Towards epistemically-just research: a methodologies framework
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Abstract
This paper interrogates the relationship between social science research and ways of doing, knowing and being that are dominant in western universities. It traces a line from the colonial origins of dominant knowledge, through the creation of a rational scientist subject, to make visible the reproduction of epistemic inequality in modernity/coloniality (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). The link between epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) and neoliberal knowledge-production practices in higher education is made clear through a particular focus on the role research methods plays in this process, Finally, a reorientation is proposed along with a framework of methodologies for epistemically-just research.

Key words:
epistemic justice; research methodologies; de/coloniality; western knowledge; higher education

Introduction
In a special issue of the journal Qualitative Inquiry (2021, 27(5)), ideas about the role and practice of social inquiry were raised in relation to the past from which they emerged. Past theories were argued still to haunt efforts to remix physical and social sciences (de Freitas and Truman, 2021) while a dogmatic adherence to dominant philosophical traditions that emerged in the European enlightenment were seen as saturating methodological approaches to social scientific inquiry (St. Pierre, 2021).
Although that special edition continues a move towards new forms of critical qualitative inquiry aimed at addressing issues of social injustice (Denzin, 2017), methodologies remain doggedly Eurocentred and human-centered (Ulmer, 2016; Taylor, 2017) and wedded to thought traditions from western philosophy (Tesar, 2021). Such thinking, that consciously recognizes the ghost-hand of colonial processes, inescapably interlinked with capitalism and dominant knowledge production, makes visible an entrenched and abiding legacy of colonialism in modern life; a legacy which is “constitutive, not derivative of modernity” (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, p.4). Colonial power relations and hierarchies which have, through more than five centuries, falsely elevated some humans over
others, are argued to support neoliberal capitalism (de Sousa Santos, 2018), resting on binaries and absolutes to create epistemic hierarchies through hegemonies of social practices and delineate what counts as credible knowledge.

We focus particularly on knowledge work done in universities and those research methodologies which play a major role in knowledge-making practices. We align with the view that universities are institutions emerging from colonial histories of power relations and Euro-centered traditions (de Sousa Santos, 2018). Furthermore, we agree that universities, established in Eurocentred traditions, are part of the apparatus that maintains epistemic dominance and perpetuates epistemic injustice. We think this because the apparatuses of epistemic dominance simultaneously achieve three unjust process: the devaluation of pre-colonial knowledge (Wa Thion’o, 1986); the determination of what and whose knowledge matters (Stengers, 2018); and, as Smith (2012) points out in the context of the epistemic violence done to indigenous knowledge in Aotearoa, erases non-western ways of knowing the world. Our work as academics within western universities presents us with difficult questions. Particularly, how do academics that wish to delink from colonial knowledge making practices move towards more just ways of knowing the world? Our paper is offered as a point of departure to think about this question and as an invitation to dialogue with others who acknowledge struggles within this tension in academic work.

We focus on two central aspects at work in maintaining the apparatus: research practices in the modern university and those researchers who undertake them. Regarding the former, it is important to make visible the connection between university higher education and colonial knowledge production practices for three reasons. Firstly, to underscore the systemic extent of the epistemic violence that perpetuates and sustains western domination; secondly, to emphasize that this violence is found in every aspect of life in order for some humans to oppress others; and thirdly, to firmly weld the invidiousness of colonization to the process of dominant knowledge practices in universities. St. Pierre (2021) eloquently presents the case of the cyclical problem of dogmatic acceptance of ways of knowing that spring from unquestioning acceptance of social science traditions and do not query their relevance to the problems and questions of society today. She goes on to argue that social sciences are
designed to record events that have already taken place and questions the usefulness of its methodologies for actually bringing about change for the better. This relates to the latter because it requires recognition that academics, trained in western knowledge-making traditions, ask questions that matter to the ongoing process of modernity/coloniality. Their doing so perpetuates epistemic domination by, for example, directing their inquiry to research literature produced by (pre)existing academics and then teaching those that will come after them to do the same. And so the cycle goes on.

There are dire consequences to this cycle of epistemic domination in the oppression of groups – and their knowledges – that are excluded from dominant knowledge practices. Those othered are non-male; non-white; non-European; non-privileged; non-human. Meanwhile structures created to support the continuation of those in power – patriarchy; racism; extractivism - feed into a dominant, linear, thrusting narrative that makes heroes of capitalists (Le Guin, 2019. Smith (2012) has already made clear that western research methods are unsuitable for indigenous research while scholarship elsewhere explores alternative methodologies, with examples including reflexive methodologies (Alvesson 2003), digressive methodologies (Thiel and Hofsess 2020), adaptive methodologies (van Asche 2021), speculative experimentation (Koro, 2022) and ongoing work by post-qualitative and feminist researchers. Haraway (2016) is notable in her immanent and collaborative methodologies employing speculation, fiction, feminism, science and fabulation amongst other SFs. However, while the riches from colonial violence and exploitation that created Europe (Vergès, 2021) continues to sustain global capitalism and the continued domination of western norms through commerce, finance and education, amongst others, alternative methodologies remain marginalized.

