

# Epistemic Decoloniality: Transcending Colonial Epistemic Violence and Centering Southern Knowledges in Social Work

Linda Harms-Smith, University of Pretoria, South Africa

[Linda.Smith@up.ac.za](mailto:Linda.Smith@up.ac.za)

Unique conference number 152



UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA  
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA  
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

Harms-Smith, L & Afeworki-Abay, R 2024. Epistemic Decoloniality: Transcending Colonial Epistemic Violence and Centering Southern Knowledges in Social Work. In: Kleibl, T. and Afeworki-Abey, R, 2024. *Decolonizing Social Work: From Theory to Transformative Practice*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing  
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/355471794> Epistemic Decoloniality Transcending Colonial Epistemic Violence and Centring Southern Knowledges in Social Work

# CONTENT

---

SOCIAL WORK AND DECOLONIALITY

IMPACT OF COLONIZATION

CHALLENGING WESTERN  
KNOWLEDGE DOMINANCE AND  
EPISTEMIC VIOLENCE

KNOWLEDGES OF THE SOUTH

CHALLENGE, RESISTANCE, AND  
REFUSAL





# INTRODUCTION

# INTRODUCTION

---

SW history must be understood in political/socio-economic developments of the times  
European origins in mid 1800s in response to Victorian class divisions poor people seen as unhygienic and a risk to upper Victorian classes

At that time, colonisation was having a brutal impact on the lives of Black South Africans also declaring traditional culture and knowledges as inferior and 'uncivilized'

Racial capitalism and political ideologies shaped the early development of SW that served the interests of white South Africans

But all societies and philosophical traditions incorporated helping and social welfare into human relationships, rooted in collective responsibility for one another's well-being

And so now we have begun to 'decolonize' SW knowledge – but we have a problem

# WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

---

Coloniality's epistemic violence cannot be overcome by just including 'indigenous' knowledges and knowledge systems

Coloniality is maintained through economic domination; inequalities between and within-states; intergenerational transmission of historic trauma

Psycho-political violence through racist inferiorization and dehumanization persists

Taken-for-granted Western universalized knowledge and ideology maintains these

Material realities of coloniality and racial capitalism (land dispossession, extractivism, inequality, cheap labour, poverty) need complete disruption, from the bottom up

(Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Grosfoguel, 2013; Quijano, 2007; Fanon, 1967)



# IMPACT OF COLONISATION

# DEHUMANIZING IMPACT OF COLONISATION

---

- The idea of Western civilization (and barbarism and savagery of the rest) was created by Europe as it expanded to the rest of the world
- Driven by mercantile capitalism and resource extraction
- Founded on dehumanization and inferiorization to create societies of servitude and cheap labour
- Dehumanizing colonial project achieved especially through European colonists and 'civilizing mission' of missionaries, equating African culture with sin and evil

(Mignolo, 2019; Césaire, 1955; Fanon, 1967)



# WESTERN SENSE OF SUPERIORITY

---

- Important European philosophers held viciously racist ideas e.g.
  - Kant: “Humanity is in its greatest perfection in the race of the whites. Yellow Indians have somewhat less talent. Negroes are far lower, and at the bottom lies a portion of the American peoples”
  - Hegel: argued Africa had no history and was devoid of morality, religions, and political constitution (Asante, 1990)
- European collective notion of superior identity led to the sense of Westerners’ ‘positional superiority’ (Edward Said, 1978), with perceived backwardness of others

# ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL IMPACT

---

- Impact of racist dehumanisation and colonial domination was firstly economic but also internalization of inferiority (epidermalization) (Fanon, 1967)
- Impoverishment through extraction, land acquisition and creation servile classes for labour
- Colonization of the mind through the destruction of history and subjugation of language as bearer of culture (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986)
- Colonization of power, being and knowledge (Quijano, 2007)
- Wisdom and philosophical traditions were subsumed by imposed ideologies and knowledges that supported colonial power relations
- In South Africa, racist capitalism continued through apartheid



*I contend that we are the first race in the world, and that the more of the world we inhabit the better it is for the human race. Just fancy those parts that are at present inhabited by the most despicable specimen of human being, what an alteration there would be in them if they were brought under Anglo-Saxon influence...if there be a God, I think that what he would like me to do is paint as much of the map of Africa British Red as possible.*

Cecil John Rhodes - British businessman, mining magnate and politician in South Africa, Prime Minister of Cape Colony 1890-1896 (SA History-online)

<https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/cecil-john-rhodes>



ONGOING COLONIALITY

# ONGOING COLONIALITY

---

Reversing impact of colonization on peoples' psychic, social and material lives may not be possible, but radical transformation and 'inversion' for the future required

Those affected by colonization continue to experience oppressions of current era through:

