Online Article

Who Examines the Examiner? Modernity/Coloniality's War on Exteriorities and Today's Epistemic Crisis

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A theatre in the seminar room

Picture a scene that takes place in thousands of universities every week. A doctoral candidate sits before a panel. On the panel is a figure invested with a special aura: the external examiner. She has flown in from another university, perhaps from another continent. Her task is to guarantee that the thesis has been judged not by those who nurtured it but by someone standing outside, someone whose distance makes her verdict trustworthy. The same ritual is repeated in the grant office, where applications are sent to external reviewers; in the journal, where manuscripts go to external peer reviewers; in the hiring and promotion committee, where dossiers are dispatched to external referees. Modern knowledge, it seems, is obsessed with exteriority. It will not certify itself without the blessing of an outsider.

I want to begin with a question that sounds naïve but is, I think, unavoidable: external to what? The external examiner who assesses a thesis in Calgary, Cape Town, Delhi or Bogotá was trained in the same kind of university, schooled in the same canon, disciplined by the same protocols of evidence and citation, published in the same indexed journals and ranked by the same league tables as the candidate she examines. She is external to the department. She is not external to the knowledge system. She is an insider who has been asked, for an afternoon, to act as an outsider. The external examiner is an interior figure performing exteriority.

I am not joking here. I am writing about an epistemic crisis. I am pointing to what I consider the original sin of the hegemonic knowledge system that today presents itself as simply 'knowledge'. It became universal by waging a scorched-earth war on all its exteriorities, on other ways of knowing, being, living and doing. And having destroyed, disciplined and colonised those exteriorities into interiors, it now stages elaborate rituals of external validation to conceal the fact that it has no outside left. The present planetary epistemic crisis, I argue, is rooted in this condition. A knowledge system that abolished its outside can examine itself only in its own mirror. It has become player and referee at once. And we are now living through the consequences.

The epistemic crime scene: A scorched-earth war on exteriorities

The roots of the contemporary epistemic crisis lie in the scorched-earth onslaught on other knowledges that Eurocentric knowledge unleashed as it positioned itself as universal knowledge. I use the term 'scorched earth' deliberately. In military usage it names a strategy that destroys everything that might sustain an enemy, so that nothing remains to which the defeated can return. Applied to knowledge, it captures the ambition of modernity/coloniality to leave behind no alternative ground on which other ways of being human could stand.

We must first remember that Eurocentric knowledge was itself an exterior force. It arrived in other people's worlds as an invader. Before the world was made into a single world centred on Europe, it was a world of many worlds. Inca, Indus, Kemet, Mali and Songhai,

the Kongo kingdom, Mughal India, Ming China, the Mexica and Inca polities, the Islamic civilisation of al-Andalus and countless other societies organised without states were not waiting to be discovered. They were already centres of meaning with their own cosmologies, jurisprudence, medicine, astronomy, pedagogy and historiography. The scholars of Timbuktu (Sankore University), for example, were originating and annotating manuscripts on law, theology and astronomy while Europe's own universities were still young. These worlds, if not destroyed, were formidable exteriorities to Europe and indeed other places from which to see and compare but not to judge and dismiss other civilisations and knowledges, ways of being and doing.

The war on these exteriorities began with the colonial encounters of the long sixteenth century. Carl Schmitt (2003), a jurist whose politics I do not endorse but whose candour is instructive, described the order that emerged after 1492 as the first truly global nomos of the earth, grounded in a European appropriation of the rest of the planet as free space for occupation. The global lines drawn by European powers divided the earth into a zone where European public law restrained conflict among Christian sovereigns, and a zone beyond the line where conquest, enslavement and appropriation proceeded without limit. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007) showed that these cartographic lines became the template of abyssal thinking: a mode of thought that divides reality so that whatever lies on the other side of the line is rendered nonexistent. The abyssal line was never only territorial. It was epistemic. On the other side of it, knowledges ceased to count as knowledge.

