

*From Epistemic Trans-
lations to Decolonial
Encounters: Towards an
Ethics of Reciprocity in
Academia*

Amanda González Izquierdo

In Jorge Luis Borges' short story "The Ethnographer," protagonist Fred Murdock is a graduate student at a North American university. He is interested in Amerindian languages and a professor suggests that Fred go spend time in a tribe and live among the Amerindians and discover their secrets. After having done so, Fred was to go back to the American university and write his dissertation and scholars would make sure that it was published. Fred goes to live among "red men" and after two years the secrets are revealed to him. When he returns to the university, however, he refuses to divulge the secrets (Borges 1999, 334-35).

Borges' story points us towards the extent to which academic research on marginalized communities often functions on the basis of extractive knowledge¹. That is, knowledge, researchers and the bodies of research are positioned within a hierarchy of power. The researcher, an agent, is expected to seek out information from the "research subjects" and bring the information he collects back to the academy². He then synthesizes it through writing about it and makes meaning of it through that act of writing, an act which also serves the purpose of making the subaltern knowledge coherent and consumable for a privileged audience. In this model, the knowledge extracted from subaltern people is only produced as meaningful as a consequence of that extraction, marking these communities as objects (as opposed to subjects) of research. Research thus conducted is inherently colonial and, by extension, epistemically unjust because the denial of subjectivity is simultaneously a denial of these communities' role as knowers and as knowledge-producers.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos theorizes that "Modern Western thinking is an abyssal thinking" that draws a metaphorical though geographical line between the side that can produce knowledge and the side that cannot exist in any comprehensible way. The line separates North and South epistemologies: the former produces Truths and the latter is not epistemically relevant, providing only raw data for digging and processing by the

North. De Sousa Santos further notes that “what most fundamentally characterizes abyssal thinking is...the impossibility of the copresence of the two sides of the line” (2007, 45). In other words, in the logic of abyssal thinking, the South exists as the site of raw materials and as infertile ground for knowledge production. It is the North that can create and produce, and modern Western thinking is predicated on the denial of subjectivity of and the epistemic injustice towards non-Western thinkers. Consequently, in order for knowledge to exist from the South, it must be appropriated by and (re)produced through epistemic systems of the North³.

Whenever academic research functions in the logic of abyssal thinking, there is a continuation of epistemological coloniality, since relations of domination surface and are upheld⁴. Through the extraction of knowledge and the subsequent interpretation, Western scholars appropriate non-Western epistemologies and control how they are (re)presented. This presentation is for a Western audience, and the non-Western subjects who supplied the knowledge are neither present nor acknowledged in its architecture. Therefore, if there is any instance of misinformation, misinterpretation, or mistranslation, there are no representatives from the communities of research that can rebut or clarify. Moreover, scholars are rewarded for their work: they are paid, published, invited to speak in conferences, and/or benefit in some other way from their extraction. The communities from which the knowledge was extracted receive no such compen-

sation. Lastly, because of the absence (the exclusion justified by fictions of epistemic nonexistence) of subaltern knowers in Western academic spheres, Western researchers can claim the knowledge they extracted as their own intellectual production and ownership, further radicalizing the abyss that divides and distinguishes spaces of elaboration of knowledge. We see, therefore, that there are colonial structures at play in research focusing on subaltern people.

This kind of research, however, is not just an extraction. In Borges' story, for example, we can say that an extraction occurred: Fred acquired the secrets of the Amerindian peoples among whom he was living. However, since he refused to share the secrets, we can argue that he did not fully conform to the coloniality of research. It follows, then, that coloniality in this sense requires two processes: an extraction and a translation. It is the extraction coupled with the act of moving the knowledge from a minoritized place to a metropole (or, moving the knowledge across the abyss from one side of the line to the other) that marks the violence of coloniality by revealing the exercise as a one-way process: The knowledge is brought unidirectionally into Western languages and spaces for Western consumption and there is no kind of reciprocity.

With some context already laid out, it is useful to expand the notion of extractive knowledge. Minority epistemologies are not only extracted through the kind of research

Borges illustrates. Though the power imbalance of extractive knowledge is perhaps most clear with real-life Fred Murdocks, it is nonetheless present in non-research contexts. The focus of this paper is extractive knowledge, which means that though I will examine research, it is not the sole focal point; in fact, I shall also be discussing more traditional ideas of translation, such as linguistic translation. This paper, then, is an exploration of the movement (translation) of knowledge, of the linguistic translation of non-Western works into Western languages, and of linguistic translation itself as a form of movement of knowledge. All these examples fall into what I will be calling epistemic translations⁵.

