

We argue for an understanding of relationality grounded in non-Western traditions, which requires Western knowledges to accept a lesser place as one epistemology among many.

Epistemological Decolonization through a Relational Knowledge-Making Model

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This article argues for epistemic decolonization by developing a relational model of knowledge, which we locate within indigenous knowledges. We live in a time of ongoing global, epistemic coloniality, embedded in and shaped by colonial ideas and practices. Epistemological decolonization requires taking nondominant knowledges and their epistemes seriously to open up the possibility of interrogating and dismantling the hegemony of the Western knowledge tradition. We here ask two related questions: What are the decolonial affordances of indigenous knowledges? And how do these compare to other contemporary critiques of epistemic coloniality, specifically those mounted by posthumanism? In answer, we develop three definitional senses of relational with reference to indigenous knowledges. First, we define indigenous knowledges in relation to Western knowledge, with which they share a dialectical origin at the moment of colonial contact. Second, indigenous knowledges are relational in their ontological and axiological orientations. Third, relationality in indigenous knowledge suggests a trialectic space, rather than a dialectic space. We argue for the necessity of an anticolonial framework, which assigns priority to indigenous people's perceptions and ways of knowing for theorizing recurring colonial relations and their (imperialistic) manifestations in producing and reproducing knowledge.

Introduction

We argue here for epistemic decolonization by developing a relational model of knowledge, which we locate within indigenous knowledges. Our underlying assumption rests on Ramón Grosfoguel's claim about colonization, that the "heterogeneous and multiple global structures put in place over a period of 450 years did not evaporate with the juridical-political decolonization of the periphery over the past 50 years" (2011, 14). Thus, we live in a time of ongoing global, epistemic coloniality, embedded in, and shaped by, colonial ideas and practices. Epistemological decolonization¹ requires being attentive to, and taking seriously, nondominant knowledges and their epistemes, so as to open up the possibility of interrogating and dismantling the hegemony of the Western knowledge tradition. A central internal tension within the decolonial project is revealed in the statement that epistemic decolonization involves interrogating "the history and logic of those processes that allowed the Western episteme to erase or conceal the contextual and temporal dimensions of its own origin so that it could present itself as acontextual, ahistorical and universal" (Praeg 2019, 1). This phrasing raises the question of the location from which such interrogation can be carried out. The failure to mention other knowledge traditions suggests that adopting an attitude of epistemic skepticism from within the Western tradition is sufficient. An opposite approach asks whether humanist thinking can be disentangled from its linkages with coloniality (Zembylas 2018). To paraphrase Audre Lorde (2003), we have to ask whether we can use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house. In this article, we consider two related questions: What are the decolonial affordances of indigenous knowledges? And how do these compare to other contemporary critiques of epistemic coloniality, specifically those mounted by posthumanism? We argue for the necessity of an anticolonial framework that "theorizes colonial and re-colonial relations and the implications of imperial structures on the processes of knowledge production and validation" (Sefa Dei 2002, 39, 43) by giving priority to the perceptions and ways of knowing of indigenous peoples and mobilizing these for interrogating their marginalization.

Considering the decolonizing potential of indigenous knowledges, we must think through the relations between what have come to be broadly termed *Western* knowledges and *indigenous* knowledges as a meeting of differing ways of producing, reproducing, and representing ideas. We define indigenous knowledges as fundamentally *relational* in three senses that are distinct but necessary to the anticolonial potential these knowledges hold for decolonization. First, indigenous knowledges must be considered relational to Western knowledges because, as categories of knowledge, they share a dialectical origin at the moment of colonial contact, when indigenous knowledges were instantiated within the colonial regime of power as subjugated and Western knowledges as superior. Any theoretical discourse about indigenous knowledges takes place within

the ongoing contestation of this power imbalance, the righting of which is the urgent work of decolonization.

Second, we contrast indigenous knowledges with hegemonic Western epistemology in terms of their ontological and axiological orientations. We draw on discussions of indigenous knowledges as fundamentally relational, in the sense that they prioritize the role of the relationships among actors, artifacts, and spaces in the construction of knowledge. This networked relational knowledge-making model establishes and nurtures connections among individuals, communities, abstract and concrete tools, and so forth that make up knowledge-producing communities. This relationality is spiritual in nature because it is rooted in an ontology recognizing the spiritual realm as real and integral to knowledge making while it guides axiological assumptions of why and how knowledge should be made, held, and applied. As we discuss in detail, this relational epistemology is radically inimical to the Western rationalist epistemology that has its roots in seventeenth-century Enlightenment humanism. By positing the knowing subject as the Cartesian *cogito*, and a specific kind of rational logic as the marker of the human, the humanist tradition severs knowledge from the temporally embodied context of the knower and subalterns humans of other epistemic traditions as well as nonhuman others. The humanist subject is thus, as Karin Murrin puts it, “the ‘I’ that has made modernity and colonialism possible” (2017, 458). Additionally, rationalist understandings of history, epitomized in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s notion of world history, which posits historical development as the result of the logical reconciliation of contradiction, locate history in the realm of the ideal and work to obscure the real historical violence by which cultures gain and reproduce power. This rationalist bias is present, we argue, in the notion of a dialectic, which focuses on universally discursive space at the cost of an embodied, situated context.