Ramón Grosfoguel (2013) reminds us that the long sixteenth century witnessed four genocides that were simultaneously epistemicides: the conquest of al-Andalus and the persecution of its Muslim and Jewish scholars, including the burning of libraries; the invasion and subjection of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas to genocides; the enslavement of Africans; and the burning of European women accused of witchcraft, who carried knowledges of the body, healing and nature. Libraries and codices were burnt, sacred sites desecrated, languages (mother tongues) beaten out of children. What was targeted was not only the body of the Other but the ground on which the Other might stand in order to think differently. Sylvia Wynter (2003) names what was then installed on the scorched ground: one local, European, bourgeois genre of the human, Man, overrepresented as if it were the human as such. Once the human was defined in this way, the war over knowledge became a war over who counts as a knower at all.

It is important to be precise here. The war was never fully won. Exteriorities were decimated, not annihilated. They retreated to the margins of the hegemonic structure of power and pitched tents of resistance there: in songs, proverbs and praise poetry; in healing practices carried on in defiance of colonial prohibition; in languages spoken at home when they were forbidden at school; in the spiritual and political order that animated the resistances and struggles of the enslaved and colonised peoples. A tent is not a fortress. It is mobile, provisional, pitched on ground one does not control. But it shelters life. That survival matters a great deal to my argument.

From knowledges to knowledge: When the player becomes the referee

Having scorched the earth, modernity/coloniality installed itself as a complete package. It did not present itself as one civilisation among others, with its own strengths and blind spots, but as civilisation as such. Its economy became the economy, its state the state, its history universal history with a capital 'H', its languages the languages of science. Other peoples were relocated on a timeline in which Europe stood at the front, so that they became contemporaries of Europe's past. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) captured the consequence: Europe became the silent referent of all historical knowledge, and the histories of other places could only be told as stories of lack, delay and incompletion.

The decisive move was the conversion of the plural knowledges into the singular knowledge (depicted and sold to the world as scientific, truthful, disembodied, neutral and universal). Knowledge had always been plural, relational and situated, produced, validated and transmitted differently by different peoples. The colonial encounter subjected this plurality to one criterion of validity. What could be produced through the methods, institutions and languages of European science and scholarship counted as knowledge; everything else was reclassified as belief, myth, custom, superstition or, at best, local knowledge, a curious phrase that assumes there is some knowledge that is not local. I have described this as the installation of a regime of monotruth (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). V. Y. Mudimbe (1988) named the archive that sustained it in Africa the 'colonial library': the travellers'

tales, missionary writings, ethnographies and administrative reports through which Africa was invented as an object of European knowledge, including for Africans themselves. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) showed how the colonial school severed the African child from the language of the home and attached thinking itself to a foreign tongue.

By making itself the only knowledge, the hegemonic system made itself the only possible standard of measurement. It became both the thing to be evaluated and the instrument of evaluation. It became player and referee simultaneously. Today's epistemic crisis follows from this structural fact.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's vow of ignorance

Nothing reveals the self-impoverishment of this knowledge more starkly than the moment when one of Europe greatest minds confronted Africa. In his lectures on the philosophy of history, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, the philosopher of the Absolute, of Spirit coming to know itself through world history, turned to Africa and found that his categories could not read it. Rather than questioning the categories, he questioned Africa. He declared the continent, or at least the Africa south of the Sahara, to lie outside history, wrapped in the darkness of night, a land of unreflective childhood in which Spirit had not yet come to consciousness of itself. And then, having confessed in effect that his system could not decode it, he invited his readers to leave Africa behind and vowed not to speak of it again (Hegel 1956).

Read that closing gesture slowly. It is an extraordinary moment in the history of knowledge. The most ambitious systematic philosopher of modern Europe meets a part of the world his epistemic coding cannot process, throws up his hands and takes a public vow of silence. It is the arrogance of ignorance elevated into philosophy. The failure is not recorded as a limit of Hegel's knowledge; it is recorded as a deficiency of Africa. Africa is written out of history and out of the world of knowledge precisely because it exceeded the grammar of the system that claimed to comprehend everything.

This is what I mean when I say the hegemonic knowledge system impoverished itself. Hegel's vow was not merely an insult to Africans. It was a self-mutilation. A philosophy that claimed to think the whole of world history declared a whole continent unthinkable, and thereby admitted, without knowing that it was admitting it, that its universality was provincial. Aimé Césaire (1972) insisted that colonisation decivilised the coloniser too. Hegel's vow is the epistemological version of Césaire's charge: the war on exteriorities damaged the centre because it deprived the centre of the outside it needed to know itself. Ironically, it then created an outside of its own invention (the invention of tradition), which has a sound history outside colonial imaginaries, fables and fictions.