- **Capitalism** (extractive industries, land dispossession, inequality)
- **Colonialism** (relationships of coloniality of power, being and knowledge)
- **Patriarchy** (ongoing oppressive power vested in men in economy, social structures, politics, religion)

Western epistemic coloniality maintains the ideologies that perpetuate these

# UNIVERSITIES AND DOMINANT IDEOLOGIES

---

- The European University in colonial contexts established through funding from the slave trade (de Sousa-Santos, 2017)
- Instruments of transmission of colonial knowledges and culture, and contributor to colonial ‘civilizing mission’ of the colonies (Césaire, 1955; Mamdani, 2019).
- Production of universal scholars regardless of the context, was the vanguard of the ‘civilising mission’ (Mamdani, 2019)
- Means of cultural invasion and formation of intellectuals that perpetuate dominance of ideas of the ruling classes and social groups
- Not only of the capitalist economic system, but also Western and Eurocentric cultural and language aspirations
- This is also the case in social work education (see global definition) “Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges”

# CHALLENGING WESTERN DOMINANCE

---

- Change must be a war waged at economic and psychological levels (Fanon, 1967)
- Critical to revisit the interpretation of the world - philosophies, knowledges and knowledge systems (Boaventura de Sousa Santos, 2018)
- Need new epistemology explicitly political and that engages political economy.
- Challenge dominance of Western universalized knowledges (all knowledges are indigenous and appropriate for local contexts)
- Achieving change requires a new epistemology that is explicitly political, and engages political economy



# SOUTHERN KNOWLEDGES



# SOUTHERN KNOWLEDGES

---

- Non-geographical (may even be located in the 'North')
- Relate to knowledges produced and validated in the experiences of groups wherever they occur
- 'Born in struggles against capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy'.
- Epistemologies of the South challenge dominant epistemologies
- Ways of knowing that are not accepted by dominant epistemologies
- In the South African SW education context, this means centering African and anti-colonial knowledges (including African feminisms and womanism); relying on anti-colonial theorists (such as Fanon, Biko, Freire, Tamale, Ndlovu-Gatsheni) but also theorists from Latin-America and other 'Southern' perspectives



IMAGES OF  
TIMBUKTU AND  
INTERPRETATION  
CENTRE AT  
MAPUMBUGWE

# CHALLENGING EPISTEMIC VIOLENCE

---

- Epistemologies of the south have a radical potential in decolonizing Western knowledge in Social Work
- Indigenous epistemologies are ‘important to the imagination of the future of the world as in the 21st century’ (Ndlovu, 2014: 84).
- Decolonial engagements in Social Work are needed to overcome hegemonic eurocentrism
- Radically different from other ways of knowing - everyday, popular, practical, commonsense, intuitive, or religious (de Sousa-Santos, 2018)

# IMAGINATION AND SURREALISM

---

- Surrealism, is a ‘permanent readiness for the marvelous’
- Invisible work of the imagination can be transformative and disrupt existing structures of capitalism and patriarchy
- We need courage to imagine what is the counter-intuitive to power structures
- Local knowledges reflect collectivist, collaborative communitarian perspectives, alternative collective economic systems
- Reject over-simplification of complex of African philosophical traditions such as Ubuntu and Igwebuike

(Mkhize, 2016; Kanu, 2017; Rasool and Harms-Smith, 2022)

# ANTI-COLONIAL INDIGENIST KNOWLEDGES

---

- Only including 'indigenous knowledge' re-enacts colonial matrix of power, seen as 'the other' while Western knowledge is universal (see global definition of SW)
- Local knowledges should be positioned at the centre and 'other' knowledges incorporated as relevant for given contexts (Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018) known as the provincialization of Western knowledges.
- Important to use anti-colonial 'indigenist' education to destabilize power relations and colonial hierarchies'
- Focus on issues of social justice in education to subvert imperialist, colonial, and racist power dynamics (George Dei, 2014)

# UNIVERSITY AND EPISTEMIC DECOLONISATION

---

- Historically, universities were situated in the project of coloniality (Mamdani, 2019; Ratele and Malherbe, 2022).
- Universities are sites of struggle for ideas through knowledge production which either protects and maintains dominant, status quo ideologies or challenges these (Issa Shivji, 2019)
- Public intellectuals who are able to break from the University's colonial role, should subvert the project from within
- Through a series of acts which examine the historical legacy, discard some parts, and adapt others for new purposes (Mamdani, 2019: 48)



CONCLUSION

# CONCLUSION

---

- For progress to be made with decoloniality, cannot only ‘indigenize’ knowledge
- This supports power structures, oppressions and material conditions of ongoing coloniality, capitalism and patriarchy
- Relevant SW knowledge and practice relies on epistemic decoloniality as part of this broader project of decoloniality
- This needs imagination and surrealism; Southern knowledges challenging Western epistemic violence; anti-colonial ‘Indigenist’ ways of knowing; and accepting that there is no real decoloniality without material transformation.
- We need a ‘state of mind’ that guides how we relate to others based on mutuality, generosity, and compassion - together with system change that deals with racial capitalism, dispossession, and inequality