Throughout this paper, I have been arguing and will continue to argue that extractive knowledge and/as epistemic translations are logics of coloniality and inherently epistemically violent. From this basis, I consider how epistemic translations can be decolonized so that we can arrive at postcolonial cognitive justice in the field of academic research. If epistemic translations are violent and uphold the structural inequalities that are the legacies of colonialism, what are the ways in which we can establish reciprocity so that non-Western peoples are not the objects from which to extract knowledge, but subjects with agency in a two-way, just process of sharing and creating knowledge? In other words, how can we have, in place of epistemic translations, decolonial epistemic encounters⁶?

It is important to note that the scholars who focus on issues of subalternity do not do so with the goal of aiding the survival of the injustices of coloniality. On the contrary, these academics often research the conditions and experiences of non-Western communities because they want to understand these people's lives and the effects that coloniality has had (and continues to have) on their existence. Indeed, "many researchers, academics and project workers may see the benefits of their particular research projects as serving a greater good 'for mankind,' or serving a specific emancipatory goal for an oppressed community (Smith 1999, 2). Perhaps for this very reason, they are not cognizant of the ways in which their work may simultaneously be sustained by and vindicate epistemic coloniality (which is, as hopefully clear by now, ethically unjust). This can explain why researchers may trust their disciplines and fields and not be incentivized to question their very methods.

However, even when they may have the best intentions, academics are often thinking *about* rather than thinking *with* subaltern people. In their studies, many scholars "silence the subaltern by (re)presenting them in discourse in which they have no speaking role" (Maggio 2007, 422). By engaging in practices of extractive knowledge, scholars reduce subaltern peoples to objects from whom to obtain knowledge, instead of engaging with them as subjects with whom to create knowledge. Moreover, by presenting their research in ways that exclude the bodies

of their research—often through not just geographical but also linguistic barriers—scholars prevent the subaltern from speaking and from claiming agency. It is not only that scholars tend to think *about*, but that they tend to speak *for* subjugated communities. Their epistemic translation, then, “se parece más a un trabajo de ventrílocuo que a un trabajo de traducción” (“is more akin to a work of ventriloquism than a work of translation”) (Inclán Solís 2016, 70; my translation). In this way, even efforts to shed light on non-Western epistemologies contribute to the colonial fiction that the world is mono-epistemic: that, as Walter D. Mignolo writes, “if my truth and objectivity is not that of others, then those others should be converted to my own objectivity” (2011, 61).

Though the work on subalternity by scholars is not always an attempt to convert others’ epistemologies, it is nevertheless a transcreation. This is because:

Whatever we seek and might find locally will have to be explained in English and in terms of the established academic tradition, otherwise it simply does not ‘make sense’ to outsiders. The local voice, if heard at all, will only be taken seriously if judged and legitimised in terms of the accepted standards already established. The homogenising power of academic globalisation renders ‘local’ ethics as an interesting variation on the normative tradition with which it is always compared. (Naude 2017, 2)

Epistemic translations are not only the process of taking knowledge from one place to another (from the side south of de Sousa Santos' abyss to the side north of it). This would in fact be just a transposition. Epistemic translations are the results of a transposition and a transcreation⁷. As I envision these processes, transposition is the carrying over of non-Western epistemologies into Western contexts and transcreation is the re-production of these non-Western epistemologies with/through Western epistemological frameworks. The effect is a homogenization of knowledges so that they all fit within a grander scheme of Epistemology⁸. This does not mean that all traces of alterity are erased; however, it does mean that they are at least greatly reduced.