Despite the challenges to doing otherwise, as qualitative researchers, we agree with St. Pierre (2021) that being critical of traditional ways of doing research is essential to keep research relevant to the (global) problems of the moment. We are experimenting with the ontology of immanence ourselves, for instance in a crafting methodology to explore issues of ethics in collaborative data production (AUTHORS, forthcoming). However, we are not clear how this approach will address problems of injustice unless it explicitly connects research practices to the epistemic injustices born in the colonial past. We specifically attend to the role of social science research methods in perpetuating
epistemic injustice in order to explore ways that we, as researchers, might actively delink from their colonial legacy. The epistemic implications of our framing are presented using Fricker’s theory of epistemic injustice (2007) and an analysis of social science research methodology that thinks with decolonial theories. While we might attend to injustices related to gender, race or the environment, in this paper we focus on epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) as a concept with considerable power to precipitate a delinking from methodologies that reproduce dominant narratives about life on this planet.

We proceed by tracing the relationship between colonial and dominant knowledge then go on to examine western universities’ knowledge-making practices as a form of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007). We focus on the role research methods play in this process before presenting a framework that reorientates social science research towards methodologies for epistemic justice.

**Dominant knowledge as colonial knowledge**
Knowledge is inextricably linked to the history of domination that generated a class of dominant knowers. The power to decide what matters about knowledge and human existence is in the hands of a small selection of human beings who have attained domination over others and, with that, the power to tell their version of history, singular; drawing on their knowledge, singular. More than any previous empires, the European colonial efforts interconnect with the lives of today’s global elites (de Sousa Santos, 2018). Consequently, the production and validation of knowledge about human existence comes from a small number of humans who became powerful in a set of relations beginning in the fifteenth century. Their power was achieved through the physical and psychological violence during the period of European colonial expansion (Fanon, 2001). The geographical expansion of Europe throughout the world was supported by the simultaneous exportation of a rational scientific mode of thought begun in Europe, in the so-called period of Enlightenment (St. Pierre, 2021; Smith, 2012; de Sousa Santos, 2018). European modes of thought and inquiry considerably accelerated Europeans’ quest to claim other lands as their own and were fundamental to fabulating a rational for colonization and its brutalities.
It is important to note that particular European ways of thinking dominated colonial thinking. Non-European worlds, of colonized lands and their people, were perceived from a Cartesian philosophical and ontological dualism which had come to prominence over other European ways of understanding reality. For example, an alternative is the call for deconstruction of western philosophies to make space for new and relevant concepts to emerge (Derrida, 1998, as cited in St. Pierre (2021) while Barad (also cited in St. Pierre, 2021) offers always-already onto-epistemology to closely connect research method to the evolving, emerging realities of lived experience. Meanwhile, de Sousa Santos (2018) reminds us of non-occidental western epistemologies as resistant to the objectives of capitalist, colonialist and patriarchal domination (p. 227). de Sousa Santos (2018) attends to the way that multiple alternative epistemologies can emerge when European scholarship is treated as one of a number of world knowledges, rather than a singular and universal understanding of the world, particularly through engagement with European non-hegemonic thinking. Ghandi who “incorporated aspects of the counter-culture in the West into his challenge from the periphery” (de Sousa Santos. 2018, p. 228) is offered as an exemplary counterpoint to epistemic singularity and domination (de Sousa Santos, 2018).

However, Cartesian dualism dominated. Credence of cognitive over bodily knowledge effectively separated intellect from affect and, along with other binaries, contributed to the creation of an epistemic hierarchy. Colonizers’ understanding of non-European lands rested on knowledge gained through scientific methods underpinned by dualism. Thus, categorization, division, separation and classification developed scientific thought and European’s knowledge of the world. Separation derived from dualism. Colonized land and people were constructed in European minds (Fanon, 2001) through dualistic cognition that privileged rationality and objectivity, serving to separate non-Europeans from Europeans in at least three ways that are relevant to this paper’s focus.

Firstly, as Smith (2012) outlines, separation enables Europeans to compare groups of human beings. In particular she points to the way the ‘West’ uses classification and simplified representation of indigenous societies to support standard models of comparison and criteria of evaluation. Smith (2012) goes on to say that “understanding was viewed as being akin to measuring” (p. 44), and
outlines the ways Western knowledge systems encoded indigenous people and societies to fit hierarchical binaries: non-west/west, women/men, non-white/white, civilized/uncivilized and so forth. A second way in which separation is fundamental, is in constructing “the colonized”, as part of a colonial social structure that is presented as rational, through the categorization of types of humans by those humans holding power:

“[una] estructura colonial de poder [que] produjo las discriminaciones sociales que posteriormente fueron codificadas como “raciales”, “étnicas”, “antropológicas” o “nacionales”, según los momentos, los agentes y las poblaciones implicadas.” (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 12)

[a colonial structure of power [that] produced social discriminations that were later codified as racial, ethnic, anthropological, or national, depending on when you are looking at it, for those individuals and populations in question.]