And the vow did not remain in the lecture hall. It became curriculum. Generations of students, including colonised students, were taught history in which Africa entered the story only when Europeans arrived. In colonial schools, the history that counted began with missionaries and concession-seekers, while the long histories of the African and other communities appeared, if at all, as a prologue to the colonial drama. Hegel's vow of silence was institutionalised as a syllabus.

Performing exteriority: External examiners who are insiders

Here is the epistemic irony that I want to put at the centre of this provocation. Having decimated other knowledges and destroyed its own exteriorities, the hegemonic knowledge system constantly works to create the impression that it tests its validity against the outside. It calls upon external examiners, external reviewers, external peers and external assessors. It seems acutely aware that a knowledge system needs external evaluation to be credible. Yet it arrived at its hegemony precisely by invading other mental universes, what Santos (2018) calls the cognitive empire, and depriving the modern world of the very knowledges that could have served as genuine external measures. Is this not a strange performativity? A knowledge system that abolished all its exteriorities now ritually summons exteriority in order to certify itself.

Consider who these external figures actually are. The external examiner, the external reviewer and the external peer are products of the same modern/colonial civilisation and of the same pan-European, westernised and Euro-North American-oriented universities. They are asked to exteriorise themselves temporarily, to step outside their home institution and perform

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the role of the detached evaluator. But they are not external to the hegemonic knowledge at all. They carry its canon in their citations, its methods in their training, its standards in their judgement, its hierarchies in their very sense of what a rigorous piece of work looks like. Their performance of distance covers up the original sin: that this knowledge system became hegemonic by destroying the outside from which it could have been genuinely judged.

The genealogy of the external examiner is itself revealing. The system travelled with empire. Many colonial university colleges in Africa, the Caribbean and elsewhere were founded in a so-called special relationship with the University of London, whose curricula and examinations defined what the colonised could study and how they would be judged (Ashby 1966). The University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, founded in Salisbury in the 1950s, was one such institution. The colonised student was examined, quite literally, by the metropole. The external examiner in the colony was the empire's own interior standard delivered by post. What we call external examination was, at its birth in the colonies, a technology of epistemic dependency. Paulin Hountondji (1997) later called the resulting condition 'extraversion': African scholarship oriented towards questions, theories and audiences located elsewhere.

Look at today's machinery of validation and the pattern repeats at scale. Global university rankings measure universities everywhere against the profile of a handful of wealthy research-intensive institutions in the North Atlantic and East Asia. Citation indexes and journal impact metrics define excellence through databases in which scholarship written in English and published in the North is overwhelmingly represented, while knowledge produced in isiNdebele, Kiswahili, Quechua, Tamil or Anishinaabemowin is largely invisible to the counting machine. Peer review, the proudest institution of modern science, asks peers to judge peers, and a peer, by definition, is someone who shares the terms of the conversation. Every one of these devices presents itself as an external, neutral and objective check. Every one of them is interior to the same epistemic order. They are, to borrow Wynter's language, genre-specific instruments overrepresented as universal ones.

I am not saying that individual examiners and reviewers are dishonest. Many of them are generous, careful and brilliant; I have been one and I continue to be one. I am saying that the structure in which they operate converts their good faith into a performance. A system that has only insiders can only stage outsiders. The question of who examines the examiner has no answer within it, because there is no longer an exterior from which the examiner could be examined.

Why not an Indigenous examiner?

Let me make the point concrete with a thought experiment. What would a genuine external examination look like? It would look like this: a doctoral thesis written within the Eurocentric knowledge system, say in economics, law, environmental science or philosophy, sent for examination to a scholar and knowledge-keeper grounded in an Indigenous knowledge system, who would assess it from the standpoint of that system's own criteria of truth, relevance, responsibility and wisdom. Imagine a thesis on water governance examined by an elder whose jurisprudence treats rivers as relatives rather than resources. Imagine a thesis on development economics examined by a scholar of ubuntu who asks what the model does to relationships among the living, the dead and the yet to be born. Imagine a dissertation in medicine examined from within a healing tradition that treats illness as a disturbance of relations. That would be exteriority. That would be an outside with authority to say 'Your categories make you blind here'.