In "The Formation of Cultural Identities," Lawrence Venuti writes: "translation is often regarded with suspicion because it inevitably *domesticates* foreign texts, inscribing them with linguistic and cultural values that are intelligible to specific domestic constituencies" (1998, 67; my emphasis). Epistemic translations do not just reword foreign knowledges to make them accessible to Western audiences. The domestication is not just a making intelligible; it entails a taming and a controlling. Epistemic translations bring non-Western knowledges into Western homes, thereby homogenizing them into Epistemological projects. These knowledges are still "other" epistemes, but they are adopted into the established academic tradition (a la Naude), which in turn grants them

objectivity (a la Mignolo) through/thanks to legitimization by the established academic tradition. In so doing, colonial power is at play because there is a marking of non-Western knowledges as needing to be legitimized and welcomed into the field of epistemology by Western value systems. There is, therefore, an upholding of inequalities and so “the scene of translation is one of violence and domination” (Conisbee Baer 2014, 236). This violence and domination are precisely the attempt to cement the idea that there can be no copresence of the two sides of the abyss as de Sousa Santos theorizes.

It is important to emphasize that in contexts of research, upholding inequalities is not always the goal. As I previously noted, many academics see emancipatory possibilities in their work. That said, coloniality is structural, which means that it is at play even when the objective is not to engage in its politics. It is imperative to recognize this because it is this very acknowledgement that reveals that doing work on or about subalternity and/or translating subaltern texts are not themselves decolonial praxes, even if/when they are intended to be. There can be no decoloniality—which is to say, there can be no epistemic justice—without a restructuralization because any work that does not attempt to subvert underlying coloniality will remain unidirectional and ultimately unethical and unjust. Through academic work focused on subjugated peoples, “colonized bodies become present (materialize) as they attempt to produce meaning, but the subaltern

fail to properly signify because the codes of signification are already established within imperial grammar itself” (Carcelén-Estrada 2016, 59). Academic work reveals to us that colonized bodies produce their own epistemologies, but it maintains those epistemologies to be inferior when it resorts to imperial epistemological frameworks to legitimize them, instead of recognizing them as “legitimate a priori” (Sepie 2014, 279).

How do we engage with subaltern epistemologies without inadvertently upholding coloniality? What’s more, how do we engage with them in specifically decolonial ways? The answer is not to stop translating works or to halt research on the subaltern condition altogether. Instead, the solution is to go about these exercises differently, in a way that fosters exchange as opposed to domination. Doing so will ensure that subaltern peoples are not just given visibility, but also dignity and the status of knowers on hierarchically equal grounds to Western knowers. This requires a thinking and acting otherwise that is not epistemically unjust. Decolonial work on subalternity is not just a carrying over; rather, it is a carrying over while bringing/giving something back: it is reciprocal and bidirectional.

Let us begin with an exploration of ways in which to decolonize linguistic translations⁹. I venture to argue that perhaps it is the transcreation part of the process of epistemic translations that can be deemed most clear-

ly about dominance. Thus, the way to counter it would be to stop re-presenting minority epistemologies with Western epistemological frameworks. The question becomes: if we are using Western languages, how can we keep from using Western epistemologies to account for non-Western knowledges? The answer might lie in not being too faithful to Western grammars. Indeed, “imperial translation seeks to transpose triumphantly (paraphrase, rewrite, reorder) the colonized subjects into the grammar of empire” (Carcelén-Estrada 2016, 59). Therefore, it seems that a way to break with coloniality is precisely to subvert Western grammar so that instead of a transcreation we have a transexpression, if you will. By “transexpression” I still mean a movement from one place to another (in this instance, also from one language to another) but without creating the text anew to fit within larger Epistemological projects. In other words, instead of a re-presentation (presenting again, but with Western knowledge systems), transexpression connotes (at least in the way I intend it) a presentation in Western languages but still with and as a non-Western epistemology in a way that highlights the legitimacy of that alterity.

In her chapter in *Decolonial Approaches to Latin American Literatures and Cultures*, Zairong Xiang notes that whenever the Nahua deity Ometeotl is translated into English or Spanish, the identity of this divine being is met with some “gender trouble” (2016, 43). Ometeotl is a god(dess) of duality who possesses both masculine and

feminine qualities. However, when translated into English or Spanish, Ometeotl becomes a masculine god or dios and only male pronouns are used. Western epistemologies of gender are thus transfused into genderless Nahuatl and in this way, the divine being is transcreated rather than transexpressed. When Western epistemologies claim to be able to translate without the necessity to disobey and transgress Western syntax and grammar, it creates the illusion that Western epistemologies are universally applicable (which brings us back to the issue of the illusion of the world being mono-epistemic).