These considerations bring us to the third sense, in which indigenous knowledge insists on relationality, its locating of knowledge in *suahunu*, a “trialectic space” of body-mind-soul or culture-society-nature, rather than the logical dialectic (Sefa Dei 2012). By insisting on knowledge as rooted in a specific location and in the embodied history of dwelling in that place, indigenous knowledges cannot conceive of universals; rather, knowledge must be understood as “multiple” (Sefa Dei 2000) or “pluriversal” (Mignolo 2002) and diverse pathways acknowledged for realizing the practicalities of its production (Zembylas 2018). To illustrate this sense of relationality further, we briefly discuss recent posthumanist ideas, which share with decolonial thinking a rejection of the modern, humanist “I.” Yet, as we show, by failing to interrogate the “geo-political embeddedness of knowledge” (Zembylas 2018, 264), by moving too quickly from the humanist concepts these posthumanist ideas reject to embracing these concepts’ logical opposites (as implied in the term *posthumanist*), posthumanist approaches fail to escape the boundaries of Hegel’s notion of history as limited to the realm of thinking. There is the danger that posthumanist thought, because it arose in

colonial centers, and paradoxically draws power from the hegemonic status of the humanist tradition it rejects, will against its best intentions work to absorb indigenous knowledges into a new universalism. That is the advantage, we contend, of George J. Sefa Dei's anticolonial approach, which looks to non-Western epistemes, new languages, and new embodied and localized metaphors with which to do the work of "reimagining present-futures" (Desai and Nyandiko Sanya 2016, 712, quoted in Zembylas 2018, 258). We argue for an understanding of relationality grounded in non-Western traditions, which requires Western knowledges to accept a lesser place as one epistemology among many.

By mobilizing the idea of relational knowledge to guide an anticolonial critique, we arrive at a counterhegemonic knowledge-making model. The three senses in which knowledge is relational thus work together, locating knowledge making in local relations among actors, artifacts, and places and so in local identities forged by histories and negotiations of power. By shaping these relationships, we can systematically pursue an agenda of epistemological diversification. We note, however, that the strategy of decolonizing from within indigenous locations and drawing from those histories and resources raises the problem of inappropriate appropriation, especially in light of the fact that none of us as authors would be considered indigenous persons.

Defining Indigenous Knowledges as Relational

We are aware that a number of pitfalls are associated with attempting to define indigenous knowledge, including the possibility of applying "the colonial paradigm" (Shahjahan 2005) of categories and reifying it according to narrow and simplistic criteria or, as we discuss in more detail below, the tendency by hegemonic interests to appropriate it for political and economic gain (Sundar 2002). Nevertheless, because the phrase *indigenous knowledge* is in widespread use, we believe that attempting a definition is necessary as an initial step, laying bare the political and conceptual foundations of the term. Defining indigenous knowledge as a conceptual category requires emphasizing the distinction between indigenous and Western knowledge communities and their knowledges and the respective positions that these communities hold, particularly within knowledge-making spaces. In other words, epistemological systems cannot be defined without acknowledging and engaging with what Michalinos Zembylas calls the "geo-political embeddedness of knowledge" (2018, 264). Our definition therefore seeks to acknowledge indigenous knowledge's entanglement with colonial categories as "other" to Western knowledges and simultaneously describe its unique epistemological positions, which, we argue, ultimately provide a new language for reframing and transforming this entanglement.

Three Senses of Relational

As set out in the introduction, we define indigenous knowledges as relational in at least three complementary senses. First, these knowledges, constituting a separate “other” category, have a dialectical origin alongside Western knowledge in the moment of colonial contact. This contact established an unequal relationship of power between knowledges, creating indigenous knowledges as subjugated knowledges. Second, indigenous epistemologies understand knowledge as fundamentally relational, existing among place, person, nature, and spirit, resulting in an understanding of the human that differs from that of the Enlightenment *cogito*. Third, the commitment of indigenous epistemologies to embodied location and relational practice implies that knowledge can never be universal, but must rather be pluriversal.

Relation as Dialectic

Our initial positioning of indigenous knowledges emphasizes their existence in dialectical opposition with Western knowledge. Here, the meaning of the term *indigenous*, as Anders Breidlid and Louis Botha argue, implies, for certain societies, a subjugated status, which “originates with and is perpetuated by their contact with a modern Western system of social organisation” (2015, 321). In this understanding, indigenous knowledges exist as a result of historical relations, which, from the moment of colonial contact, establish an antagonistic dialectic relation (since colonial contact produces domination and subjugation) between indigenous knowledges and Western hegemonic knowledge. The defining criterion for this conceptualization of different indigenous knowledge systems is therefore located within the context of a shared experience of domination. The content, explanations, and values of indigenous epistemologies preexisted colonial contact; however, their nature as subjugated knowledges, and the ontological status of their holders as inferior or nonhuman, was generated in the moment of contact with hegemonic Western epistemology. In this understanding, indigenous knowledge emerges and is recognized as a counterpoint and site of resistance to the dominance of encroaching Western, colonial epistemes.

