields who have traced colonialist legacies and pursued decolonizing practices from their own distinct locations, including Linda Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Andrea Smith, *Conquest*, and Harsha Walia, *Undoing Border Imperialism*. I here put aside these thinkers’ differences so as to foreground their shared insights into epistemic colonialism.
  7. Elsewhere, I address the Eurocentric character of global-ethics education through the lens of feminist standpoint theory. See Stone-Mediatore, “A Not-So-Global Ethics.” I presented an early version of the present paper at the Caribbean Philosophical Association conference (Rutgers University, September 2011). I received partial funding for further development of this research from a Great Lakes Colleges Association New Directions grant (2011/2012).

causes or be motivated by legitimate concerns. The point is, rather, that since the 1600s in the industrialized world, exaggerated ideals of objectivity have provided a guise of epistemic superiority to privileged-class European men, who have appeared “certain,” “universal,” and “objective” on account of their political and economic power; that is, their capacity to distribute their beliefs widely, impose their ideas on society, and ignore competing views. Even when the model of idealized objectivity is not explicitly endorsed, critics argue, its assumptions continue to influence us. For instance, we continue to esteem thinkers who appear “above the fray” while we overlook the power relations that have supported their elevated platforms. At the same time, we continue to devalue thinkers who speak from within a community of diverse voices and whose marginalized social status has marked them as “parochial” and “subjective.”<sup>8</sup>

### ***Colonialism and Epistemic Authority***

Coloniality scholars have focused in particular, on the complicity of modern epistemic norms with colonial rule. They have described, for instance, how modern European claims to objectivity were underpinned by political and military domination over colonized lands. In this account, Spanish and Portuguese (and later Dutch, French, and British) colonizers imposed their beliefs on the people whose land they occupied and then confused their political power to enforce their beliefs with actual epistemic superiority. As one critic put it, Europeans have been able to locate themselves “at the center of the world [only] because they have already conquered it.”<sup>9</sup> At the same time, economic and technological advantages enabled colonizers to distribute their studies of conquered lands across the globe. The worldwide distribution of colonial texts helped Europeans to regard themselves as occupying the “point zero” from which all worldly phenomena could be objectively evaluated.<sup>10</sup> Since colonial times, European and Euro-American control over the production and distribution of knowledge has continued to support notions of “the West” as “the arbiter of what counts as knowledge,” and “the foundation of all Truthful knowledge.”<sup>11</sup>

European claims to objectivity also have relied upon the sabotaging of indigenous cultural institutions. Since the Conquest, critics stress, indigenous people have resisted European hegemony and continued to create their own narratives and knowledges. Thus early colonizers could maintain

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8. See, for instance, Code, *Ecological Thinking*, 22–29, 99–133; Harding, *Whose Science*, 81–97; Harding, *Sciences from Below*, 1–8; Mato, “There is No ‘Universal Knowledge.’”
  9. Grosfoguel “Decolonizing Postcolonial Studies,” 7.
  10. Castro-Gómez, cited in Grosfoguel, “Decolonizing Postcolonial Studies,” 6.
  11. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 63; Grosfoguel, “Decolonizing Postcolonial Studies,” 7.

pretenses of universality only by “repressing as much as possible the colonized forms of knowledge production.”<sup>12</sup> Early colonizers tore down indigenous temples, set fire to eight centuries of Mayan codices, and burned alive indigenous spiritual leaders.<sup>13</sup> In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the U.S. and Canadian governments outlawed Native American spiritual practices and forced Native American children into boarding schools, where their languages and rituals were forbidden.<sup>14</sup> More recently, efforts by the Arizona state legislature to dismantle popular Raza Studies programs in Tucson—by outlawing Raza Studies, firing teachers, and banning books—express ongoing attempts by settler societies to prevent people from colonized heritages from developing knowledges from their own standpoints.<sup>15</sup>

Tellingly, a few years ago, when a colleague sought a philosopher to join a colloquium he was organizing on terrorism, he rejected an accomplished scholar I recommended, explaining that he wanted “a regular philosopher, not a Native American or feminist.” Such comments betray how received epistemic norms continue to allow (male, professional-class) Western-identified thinkers, whose views are privileged by Eurocentric institutions of knowledge production, to pose as objective, “regular” scholars and to disregard voices radically different than their own.

### ***Colonialism and Models of Theory/Practice***

Coloniality scholarship likewise has linked colonialism with a model of theory/practice in which theorists stand apart from everyday life and provide guiding principles to practitioners, who are supposed to implement those principles.<sup>16</sup> This top-down epistemic model gained traction under colonialism insofar as colonialism treated the colonized world as an object of management and control, rather than a community within which to engage in mutual exchanges of influence. In this context, an epistemic approach took hold in which European administrators, scientists, and other observers eschewed dialogue with the indigenous people and, instead, classified everything they “encountered” in the “discovered” lands with complete disregard for the particularities in which they were situated and the perspective of the people classified. “[I]n the best of cases,” says one critic, commenting on the

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12. Quijano, “Coloniality of Power,” 541.

13. See, for instance, Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas*, 42–54; Galeano, *Open Veins*, 42–44; Quijano, “Coloniality of Power,” 540–42; and Rodríguez, *Our Sacred Maíz*.