To counter this colonial fiction, the grammar and syntax need to be thought of as malleable so that they can be used playfully and so that they can be distorted. Translating non-Western epistemologies responsibly requires transforming Western languages. Perhaps a way to engage decolonially with the translation of Ometeotl in English would be to use gender neutral pronouns like “they” and to refer to Ometeotl not as god but as god(dess) to invoke their duality. Something similar can be practiced in Spanish: the uses of “el” and “dios” can be substituted with “el(la)” and “dios(a).¹⁰” These are simple ways to transgress the gender binaries of Western grammars in order to be more faithful to the non-Western epistemology in translation. In fact, this very exercise points us to the alterity of non-Western knowledges and shows us that translation does not have to signify domestication. Having to shift Western languages to

translate non-Western knowledges shows us that the latter are not peripheral to the former but that they contest and defy the parameters set by coloniality. Once we have established and accepted this, translation is no longer unidirectional. Rather, a decolonial encounter occurs.

Instead of a one-way movement from non-Western epistemologies to Western systems, a subaltern “understanding is rendered in and even in violation of [Western] syntax, becoming transformed in the process but not entirely losing its difference from Western understanding” (Mignolo and Schiwy 2007, 16). In a translation that is not afraid to disrupt the language that knowledges are being translated into, there is no longer a movement from “object language A to subject language B” (Mignolo and Schiwy 2007, 25). Rather, there is an encounter of subject language A and subject language B in a borderzone of mutual transformations and where new avenues of thought open. In these borderzones, “translation is the procedure that allows for mutual intelligibility among the experiences of the world...without jeopardizing their identity and autonomy, without, in other words, reducing them to homogeneous entities” (de Sousa Santos 2006, 132). These borderzones are the decolonial cracks to hegemonic Epistemic projects.

Decolonial ways to engage in epistemic translations are “responsible movement[s] towards not only accepting but understanding the radical alterity presented by Na-

tive ontologies” (Sepie 2014, 290). “Violating” language is not the only way to achieve epistemic justice. Another way to accept and understand alterity would be to translate “both the textual and the conceptual” (Augusto 2014, 634). In many indigenous communities, one of the main ways in which knowledge is produced is through oral literatures. The tendency with translation, however, is to translate written works. Since Western knowledge is produced through and in writing, the belief that all knowledge is likewise produced is itself a way to operate within the mono-epistemic structure of coloniality.

Accepting that epistemological frameworks emerge from different sources in non-Western thinking is a decolonial praxis. Translators could provide accounts not just of the stories being told but of the people who tell them, as well as how and in what contexts. This would be not only a method to transexpress the knowledge created by subaltern communities, but also a way to recognize the Other as a producer of knowledge that creates new ways of thinking collectively and through kinship. It would also be a way to recognize, accept, and understand that knowledge is not only produced in the academy, but that it is produced in communities by all kinds of people, not just those who signify “learned” according to Western ideals (Arias 2016, 81).

Thus, translating the textual and the conceptual sets the stage for a bidirectional movement whereby the West—

metonymic of power in structures of coloniality—gains non-Western knowledge and unlearns the narrow views of what constitutes knowledge. In the other direction, the non-West stops being considered a peripheral, lesser source of knowledge and there is a more equal epistemic ground being occupied by all knowers. I want to be careful here and not insinuate that the West bestows upon the non-West the status of knower. Nor am I proposing the benevolence of the West; rather I am calling the West into action to recognize and accept that non-Western epistemologies are valid, and that mono-epistemology is a fiction of coloniality. The decolonial encounter (borderzone) is a place of contestation that undermines colonial ways of construing knowledge and advances epistemic pluriversality (which is to necessarily say epistemic justice). That is, destabilizing the coloniality of knowledge implicitly means subverting the idea of a single totality of epistemology wherein Western thinking is universal. The decolonial borderzone highlights multiple, distinct, and local knowledges, histories, and ways of thinking and creating. In so doing, it problematizes universality and makes way for pluriversality, instead, whereby ways of thinking and doing otherwise coexist while unsettling Western ethnocentrism¹¹.