Above, we noted a risk associated with applying colonial paradigms to define indigeneity. Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues vehemently against the category of *indigenous*, arguing that “research and theorizing about the multiplicity and specificity of indigeneity ends up producing cultural difference as an a priori and renders invisible racialized knowledges that continue to define us. In this way cultural difference is compelled to function discursively to re-inscribe race” (2016, 115). She holds that it is impossible to “transcend liberal universal thought without first dismantling and destroying racialized knowledge” (2016, 115). We are attentive to this warning, but hold that it is in the articulation of indigenous knowledges in their

uniqueness, and their differences from Western hegemonic knowledge, that their epistemological and moral authority can be manifested and acknowledged as equal to, not subjugated by, Western knowledges. In this way racialized categories placing Western knowledge above indigenous knowledges are destroyed. Also, we hold that the idea of indigenous as appearing in opposition to Western hegemonic knowledge is still vital to maintain, so that the urgent and unfinished political work of decolonization is less easy to ignore. Recognizing the indigenous as dialectical other to Western knowledge claims opens discursive space in which alternate, long-silenced epistemological positions and tools can appear.

Relational as Ontological Space

Indigenous knowledges cannot be reduced to their opposition to Western knowledge. They mount a serious challenge to humanist assumptions by offering radically different ontological and epistemological principles. Before setting out their central positions, we therefore give a necessarily brief account of characterizing arguments of Western hegemonic epistemology.

Like Lesley Le Grange (2004) and Breidlid (2013), we use the term *Western* to identify tentatively a dominating Eurocentric way of knowing that has its origins in the seventeenth-century Enlightenment. Its features are perhaps most clearly visible in the Cartesian-Newtonian version of science, with its characteristically mechanistic view of reality, true/false dichotomies, and aspirations of objectivity (Morgan 2003). Such a science aspires to universalism, disinterestedness, and organized skepticism, driven not only by a methodological rationale, but also by the belief that the Western scientific way is right and good (Merton 1973). Two core dynamics of Enlightenment epistemology are evident here: first, the humanist assumption that *rationality* is the singular human ability; second, a tendency to *hierarchize and dominate*. These dynamics are intertwined.

In Enlightenment thinking, the “nature and destiny of the human being” is to achieve “rational autonomy,” with rationality taken to be the “marker of what it means to be human” (Biesta 2006, 4). This legacy is grounded in the work of Immanuel Kant, who argues that Enlightenment “is the human being’s emancipation from its self-incurred immaturity” (2006, 17). This position is affirmed in the work of René Descartes, whose famous dictum, “*Cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am)” ([1637] 2003), shapes the emergence of Western modern subjectivity. Modern subjects are defined by what they can know with absolute certainty through reason, and thus, necessarily, what is open to doubt. Hence, what the *cogito* (the rational, thinking subject) can know creates an important epistemological orientation, which, in turn, gives rise to various ontological dispositions, such as skepticism, subject/object dualism, and the central reliance on rationality to determine truth. These ontological assumptions shape what counts as knowledge, as well as whose knowledge counts. One important materialistic expression of these dispositions is evident in Auguste Comte’s positivism, which

advocates for a purely empirical approach to social reality to determine the laws that govern it ([1848] 2009). It constructs knowledge as a hierarchy and restricts its attainment, with humanist rationality the gatekeeper to epistemological access. At the same time, it characterizes other knowledges (for example, magical or religious thinking), or the epistemes of unenlightened societies, as being of limited local relevance and scope, relativist, irrational, and so forth. Implied in this construction is a right to hegemonic status for “true rational” knowledge.

Perhaps the most influential account of the functioning of rationality in the humanist tradition is Hegel’s dialectical method, which essentially aims to account for the logical evolutionary development of a concept and, for Hegel, history itself ([1817] 1991, [1807] 2013). It begins with a stable, fixed concept, called the thesis; for example, “Being.” The existence of this concept necessarily gives rise to dialectical movement, called the “negatively rational” (Hegel [1817] 1991, sec. 79; Maybee 2016). What emerges in this moment of instability is that the thesis passes into its opposite, giving rise to the antithesis, in our example, “Nothing.” Hegel calls this movement “self-sublation” ([1817] 1991, sec. 81). The third moment of the dialectic is the synthesis, called the “positively rational” moment (Hegel 1991, secs. 79, 82). This moment “grasps the unity of the opposition between the first two determinations [and] is the positive result of the dissolution or transition of those determinations” (Maybee 2016). In our example, the synthesis would be the emergence of “Becoming,” through the sublation of Being and Nothing. Thus, for Hegel, to sublata (in the German, *aufheben*) has a double meaning, implying both to cancel (or negate) and to preserve:

The moment of understanding sublata itself because its own character or nature—its one-sidedness or restrictedness—destabilizes its definition and leads it to pass into its opposite. The dialectical moment thus involves a process of self-sublation, or a process in which the determination from the moment of understanding sublata itself, or both cancels and preserves itself, as it pushes on to or passes into its opposite. (Maybee 2016)