14. See, for instance, Smith, *Conquest*, 35–53; Million, “Felt Theory,” 53–76; and Thomas, “Violence and Terror in a Colonized Country.”

15. See Rodríguez, “Raza Studies.”

16. On the cultural specificity of this epistemic model, see, for instance, Banerjee, Nigam, and Pandey, “The Work of Theory”; and Robinson and Tormey, “Resisting ‘Global Justice.’”

conquistadores' fascination with the Aztecs, "the Spanish authors sp[oke] well of the Indians, but with very few exceptions they d[id] not speak to the Indians."<sup>17</sup> When colonizers imposed their beliefs on the colonial world, the latter then "confirmed" their beliefs. For instance, when colonial European ideas about "race" were institutionalized into legal categories and racially organized divisions of labor, colonial society then confirmed the "reality" of superior and inferior "races."<sup>18</sup>

Colonial knowledge practices not only were upheld by colonial domination, critics argue, but also facilitated colonial rule. When "[i]ndigenous people were classified alongside the flora and fauna" and "hierarchical typologies of humanity" were established, Smith explains, such "knowledge" helped Europeans to assert authority over purportedly "primitive/savage" people.<sup>19</sup> More recently, Western scientists have made ostensibly objective pronouncements about the weaker brains and temperaments of Algerians, Iraqis, and Muslims, thereby facilitating U.S. and European subjugation of those people.<sup>20</sup> With these sort of examples in mind, Smith argues that knowledge-making pursued under auspices of objectivity has been "undeniably also about power and domination."<sup>21</sup>

### ***Colonialism and Modern Historical Outlooks***

Finally, coloniality scholars trace in received knowledge-practices a colonialist historical outlook that obscures the moral and historical significance of colonialism. The crux of this outlook is a story of progress that Dussel calls *the myth of modernity*. According to this myth, the political, economic, and cultural achievements of the post-seventeenth-century liberal-capitalist world are the products of uniquely "Western" virtues, especially Western reason, productivity, and lawfulness. "The West" is here the self-propelled motor of progress; and colonialism represents the spread of progress to regions supposedly unable to advance on their own.<sup>22</sup> As Quijano emphasizes, this myth disguises colonial power relations in a story of geographically organized and biologically determined ranks of human beings—"races"—with different capacities for historical advancement.<sup>23</sup> In the context of this myth, Hegel could cast the slave-trade as a means of providing Africans with "education" by "a higher morality and the culture connected with it";<sup>24</sup> the

17. Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, 132.

18. See Quijano, "Coloniality of Power," 536–41.

19. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 59.

20. See, for instance, Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 298, 301; Stone-Mediatore, "Epistemologies of Discomfort," 35; and Perera and Razack, "Introduction," 6.

21. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 60.

22. Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas*, 9–12, 19–26.

23. Quijano, "Coloniality of Power," 541–43.

24. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, 99.

nineteenth-century U.S. state could describe the forceful relocation of Native American children into repressive English-only residential schools as a civilizing mission;<sup>25</sup> and contemporary scholars could describe the U.S. military invasion of Iraq as a means of “moderniz[ing] . . . the Arab landscape.”<sup>26</sup>

A similar myth reappears, critics argue, in popular narratives of “globalization.” Often, “globalization” is presented as the most recent stage of Western-led progress. According to these narratives, post-World War II (Western-dominated) transnational institutions and technologies unleashed the “free flow” of capital and industry across national borders. Like earlier myths, this story fashions U.S. and European intervention in other regions as a quasi-natural force. As two popular authors tell it, Western-based enterprises let loose a “wave of globalization” that has flowed naturally across the earth, “sweep[ing] away” the “flabby organizations” and “corrupt empires” that are unprepared for “contact with foreigners” and newly linking people’s everyday lives to transnational processes.<sup>27</sup>

Coloniality scholars offer a critical perspective on these myths by returning to a close engagement with transnational social history and the standpoint of colonized people. From this standpoint, they trace how liberal-capitalist progress has been built with the “the sweat and dead bodies” of others,<sup>28</sup> and how so-called globalization is not natural or new but “the culmination of a process that began [500 years ago] with . . . colonial/modern Eurocentered capitalism.”<sup>29</sup> They also remind us that these processes were contested “[f]rom the very beginning [when] the native American people rebelled against their dominators.”<sup>30</sup>

For instance, coloniality scholars trace how Spanish conquistadores worked to death millions of indigenous Americans while pillaging 185,000 kilograms of gold and 16,000,000 kilograms of silver, which was funneled to

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25. See Smith, *Conquest*, 35–53.

26. Ajami, “Iraq and the Arab’s Future,” 18. I address additional appeals to colonialist myths to defend the U.S. invasion of Iraq in Stone-Mediatore, “Epistemologies of Discomfort,” 34–36.

27. Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *A Future Perfect*, 126. Interestingly, the authors describe both contemporary transnational processes and colonialism as “contact” that vanquishes the unprepared. In their remarkably insensitive words: “these flabby [global-South] organizations, particularly the ones that have grown up behind high tariff barriers, tend to be about as well prepared for contact with foreigners as the Aztecs were for the arrival of Cortés” (126).

28. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 96.

29. Quijano, “Coloniality of Power,” 533. See also Alcoff, “Foreword,” vii; and Sáenz, “Introduction,” 11.

30. Guitiérrez, *The Power of the Poor*, 189. See also Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas*, 95–115; Galeano, *Open Veins*, 43–44; and Tauli-Corpus, “Our Right,” 14.

banks across Europe, thereby fueling the European market economy. They also describe how the Dutch, British, and French constructed railroads and infrastructure in colonized lands so as to facilitate the export of natural resources and import of European industrial goods, thereby strengthening European industry at the expense of local African and Latin American economies, all of which served to concentrate capital accumulation in Western Europe.<sup>31</sup> They trace how, even after independence, U.S. and European states and corporations (and, later, transnational institutions controlled by these entities) have used economic leverage to bend newly independent economies to foreign interests.<sup>32</sup> And still today, the people whom colonizers treated as “part of the flora and fauna to exploit” are viewed by white Americans as not “real people,” while global-South regions continue to be viewed as mere “large mass[es] of land with a wealth of natural resources and plenty of cheap labor.”<sup>33</sup>

Myths of an edifying “progress” obscure these enduring patterns of exploitation and dehumanization. They thereby suppress the moral questions that colonialist legacies raise. The myths also obscure indigenous people’s longstanding resistances to European-led “progress.” The myths thereby also suppress imagination of different possible historical agencies and futures, which the resistances invite us to consider.

### Coloniality and Global Ethics

The literature of global ethics is a curious place to find echoes of colonialism, for the literature aims to broaden the moral horizons of affluent-world citizens. The discourse about global ethics,” says Thomas Pogge, treats our “increasingly complex and increasingly transnational moral responsibilities.”<sup>34</sup> Other editors present their anthologies in global-ethics and related fields as efforts to promote “global dialogue” and “global perspective” on the moral duties of contemporary world citizens.<sup>35</sup> Global-ethicists have devoted particular attention to world poverty. As Pogge observed in 2002, world poverty took the lives of nearly 18 million people annually, and yet those of us in more privileged locations have tended “not [to] see global poverty and

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31. See, for instance, Todorov, *Conquest of America*, 133–42, Galeano, *Open Veins*, 11–65; and Quijano, “Colonality of Power,” 533–40.

32. See, for instance, Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 96–104, 149–53; Galeano, *Open Veins*, 61–261; Quijano, “Colonality of Power,” 533; Marcos, “The Fourth World War Has Begun,” 272–78; and Sáenz, “Introduction,” 1–4.

33. Zea, “Humanity and Globalization,” 142; Ontario finance minister Jim Flaherty, cited in Smith, *Conquest*, 12; and Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America*, 12. See also Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 153–54, 250.

34. Pogge, “Preface,” xxii.

35. Dower and Williams, “Introduction,” xv.

inequality as morally important issues for us.”<sup>36</sup> Even many professionals aware of the statistics have found them “not morally disturbing enough to highlight, publicize, and discuss.”<sup>37</sup> In this context, Pogge and fellow liberal-egalitarian global-ethicists have sought to invigorate affluent-world discussions of transnational moral duties, and especially duties to the global poor.

I argue however that, notwithstanding the contribution of global-ethics scholarship to promoting attention to world poverty and inequality, traces of coloniality appear throughout the literature. Some recent global-ethics scholarship has exceeded colonialist tendencies more than others. Still, prominent anthologies and the essays that feature regularly in these anthologies continue to express colonialist elements and do so in ways that hamper efforts to promote more ethical transnational relationships.<sup>38</sup>

### ***Global Ethics and Colonialist Conceptions of Epistemic Agency***

Coloniality appears most clearly in the tendency of prominent global-ethics anthologies to locate epistemic authority in the white, affluent world. For instance, many of these texts stress global-mindedness, but they are dominated by Western-European- and Euro-American-trained (mostly male, Anglophone, liberal-analytic) authors.<sup>39</sup> The contributing authors likewise

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36. Pogge, *World Poverty*, 3. Since the publication of *World Poverty*, the number of people living in extreme poverty has been declining. Still, as of 2015, over 700 million people continued to live in extreme poverty. (See <https://ourworldindata.org/extreme-poverty/>.)

37. Pogge, *World Poverty*, 3.

38. Pogge’s co-edited volumes—Pogge and Horton, *Global Ethics*, and Pogge and Moellendorf, *Global Justice*—are representative. I focus on these volumes not because they are more ethnocentric than others but because Pogge is one of the most eminent and influential scholars in the field and his co-edited volumes contain some of the most widely cited work in the field. Some of the contributors to these volumes (including Pogge himself) have other writings that better supersede the tendencies I describe here. My concern, however, is not to judge specific authors but to examine problematic tendencies in the literature.