Why does this sound absurd, even slightly scandalous, to the ears of the modern academy? Precisely because the war on exteriorities succeeded to the extent that it made genuine external evaluation unthinkable. The anthropologist could study the healer, but the healer could never examine the anthropologist. A knowledge system that studies only others and is never studied by them in return loses the capacity to see its own particularity. That asymmetry is the architecture of the epistemic crisis.

The thought experiment runs into an even deeper obstacle. Even where Indigenous knowledges have entered the university, they have often been disciplined into operating according to the protocols, criteria and standards of the hegemonic system. To be admitted, they must be translated into research questions, literature reviews, methodology chapters, ethics applications, measurable outputs and citable publications. Traditional ecological knowledge is welcomed as data for environmental assessment rather than as a jurisprudence that could put the assessment itself in question. Indigenous research methods are

incorporated as a methods option in the curriculum rather than as a rival epistemology. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) showed long ago how research itself was experienced by Indigenous peoples as an instrument of domination, and her call for research grounded in Indigenous values and protocols remains, a quarter-century later, a challenge rather than an accomplished fact. Writing from Treaty 7 territory in Calgary, I see daily how hard Indigenous scholars and communities must labour to insist that recognising their knowledges requires changing not only what universities teach but how they understand knowledge itself.

This compounds the crisis. The one resource that could restore an outside to modern knowledge, the survival of other knowledges, is at risk of being absorbed and domesticated, turned from an exteriority into another interior specialisation. Admission on the terms of the hegemon is the most sophisticated form of the war on exteriorities. It does not burn the codex. It catalogues it.

On the hall of mirrors: Why modern critique was born limited

Eurocentric knowledge system prides itself on being one knowledge system that institutionalised self-criticism. The Enlightenment named itself the age of critique. The modern university made argument, refutation and revision its daily bread. How can a system this self-critical be accused of being unable to see itself?

The answer is that modern knowledge did not abandon critique; it internalised it. Critique became the critique of one part of the system by another part of the system, conducted in the system's own languages, by its own standards of evidence, within its own institutions. It could refine, extend and reform the system. It could not step outside it, because the outside had been declared empty. External review and critique were folded into the structure of modernity/coloniality itself. The result is a hall of mirrors. A knowledge system that has abolished its outside can only examine itself through reflections of itself. The reflections may be dazzling, and the play among them may generate astonishing sophistication. But no reflection shows what lies beyond the walls. Modern knowledge became extraordinarily good at answering the questions it set itself and extraordinarily poor at recognising that other questions might matter more. Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) demonstrated this with the Haitian Revolution: an event that was unthinkable for its Western contemporaries, not because they lacked information but because their categories could not accommodate enslaved Africans as authors of a universal political project. That is not ignorance of facts. It is the blindness of interiority.

It follows that critical theory itself was born limited by its interiority to what it sought to criticise and change. Max Horkheimer (1972) defined critical theory as theory reflexive about its own social conditions and oriented towards emancipation. Yet the society whose conditions it reflected on was largely European bourgeois society, and the colonial constitution of that society, the fact that its wealth, its self-image and its very concept of freedom were bound up with the plunder of exteriorities, lay mostly outside its classical agenda. Amy Allen (2016), writing from within the Frankfurt tradition, has acknowledged that its normative foundations rest on Eurocentric narratives of progress and social learning that must be decolonised if the tradition is to remain critical. Classical Marxism critiqued capital while often placing the colonised world within a stadial history in which conquest could appear as the brutal midwife of progress. Poststructuralism dismantled the sovereign subject while continuing to treat Europe as the privileged site of both the problem and its deconstruction. In each case, the critique of Europe was conducted by Europe, about Europe, in Europe's terms.

This is the terrain on which flourished what Immanuel Wallerstein (1997) called anti-Eurocentric Eurocentrism. Many attempts to challenge Eurocentrism, he observed, ended up reproducing it, for example by proving that other civilisations had also been on the road to capitalism or modernity before Europe interrupted them. Such arguments contested Europe's claim to have arrived first while leaving the destination intact. African scholarship was not immune. Nationalist historiography, which I honour, from which my own scholarship has benefitted and to which it is indebted, refuted the colonial claim that Africa had no history by showing that Africans built states and empires comparable to Europe's. But it often took the centralised state as the measure of historical worth, marginalising societies organised on other principles. It fought the colonial library on ground that the colonial library had already surveyed. Anti-Eurocentric Eurocentrism is the characteristic pathology of critique in a world without exteriorities.