The dialectical process unfolds continually through history, leading to increasing comprehensiveness and universality. The synthesis self-sublates, creating a new antithesis; thus, in turn, a new synthesis emerges, and the process continues in an evolutionary and teleological fashion, moving toward what Hegel calls the “Absolute” ([1807] 2013, 11). In his philosophy of world history, Hegel defines history in rational terms: history is the rational pursuit of freedom, and non-European civilizations are unhistorical because they are not conscious of freedom, of the capacity for self-determination that resides in every human’s rationality. Therefore, individuals in these civilizations are not motivated to work for their own freedom. They exist in time, but not in history. Historical development, which is confined

to European civilization, happens when “a given level of consciousness of freedom being attained and embodied in social life, that level of consciousness harbors some inner ‘contradiction’ or tension which propels people, *qua* rational beings, to bring about change and improvement” (Stone 2017, 13). Historical development is thus a rational response to contradiction—the dialectic between thesis and antithesis, giving rise to sublation. That is why the “Absolute” is both logical and historical, the final “completely all encompassing” moment (Maybee 2016), which Francis Fukuyama famously termed “the end of history” (1992, ix). The dialectical process occurs across all levels of reality to reach its full, eventual completeness. What underpins this movement is *Geist* (Spirit) another central term in Hegel’s work. *Geist* is a “sort of *general consciousness, a single ‘mind’ common to all men*” (Solomon 1970, 642). *Geist* is not a thing, but, like Descartes’ *cogito*, a rational activity, which shapes and directs reality. It “is simply the underlying unifying principle of consciousness and, at the same time, the underlying rational will ‘behind’ all practical reason and action” (Hegel [1807] 2013, sec. 440; Solomon 1970, 660).

Such a dialectical understanding of ideal history is an illuminating example of the all-encompassing Enlightenment narrative, which finds support in progressive scientific and political endeavors in Western Europe, but is used to justify colonization in the name of this Eurocentric humanism itself. Kant and Hegel, for example, both express racist stereotypes about the nature of precolonial societies (See, e.g., Kleingeld 2007; Kuykendall 1993; Moellendorf 1992). Hegel writes that Africa “has no historical interest of its own, for we find its inhabitants living in barbarism and savagery in a land which has not furnished them with any integral ingredient of culture” ([1837] 1992, 174). The underlying teleological assumption of the dialectical method implies the inevitability of the triumph of Western knowledge over all other systems of knowledge.

The universalizing potential within Western epistemology was progressively confirmed and heightened by the ongoing process of colonization.² With “conquest, world trade, colonialism, and development, . . . what the West exported, and continues to export world-wide, is a particular form of rationality which is dominant today” (Apffel-Marglin [1996] 2011, 34). The manner in which this dominating tendency is coupled with Western colonialism to produce dominant and subjugated knowledges is highlighted by Breidlid:

It is one of the characteristic traits of colonialism that it denied diversity, epistemic diversity, and created instead inferiority. The production of the hegemonic epistemology necessitated the Other, which is characterized as uncivilized, irrational, superstitious. (2013, 7)

Under the political and economic conditions of colonialism, a European epistemology, which was not a universal, but a localized, knowledge system,

was transformed into a globalized, dominant epistemology with universalizing claims:

Knowledge constructed by modernity and Eurocentrism (since the Renaissance) is native or indigenous European knowledge (yes, Europeans are indigenous peoples too; they do not come from the moon), which became universal through the demanding [of] support in economic matters by capitalism and its expansionist political project of the neoliberal nation-state. (Mignolo 2013, 7)

In the neoliberal climate, we speak of the “global knowledge economy,” a euphemism for the way in which advanced, first-world economies more or less determine the economic and political fate of other countries by allowing or withholding access to material and social resources. In epistemic terms, humanism and its central value of rationality still overwhelmingly shape how we determine the meaning of humanity and the accompanying subjugation of other ontologies and epistemes. It is against this epistemology that, we contend, indigenous knowledges assert themselves as relational.

This second meaning of *relational* is the idea that knowledge is strongly related to local context and practices: “indigenous knowledge . . . may be defined as the cumulative body of strategies, practices, techniques, tools, intellectual resources, explanations, beliefs, and values accumulated over time in a particular locality without the interference and impositions of external hegemonic forces” (Emeagwali 2013, 31). This interpretation posits that indigenous knowledges originated in a time before colonial invasions. The deep and independently established ontological roots of indigenous people’s knowledges form the basis of the often unique epistemological and axiological assumptions that govern their epistemic traditions and differentiate those from the dominant Western ones dispersed by colonial invasions. Such an understanding is valuable in that it offers descriptors of indigenous knowledges independent of their relationship with their Western hegemonic Other. Now the focus is instead on the relationships established by ontological space, “innate intuitive ways of knowing associated with long-term dwelling within particular historical spaces” (Sefa Dei 2012, 824). The association of indigenous knowledges with a specific location seems often to be misconstrued as implying that it is *about* local phenomena, whereas we believe it should be read as indicating knowledge that is characterized by strong relationships *with* local phenomena. The relational principles that indigenous epistemologies share speak to the ways in which histories become inscribed in the tools and practices of a community, becoming fit for the specific social and material contexts within which they were developed. These definitions focus on the relational epistemological principles by which indigenous knowledges operate, more so than their content or purview. The local relational aspect of indigenous knowledges is thus based within a pervasive and globally dispersed ontological space:

Indigenous peoples are those who have creation stories, not colonization stories, about how we/they came to be in a particular place—indeed how we/they came to *be a place*. Our/their relationships to land comprise our/their epistemologies, ontologies, and cosmologies. (Tuck and Yang 2012, 6)