39. For instance, Pogge presents his co-edited volumes on global ethics and global justice as “a representative sampling of the most significant, most original, most influential writings” on global moral issues (Pogge, “Preface,” xxii); however, only two of the thirty-seven contributions present global-South perspectives (Jaggar, “Saving Amina,” and Sen, “Population”). Dower and Williams present their anthology as a means to “global perspective” and “global dialogue” (*Global Citizenship*, xv); however, all nineteen contributing authors seem to have Euro-American or Western Europe backgrounds. Other representative anthologies include Booth, Dunne, and Cox, *How Might We Live?*, in which fourteen of fifteen contributors have a seeming Euro-American or Western European background; and Whisnant and DesAutels, *Global Feminist Eth-*

tend to restrict their interlocutors and virtually all of their sources to fellow affluent-world scholars. They may stress the need to expand “[t]he ethical and political norms that we constantly use” beyond “the world of states”;<sup>40</sup> however, they rarely doubt the starting point in U.S. and Western European thinkers and familiar (European-liberal) norms. In the same vein, representative anthologies have defined the field of global ethics in terms of recent decades of British and Euro-American concern with world poverty; and they have described global justice as an extension of John Rawls’s work to the global realm.<sup>41</sup>

Global-South communities tend to appear in these texts only as objects of affluent-world theory and policymaking. Not unlike the Spanish colonizers, who spoke “*of* but not *to*” the indigenous Americans, the essays that fill global-ethics anthologies tend to speak *of* but not *to* or *with* economically marginalized communities. They rarely mention global-South intellectuals or social movements but tend to refer to people struggling with poverty-related problems only in abstract categories, such as “the global poor,” “have-nots,” or “hungry people.”<sup>42</sup> One popular global-ethicist has described Westerners as the emissaries of universal moral principles and other “villages” as offering mere “tribal/familial” customs with which principle-guided Westerners must compromise in pragmatic “trade-offs.”<sup>43</sup>

Discussions of aid to the poor or negotiations to protect vulnerable communities can reflect legitimate concerns on behalf of affluent-world thinkers to address the distinct responsibilities of affluent-world agents. They also can push policy-debates in favor of more generous or vigilant behavior on the part of affluent states. When these categories and intellectual orientations dominate the discourse, however, they risk turning global-ethics

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*ics*, in which twelve of fourteen contributors have a seeming Euro-American or Western European background. An exception is Jaggar, *Thomas Pogge and His Critics*, which includes contributors from diverse geographic and cultural backgrounds and includes substantial attention to social history.

40. O’Neil, “Foreword,” xi.

41. For instance, Pogge, “Preface,” xx.

42. For instance, O’Neil “Rights, Obligations and World Hunger” (which appears in Pogge’s co-edited *Global Ethics* as well as in two other global ethics books) argues for the superiority of a Kantian approach to world hunger over other Western theoretical frameworks. Her defense of the Kantian approach presents compelling criticism of aid policies that fail to support the self-sufficiency of those aided. Still, the essay presumes the universality of Western moral frameworks and ignores global-South intellectual traditions and perspectives. It expresses concern for the agency of the “the poor” but recognizes them only as faceless victims, such as “have-nots.”

43. Ignatieff, “Reimagining a Global Ethic.”

forums into discussions by white, affluent-world theorists about how affluent-world agents should respond to others' problems.

Coloniality studies also point us toward the material underpinning of this epistemic ethnocentrism. If in colonial times Europeans appeared universal because they had the economic and technological leverage to distribute their texts across the globe, today white affluent-world theorists appear as authoritative "regular scholars" because publishing houses and universities worldwide tend to be controlled by European- and Euro-American-oriented agents.<sup>44</sup> The epistemic authority of global-ethics anthologies that consist almost entirely of white, affluent-world thinkers depends on these power relations (and their marginalization of global-South, indigenous-American, and grassroots voices) passing unnoticed.

### ***Global Ethics and Colonialist Models of Theory/Practice***

Global-ethics texts likewise express elements of the top-down epistemic model associated with colonialism. If in colonial times this model took the form of colonizers standing apart from colonized communities and theorizing principles by which to organize them, then current global-ethics anthologies present a similar model insofar as they include only theorists who treat problems from a distance, so that the discussion takes place in a world removed from the problems studied. By contrast, many global-South and Native American theorists of global issues follow a more situated approach, drawing on insights from their experiences in social movements and conversations with activists.<sup>45</sup> Such engaged thinkers, however, are rarely included in global ethics anthologies or cited by the contributors.<sup>46</sup>

Global-ethics texts also follow the model of detached authority insofar as they pursue abstract analysis and scholarly debates that require little engagement with specific struggles. As Onora O'Neil says (albeit somewhat sardonically), the "standard operating procedure" for examining transnational moral duties is to "imagin[e] lurid situations."<sup>47</sup> By working through hypothetical scenarios, scholars like O'Neil and Peter Unger aim to clarify our moral duties to people in need, and to do so in ways that cull prejudiced dispositions from "our Values, and the true nature of morality."<sup>48</sup> Such

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44. See, for instance, Mato, "There is no 'Universal Knowledge,'" 409–11; Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America*, 115–23; Rodríguez, *Our Sacred Maíz*, xxiii,12; and Walsh, "Shifting the Geopolitics of Critical Knowledge," 224–39.