Destabilizing colonial ways of construing knowledge also means challenging the ways in which it is obtained. In fact, “the acknowledgement of the other as producer of knowledge has to be turned against us to question

our positionality as investigator or researcher” (Arias 2016, 92). The very recognition that the other is a producer of knowledge which is valid a priori and does not need Western scholars to legitimize it sets the stage for a bidirectional decolonial encounter. When Mariana Mora went to the Zapatista caracoles to do ethnographic work on life in Chiapas, she helped to foster the conditions for and involved herself in a dialogic relationship that redefined her research and her role as investigator. She recognized that the Zapatistas were knowing subjects and not objects to be explored and exploited for the sake of academic research. She executed her project not as another attempt at extractive knowledge, but as an engagement that had as its purpose sharing and creating knowledge. Mora accepted that the Zapatistas had a speaking role in this encounter and the methods of the research were decided collectively, in conversations between her and various Zapatista leaders and community members. The kinship that was formed and that created the conditions for knowledge production decentered the Western ethnocentrism upheld by the coloniality of research.

Mora first sent her proposal to a junta (one of multiple regional gubernatorial councils in charge of approving, rejecting, or modifying research projects on Zapatistas) and later it was examined at the caracol assembly by representatives of every municipality. Then, it was taken up again by the municipal assembly, which brought together representatives of all communities (Mora 2017, 218).

These gubernatorial bodies proposed modifications to her research plan, and thus the “process [was] partially defined by those on whose participation it depended” (Mora 40). The individual members of the village where she conducted interviews also took part in aspects of the decision making (Mora 2017, 218). The project was a collective endeavor between speaking subjects on hierarchically equal grounds. The conversations that emerged were only made possible because the research “was put to the service of the people and provided benefits to the communities” (Mora 2017, 41). Mora did not extract knowledge but partook in the deliberations that created the conditions for sharing epistemologies.

The Zapatistas’ role in the encounter did not end with deciding how the research would be conducted; they also monitored the result of the research process. Juan Miguel de Santiago determined: “when you [Mora] have visited two or three communities, you will turn in a report with copies of the interviews so we can analyze them. The final text will be presented to the junta...and to all of the assembly representatives” (qtd. in Mora 2017, 40). I noted previously that when Western scholars extract knowledge and then present it to a Western audience, the non-Western subjects who supplied the knowledge do not usually have the opportunity to speak and write back to how the academy interprets their epistemologies. The Zapatistas, however, carved out the space for themselves to correct the instances in which Mora’s ren-

dition of them did not adequately elucidate their lived experience. For example, Mauricio told Mora that when she wrote about the Mexican military incursions of 1994 and 1998, she should not write that people were fearful, but that they were enraged, because “fear paralyzes” but rage inspires action and defense (Mora 2017, 63-64). In so doing, Mauricio actively took part in the writing and the synthesis of Zapatista history. In demanding the change, he reclaimed and expanded his role into far beyond just being a participant of research: He enunciated himself as knower, thus assuming a speaking role.

The Zapatistas’ political and ethical project is to reclaim the dignity that the coloniality of power took away (Mignolo 2002, 245). Part of claiming dignity is dependent on situating the self as agent with epistemic potential. The Zapatistas did not just engage with Mora’s research as its subjects, but also as active members in a process that subverted Western coloniality. Though the Zapatistas allowed the translation (movement) of their knowledge, they reconfigured what it meant to obtain it. Thus, there was a challenge to the notion of extractive knowledge, and this simultaneously was and made way for a decolonial methodology of co-laboring that opened avenues of/for collective thought. No longer did the researcher occupy a position of power over the bodies of research; rather, everyone had agency, which meant that instead of a knowledge extraction, there was an encounter of and for knowledge production.

Since this was an encounter, it would be a mistake to pretend that only the Zapatistas were responsible for the decolonial praxis the research took. Mora did not just conduct her research as a scholar, but as a scholar activist. She writes: “because of my political commitments, I wanted this to be a collaborative endeavor and therefore understood that the proposed modification to the project formed a necessary part of the interactions” (Mora 2017, 40). Mora’s acceptance of the Zapatistas’ terms necessarily meant that she viewed them as agents. If she had been unwilling to see the Zapatistas as knowers, her entire project would have been epistemically unjust because it would have fallen into the logic of extractive knowledge. The decolonial encounter only occurred because of a bidirectional ethics that recognized that all parties had epistemic potential that could and would engage in a process of thinking, acting, and speaking with. Thinking back to Borges’s story, I originally argued that Fred did not fully conform to the coloniality of research because he refused to divulge the secrets. With the considerations thus far discussed, I now propose a slightly different reading: it is not that Fred did not conform to the coloniality of research so much as he did not complete the process of the coloniality of research. The original argument of non-conformism is in fact better applied to Mora. Because she never engaged in extractive politics, she rejected coloniality altogether. Mora acquired knowledge ethically, ensuring epistemic dialogue and justice, and then transexpressed it: her project was decolonial in both theory and practice.