As Maldonado-Torres implies, though categories change over time, categorization is fundamental to maintaining a societal hierarchy of human beings which separates and persistently discriminates against some groups. A third aspect of separation made possible through the dominance of dualism is the perceived separation of the individual from their world. Smith (2012) describes this separation as an overriding concern to understand the human subject as existing in the world, rather than with-and-in the world; a separation perpetuated by thought that facilitates the illogical intellectual position that (any)one can exist in a way that they are separate from the world. Such a stance makes possible an emotional separation. While such separation is prized in logic and objectivity, emotions and subjectivity are held in lower esteem. This is the epistemic hierarchy that arose from colonial knowledge based on rationality – only – and its coming to be valued as exceptional (Smith, 2012).

Colonial representation of the known world was unyieldingly delineated by rational, unemotional, disembodied, androcentric, anthropocentric thought. Knowing and being in other ways were dangerous and so were delegitimized, ignored, side-lined or erased, because they did not align with the epistemology of those rational scientific men in privileged positions, initially in the European churches and, later, in its universities.
Following this argument, dominant knowledge was, and still is, central to creating *de facto* epistemic norms that fabricate justifications of the violence of European invaders and the growing dominance of capitalism in exploiting land to extract its riches. The creation of a non-European world, as imagined in Eurocentered minds, began and was constructed through systems of thought – rationality, objectivity, separation, binaries, division and hierarchies. Furthermore, the categorization of the non-European world and ways of knowing by European knowers, those “I”s, who saw “not-I” as *other*, served to separate being from knowing and knowing from context (St. Pierre, 2021).

Two profound and enduring consequences emanated from the colonial strategy of separation. Firstly, it created a hierarchy of humanity. The “civilizing” colonizers whose ways of doing, being and knowing dominated the colonized, those non-Europeans who could be painted a “quintessence of evil...[in a] colonial context characterized by the dichotomy which it imposes on the whole people” (Fanon, 2001, pp. 34-35). This othering of non-Europeans created conditions to think of non-Europeans in an emotionally disconnected way, easing the consciousness of those engaging in the brutality and violence that accompanies colonization. Secondly, but central to achieving the eventual dominance of this invented dichotomy, was the violent and ongoing suppression of non-European, racial and gendered knowledges as ways of knowing, doing and being that were worth/less contributions to understanding human life.

In order to maintain the façade that European scientific ways of knowing were exceptional, it was essential that the knowledge of the colonized be denigrated. In the context of Kenya, for instance, British colonial assimilation policies led to the erosion of Kenyans’ beliefs in the value of their own languages, cultures, traditions and heritage, and “ultimately in themselves” (Wa Thiong’o, 1986, p. 3). In Algeria, French colonizers saw “the customs of the colonized people, their traditions, their myths – above all their myths – are the very sign of poverty of spirit and of their constitutional depravity” (Fanon, 2001, p. 32). Wa Thiong’o and Fanon both connect colonization with alienation from pre-colonial culture, the former explicitly identifying the imposition of colonial education as alienation. Ways of being and doing and speaking that transgress colonizers’ norms are impermissible, so
indigenous values and traditions and languages are debased in relation to the (now preferable) colonizers’ ways of knowing (Wa Thiong’o, 1986).

The violent destruction of part of/a society and its knowledge systems - the massive epistemicide that validated dominant Western scientific ways of knowing (de Sousa Santos, 2018) – brought with it a devastating and enduring change in what came to be widely considered as valid knowledge, as common knowledge. While this “pretensión “científica” y “objetiva” (Quijano, 1991. p. 12) [the pretense of the scientific and objective] dominates, it represses many ways of knowing that are central to history and identity:

“...ante todo, sobre los modos de conocer, de producir conocimiento, de producir perspectivas, imágenes y sistemas imágenes, símbolos, modos de significación; sobre los recursos patrones e instrumentos de expresión formalizada y objetivada.” (Quijano, 1991, p. 12)

[above all, regarding ways of knowing, producing knowledge, producing perspectives, imaginings and systems of imagining, symbols, ways of signifying; regarding the resources, patterns and instruments of formal and objective, intellectual and visual expression.]

Thus, the violence of colonialism is enacted on non-colonial ways of knowing, suppressing them whilst falsely elevating colonizers’ knowledge, creating a human hierarchy and a dominant knowledge which denigrates alternatives. Through this process, over centuries, a dominant, resilient and unjust epistemic paradigm emerges.