45. For instance, Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*; Rodríguez, *Our Sacred Maíz*; Shiva, "Solidarity," 89–92; Smith, *Conquest*; Thomas, "Violence and Terror"; and Walia, *Undoing Border Imperialism*.

46. An exception is Jaggar, "Saving Amina," which engages global-South human-rights activists.

47. O'Neil, "Lifeboat Earth," 4.

48. Unger, *Living High and Letting Die*, 14.

approaches can elucidate moral principles and their implications for duties to the distant poor; however, they tend to proceed with little sensitivity to the insights and dynamics of actual transnational struggles. In some cases, authors cite real-life incidents of poverty-related ills; however, they tend to abstract such incidents from their historical context and use them only to underscore the urgency of problems or illustrate moral principles, not to examine specific problems in any socio-historical depth.<sup>49</sup>

Even when the more socio-economically-versed scholars enhance their analysis with references to actual transnational processes, few pursue such references far enough to challenge taken-for-granted academic framings of problems. For instance, O'Neil combines "standard [imaginative] procedures" with references to actual social processes, such as the way that profit-focused foreign investment and strategic commodity pricing can threaten the living conditions of vulnerable communities. She integrates these real-world processes (in generalized form) into hypothetical accounts of famine threats, which she compares to scenarios on an imaginary lifeboat. From the lifeboat analogy, O'Neil distills a clear moral duty to avoid killing. Based on this duty, she draws bold conclusions about the responsibility of contemporary citizens and states to support policies that regulate resource-use. Still, her approach elides the political context of actual global-justice struggles. For instance, the lifeboat analogy underscores the moral imperative to limit resource-use; however, it ignores the political factors that (despite centuries of moral theories directing us to share wealth<sup>50</sup>) have continued to obstruct

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49. For instance, in his classic essay on world hunger, Singer cites Bangladesh as a timely example of famine that calls for a moral response; however, he does not address the socio-historical factors that have generated famine in resource-rich regions like Bangladesh. Moreover, he accepts uncritically popular assumptions about the causes of famine, such as "the population explosion" ("Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 11). In "Rights, Obligations, and World Hunger," O'Neil recognizes that famines occur "only when social structures are inadequate (141); however, the bulk of the essay compares the adequacy of three Western theoretical framework for approaching famine in general. Brian Barry, in "Humanity and Justice in Global Perspective," is more socio-historically grounded than many popular global-ethics scholars insofar as he recognizes historical theft on the part of affluent countries and presents examples of exploitative trade policies; however, the latter remain disparate examples with little analysis of the socio-historical processes that have given rise to these cases of abuse. Pogge presents an exception to these tendencies insofar as he bridges liberal-analytic moral theory with institutional analysis of world poverty. For instance, Pogge "'Assisting' the Global Poor." Young, "Responsibility across Borders," also exceeds the typical abstract approaches insofar as she rethinks global moral responsibility in light of historically specific structural injustices, notably sweatshops.

50. For instance, Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, 191–236.

just rationing of resources. In her focus on “population policy” as a central “pre-famine” tool, she also overlooks the many global-South criticisms of population control as a response to famine.<sup>51</sup>

Even texts that pursue more nuanced moral principles can allow scholarly routines to insulate their analysis from broader global-justice conversations. For instance, drawing on Amartya Sen’s concept of “human capabilities,” Martha Nussbaum famously argues that basic capacities essential to human flourishing can be identified that provide a strong foundation for claims of justice on behalf of women in developing countries. My concern here is that, even if Nussbaum’s list of human capabilities is truly transcultural (and this is debatable<sup>52</sup>), her project of articulating universal moral ideals on which to ground state law and policy is at odds with the more situated approaches of many of the women she seeks to aid. Nussbaum criticizes a naive relativism that would base moral norms on individuals’ actual preferences; however, in her quick dismissal of a crude relativism and her concern to prevail over academic opponents, she overlooks the many women’s movements that have developed sophisticated practice-grounded skepticism of state-centered approaches to women’s rights. For instance, Nussbaum has focused on women’s rights in India. According to Nivedita Menon, however, Indian feminist movements since the mid-1980s have turned away from universal-rights-advocacy, as they have grown suspect of the politicized ways that the state has invoked the Uniform Civil Code. Wary of state-enforced universal law, many Indian feminists have pursued locally-initiated projects to address concerns within their communities.<sup>53</sup> Other women have emphasized that women’s rights do not become universal “by means of uniformity and fiat” but only when gender justice is pursued through negotiations at local levels with the people who will daily enjoy and enforce those rights.<sup>54</sup> Such negotiations also can empower women at the local level, which many women argue is a crucial complement to legal rights. Without greater attention to these women’s insights, Nussbaum’s analysis has limited relevance to, and sometimes threatens, their projects.<sup>55</sup>

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51. For instance, Sen, “Population”; and Galeano, Introduction to *Open Veins*.

52. See, for instance, Menon, “Universalism without Foundations?,” 152–57.

53. *Ibid.*, 160–62.