Raising the dead: Žižek and the necromancy of Europe

If Hegel represents the founding vow of ignorance, then the contemporary Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek represents its most celebrated afterlife. Žižek is among the most widely read public intellectuals of our time, and he is refreshingly candid about his commitments. In an essay whose title tells us everything, 'A Leftist Plea for "Eurocentrism"', he argued that the left should defend the European legacy of universalism and democracy against what he saw as the particularisms of identity and multiculturalism (Žižek 1998). His major philosophical project has been a monumental return to Hegel, read through Jacques Lacan, in the name of rethinking dialectical materialism for the present (Žižek 2012). He is, in short, a self-declared Eurocentrist who proposes to advance modern knowledge by reviving Hegel, raising Lacan and a cast of European thinkers from the dead, and defending the Enlightenment as the only available horizon of emancipation.

What is at play here? I want to suggest that it is a form of intellectual necromancy, and that it is diagnostic. When a knowledge system has abolished its outside, it can only look for renewal inside its own archive. The future is sought in the past, but only in one past. Faced with ecological collapse, the crisis of liberal democracy and the exhaustion of emancipatory projects, the most celebrated philosopher of the European left returns to Hegel, the same Hegel who took the vow of silence about Africa, as the resource from which the future must be thought. It is as if the house were on fire and its most brilliant resident proposed to save it by rereading the architect's original plans, in a language only the residents speak.

I do not deny Žižek's brilliance, his humour or the genuine insight of much of his work. The problem is structural, not personal. His project dramatises the closed circuit of interiority: the answer to Europe's crisis must come from Europe's canon; the only universalism worth defending is the one Europe invented; every other tradition is either a particularism to be transcended or an object to be interpreted. Hamid Dabashi (2015) put the unavoidable question sharply in the title of his book, *Can Non-Europeans Think*?, written in the wake of a public controversy in which European philosophy was once again presented as philosophy as such, while thinkers from elsewhere were treated as sources of local colour or regional expertise. The question is rhetorical, but its rhetorical force depends on a very real habit: the assumption that thought happens in Europe and that the rest of the world supplies experience, raw material and case studies.

Here, the hall of mirrors has a resident philosopher. He can see his reflection in every mirror, and he can argue with every reflection with dazzling wit. What he cannot do is leave the hall, because he has been persuaded that there is nothing outside it except particularities waiting to be universalised by Europe.

Naming the current crisis: When knowledge feeds on itself

The dominant knowledge system is unable to adequately explain, let alone resolve, the crises it has helped to produce: ecological devastation; climate breakdown; persistent racialised inequality; the exhaustion of development paradigms; the hollowing out of liberal democracy; and the collapsing legitimacy of the very institutions, including universities, that were meant to produce trustworthy knowledge. These are usually treated as separate problems demanding separate experts. They share a common epistemic root.

The crisis is not simply that modern knowledge lacks answers. It is that the alternatives on offer are not decoupled from the orthodoxy they oppose. They emerge from the same terrain, so that the problem to be explained and the solutions proposed are both interior to coloniality. The ecological crisis arises from a conception of nature as an external resource to be mastered, a conception built into the modern/colonial package. Yet the dominant responses—green growth, carbon markets, offsets, geoengineering—largely remain inside that same conception. They propose to cure the disease with more of the knowledge that produced it. Arturo Escobar (2018) calls this the predicament of the one-world world: what is required is not better design within it but transition towards a pluriverse. Development follows the same pattern: each failed paradigm is replaced by a new paradigm of development, promising to fix development with more and better development. This is why Santos (2014) insists that we need not simply alternatives but an alternative thinking of alternatives. The imagination itself has been colonised.