This fundamental relational principle, in terms of which knowing is constructed within the relationships between indigenous people and their surroundings, implies a second orientation, profoundly different from the Western hegemonic tradition, which holds that these relationships become “the spiritual link that binds the individual to content, process and protocol” (Fatnowna and Pickett 2002, 214). This observation, which comes from work in Aboriginal Australian communities, implies the associations that indigenous people and their knowledges have with their locality are premised on a spiritual access that mediates knowledge *about, with, and for* their environment and realms beyond them. Explanations of how indigenous knowledges proceed from an understanding of spiritually based reality are abundant (Chilisa 2012; Kovach 2009; Sefa Dei 2002), and they speak to the epistemological and axiological implications of this worldview: “Spirituality in an Aboriginal sense is encompassing and holistic in nature. It is the starting point that requires no demonstration of proof; it exists and all truths begin and end there” (Fatnowna and Pickett 2002, 214). Indigenous epistemologies are premised not only on investigations of the world observable to humans, but also on interactions with a spiritual realm. This contrasts with Western epistemologies, which limit themselves strictly to knowledge *about*, and separate ethical considerations into a different category of thought, and in which “anything non-material, unseen, and thus immeasurable in this [scientific] epistemological framework [is] considered invalid and ‘unreal’ and dismissed as invalid knowledge” (McDonnell 2014, 104).

The central relational principles of indigenous knowledge therefore have profound ontological and ethical consequences that are inimical to hegemonic rationality and to global capitalist assumptions. Regarding this, we draw from Riyadh Ahmed Shahjahan, who calls spirituality “a way of being in the world where one is connected to one’s cultural knowledge and/or other beings (e.g., one’s community, transcendental beings, and other parts of creation) and allows one to move from inward to outward action” (2009, 122). This way of being is deeply antithetical to the radically individualized, disenchanted, disembodied *cogito*, on which humanist ideals of rationality are founded. Indigenous spirituality, then, is more than an understanding that the world is made up of spiritual elements, and it goes beyond the epistemological implications that this has for making knowledge about the world. Indigenous people’s spiritual connections expand the ethic and purpose of their knowledge making so that these become epistemic endeavors *with* the world and *for* it. Accounts of indigenous knowledges as spiritual must not be subsumed into Orientalism,

rationality's cousin. We are not proposing a gnostic, romanticized oneness with nature, constructed from the desires of the Western subject (Said 2003). Rather, the notion of the spiritual in indigenous knowledges must be taken as a rigorous epistemological principle. Believing knowledge to be rooted in the cycles of nature and the material parameters of a particular location will result in a historical sense different from the march of the *Geist*. Although the German word means "Spirit" in Hegel's use of it to describe universal claims of a general consciousness discovered through "strictly *rational* procedures" (Solomon 1970, 646), *Geist* is incompatible with localized, embodied spiritualities characterizing indigenous ways of knowing. Perhaps more significantly, in locating the progression of history purely in the logical realm, the dialectic method obscures the historical realities of power and subjugation.³ Colonial knowledges did not achieve their dominance through logical sublation, but through political violence. By insisting on knowledge as rooted in the realities of place, indigenous epistemologies cannot be this forgetful.

Emphasis on ontological space as the site of indigenous knowledges explains why we retain the term *indigenous*, which has been critiqued as a colonial tactic to miniaturize subjugated knowledges so as to establish the superiority of the colonizer's own knowledges in scope and therefore authority. These and other normative associations linked with the term *indigenous knowledge* may suggest a preference for the term *endogenous knowledge* instead (Crossman and Devisch 2002), but we retain *indigenous* precisely because it foregrounds the unequal political conditions in which indigenous knowledges have to function. We wish to maintain the urgency of claims for epistemological justice. The relational model we propose is profoundly different from the Enlightenment understanding of rationality as a purely ideal, unembodied feature of existence, abstract and universal. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that trends in twentieth-century Western philosophy, specifically phenomenology and hermeneutics, are attentive to the embodied experience and the shaping importance of cultural histories in knowledge; similarly, sociocultural perspectives in the human sciences have explored learning and other aspects of social life as being a cultural activity situated by shared values, norms, and practices within a community. However, we maintain that the dialectical logic fundamental to so much of post-Enlightenment thought predisposes Western theoretical discourses, even those attempting to critique Western hegemony from within, to explore, encircle, and absorb other knowledges—in other words, to sublimate them (see, e.g., Allen 2015). Such distortion of other knowledge traditions necessarily occurs in the moment of translation, when epistemes and languages encounter and try to understand each other; however, the epistemic attitude established by humanist rationality exceeds such necessary moves. The implications of this point can be made clearer by engaging with a recent development in Western thinking, one that at first glance seems to share the commitment of indigenous knowledges to relationality. This is posthumanism. The assumption, however, that it offers an alternative perpetuates the same kind of

dialectical move that results in sublation and the appropriation and negation of other voices. In contrast, we argue that the commitment of indigenous epistemologies to ontological space produces a relational understanding of how different epistemes interact.

Relational as Trialectic

Before demonstrating our reservations about the decolonizing potential offered by epistemological alternatives of posthumanism, we wish to clarify that our intention is not to address all knowledge traditions, including countertraditions; rather, our focus is on what we call the hegemonic Western knowledge tradition, characterized by post-Enlightenment thought, and the role that indigenous knowledges can play in decolonizing it. As should be clear, we identify the dialectical logic as a fundamental element of it and its construction of itself as superior, thereby making it the target of our proposed decolonization through indigenous knowledges. In what follows, we are suggesting that, while posthumanism may have similar intentions, it may fall short, for the reasons offered below.