54. Rajan, “Women’s Human Rights in the Third World,” 121.

55. For instance, Nussbaum pursues her claims through a debate with Rawls; however, Menon argues that Indian feminists “have moved far beyond the Rawls-Nussbaum debate” and this “joust between two liberal Western philosophers” is “about as relevant to understanding contemporary Indian politics as a debate with Vivekenanda would be to understanding politics in the US” (Menon, “Universalism without Foundations?,” 162). Menon also warns that Nussbaum advises nations to use their leverage to promote capabilities-based norms in other nations; however, the excuse of “protecting women’s

More generally, when global-ethics texts presume that epistemic agency lies in detached academics and political agency in the state, they contradict a central aim of many grassroots global-justice movements, which has been precisely to decentralize knowledge and politics. The Zapatistas of Chiapas, Mexico, for instance, have focused less on defining political agendas than on creating “democratic space for political struggle,” that is, space for people who have been excluded from state power to develop their own governing structures and articulate their own demands.<sup>56</sup> To this end, they have built networks of local governing committees, or *Caracoles*, which are inspired by traditional indigenous governing councils and have regularly rotating members to ensure against corruption.<sup>57</sup> Others have organized local councils and referendums to present grassroots opinions on mining in their homelands.<sup>58</sup> These and other colonized communities have claimed their right to interpret, for themselves, the value of elements of their environment, which they view as irreducible to market calculations. They also have affirmed their own knowledge practices that stress community involvement in knowledge-making and the accountability of educational institutions to local communities.<sup>59</sup>

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rights” too often has provided a cover the U.S. to invade other nations for its own interests (164). I address in greater detail global-South feminist criticism of Nussbaum and Susan Okin in Stone-Mediatore, “Cross-Border Feminism,” 59–67.

56. Marcos, “Second Declaration,” 226. Efforts to re-anchor knowledge and politics in local communities also raises difficult questions about how to keep local activities sensitive to tensions within localities and accountable to broader human endeavors. Many grassroots global justice movements and their scholar-allies are sensitive to these concerns. See, for instance, Castillo, “National Law”; Fornet-Betancourt, “An Alternative to Globalization,” 231–34; Gledhill, “Indigenous Movements in Mexico”; and Stone-Mediatore, “Cross-Border Feminism,” 60–66.
57. See Marcos, “Fourth Declaration,” 246–50; and Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America*, 127–28.
58. See, for instance, Cregan, “Inter-ethnic Summit”; Cuffe, “Guatemalans Are Taking Their Democracy Back”; Marcos, “Fourth Declaration”; and Tauli-Corpuz, “Our Right.”
59. For instance, Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 4–5, 107–20; Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 189–98; Walsh, “Shifting the Geopolitics,” 230; Emiliani, “In Rural Mexico”; Macas, “Amautawasi Quechuan University”; Valdiviezo, “Indigenous Worldviews”; and the author’s interview with Amautawasi University administrators (Quito, November 2011). On the tendency of global-justice texts to locate epistemic and political agency in centralized states, which contradicts the concerns of grassroots global-justice movements, see Robinson and Tormey, “Resisting ‘Global Justice.’”

Finally, studies of coloniality warn that epistemic distance reflects human distance. If the colonizers “objectivity” reflected their social segregation from the people whose land they occupied, today’s “professional distance” reflects the socially privileged location of professionals. When professional distance operates as an unquestioned norm, it allows those of us with the prerogative to distance ourselves from social suffering to avoid responsibility for the sheltered locations from which we write. We can avoid examining, for instance, how our comfortable distance from “the global poor” might limit our understanding of specific struggling communities; or how our assumption that we can detach at will from our human ties to the world might hinder our ability to build relations of trust and dialogue with those communities.

### ***Global Ethics and Colonialist Historical Outlooks***

Global-ethics texts also express colonialist historical outlooks. They do so mainly through what is missing: European colonialism and the North-Atlantic slave-trade receive scant mention in global-ethics readers. Even when editors present historical background on “globalization,” they tend to address only post World-War-II history while ignoring the longer 500 years of transnational relations.<sup>60</sup>

From the perspective of coloniality studies, this inattention to transnational social history is troubling, for it allows received historical myths to remain intact. Sometimes, myths remain intact simply by the neglect of colonialism. Other times the myths are manifest, as when Richard Rorty famously argues that those of us in the “rich and lucky” world cannot aid the poor without undermining our ability to “recognize [our]selves” as advanced democracies.<sup>61</sup> Rorty appreciates that our ethical stance toward others is guided by our sense of “who we are.” His account of “who we are,” however, plays fast and loose with history. Following popular narratives, he attributes liberal-capitalist growth to conflict-free processes internal to Western Europe. “Technology began making Europe rich,” he says, thus generating a “rich and lucky” region of the world, whose wealth catalyzed “some of the dreams of the Enlightenment.”<sup>62</sup> Rorty also conjectures that any efforts to redistribute this wealth “may be” equivalent to the absurd act of “somebody proposing to share her one loaf of bread with a hundred starving people.”<sup>63</sup> Historical rigor is here replaced by myths of a self-made Western world while empirically accurate resource assessment is replaced by popular anxieties about hordes of outsiders threatening our goods.

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60. For instance, Pogge, “Preface,” xiii–xviii.