Here are examples of three knowledge practices, each widely discussed in our universities, in which the crisis of interiority is now visible to the naked eye. The first is the machinery of metrics. Universities increasingly know themselves

through numbers generated by the system itself: rankings, citation counts, impact factors, h-indices, grant income. Scholars are pushed to write for the journals that count, in the language that counts, on the questions that count. The metric is presented as an external audit of quality. In truth it is the system measuring itself with its own ruler and then congratulating itself on its accuracy. The scholar from the global South learns quickly that the path to recognition runs through the gatekeepers of the North, and so extraversion is renewed with each performance review.

The second is the crisis of trust in knowledge, what the commentariat calls post-truth or the war on expertise. It is fashionable to blame this crisis on social media, demagogues and conspiracy theorists, and they carry real responsibility. But there is a deeper story. A knowledge system which has declared itself the only knowledge, and which has repeatedly been used to justify conquest, racial hierarchy, extractive development and austerity, should not be surprised when those on the receiving end stop believing it. When there is only one authorised knowledge, every disappointment with it becomes a crisis of knowledge as such. Monotruth breeds its own nihilism. The populist who rejects all expertise and the technocrat who recognises only one expertise are, strangely, twins: both have forgotten that knowledge was once plural.

The third is the most topical of all, and it is where the hall of mirrors becomes literal. Generative artificial intelligence is now woven into how students write, how scholars search, how reviewers review and how institutions decide. These systems are trained on vast digitised corpora, and those corpora are the colonial library in its most recent and most massive edition: dominated by a handful of languages, saturated with the categories of the one-world world, and largely silent on the knowledges that were never written down, never digitised or never permitted into the archive. What such machines produce is, by design, a statistically fluent recombination of what the archive already contains. They are interiority automated. Researchers have already documented peer reviews at major AI conferences that appear to have been substantially written with the help of large language models (Liang et al. 2024). Pause on that image: the external reviewer, already an insider performing exteriority, now outsources the performance to a machine trained on the insider's archive. The mirror now reflects the mirror.

There is an even sharper lesson from within computer science itself. Studies of what has been called model collapse have shown that when generative models are trained recursively on data produced by earlier models, they progressively lose the rarer features of the original distribution, the tails, until their outputs converge on a narrowing, degraded sameness (Shumailov et al. 2024). I can think of no better scientific parable for the epistemic history I have been describing. A knowledge system that feeds only on itself does not become purer. It collapses. It forgets the tails, the margins, the exteriorities, and in forgetting them it forgets what the world actually contains. Modernity/coloniality performed this experiment on a planetary scale over five centuries. The machines are merely running it faster.

The university sits at the centre of this storm. The students who called for Rhodes to fall in South Africa in 2015 and 2016, and for the decolonisation of curricula, were in my reading naming precisely this problem in the idiom of their generation: an institution of knowledge that could see the world only through its own mirror and that had no place for the exteriorities it embodied (Mbembe 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). Since then, the university has discovered a thousand ways to absorb the demand without meeting it: decolonisation as a module, as a reading list, as a diversity statement, as a strategic priority in a glossy plan. The crisis of the university is the crisis of interiority made visible, and incorporation is how interiority survives its critics.

Frozen, not exhausted: Breaking out of the epistemic prison

Here the argument turns from diagnosis to hope. Because modernity/coloniality made itself global, its crisis is global and there is no longer an outside that stands untouched. But the outside was never fully destroyed. The war was never fully won. To understand why, we must be precise about what the war on exteriorities actually did to the knowledges it could not destroy.

It did not exhaust them. It froze them. Euromodern epistemology pushed the epistemologies of the South and Indigenous epistemologies to the margins and borders of modernity/coloniality and held them there in a condition of suspended animation. They were declared premodern, traditional and static and then, through colonial codification, they were made static.

Mahmood Mamdani (2012) shows how colonial power took living, contested and changing customs and fixed them into customary law, a frozen image of tradition administered by the colonial state and its appointed chiefs. The healer became a witchdoctor to be prohibited, the oral historian a native informant to be mined, the language of the home a vernacular to be left at the school gate. Knowledges that had grown through debate, travel, borrowing and innovation were locked out of the institutions through which knowledge renews itself: schools, libraries, universities, courts and treasuries. They were not allowed to change, and then they were blamed for not changing.