As noted earlier, central to this paradigm was the exportation of ways of knowing that originated in the European Enlightenment. When rational science challenged previously uncontested theological views of reality, there began an inextricable entanglement of colonial and epistemic conquest which became concretized in colonial institutions, including educational ones. Knowledge-making traditions in educational systems, including universities, whose hierarchization of knowledge and exclusivity of access perpetuate the legacy of European colonialism (de Sousa Santos 2010) and reproduce dominant, colonial knowledge. Through university colonialism (de Sousa Santos, 2018), an
enduring sociological apparatus was created, falsely elevating European ways of doing knowledge work (methodologies), ways of knowing (epistemologies) and ways of being (ontologies) (Cannella, 2015; Smith, 2012; Maldonado-Torres, 2007, respectively). Concurrently, educational institutions were central in forming, according to St. Pierre (2021), a particular kind of human subject who upholds as exceptional European ways of knowing that are rational, objective and separate from the natural world. St Pierre (2021) argues that these human subjects have come to prominence through a dogmatic adherence to the construct of the rational as the pinnacle of human characteristics.

The consequences of epistemic violence – the denigration, obliteration, erasure of non-European ways of knowing about being-in-the-world – remain conspicuously visible: the perpetuation of systems of social reproduction which support the powerful; the pretense that the constructs and concepts they value are exceptional; dominant narratives that ignore the pluralities of human and non-human life; and the promotion of competition, hierarchy, and inequality as ways of being to which there are no alternatives. Spaces for alternative epistemologies are crowded out. Questions that matter and methodologies to address them are in the hands of those researchers trained in western universities to use them. Uncritical inhabitation in the methodological sediment will only perpetuate the colonial legacy of epistemic injustice. Only by recognizing the legacy, for instance through seeing knowledge as constructed in modernity/coloniality (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018) can we consciously begin delinking from epistemic injustices that coloniality has inflicted on the way we, modern human beings, do, think and know.

At this point, it is important to reiterate our positionalities. We, the authors, are engaged in considering how we can continue to situate ourselves in a system that elevates some above and over others, particularly as we do so from personal western traditions as white, university-educated women. As such we identify ourselves as working within these epistemically oppressive systems, as researchers trained in western universities to uphold the false notion of the exceptionalism of Eurocentred scientific thought and methods. We strive to be humble in the way we think with non-European theories as we try to resist passive participation in epistemic injustice. We reiterate our
agreement with St. Pierre (2021) that the constructed nature of the individualized, rational scientific subject is historical and contingent and, in that case, can cease to exist. It is with the hopeful thought that recognition of the intertwined relationship of ways of knowing, doing and being as colonial might create the conditions to delink research/ers from them, and which moves us to examine epistemic injustice more closely.

**Epistemic injustice as a consequence of dominant knowledge**
The dominance of some ways of knowing the world over others’ is an epistemic injustice in the sense that it establishes the norms that make permissible some aspects of social life, representation and state systems and make them “impossible to discuss without an acknowledgement of colonization” (Bhambra, 2009, p. 148). To fail to acknowledge the power of the colonial past on understanding the present is to be complicit in reinforcing normative assumptions about social life whilst marginalizing experiences that do not conform to them. This dominance is reproduced through economic, class and political systems as well as in the knowledge that is ratified by those who are powerful in them.

However, by acknowledging that modernity is shaped by and through coloniality, invokes the possibility of multiple perspectives, not only those of the powerful and, in recognizing pluralities, the state of existence that allows some perspectives to carry more credibility than others can be contested. Fricker (2007) identifies the centrality of social power in producing inequality of credibility as epistemic injustice, where credibility deficit and prejudice separate knowers individually (agentially) and systemically (structurally) through two interlinked processes. Firstly, in communicative transactions, a speaker’s credibility can be deflated owing to a prejudice on the hearer’s part, leading to a credibility deficit she terms testimonial injustice (Fricker, 2008). According to Fricker, testimony is the act of communicating – spoken, written, by song or art – one’s ideas about the world. The communication can be face to face or via societal means such as media or news. Testimonial injustice occurs when the hearer judges the speaker to lack credibility based on their prejudice towards the identity of the speaker or their mode of communication. When this happens, the knowledge itself is dismissed without due consideration: the speaker is wronged as a knower. Hermeneutical injustice occurs when there is a collective inability to make sense of a social experience in the conditions of the existing social context. She describes:
“a hermeneutical lacuna whose existence is owing to the relative powerlessness of a social
group to which the subject belongs. Such a lacuna renders the collective interpretive resources
structurally prejudiced.” (Fricker, 2008, p. 69)

This is hermeneutical injustice, structural, contextual and situated in the specifics of histories and
traditions of social groups. The low socio-economic status of some groups - in relation to others -
means that they suffer prejudice, and this prejudice prevents them from being heard or even
considered as individuals, or a collective, who have anything valuable to contribute to the wider,
collective knowledge resource of the community/society. Fricker (2007) makes the point that social
power with the practical aim of controlling others’ actions compels questions about “who or what is
controlling whom and why” (p. 14).