We have seen how a significant reason for Mora's research being successfully decolonial was that she and the Zapatistas reconfigured the frameworks for obtaining knowledge. Furthermore, they also redefined the translation (movement) aspect of the process. The bidirectionality and reciprocity of Mora's research were not only evident in the methodologies that were collaboratively deliberated and agreed upon. *Kuxlejal Politics: Indigenous Autonomy, Race, and Decolonizing Research in Zapatista Communities* (2017), the book Mora authored with the knowledges created and shared with her, is currently only available in English. However, it is scheduled to be published in Spanish sometime in 2019. This means that the knowledge produced through that research did not just leave Chiapas to be translated (linguistically and geographically) into academic contexts divorced from the Zapatistas' lived experience. Rather, the Zapatistas' testimonies and epistemologies (and their testimonies as epistemologies) will find their way back to Chiapas¹². What we have, then, is not an extraction of knowledge that travels in one direction towards a privileged audience, but an encounter of knowledge that travels multidirectionally, including back towards the place where the encounter occurred. Mora's book is not just the synthesized history of Zapatista municipalities and their insurgent movements and practices. It is also an account of their political actions in the very research that produced those syntheses, as well as a set of reflections that encourage interactions across communities and foster social transformations.

The forthcoming publication of the book in a language that makes it accessible for the Zapatistas is not the only instance of bidirectionality and reciprocity. In October of 2018, Mora was invited to speak at Rutgers University as part of the Rutgers Advanced Institute of Critical Caribbean Studies' speaker series "What is Decoloniality¹³?" During her talk, she revealed that she would soon be going back to the caracoles to teach a workshop focusing on the themes of social transformation that inspired, shaped, and were written about in *Kuxlejal Politics*. This workshop is an example of not just the methodologies of decolonizing research that took place in Chiapas, but of decolonial social justice (decolonizing research being itself a kind of decolonial social justice). Mora's workshop is a manifestation of how epistemology does not belong to academics divorced from the lived experiences of the bodies on whom the research focuses. It makes the statement that knowledge belongs to everyone and can be produced by everyone. In so doing, it highlights the dignity of the Zapatista communities and helps to cultivate the environment of continued social change and political training of younger generations. In the course of the research, the interviews conducted were intergenerational "so as to prioritize the circulation and production of social memories as part of [the Zapatistas'] continual political formation" (Mora 2017, 69). The workshop, then, by being aimed at younger people in the community, follows this same ethos. These

all demonstrate that the research and its various translations are not only respectful of Zapatista politics and benefit Zapatista communities, but support and seek to advance Zapatista autonomy.

Throughout this paper, I have been arguing against colonial ways of obtaining and disseminating knowledge and for decolonial encounters that are epistemically just. I have sought to show that research and linguistic translations that address subalternity exist within a structure of coloniality and thus, unless they are thought and performed otherwise, they inevitably uphold the violence and domination of hegemonic epistemological systems emanating from metropolitan centers of power. In so doing, I hope to have made clear that there is a need for movements that are actively and explicitly subversive of the colonial order and that orient themselves towards an otherwise. It is only through decolonial encounters that understand, accept, and uphold the dignity of subaltern knowers that a truly pluriversal and ethically viable epistemological framework can be produced.

Even then, an issue remains. The next line of inquiry should be a substantial review of work by subaltern communities that has addressed and critiqued epistemic coloniality. My essay has focused on the relation between Western academics and non-Western knowers and has argued for reciprocity in such contact zones of knowing and knowledge-production. However, rec-

iprocity does not only come in the form of conducting epistemically just research. Rather, it also manifests in the acknowledgement that those south of the abyss have already produced knowledge, independent of and before researchers arrived from the North. The work of non-Western people should not only be addressed when it comes to be in relation to the West. Rather, it should be acknowledged, studied, and valued on its own, with the recognition that it exists and that it is comprehensible both within and without relations with the West.