This freezing was a form of imprisonment. The Eurocentric epistemological prison did not need walls of stone. Its walls were categories: myth rather than history, belief rather than knowledge, custom rather than law, folklore rather than philosophy, local rather than universal. Its guards were the curriculum, the examination, the language policy and the canon. Its cells were the margins and the borders: the reserves, the homelands, the rural areas under indirect rule, the native sections of the archive. Those confined there were never permitted to address the centre as equals, only to be studied by it.

But here lies the paradox that makes the present moment so significant. Precisely because they were frozen rather than used up, these knowledges were never exhausted. Eurocentric epistemology, by contrast, has been running at full capacity for five centuries. It was universalised, exported and imposed, applied to every problem in every place, asked to explain every society and to manage every economy and ecosystem on the planet. It has been stretched over the whole earth and made to carry the weight of the whole world.

Eurocentric knowledge is exhausted in the literal sense: worn out by overuse, running on its own fumes, recycling its own canon, reviving its own dead. Santos (2014) captures this condition when he observes that Western critical thinking now faces strong questions for which it can offer only weak answers. The hegemon has spoken for so long, about so much, that it has little new left to say. Its rescue missions to Hegel and Lacan are the signs of a spent force.

The knowledges on the margins and borders tell a different story. Held in the freezer of coloniality, they were kept alive in the tents of resistance: in the memory of elders, in ceremonies and songs, in land-based practices, in languages that refused to die, in the everyday philosophy of communities who went on living by principles the colonial library never recognised. Walter Mignolo (2000) calls the thinking that emerges from these places 'border thinking', thought produced from the colonial difference. What was intended as a prison turned out also to be a reservoir. The border was not only a site of confinement. It became a site of preservation, and now is one of emergence.

This is why I speak of the release of these knowledges from the Eurocentric epistemological prison. The crisis of Euromodern epistemology is loosening its grip. Its claim to epistemic sovereignty has lost credibility, even where its institutions remain powerful, which is what Santos (2018) means by the end of the cognitive empire. As the hegemon falters, frozen knowledges begin to thaw. We see it in Indigenous nations asserting jurisdiction over land, water and research in their territories; in movements that ground law in the rights of rivers and mountains; in African philosophies of ubuntu and relationality entering debates on justice, care and ecology; in language revitalisation, from Aotearoa to the Andes to the Prairies; in students who demand that universities stop teaching them to see their own worlds through someone else's eyes. These are not museum exhibits being dusted off. They are knowledges returning to history, recovering what Amílcar Cabral (1973) called 'historical initiative'.

Two cautions follow, and they anticipate the traps I discuss below. First, a knowledge released from the freezer is not a knowledge returned to an unchanged original state. It must be thawed into life, which means debated, renewed, taught, extended and allowed to change, as all living knowledges do. To display it frozen, now celebrated rather than despised, would be to keep it in prison under a new warden. Second, release does not mean that these knowledges simply replace the exhausted hegemon with a new monotruth. Their gift to the world is not a new centre but the return of an outside: the capacity to look at Euromodern knowledge from elsewhere, to name its limits and to meet it as one knowledge among many. Freed from the prison, they make genuine external examination possible again.

Restoring the outside

The exteriorities that retreated to the margins and pitched tents of resistance are still there, carrying knowledges that were never fully absorbed into the package. Their survival, and now their release, is the condition of possibility for moving beyond the crisis.

This is how I read the epistemologies of the South and the revival of Indigenous knowledges: not as additions to an academic menu but as projects for the restoration of exteriorities. The South here is epistemic rather than simply geographic, naming knowledges born in struggle against colonialism, capitalism and patriarchy (Santos 2014, 2018). The proposal of an ecology of knowledges, in which modern science is recognised as one knowledge among others, powerful for some purposes and blind for others, matters precisely because it restores the conditions for genuine external review. In an ecology of knowledges, each knowledge can be seen from the standpoint of the others. Modern science can once again be placed in question from outside itself. The Indigenous examiner of my thought experiment ceases to be absurd and becomes a necessity.

But restoration has its own dangers, and a provocation that did not name them would be dishonest. There are three traps, each of which would reproduce the logic of the war it seeks to undo.