Epistemic injustice goes a considerable way towards thinking about sustained systemic
inequalities broadly as well as being applied specifically, to education for instance. However, to fully
recognize the implications of systemic social injustices, an historical perspective must be purposefully
adopted. The analysis of knowledge as emergent from a colonial past is one such perspective. The
longevity of colonization is important to recognize in relation to hermeneutical injustice. Once society
perceives values in certain materials or ideas, the oppressive systems are hard to disrupt. The upheaval
of revolution may deliver to power new sets of people, but they inherit administrative systems – that
support business, education, transport, medicine, agriculture, transport – and social hierarchies
established under colonists. Those unjust systems are tenacious and characterize modernity to such an
extent that we must see that society is shaped by it. Wealth and power are retained by a minority of
nations and individuals while the majority world and the majority of populations in all countries, live
without access to wealth and power whilst in thrall of it.

Power is wielded by those who can actively mold and influence economic, class and political
systems and they often do so by appealing to ‘common sense’ arguments and policies, which only
appear to be ‘common sense’ because they are underpinned by dominant (Eurocentred) ways of
knowing. In applying Fricker’s ideas about epistemic injustice to education, we see how dominant
ways of knowing define school curricula, establish pedagogical norms and expectations, and
distinguish the credence of different groups of knowers (e.g., teachers, pupils, parents). A model of schooling we are familiar with is the ‘good’ teacher as a knowledgeable ‘giver’ of knowledge, standing at the front of the classroom, with pupils seated as passive ‘receivers’, facing the teacher and expected to take up the knowledge imparted to them. The ‘good’ student learns ‘the’ knowledge and subsequently ‘performs’ it in assessments. ‘The’ knowledge is that which has been endorsed and approved, considered valid and valuable, often through educational research conducted in universities. Assessment grades, categorizes and ranks students according to their performance of this knowledge, separating some as exceptional from others.

Epistemic justice can be approached to form a more positive perspective, for example as a “equality in the production, recognition and consumption of knowledge” (Hall, Godrie and Heck, 2020, p. 35). What would it mean for the classroom if everyone present felt themselves to be equal in their opportunities for producing knowledge, for recognizing knowledge, and for consuming diverse sources and forms of knowledge? We might see more co-produced pedagogy, where teachers are not delivering knowledge but facilitating more storytelling, sharing and creating with and among pupils (Balarin et al., 2021). Powerful knowledge would not stem from disciplinary canons and western scientific traditions but would sprout from unexpected places and be developed in collaboration. This plurality of narratives has potential to foster solidarity and a sense of community among participants in educational settings that may begin pushing hierarchies and dominant knowledges into the background. At this point, we return to consider the university and its part in sustaining dominant knowledge, focusing on two key elements: researchers and methodologies.

**Epistemic injustice in research methodologies**
As outlined above, western universities emerge through modernity/coloniality to create, support and sustain dominant social knowledge through the use of western research practices and practitioners trained in them. This section analyzes research practices, specifically research methods and methodologies, drawing on the work of research practitioners using decolonial and post-qualitative lenses to make visible some of the epistemic injustices that western research perpetuates. First, we briefly look at data, research design, ethics and analysis.
Knowledge claims rest on evidence which arises from researchers’ interpretation of data. Data collection, part of an organized research design, is a pivotal aspect of dominant research methodologies. Questions about what “counts” as data are intertwined with epistemology and, when addressed, can suggest a particular research paradigm. Data is usually collected in the form of numbers and text although visual and audio-visual artefacts are considered data by some engaged in qualitative research. In qualitative research, flexible design tries to address issues bound up with having to set out a plan for events that will take place in the future, during data collection. Thinking through the many possible events that might arise are part of the ethical considerations, particularly concerning the experience of non-researcher participants. In western universities, these thoughts are presented to ethics boards and tend to be written by researchers for those researchers sitting on the boards. A valid question is raised about how flexible designs can be when ethics approval precedes contact with participants, particularly when those ethics are not recognized/relevant/meaningful in non-western research contexts (Oyinloye, 2021). The use of researcher-driven design notions, like “collection” of data and going “out into the field” to do so convey a separation of data from context, researcher from participants, and opens a gap between academic and non-academic, or artesanal, knowledge (de Sousa Santos, 2018). Add to this, the removal of the data from participants’ presence for the purpose of interpretation or analysis. Despite the development of methodologies that involve participants in the creation of date/knowledge, for example Fals Borda’s participatory action research, the stage of analysis still largely sits in the hands of researchers, as is the representation of the participants in final (published/restricted) accounts of the new knowledge. Together, these four elements of dominant research practices align with the rational scientific tenets of the natural sciences as well as reinscribing the separation of research/er from those she is researching with.