By posthumanist we understand, along with Gert Biesta (2006) and Cary Wolfe (2010), that a core element of this concept is its critique of the primacy of “the ‘I’ that has made modernity and colonialism possible” (Murriss 2017, 458). We refer here to posthumanism’s aims of reimagining what it means to be human in light of Western colonial, modernist, and humanist perceptions, which have subalterned some people and nonhuman others. These perspectives tend to create binary oppositional categories, such as those of human and nonhuman, nature and culture, living and nonliving. These perceptions are further premised on universalist assumptions, which often ignore the role of power relations in their othering tendencies, as we intimated above in our discussion of Western knowledges. The notion of *human* is neither universal nor neutral, but “a normative category that indexes access to privileges and entitlements. Appeals to the ‘human’ are always discriminatory: they create structural distinctions and inequalities among different categories of humans, let alone between humans and non-humans” (Braidotti 2019, 35). Therefore, posthumanist positions tend to define people as situated and acting from within relationships, as when a posthuman subject is described as “embedded, embodied and yet flowing in a web of relations with human and non-human others” (Braidotti 2019, 34). These positions are similar to the relational and spiritual ontological and axiological assumptions of indigenous knowledges discussed above:

Many indigenous worldviews are based upon an animistic philosophy that attests that the human entity is but one clan group within its relational family. [Vine] Deloria [1999] argues that a relational worldview, from a tribal perspective, is one that assumes relationships between all life forms that exist within the natural world. (Kovach 2009, 34)

We argue, however, that moving too quickly to equate the relationality proposed in posthumanist arguments with that of indigenous knowledges elides the duty of fully recognizing the ontological status and moral authority of indigenous epistemes.

This point is necessary to emphasize because similarities between claims made by certain postmodernisms and decolonial positions have been hailed as positive, providing a pragmatic way forward out of the impasses of local decolonial struggles that can distract from wider global ecological concerns. Achille Joseph Mbembe, for example, argues that decolonial struggles remain in the rational humanist space; the colonized subject fighting oppression is constructed as an autonomous subject acting against an objective background. For him, the “dreams of mastery” (2016, 42) so central to the decolonial impulse cannot be sustained because they replicate the terms established by colonization. He argues for a move beyond the colonial/decolonial binary by considering the nature of the human itself and the possibility of the posthuman. He follows the trace proposed by Frantz Fanon, that if a government is to liberate genuinely, it requires not only various social and economic programs, but, in fact, “a concept of man, a concept about the future of mankind” (1961, 143). Mbembe goes beyond the nationalistic sentiment in Fanon to the global, arguing that we must think of humanity not “from the perspective of its mastery of the Creation as we used to, but from the perspective of its finitude and its possible extinction” (2016, 42). Thus, we must “rethink the human” (Mbembe 2016, 42). Mbembe posits that the language of decolonization within the global colonial matrix is perhaps too archaic, inherited “from an entirely different age and epoch” (2016, 32). For him, the term had force in the work of, for example, Fanon (1961) and Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1986), but he now wonders whether this particular concept, in the sense it was used then, is even suitable for the “complexly mutating entity” of coloniality we are fighting now (2016, 32).

We agree this is a pragmatic response, but we are cautious in too quickly abandoning the language of decolonization and taking on that of posthumanism instead. As Zembylas warns, the agendas of posthumanism and decolonization do not always align, and significant tensions occur between these approaches. Both may involve rejecting the modern “I,” but the posthumanist focus on anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism of this “I” as the targets of its critiques may issue in “new universalisms in the form of undifferentiated, ahistorical subjects by obscuring the geo-historical embeddedness of knowledge; by conflating being and our knowledge of it; and by underestimating the depoliticizing effect of distributing responsibility to assemblages of human and non-humans” (2018, 264). In similar although less nuanced terms, Artwell Nhemachena (2018) rejects posthumanism as cannibalistic of African humanity in that it seeks to erase the distinction between African people and animals through a colonial-styled decentering and deconstruction of African human essence. Nhemachemba’s argumentation reveals an uneasy awareness that posthumanism, although it critiques

the modern colonial subject, does not yet appreciate indigenous (including African indigenous) identities and ways of being (human) in the world.

One error posthumanisms can fall into, as Zoe Todd explains (2016), is that what is presented in academia as the theories and concepts of Western scholars can often be found in knowledges long held by indigenous people. Todd uses the example of a talk given by Bruno Latour in February 2013 as part of the University of Edinburgh's Gifford Lectures on Natural Theology (Latour 2017). She describes how Latour develops a complex account of climate change as a matter of "common cosmological concern" without referencing any indigenous thinkers "for their millennia of engagement with sentient environments, with cosmologies that enmesh people into complex relationships between themselves and all relations, and with climates and atmospheres as important points of organization and action" (2016, 6–7). To illustrate, she gives an account of the concept of *sila*. As she explains, *sila* is an Inuit word that has come to mean "climate" to non-Inuit, but it is also, according to Rachel Qitsualik (1998), "the breathe [*sic*] that circulates into and out of every living thing" (quoted in Todd 2016, 5). Todd adds that *sila* links the environment to knowledge (2016, 5). The complexity of this concept lies in the way it is perceived as a common force in the air animating animal life and meteorological and other phenomena, prompting Todd to suggest that "it is bound with life, with climate, with knowing, and with the very existence of being(s)" (2016, 5). But it is the absence of this word or reference to the intellectual heritage of indigenous thinkers and activists in a talk on climate awareness by Latour that prompts the thought that when academics "start cherry-picking parts of Indigenous thoughts that appeal to them *without engaging directly in (or unambiguously acknowledging) the political situation, legal orders and relationality of both Indigenous people and scholars*, we immediately become complicit in colonial violence" (Todd 2016, 18). The risk of forgetting the political is what Mbembe falls into, arguably, by moving too swiftly into the posthumanist framework.