61. Rorty, “Who are We?” 319, 323.

62. Rorty, “Who are We?” 317.

63. Rorty, “Who are We?” 317, 318.

Individual authors may have compelling reasons for analyzing global inequalities independently of history.<sup>64</sup> However, when anthologies devoted to transnational moral problems offer virtually no discussion of colonialism or the slave-trade, they send the message that those of us in the affluent world have no moral quandaries inherited from the past; that we can understand “who we are” and our transnational moral responsibilities perfectly well without considering colonialist crimes.

This neglect of colonialism contradicts the efforts by many communities to promote discussion and responses to colonialist violence. Many global-South and Native-American communities stress that they are “still searching for justice” for colonialist crimes, whose scars continue to manifest in individual and community dysfunction.<sup>65</sup> Many communities also face ongoing land theft, cultural destruction, state-sponsored torture, targeted criminalization, and systemic displacement made worse by borders that criminalize movement. Thus, many global-South and Native-American activists have stressed the need for people to share stories of colonialist-related violence. By carefully sharing stories of lingering inter-generational trauma from colonialist crimes and stories of ongoing colonialist theft and violence, they argue, we help not only to amend historical records, but allow people who have borne colonialist wounds silently to begin to heal, help all of us to identify ongoing colonialist abuses, and compel states to take responsibility for colonialist crimes.<sup>66</sup>

### **Conclusions: Rethinking our Role in Global-Ethics Discussions**

How can those of us who study and teach global ethics better unsettle colonialist baggage and join others in promoting healthy global communities? Tellingly, a former student told me that the skills she learned in college were inadequate for her current work with urban community groups. College, she said, prepared her to master professional vocabularies, take command of problems, and assert her intellectual authority. In her community work, however, she has needed to recognize when she does not know things, be

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64. For instance, Nagel, “Poverty and Food,” sets aside social history in order to argue that radical inequalities are unjust independently of how they were generated. Still, when he dismisses the significance of colonialism with little historical support, he feeds tendencies simply to neglect colonialism (51).

65. Smith, *Decolonial Methodologies*, 34.

66. See, for instance, Aylwin, “Indigenous People’s Land”; Coppola, “Suicide in the Great Sioux Nation”; Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 148–310; Hamilton, “The Gentrification to Prison Pipeline”; Hudson, “Beyond Homan Square”; Nasr, “Gassing of Indigenous Youth”; Million, “Felt Theory”; Rodríguez. “Not Counting Mexicans or Indians”; Smith, *Conquest*, 55–150; Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 34; Thomas, “Violence and Terror”; and Walia, *Undoing Border Imperialism*.

receptive to modes of speaking that are alien to her, and form mutually trusting relationships with people from different backgrounds.<sup>67</sup> Her reflections seem to me consonant with the implications of my analysis for some directions we might pursue to shake colonialist baggage.

### ***Preparing for Pluricentric Dialogues***

Pursuing a less colonialist global ethics means, first of all, opening ourselves to the shifts of a more pluricentric dialogue. Those of us who have enjoyed “the luxury of not being aware of discourses other than [our] own”<sup>68</sup> need to consider how differently situated thinkers have framed global moral issues. While current global-ethics texts tend to avoid colonialism and frame questions in terms of duties to an abstract “global poor,” many global-South and indigenous-American thinkers shift the focus to ongoing colonialist processes and the resistant agency of affected communities. For instance, the global-South and indigenous-American theorists and activists cited here have raised questions such as: How can states be held accountable for the lasting effects of residential school abuses? How can the people who produce food regain greater control over food economies? How has racialized capitalism maintained an under-class vulnerable to human-rights abuses? How have bordering and criminal-legal practices upheld longstanding hierarchies of race and class? How have people indigenous to this continent come to be labeled “illegal?” How can communities balance concerns for local autonomy with concerns to participate in broader political and economic processes? And how can people draw on resources in their daily lives to creatively reorganize the transnational processes in which they are situated?

Pluricentric dialogue also requires openness to more engaged and creative styles. The global-South and movement-oriented thinkers cited here cannot pass as “regular” scholars; however, many have effectively combined rigorous theoretical analysis with creatively pursued practice-born insight. Harsha Walia, for instance, combines sophisticated analysis of the politics of bordering practices with her experiences in immigrant justice movements. She thereby raises fresh questions about the relation of “border imperialism” to global inequities and about the borders we create between one another in our daily lives. Vandana Shiva subverts familiar discourses of violence when she creates new metaphors to help those of us for whom terrorism has always meant a disruption of everyday life to fathom the everyday terrorism endured by the women of Kashipur, India. Upon visiting with these women, who face displacement from their mountainside homes by mining companies and whose nonviolent resistance has been met with lethal state repression, Shiva asks us to “[i]magine each mountain to be a

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67. Discussions with Kamila Golin, October 2013.

68. Kuokkanen, *Reshaping the University*, 77.

World Trade Center built by nature over millennia. Think of how many tragedies bigger than what the world experienced on Sep 11th are taking place to provide raw material for insatiable industry.”<sup>69</sup> Others have used literary prose and parody to provoke us to rethink, for instance, who is a “security threat” to whom and who has been “accruing debt” to whom in global transactions.<sup>70</sup> These thinkers have stirred substantial dialogue about global issues in communities across the global-South.<sup>71</sup> If we global-North academics want to participate in the conversations that these thinkers are leading, then we need to reckon with topics such as corporate terrorism and border imperialism that exceed our expertise and comfort-zones. We also need to engage texts that speak to us as situated beings and challenge us to take responsibility for how we are connected (or not) to broader global-justice communities.