In qualitative research agendas seeking to understand lived experience, standard practices like member checking, debriefing participants after their involvement in research were created with the intention to centralize participants’ knowledge. Critical qualitative inquirers have developed inclusive and participatory methods, where researchers and participants co-create research, co-creating artifacts or outcomes that can be shared widely beyond the research group and, in some cases, even precipitate
policy change (Renold, 2018). Nevertheless, the dominance of comfortable methods that will sail through an ethics board or be familiar enough to grant review committees still entices researchers to adopt methodologies that exclude participants from aspects of research. Sedimentation of familiar methods (St. Pierre, 2021) feeds into the overwhelming amount of research results, largely presented in text form. This knowledge format has assumed “monumental” significance (de Sousa Santos, 2018) of almost incontestable status. Published research texts become, for researchers, the sources of further questions and problems, proposals often address a “gap” in the literature, and studies that are carried through to publication feed into established disciplinary theoretical canons. These are then passed on to students which, unless conscious efforts are made to including knowledge from different perspectives and scholars, present inert accounts. Is there the possibility that knowledge can be relevant, emerging through ethical co-creation of immanent knowledge, in active engagement with the unfolding and unpredictable sequences of human interactions that make up our lives?

Western knowledge production practices actively validate western scientific notions of knowledge as superior to other kinds of knowledge, through practices drawn - and practitioners who draw - from “fool-proof, pre-existing research process(es)” (St. Pierre, 2021, p. 486) defined within the Eurocentric archive of knowledge (Smith, 2012). This archive continues the re/creation of the West in ways that allow it, through research, to define the world and its problems from its own particular perspective. Not only does this further perpetuate the delusional, but persistent, notion of western exceptionalism and its exceptional knowledge creators (St. Pierre, 2021) but it produces valued knowers (Masaka, 2019), or a ‘marked’ group judged as ‘right’ for the academy (Stengers, 2018). The marked group use western methods to gain research credibility and rise to prominence in universities, continuing to feed on and be fed by dominant epistemic norms.

Employing “ready-made techniques and technologies for interpreting the world” (Gildersleeve and Guyotte, 2020, p. 1122), severely limits the extent to which understanding is advanced. University researchers model research practices to their students, employing and recommending safe choices of methods to ensure safe passage through the regulatory structures of the neoliberal university until they are fully formed in and through neoliberal academic research
practices. Feelings of accountability to neoliberal agendas become ingrained until “the individual self is capital” (Cannella, 2015, p. 595). Universities create the conditions for hermeneutical injustice, alienating those excluded from the marked group and perpetuating testimonial injustice towards them. We align with Wa Thiong’o’s (1986) assertion that education is a process of alienation: that the knowledge created using dominant research methods and passed on to younger generations in universities, addresses the problems constructed in the literature and of interest to that marked group who contribute to this exclusive kind of knowledge. Remembering that kinds of human self were created by particular ways of doing, knowing and being, we suggest that different kinds of knowledge making practices are possible: that there are alternatives to the neoliberal scholar and dominant ways of knowing about the social world are possible. These alternatives rest on imagining research practices and practitioners that actively resist capitalist competitive individualism and seek to delink from those unjust practices through motivated action towards research methods that make room for alternative accounts of human life to be seen as valid.

**Towards epistemically-just research**

We argue that research and researchers need to find ways to delink from the colonial legacy of research if it is to be epistemically just. We are aware that we are not proposing something entirely novel and while we are not offering a review of such methods, we cannot fail to acknowledge the counter-hegemonic work underway in different aspects of critical qualitative inquiry. Critical research has analytical tools that scrutinize history and emergent social structures, institutions and practices that maintain disadvantage, to identify where and how exploitative practices can be altered and contested (Giroux, 2011). Alternative theoretical work against epistemic dominance already exists in the work of feminist, decolonial, anti-capitalist, and anti-racist scholars who, broadly, seek to identify and challenge social injustices through their research and methodological innovation is evident in these fields. For instance, critical pedagogy (Freire, 1993/1970; Giroux, 2011) centralize dialogue in actively following an emancipatory agenda, challenging educational systems and oppression caused by capitalist social structures that maintain disadvantage. Feminist scholars work otherwise to story stories and world worlds differently, as set out by Haraway (2016) as the SFs (Speculative Feminism, String Figuring, Speculative Fabulation, Science Fiction etc.). Digressive methodologies suggest
adapting phenomenology, arts-based inquiry to mobilize five modes of inquiry: unsettle, unrest, untether, unearth, unfold (Thiel and Hofsess, 2020). The central connection between these methodologies is their deliberate challenge to dominant systems of oppression and their vision that a different way can be found to create knowledge. Though their research may not center on colonial legacies in research as ours does, they have the common drive to actively bring about just change in response to witnessing the marginalization of some people’s accounts of their lived experiences and to exploring alternatives. That said, we turn again to Smith (2012) in recognizing that most people - researchers, activists or something in between - think/hope their work will lead to social transformation. We also note her view, activism and research remain two separate activities, although they both have the discourse of suspicion directed at them, though we question whether that particular separation might not be closed by adopting epistemically-just methodologies.