NOTES:

1. I say “much academic research” because not all academic research is inherently colonial. The very aim of this essay is to think through decolonial approaches to knowledge production. In fact, I conclude this paper by highlighting a particular example of research that was epistemically just.

2. I use “he” purposefully, since the status of “knower” has historically been reserved for male (white) bodies.

3. Let us briefly turn back to “The Ethnographer” to elucidate this point further. Fred’s academic advisor told him to learn the Amerindians’ “secrets,” not to learn from them, or to learn their knowledges. This reflects the modern colonial notion that the South is territory for source material to be extracted, not for locally produced knowledge to be learned. Moreover, Fred was

to write about the secrets in his dissertation; in other words, his mission was to extract in order to produce in a Western context, which is to say to appropriate. We see, then, the logic of abyssal thinking and its inherent cognitive injustice displayed in Borges's story.

4. In the words of decolonial scholar Nelson Maldonado Torres, "colonialism and decolonization are for the most part taken as ontic concepts that...refer to specific empirical episodes of socio-historical and geopolitical conditions...When approached in this way, colonialism and decolonization are usually depicted as past realities" (2016, 10). Coloniality is distinct from colonialism because it highlights the ways in which the logics of colonialism and its hegemonic discourses continue to exist even after declarations of independence. In this paper, I am preoccupied precisely with coloniality: with the totalizing ideas constructed by the West that result in the abyss and in the fiction that Western knowledge is universal.

5. For clarity, and to summarize the concepts that have led me to the term "epistemic translation," I want to define more succinctly what the very term means. I use epistemic translation to signify the movement of knowledge across linguistic and geographic borders. By employing the term, I also mean to connote a power imbalance between those engaged in the act of moving knowledge and those whose knowledge is being moved. Thus, epistemic translation is a subset of the coloniality of research and functions within the model of abyssal

thinking proposed by de Sousa Santos.

6. These encounters must be decolonial precisely because they must acknowledge, respond to, and destabilize coloniality. Indeed, “decoloniality refers to efforts at rehumanizing the world, to breaking hierarchies of difference that dehumanize subjects and communities and that destroy nature, and to the production of counter-discourses, counter-knowledges, counter-creative acts, and counter-practices that seek to dismantle coloniality and to open up multiple other forms of being in the world” (Maldonado Torres 2016, 10). The ethics of reciprocity I explore in this paper concerns the creation of counter-practices. This ethics is the result of the recognition of the agency and epistemic power and potential of the “other.” In so doing, ethical praxes necessarily dare to imagine an otherwise to coloniality that unsettles the fictional universality of Western systems of epistemology. They are therefore decolonial in nature.

7. I borrow both of these terms from Arturo Arias’ contribution to *Decolonial Approaches to Latin American Literatures and Cultures* (2016, 82).

8. I capitalize Epistemology in this instance to signify a homogenized, hegemonic, colonial episteme.

9. I want to preface this by noting that I am not being prescriptive on how to do decolonial work. I aim to present what I consider decolonial practices that counter

the coloniality of research and knowledge, but I do not claim them to be the only nor the best ways to engage in decoloniality.

10. Feminist language reformers have proposed the substitution of “o” and “a” word endings that often signify male or female with the gender neutral “e.” In the case at hand, Ometeotl could be referred to as “elle” and “di-ose.”

11. My understanding of pluriversality and doing/thinking otherwise is informed by Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh’s discussions of these concepts throughout *On Decoloniality* (2018).

12. There is, however, the problem that the book is only being translated to Spanish even though the Zapatista municipalities have six other constitutional languages. We could make the case that coloniality is still present since the only language of translation is itself a hegemonic (colonial) tongue. Therefore, we should be recognizing that measures are being taken to ensure access while still crafting a critique and taking issue with the lack of attention to the diversity of indigenous languages of the region.

13. In her talk, Mora was in dialogue with Antonio Carmona Baez and they discussed coloniality and decoloniality in Mexico and in the Dutch Caribbean, respectively. Both scholars then participated in a book pre-

sensation for *Kuxlejal Politics: Indigenous Autonomy, Race, and Decolonizing Research in Zapatista Communities* (2017) and *Smash the Pillars: Decoloniality and the Imaginary of Color in the Dutch Kingdom* (2018). This presentation was held at Lazos America Unida, a community center in Downtown New Brunswick, NJ, and the conversations that emerged were between scholars, activists, community members, and students. Thus, the very nature of the presentation (which was organized by Nelson Maldonado Torres) was in content and structure a decolonial encounter.