Openness to new topics and styles does not require that we replace all of our familiar global-ethics texts with new ones; however, it does demand that we begin situating familiar texts within a broader array of discourses on the global world. By juxtaposing texts from an array of epistemic styles and standpoints, we highlight the plurality of approaches through which global problems can be studied. Only when “the multitude of epistemes is made visible,” says Rauna Kuokkanen, “can we proceed with the project of decolonization, of deconstructing Eurocentric biases, of dismantling the hierarchies of discourses and epistemes.”<sup>72</sup> To do this effectively, however, we cannot merely “tolerate” different styles and perspectives but must consider how unfamiliar texts challenge our own thinking. For instance, if we are surprised that many global-South authors remain concerned with colonialism, then we might ask why colonialism remains central to their work while it has been largely absent from our own. If the community-situated, engaged approaches of some of these thinkers seem un-academic to us, then we might ask about our own epistemic biases and the academy’s “studied ignorance about indigenous epistemes.”<sup>73</sup> In essence, we need to give greater scrutiny to “who we are,” including our own intellectual and historical identities, in light of the stories of people on the other side of global hierarchies.

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69. Shiva, “Solidarity,” 90.

70. See, for instance, Britto García, “Guaicaipuro Cuahémoc cobra la dueña a Europa”; and Marcos, “The Fourth World War Has Begun,” 279–81.

71. For instance, Britto García’s essay, “Guaicaipuro Cuahémoc,” has inspired rock-band lyrics and multiple popular videos, Vandana Shiva and Harsha Walia have spoken at popular forums and been published in popular venues across the globe, and the communiqués of Subcomandante Marcos have gained worldwide audiences.

72. Kuokkanen, *Reshaping the University*, 77.

73. *Ibid.*, 150.

### ***Learning from the Grassroots***

Joining more inclusive dialogues also requires that we pursue the practical work necessary to connect with voices outside of our academic circles. This does not mean that scholars must become activists. It does demand, however, that we reach beyond familiar knowledge sources. For instance, we might invite global-justice activists to speak (or skype) on our campuses, read and teach more essays and news journals that present activist voices, and explore how such activists can challenge our own thinking; for instance, some of the activists cited here challenge us to take seriously the threats that globalizing discourses and institutions present to local democracies and the importance to human flourishing of biological and cultural diversity.<sup>74</sup>

When we engage thinkers with direct experience of social problems, we begin to dismantle colonialist hierarchies between “universal” and “local” knowers. We also support the efforts of global-justice movements to promote the political and cultural agency of their local communities. These communities do not need academic recognition in order to continue analyzing their daily struggles and experimenting in social progress; however, we academics join their efforts to democratize knowledge and politics when we pursue conversations with global-justice activists and help bring their voices to a broader public.<sup>75</sup>

Ultimately, listening to grassroots voices means entering global-ethics discussion with less products to offer and more commitment to learn in struggle. This defies academic conventions as well as the story of Westerners bringing progress to others. But it would answer the call of global-justice activists from Zapatista women to Native-American climate-justice organizers, who have stressed that what they would like from affluent-world agents seeking to aid them is less leading and more listening; less “imposing [our] own social-justice program” and more “learn[ing] by observing”; less trying to solve others’ problems and more “organiz[ing] [our]selves” to “democratiz[e] [our own] governments’ domestic and foreign policies.”<sup>76</sup>

### ***Attending to the Politics of our Knowledge Practices***

Finally, more responsible participation in global dialogue demands greater attention to the politics of our own knowledge-practices. We need to consider the kinds of attitudes and relationships that our own knowledge practices

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74. Cregan, “Inter-ethnic Summit”; Macas, “Amautawasi Quechuan University”; Martin, “Three Tactics”; Shiva, “Solidarity.”

75. Examples of such bridging of academic and activist knowledges include Jaggar, “Saving Amina”; Shiva, “Solidarity”; Smith, *Conquest*; Thomas, “Violence and Terror”; and Walia, *Undoing Border Imperialism*.

76. Martin, “Three Tactics”; Khorasani, Interview; and Zapatista women, cited in Weidman, et al., “Zapatista Women’s Encuentro.”

cultivate. We need to consider how well our academic work prepares us to hear others' voices and form trusting relationships with people on the other side of global hierarchies. Given that academic conventions have not fared well in this regard, we need to consider new ways of entering discussions that are more conducive to the kind of humility, self-scrutiny, and attentiveness to others that are vital to democratic global communities.

In short, we need to complicate our routines. We need to engage voices and topics that stretch our comfort zones and betray the limits of our academic training. This can be unsettling, especially for those of us who have taken for granted our academic norms and epistemic authority. But unsettling routines can help to keep philosophy lively and responsive to the living world. It also might help us to participate more fruitfully in a "future, pluralist humanity."<sup>77</sup>

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77. Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas*, 132.

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