Commitment to epistemically-just research requires a particular - and different? - kind of researcher. Earlier we noted the view that the rationale researcher/subject is a construct (St. Pierre, 2021) presenting the possibility of an alternative subject. With an alternative subject, alternative ways of conducting research can be imagined. Cannella (2015), arguing from a critical qualitative research stance, suggests that taking a conscious activist approach requires researchers to consciously construct activist researcher subjectivities who are “always/already address power relations while countering the creation of increased power for the researcher” (p. 597). She acknowledges that researchers are “dominated/controlled/saturated by neoliberalism” (Cannella, 2015, p. 595), inhabiting the research identity of homo entrepreneur, in a globalized and marketized higher education sector but that transformation based on critique and that takes up “collaborations and explorations with traditionally marginalized knowledges” (Cannella, 2015, p. 596) can be mobilized with activism that is also a political agenda for research.

Cannella’s (2015) representation of the modern university foreground further impediments to deviating from the cyclical imperative to follow well-trodden methodological paths. Room for exploring alternatives to dominant practices is difficult when universities are subject to “adjust and submit to the relevance and efficacy criteria of global capitalism…[as] a business corporation
producing a commodity whose market value derives from its capacity to create other market values (e.g. diplomas that give access to highly paid jobs).” de Sousa Santos, 2018, p. 269-272). This way the commodification of knowledge through higher education plays out in ways that further embroil the western university in dominant traditions that support the formation of capitalist elites (de Sousa Santos, 2018). Breaking the cycle needs to draw in new ideas. Here again we turn to St. Pierre’s (2021) notion of the impermanent construct of the researcher and apply this idea to the university so we can, to some extent, imagine the possibility of it ceasing to exist in its current form. Accepting that western knowledge is not a universal way of knowing, but only one amongst many epistemologies, the singular exceptionalism of epistemic dominance falters. Here the *university* as a concept no longer holds but must, as de Sousa Santos (2018) suggest, accommodate multiple knowledges, validating an ecology of knowledges. For de Sousa Santos (2021) the concept of *pluriversity* recognizes the vast amount of human ways of knowing about lived experiences, where ecologies of knowledge have space to be developed. The pluriversity is a concept that is fundamentally resistant to the notion of dominance and the social structures of knowledge creation that support it and can grow inside current institutions as a starting point to delinking from colonial, capitalist and patriarchal domination (de Sousa Santos, 2018). In the context of epistemologies of the South, de Sousa Santos (2018) stresses that, rather than aiming to become the dominant way of knowing, opening to multiple knowledges existing in a pluriverse is a step towards reclaiming the legitimacy of ways of knowing that were, and continue to be, erased in modernity/coloniality in order to attend to the problems of those marginalized by, and engaged in the struggle against, global capitalism.

What methodological options are there for researchers whose work is conducted from within western universities? We acknowledge that this is not the easiest of paths however see powerful potential where knowledge creation is done by loose collectives of knowers whose perspectives include those from outside the university and its training (Davies et al., 2006). Particularly as an alternative to Cannella’s (2015) *homo entrepreneur*, collective knowledge creation in consciously activist research can assert knowledge-making that resists dominant, individualized practices and
move into spaces where objectivity and rationality sit alongside subjectivity and affectivity as valid, non-hegemonic epistemological stances:

“Collective creations [are] acts of resistance to dominance of the individual marketised academic working under the gaze of performative measures” (Handforth and Taylor, 2016, p. 628)

Researchers seeking to resist the apparatus of domination are, perhaps, uniquely placed to find ways to do/know/be differently. Nevertheless, resistance rests on the new researcher/subject being able and willing to transform their identity and engage in the imperative task of finding methodologies that unapologetically centralize accounts of reality from those who have been silenced. It is not enough to merely critique existing methods of research which perpetuate that injustice. Until collaborative, participatory and co-creative projects embrace the equal inclusion of non-academics, it will be pulled back to ready-made techniques from dominant methodological practices (Gildersleeve and Guyotte (2020).

Any methods employed without awareness of modernity/coloniality, betrays the promise of research that aims to work against social injustice by passively reasserting dominance of one knower over others - epistemic injustice by omission rather than commission. And, if research practices and practitioners are the problem, can they be part of a solution that makes spaces for many knowledges to be equally valued? The continuation of a universal, Eurocentred, scientific method and subject must be recognized, disrupted and transformed; unsettled, untethered whilst alternatives are unearthed and allowed to unfold. Researchers must find, see or be encouraged to look for alternative methods of knowledge creation that are driven towards social justice by epistemically-just research methodologies.