Todd's example illustrates how coloniality of thought still functions via the movement toward *sublation*—an epistemological process of history-making and knowledge-making that must homogenize and synthesize the dialectic through the movement of reason itself. Indigenous knowledges, if conceived of solely in dialectical relationship with Western knowledge, are placed in a dangerous and vulnerable position, where it is likely that in time they will be appropriated, absorbed, and dissolved into globalizing neocolonial culture. The need for epistemological decolonization can disappear behind more obviously immediate struggles for institutional and economic justice. We do not forget that, as Sefa Dei points out, colonialism is alive in the denial of indigenous peoples' sovereignty and self-autonomy, the dispossession of lands, the displacement of peoples, and the denial of people's basic humanity, as well as imperialistic projects that continue to design other people's futures (2016, 2). But we argue that decolonization is incomplete without epistemological justice, as illustrated by the example of a decolonial confrontation in Bolivia described by Alison Brysk and Natasha Bennett

(2012), who cite the conflict between the indigenous people whose ancestral lands form part of the Isiboro Secure Indigenous Territory and National Park (TIPNIS) and international, state, and commercial farming interests supporting construction of a highway through the ancestral lands as illustrating an ongoing disregard for indigenous peoples' identity and rights. In 2011, approximately one thousand indigenous people from the lowlands took part in a two-month, 250-mile march, now known as the TIPNIS March, to the presidential palace to deliver sixteen demands for legal and political recognition and protection. This appeal was largely successful, with the president signing a law that forbade construction of the road through any portion of the TIPNIS area and classified the park as untouchable for development projects (Brysk and Bennett 2012, 123). However, while Brysk and Bennett may celebrate the indigenous people's appropriation of globalized discourses, politics, and languages to halt the construction of the road, this progress in indigenous people's strategies against marginalization, we contend, signals the failure to recognize on their own terms the moral authority of indigenous worldviews. Such a failure effectually produces indigenous knowledge as a racialized category, produced from and owing its being to Western discourses and desires. It is of this version of indigenous knowledge that Lesley Green speaks of when she finds a "rich irony in that the concept of 'indigenous knowledge' is itself a hybrid creation which emerges in counterpoint to globalization, and draws from a romantic Western notion of culture as static and unbounded" (2008, 113). Jeff Corntassel and Cheryl Bryce seem to be in agreement with her when they suggest "moving away from the performativity of a rights discourse geared toward state affirmation and approval toward a daily existence conditioned by place-based cultural practices" (2012, 153). We insist, therefore, that it is necessary to frame the struggles of indigenous people, and colonized peoples more broadly, within their own ontological and axiological frames of reference, for two reasons. First is the conceptual richness of indigenous knowledges arising from alternative ontological and axiological preconceptions about knowledge and knowing, which offer underexplored—in academia—avenues for thinking through the ongoing problem of coloniality. Second, it is necessary to give subjugated knowledges equal status in terms of political agency and explanatory power as a means of taking an unambiguous step toward undoing their silencing by global coloniality. Given the persisting effects of colonialism as a subjugating force, we have therefore chosen the anticolonials as the framework from which to approach decolonization.

An anticolonial framework "theorizes colonial and de-colonial relations and the implications of imperial structures on the processes of knowledge production and validation" (Sefa Dei 2002, 43) by giving priority to indigenous peoples' perceptions and ways of knowing and mobilizing these for interrogating their marginalization. By resisting that which the colonial ideology brought into being, such as the current academic interpretation of justified true belief, and historically situating research within the power relations of a collective struggle for redefining the role of knowledge,

anticolonialism seeks to acknowledge locally produced knowledges (Sefa Dei 2000, 2002). Affirming local knowledge in this way counteracts the hegemonic tendencies of the dominating epistemological traditions and formal knowledge-producing institutions initiated by colonial rulers. The anticolonial approach directs its focus on “(a) processes of knowledge production, interrogation, validation, and dissemination; (b) the understanding of Indigeneity as both a process and identity; and (c) the pursuit of agency, resistance, and subjective politics” (Sefa Dei 2016, 1). By tracing back to colonialism the inequalities complicit in knowledge production, the anticolonial framework affirms our definition of indigenous knowledges as arising out of a dialectical relationship within that context, recognizing their present condition in a manner that brings continuity to the struggles of the holders of those knowledges. Given the related relational and spiritual components to local knowledge conveyed by the defining aspects we identify above, it can be argued that by prioritizing local knowledge, the anticolonial approach makes these elements central to its theorizing of decolonized knowledge production. In effect then, the first two senses of relationality are operating here.