# REFERENCES

- Adésínà, J.O. (2022). Variations in Postcolonial Imagination: Reflection on Senghor, Nyerere and Nkrumah. *Africa Development/Afrique et Développement*, 47(1), 31-58.
- Asante, M. (1990). Kemet Afrocentricity and knowledge <https://idoc.pub/documents/molefi-asante-kemet-afrocentricity-and-knowledge-1d47w1kywdn2>
- Dei, G. S. (2014). Global Education from an 'Indigenist' Anti-colonial Perspective. *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education*, 2014, 9(2):4-23 <https://journals.library.ualberta.ca/jcie/index.php/JCIE/article/view/24090/17896>
- Ferguson, I. (2008). *Reclaiming social work*. London: Sage Publications.
- Higginbottom, A. 2023. The Corporate Make-up of the Mining Industry in South Africa: Profit Survey 2023. *Monthly Review Online*. August 16, 2023. <https://mronline.org/2023/08/16/the-corporate-make-up-of-the-mining-industry-in-south-africa-profit-survey-2023/>
- Grosfoguel, R. (2013). Epistemic racism/sexism, Westernized universities and the four genocides/epistemicides of the long 16th century. *Tabula Rasa*, 19, 31-58.
- Mbembe, A. (2015). *Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive*. Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER), University of the Witwatersrand, 29.
- Mamdani, M. (2019). Decolonising universities. In: Tor Halvorsen, Kristin Skare Orgeret & Roy Krøvel (eds.). *Sharing Knowledge, Transforming Societies. The Norhed Programme 2013–2020*, Cape Town: African Minds, pp 48-67.

# REFERENCES

- Mkhize, N. (2016). Ubuntu-Botho Approach to Ethics: An Invitation to Dialogue. In: Nortje, N., Hoffman, W.A. and De Jongh, J. (eds). African perspectives on ethics for healthcare. Switzerland: Springer.
- Ndlovu, M. (2014). Why indigenous knowledges in the 21st century? A decolonial turn. *Yesterday & Today*, 11, 84-98.
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S.J. (eds.) (2018). *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization*. London: Routledge.
- Quijano, A. (2000). Coloniality of power and Eurocentrism in Latin America. *International Sociology*, 15(2), 215-232.
- Quijano, A. (2007). Coloniality and modernity/Rationality, *Cultural Studies*, 21(2):168 -178, DOI: 10.1080/09502380601164353
- Rasool, S. and Harms-Smith, L. 2022. Retrieving Black African womanist/feminist voices for work towards decoloniality in social work. *Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development*. 34(1): 1-30
- Ratele, K. & Malherbe, K. (2022). Liberatory, Africa(n)-Centred Community Psychology of Psychosocial Change. In: Shose Kessi, Shahnaaz Suffla, Mohamed Seedat (eds), *Decolonial Enactments in Community Psychology*, Switzerland: Springer, pp.13-27.
- Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism: Western conceptions of the Orient*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Shivji, I. (2019). Social responsibility of intellectuals in building counter hegemony. Keynote address at the launch of African Humanities Programme Books, University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, *Panbazuka News*,
- Suffla, S. and Seedat, M. 2021. Africa's Knowledge Archives, Black Consciousness and Reimagining Community Psychology. In: G. Stevens, C. C. Sonn (eds.), *Decoloniality and Epistemic Justice in Contemporary Community Psychology*, *Community Psychology*, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-72220-3\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-72220-3_2)
- wa Thiong'o, N. (eds.) (1986). *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Oxford: James Currey.



TIMBUKTU

## TIMBUKTU

Once a thriving centre of learning and culture, Timbuktu is home to notable architecture and one of the world's greatest collections of ancient manuscripts.

A West African city with a name long synonymous with the unknown edges of the world, Timbuktu flourished from trade in salt, gold and ivory and was part of the Mali Empire of the 14th century. Its Sankore University, together with a thriving book trade and the presence of numerous famous scholars established the city as a renowned scholarly centre in Africa.

## UNIVERSITY OF SANKORE

At one of the most southerly points of the Muslim lands was the University of Sankore, in Timbuktu, and it was the intellectual institution of Mali, Ghana, and Songhay.

It developed out of the Sankore Mosque, founded in 989 by the erudite chief judge of Timbuktu, Al-Qadi Aqib ibn Mahmud ibn Umar. It prospered and by the 12th century, student numbers were at 25,000, an enormous amount in a city of 100,000 people.

<https://www.1001inventions.com/timbuktu/>

Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences,  
humanities and indigenous knowledges,