**A proposed framework for epistemically-just methodologies**

We take up the notion that the dominant human in western universities – the researcher/subject – is a creation, and propose a recreation, a reimagining or reorientation of this subject as one who unfolds as an immanent researcher/subject working towards epistemic justice. The immanent scholar is conscious of their role in reproducing dominant knowledge, alert to the dangers of being prejudiced hearers. This scholar is constructed as an activist researcher whose research explicitly works to create
the conditions for epistemic justice to emerge while resisting neoliberal agendas of competition and individualization. Their activism for social justice consciously questions production of un-useful social knowledge that has no just impact on social life. They find ways to delink from research practices that originate from western colonial knowledge-production, working in open collectives of human beings, particularly aiming to assert the value of existences that, under capitalism, are oppressed, marginalized, silenced, ridiculed or erased. The immanent scholar is led by the existential problems perceived by such groups of people, rather than turning to those proposed in monumentalized, inaccessible and exclusive forms of (academic/validated) knowledge. The immanent scholar adopts an immanent ontology that guides them to devise methodologies that prioritize agile, responsive, adaptable, ethical and unfolding counter-cultural encounters in co-creative collaborations.

The framework we propose (Table One) might guide the immanent scholar. It vastly simplifies and reduces the problems we discuss above and that create testimonial, hermeneutic, methodological and epistemic injustice. Those traditions that have normalized ways of doing, knowing and being in social life and academic work are presented under the heading ‘dominant research methods’ whilst alternatives are presented in the column headed “epistemically-just methodologies”. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list, as this work is itself always unfolding. Nor is one suggested as being ‘bad’ research while the other is “good”. Instead, it is a way to synthesize the arguments we have been making about dominant knowledge creation.

It is very important to note that these methodologies are not mutually exclusive and are not intended to strengthen binary notions of research. This reductive presentation highlights some of the problems and summarizes the alternatives we have been discussing but should be read by imagining (yourself?) a disruptive enquirer transgressing the boundaries across columns and rows.

[Table One: moving from western to epistemically-just research traditions near here]

We offer this summary of ways of doing/being/knowing in order to prompt collective discussion about epistemic (in)justice, about dominant (colonial, capitalist, patriarchal) knowledge and the impact this has on ways of being human. It may point towards exploratory attempts and creative
forays into research that (co-)generates transformative knowledge in just, ethical, activist ways, with the aim of finding spaces where dominant norms can be made visible, where seeming universals can be critiqued, where singularities can be problematized. It may provoke and unsettle our understanding of valid knowledge, and ask us to consciously delink from familiar practice, to recognize and resist dominant ways of doing and thinking that alienate us from ourselves and our lived experiences. It may encourage us to imagine experimental methodologies geared towards epistemic justice. The ideas summarized in Table One are proposed as a suggested direction of travel, an opportunity for reorientation, an invitation to attempt a radical de-linking from familiar traditions of knowing that dominate research and methodologies. The proposition is that we expand beyond sedimented methods to experiment with artifacts and materials valued outside university as well as within it and to experiment with our selves as immanent. Furthermore, the proposal directs us to expand beyond unjust ways of knowing human experience and assert the right of the marginalized to be heard without prejudice. And finally, the proposition invites an expanded vision of reality that is hybrid, uncertain, non-binary, horizontal, collective and co-operative.

**Reorientation around a framework for epistemically-just methodologies**

We have argued that research can and should be done differently to make knowledge consumption and production more just. We hope the imperative to do justice by recognizing and promoting pluralities of doing, knowing and being in the world is compelling enough to motivate change in research practices and institutions. It seems urgent that we do so at a time when existing methods limits are stretched in the face of problems never previously encountered, such as the unprecedented challenges of the climate emergency, the erosion of biodiversity, the threats of pandemic and the consequences of rampant capitalism. At such a time, what could a greater diversity of perspectives offer? We argue that epistemically-just research methods offer a rationale for deliberate inclusion of denied voices and a robust argument against dismissing the credibility of some because of who they are, how they are heard and how they communicate. However, we recognize that, implicit within any move away from dominant ways of doing/knowing/being, there is a risk; that those choosing to de-link will themselves be marginalized, ignore, silenced, overlooked, edged out; that researchers who
attempt this work will be laboring within a global industry enmeshed in global capitalism; that dominant practices actively encourage use of safe and familiar methodologies, regardless of (or in order to) reproduce the conditions that benefit the powerful few. These risks may play out in many ways that personally disadvantage the emergent scholar/activist, for instance, having funding for proposed projects refused, being unable to attract funded doctoral students, having limited publication outlets and opportunities to present, and so forth.

Nevertheless, as we point out above, there are scholar/activists working today who come from established and strengthening traditions, whose ontological position is grounded in a worldview alive to social injustice and who are motivated by the belief that alternative existences are attainable if alternative approaches are adopted. Those who are persistently resistant and impressively digressive, work in stubborn hope of just change that de-centers dominant narratives and makes room for multiple knowledges so establishing epistemic justice for those who are currently positioned as less-valued knowers. We hope sharing the framework prompts critical discussion amongst those ready for/already doing that work, about its usefulness and its shortcomings, to develop it further and to support research that builds alternative, more just, ways of doing/knowing/being. If alternatives can be explored, and room be made for narratives that contest, confound and resist dominant knowledges, other, epistemically-just methodologies will be possible.

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