Sefa Dei (2012) works to instantiate the change he calls for by applying the concept of *suahunu*, drawn from his Ghanaian Akan heritage, to the anticolonial approach. He explains that *suahunu* means something like “learning and coming to know and to act responsibly within communities” (2012, 841)—in other words, the kind of knowing *with* and *for* discussed above. Sefa Dei speaks eloquently about the epistemological principles of Akan culture, in which body/mind, spirit (personality and integrity), and soul (inner self or environment) work together to help the self “come to know and make sense of the world in relation to others” (2012, 830). This understanding of knowing is clearly a “paradigm shift” away from the “privileging of Cartesian reasoning and ‘intellect’ over body” (830). Sefa Dei then expands, theorizing *suahunu* as a trialectic space within which transformative engagement is facilitated through multiple epistemic sites, which privilege interconnections at levels within and among the self, society, and nature. Thus, ontological space is central to trialectic space, which Sefa Dei calls a site for “multicentric ways of knowing” involving dialogue between “Indigenous knowledge and other bodies of knowledge, including mainstream or Western science knowledges,” seeing emotions, intuitions, and spirituality as “legitimate knowings” as well as rational deductions (2012, 836). The multidimensionality of trialectic space is usefully outlined by Jadie McDonnell: “As the spirit is embodied and manifests in multiple sites of knowledge (the social, cultural, environmental, economic, and political)[,] it is not separate from knowledge, production, worldviews, morals, values, and beliefs but is also interconnected and intertwined with all aspects of life” (2014, 102). Within trialectic space, these body-mind-soul or culture-society-nature relationships offer opportunities for negotiating indigenous priorities in a space that is “transgressive and counterhegemonic to institutionalized colonial epistemes” (Sefa Dei 2012, 824). Importantly, *suahunu*, and so also

Sefa Dei's anticolonialism, are founded on respect: "acknowledging multiple knowledges is about the humility of knowing, eschewing arrogance" (2012, 836). The work of decolonization is "not to undo Western ways of knowing, but rather to undo the hold they have on what is considered legitimate knowledge" (2012, 825).

Sefa Dei's notion of epistemological humility encapsulates the third sense in which indigenous knowledges are fundamentally relational. As the root of the word *trialectic* suggests, Sefa Dei's anticolonial framework transcends dialectical logic and the dynamic of sublation that haunts it. By insisting on knowledge as embedded in local histories, experiences, and spiritualities, as multifaceted and multicentric, anticolonial approaches theorize epistemes existing in dynamic networked relationships that can never collapse into a single universal. Sefa Dei's notion of multicentric knowledge and trialectic space resembles Walter Mignolo's conception of the pluriversal (2002). As Zembylas explains, pluriversality would acknowledge diverse pathways for realizing the practicalities of knowledge production (2018).

Concluding Remarks

In this article we have demonstrated the potential of indigenous knowledges, and particularly their fundamental relationality, as tools for exposing and undermining what we have identified as the ongoing colonial historical and logical processes perpetuating Western epistemic domination. Thus, the purpose of identifying "a particular species of contact with a dominant Western society" is to draw attention to a historical reality that has resulted from human action (Breidlid and Botha 2015, 322). The implication is that if this reality is the product of human action, then transforming it is also a historical task for humans. That is to say, indigenous knowledges have been constructed as the subjugated Other to hegemonic Western knowledges by historical human action, and therefore the possibility of creating alternative realities in this regard exists. It is for this reason that Sefa Dei and Alirezza Asgharzadeh view indigenous knowledges as offering "a social and political corrective" (2001, 298). Our argument here is that the transformative potential within the dialectic relations between indigenous and Western knowledges can be harnessed for the purpose of decolonization until the relationship between them is no longer dialectical between hegemony and subjugated, but relational. In this way, we have sought to address the persistent historical logic of Western rationalization, which tends to subsume attempts at countering the dominant knowledge tradition.

Our conceptual argument has focused on one element of the anticolonial project, "processes of knowledge production, interrogation, validation, and dissemination," but ultimately this cannot be separated from the other two, "the understanding of Indigeneity as both a process and identity; and

... the pursuit of agency, resistance, and subjective politics" (Sefa Dei 2016, 1). A percipient interpretation of the relational dimensions of indigenous knowledges affords the opportunity not only to dismantle the subtler workings of colonial relations, but also to reposition them so they illuminate the counterhegemonic spaces we wish to create.

NOTES

1. By epistemic decolonization, we mean far more than simply Africanizing curriculum content. Instead, we refer to undoing that strand of the "colonial power matrix" that seeks to control knowledge and subjectivity by establishing colonial regimes of knowledge as the only legitimate knowledge and rearticulating non-Western subjectivity as "inferior and constituted by a series of 'deficits' and a catalogue of 'lacks'" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2012).
2. And is now sustained by the neocolonial dynamics inherent in globalization, the heir of colonization; it is only at the borders of colonial space that "the economic conditions created by globalization [have] contributed to the rise of 'barbarian theorizing'" (Mignolo 2012, 308).
3. Certainly, in the Western tradition, Hegel's idealism has not gone uncontested. Marx inverted Hegel's teleological approach to history, grounding it in material reality. Subsequent generations of Frankfurt School and Critical Theory theorists have grappled with and revised Marxist claims, developing notions such as *praxis* and emancipation from them, with reference to contemporary society (Blake and Masschelein 2002).

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