Works Cited

- Arias, Arturo. 2016. "New Indigenous Literatures in the Making: A Contribution to Decoloniality." In *Decolonial Approaches*, edited by Juan G. Ramos and Tara Daly, 77-95. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Augusto, Geri. 2014. "Language Should Not Keep Us Apart! Reflections Towards a Black Transnational Praxis of Translation." *Callaloo* 37, no. 3: 632-647. doi:10.1353/cal.2014.0081.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. 1999. "The Ethnographer." In *Collected Fictions*. Translated by Andrew Hurley, 334-35. London: Penguin.
- Carcelén-Estrada, Antonia. 2016. "What Does the Sumak Kawsay Mean for Women in the Andes Today? Unsettling Patriarchal Sedimentations in Two Inca Writers." In *Decolonial Approaches*, edited by Juan G. Ramos and Tara Daly, 57-75. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Carmona Baez, Antonio and Mora, Mariana. 2018. "Decolonizing Knowledge and Research in 'Latin' America and the Caribbean." Lecture presented for *What is Decoloniality? A Speaker Series*. Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey.

- Conisbee Baer, Ben. 2014. "What Is Special about Postcolonial Translation?" In *A Companion to Translation Studies*, edited by Sandra Bermann and Catherine Porter, 233-45. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- De Sousa Santos, Boaventura, 2006. *The Rise of the Global Left: The World Social Forum and Beyond*. London: Zed Books.
- De Sousa Santos, Boaventura. 2007. "Beyond Abyssal Thinking: From Global Lines to Ecologies of Knowledges." *Review - Fernand Braudel Center* 30, no. 1: 45-89. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40241677>.
- Inclán Solís, Daniel. 2016. "Against the Ventriloquism: Notes on the Uses and Misuses of the Translation of the Subaltern Knowledge in Latin America." *Cultura-Hombre-Sociedad* 26, no. 1: 61–80. doi:10.7770/cuhso-V26N1-art1019.
- Maggio, J. 2007. "Can the Subaltern Be Heard?: Political Theory, Translation, Representation, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak." *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 32, no. 4: 419-43. doi:10.1177/030437540703200403.
- Maldonado Torres, Nelson. 2016. "Outline of Ten Theses on Coloniality and Decoloniality." *Frantz Fanon Foundation*: 1-37. http://fondation-frantzfanon.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/maldonado-torres_outline_of_ten_theses-10.23.16.pdf

- Mignolo, Walter, and Schiwy, Freya. 2007. "Transculturación y La Diferencia Colonial." *IC Revista Científica de Información y Comunicación*, no. 4: 6–28. <http://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/oaiart?codigo=3639036>.
- Mignolo, Walter, and Walsh, Catherine. 2018. *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, and Praxis*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Mignolo, Walter. 2002. "The Zapatistas's Theoretical Revolution: Its Historical, Ethical, and Political Consequences." *Review - Fernand Braudel Center* 25, no. 3: 245–75. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/60455799/>.
- Mignolo, Walter. 2011. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Mora, Mariana. 2017. *Kuxlejal Politics: Indigenous Autonomy, Race, and Decolonizing Research in Zapatista Communities*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Naude, Piet. 2017. "Decolonising Knowledge: Can Ubuntu Ethics Save Us from Coloniality?" *Journal of Business Ethics*: 1–15. doi:10.1007/s10551-017-3763-4.
- Ramos, Juan G., and Daly, Tara, ed. 2016. *Decolonial Approaches to Latin American Literatures and Cultures*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Sepie, Amba J. 2014. "Conversing with Some Chickadees: Cautious Acts of Ontological Translation." *Literature and Medicine* 32, no. 2: 277–98. doi:10.1353/lm.2014.0027.
- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. 1999. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed Books.
- Venuti, Lawrence. 1998. *The Scandals of Translation Towards an Ethics of Difference*. London: Routledge.
- Xiang, Zairong. 2016. "The (De)Coloniality of Conceptual Inequivalence: Reinterpreting Ometeotl through Nahua Tlacuiloliztli." In *Decolonial Approaches*, edited by Juan G Ramos and Tara Daly, 39-55. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.