The first is purism. There are no sealed, uncontaminated traditions waiting to be retrieved intact. Walter Mignolo (2000) reminds us that the outside of modernity was partly invented by modernity itself, and all surviving knowledges bear the marks of the encounter. Francis Nyamnjoh (2017) teaches that incompleteness is a fundamental feature of being and knowing: no person, community or knowledge is complete in itself. To imagine exteriorities as pure would be to reinstate the colonial fantasy of the static native, now valorised rather than despised. Restoration means recovering Cabral's (1973) historical initiative, the capacity to make history and knowledge again on one's own terms, not the reconstruction of an imagined origin.

The second is nativism. My work on Afrophobia in South Africa has taught me how the language of indigeneity and belonging can be turned against other Africans, producing new exclusions in the name of decolonisation. What I theorise as lateral coloniality, the reproduction of colonial logics among the formerly colonised themselves, is a warning that the wounded are not automatically immune to the habits of those who wounded them. Restoring exteriorities must not become a new hierarchy of authenticity. The decolonial project is pluriversal, not nativist: a world in which many worlds fit, not a world partitioned into ethnic enclaves of knowledge.

The third is incorporation. The hegemonic system has a long record of absorbing its critics and turning them into subfields. The danger is that epistemologies of the South and Indigenous knowledges are admitted as niche specialisations, diversity add-ons or sources of data, while the structure of knowledge as a whole remains untouched. That would be interiority by another name. The test of genuine restoration is simple and demanding: can the restored knowledges examine the dominant knowledge, with authority and change its verdicts? Or are they merely represented within it?

Avoiding these traps requires a relational and pluriversal idea of restoration. Exteriorities are not restored by returning them to isolation but by re-establishing the conditions of genuine encounter, conditions in which each knowledge can be an outside for the others. This is what I understand by reworlding: remaking the world as a world of many worlds, in which the singular of knowledge gives way again to the plural of knowledges, and in which critique regains the external vantage points it lost. Reworlding is not only a political and ethical project. It is an epistemological necessity. Without it, the hegemonic knowledge will continue to feed on itself, and like the recursive machine it will collapse into ever more fluent sameness.

Provocations for debate

I offer the following provocations to the members and readers of the Reworlding the World Research Network, not as conclusions but as invitations to argument.

First. The contemporary epistemic crisis is not a recent malfunction of an otherwise healthy knowledge system. It is the long-delayed consequence of that system's founding violence: a scorched-earth war on other knowledges that it waged in order to become universal.

Second. Modern knowledge's rituals of external validation, the external examiner, the external reviewer, the external peer, the ranking and the metric, are performances of exteriority by a system that destroyed its exteriorities. We should ask of every such ritual: external to what?

Third. A genuine external examination would allow knowledge-keepers from other epistemic traditions to examine work produced within the hegemonic tradition, by their own criteria, with authority. If this sounds impossible, that impossibility is the measure of the crisis.

Fourth. Hegel's vow never to speak of Africa again was not only an insult to Africa but a confession of the limits of Eurocentric epistemic coding. The self-impoverishment of modern knowledge can be read in that vow.

Fifth. Contemporary efforts to renew thought by resurrecting Hegel, Lacan and the Enlightenment canon, however brilliant, are symptoms of interiority: the search for the future in only one past.

Sixth. Generative AI trained on the colonial library at scale is not a neutral new tool but the automation of the hall of mirrors. The phenomenon of model collapse is a scientific parable of what happens to any knowledge system that feeds only on itself.

Seventh. The epistemologies of the South and Indigenous epistemologies were frozen and confined to the margins and borders of modernity/coloniality, but they were never exhausted; Eurocentric epistemology, universalised and overused for five centuries, is. The crisis of the hegemon is therefore the moment of release of the knowledges it imprisoned.

Eighth. The restoration of exteriorities must be pursued without purism, nativism or incorporation. Its test is whether other knowledges can examine the hegemon, not whether they are allowed to decorate it.

The knowledges that survived the war, from Africa to Treaty 7 territory and across the many worlds of the South, are not relics of a defeated past. They are the external vantage points without which no knowledge, including the knowledge that tried to destroy them, can come to know itself. Who examines the examiner? Until we can answer that question honestly, the epistemic crisis will remain unavoidable. The task is to reworld the world, so that knowledges can once again face one another as equals, and so that critique can at last step outside the house in which it was born.

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