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who decides? in whose name? for whose benefit? decoloniality and its discontents

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The growing traction of decolonization as a discourse and practice within and beyond the context of academic scholarship has generated important spaces for critical, self-reflexive engagements with the role of systemic, historical, and ongoing colonial violence in the foundations of various scholarly fields. Although the overarching area of "decolonial critique" contains a considerable range of perspectives, both complementary and contradictory, overall these perspectives challenge the common assumption that colonialism is "over", pointing instead to the ways that it has persisted and shapeshifted both in settler colonial countries (where the colonizing power never 'left'), as well as in purportedly decolonized countries that are nonetheless characterized by "patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations".

The growing traction of decolonization as a discourse and practice within and beyond the context of academic scholarship has generated important spaces for critical, self-reflexive engagements with the role of systemic, historical, and ongoing colonial violence in the foundations of various scholarly fields. Although the overarching area of "decolonial critique" contains a considerable range of perspectives, both complementary and contradictory, overall these perspectives challenge the common assumption that colonialism is "over", pointing instead to the ways that it has persisted and shapeshifted both in settler colonial countries (where the colonizing power never 'left'), as well as in purportedly decolonized countries that are nonetheless characterized by "patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations" (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243).

In addition to denaturalizing and historicizing the colonial present – that is, the ways that colonial relations continue to organize everyday contemporary life – decolonial critiques also gesture toward alternative possibilities for knowing, being, and relating. These alternatives are not sanctioned by, and in fact are often ignored or actively suppressed within, mainstream institutions and discourses. While decolonial critique has been around for a long time, arguably since the onset of European colonialism in the 15th century, its recent growing popularity has prompted many critical responses. These responses range from Indigenous scholars who express frustration with how decolonization has been conflated with other social justice projects premised on representation, recognition, and redistribution within a reformed but still-colonial system (Tuck & Yang, 2012), to the vitriolic backlash of right-wing groups who warn that decolonial critiques are nefarious efforts to eradicate white, western ways of life.

Yet beyond these two highly visible perspectives are perhaps the more common responses from researchers who question claims about the enduring character of colonialism and challenge the legitimacy of decolonial critiques in more subtle ways. Rather than dismissing them outright, they offer seemingly reasoned engagements with decolonial critiques that nonetheless ultimately conclude that the critiques are premised on scholarship that does not hold up to careful scrutiny, nor meet accepted (Eurocentric) standards of academic rigour, rationality, and social impact. Although these approaches are much less direct in their dismissal than those that attack decolonial critique on principle, ultimately, they tend to come to a similar conclusion that suggests these critiques are of little social or scholarly value. Because these engagements are articulated within the standard discourse and political orientation of mainstream scholarly critique, they tend to carry significant weight both within and beyond higher education institutions, and thus, they warrant a response. This is what we offer here.

In particular, we do so by responding to a recent article by Edward Vickers (2019), "Critiquing coloniality, 'epistemic violence' and western hegemony in comparative education – the dangers of ahistoricism and positionality," which exemplifies this seemingly more measured approach. In the piece, Vickers engages with the articles published within a special issue of the *Comparative Education Review* (CER) journal on the theme of "contesting coloniality," to which two authors of this article contributed (see Shahjahan, Blanco & Andreotti, 2017; Stein, 2017). He begins by affirming his "broad sympathy" with the critique of Western epistemic dominance (Vickers, 2019, p. 3), but quickly moves to argue that the special issue as a whole is characterized by "highly generalising claims regarding the nature and significance of Western 'coloniality,' uninformed by any balanced comparative analysis of colonialism as a historical phenomenon" (Vickers, 2019, p. 2).

Vickers implies that the special issue itself was unnecessary, as "critiques of Eurocentrism increasingly abound" (Vickers, 2019, p. 3) within the field of comparative and international education. Yet not only are not all critiques of Eurocentrism necessarily decolonial (as Vickers himself notes), but also the mere presence of critique does not equate to its mainstream positioning. More often than not, critiques of Eurocentrism (whether decolonial or not) are engaged tokenistically, in ways that deflect rather than engage those critiques in a substantive way. Nonetheless, it is common for responses to decolonial critiques to represent them as holding far more institutional and epistemological power than they do – and therefore, to be potentially threatening to the integrity of academic scholarship. Thus, the creation of more space for critical voices, however minimal and conditional, is often perceived as a threat to the status quo. The assumption is, first, that inclusion is granted only through the benevolence of those doing the including, rather than out of a recognition of the value of what is being included, or the ethical imperative to ensure that diverse perspectives are not only heard but also taken seriously; and second, that those who are being included are vying for hegemony and a monopoly on available resources (Ahmed, 2012). Indeed, these concerns become evident when Vickers (2009) warns that the critique of epistemic violence "echoes the virulent identity policies of the contemporary USA" that "threatens open academic debate" (p. 12).

Given the appeal that this argument may hold for an audience that is already suspicious about the scholarly and social value of decolonial research, we have chosen to respond to Vickers' intervention. Like Vickers, we affirm "the healthy complexity of conversations within our field" (Vickers, 2019, p. 17). Furthermore, we affirm the need to ensure the rigor and social impact of decolonial work, but we emphasize the importance of doing so from a space that takes into account systemic, historical, and ongoing power inequities between dominant and marginalized communities

and their knowledge systems. One of Vickers' overall concerns is that critiques of coloniality, in particular the coloniality of knowledge, risk reproducing at least some of the problems that they identify. Ultimately, we acknowledge this risk, but critique both the approach and the grounds on which Vickers articulates his concern – that is, from a defensive position in which his own perceived colonial entitlement to occupy a position of epistemic authority have come under critique. We suggest that this does not offer a generative starting place to address the risks of circularity in decolonial critique, which instead can be most strongly and carefully addressed in strategic, power conscious, socially accountable and context-specific ways by those who are already deeply engaged with the complexities of decolonizing work.

In an effort to represent Vickers' argument without reproducing it in its entirety, we spend the first part of the remainder of this article summarizing his concerns. Next, we offer our response to each of these concerns, suggesting that his portrait of decolonial scholarship fails to attend to the highly uneven power relations that continue to characterize knowledge production in academic contexts. In doing so, we identify some of the ethical and political stakes of decolonial critique, emphasizing how the colonial relations that characterize both higher education and larger social contexts shape the kinds of scholarly interventions and framings that can be effectively mobilized toward pluralizing possible futures – including decolonial futures. Despite refuting Vickers' characterization of decolonial critique, we nonetheless take the opportunity to offer reflexive engagements with decolonial work, including the risks of circularly reproducing colonial patterns of entitlement and exceptionalism. We suggest that decolonial scholars must be conscious of these risks, address the complexities and tensions involved in activating a decolonial orientation, and ask how our scholarship might denaturalize Western hegemony without asserting another hegemony in its place.

Vickers' Critique

In this section, in order to respond to Vickers' critique of coloniality scholarship in the CER special issue, we first summarize his critique under three broad, interrelated concerns. The first concern is the notion that critiques of coloniality tend to rest on uninterrogated essentialisms about both the West and its 'others'. For instance, Vickers asks, "What does it mean to talk of the 'West', 'North', 'Anglo-West', 'Euro-America' or the other terms they use interchangeably?" (Vickers, 2019, p. 4). Identifying a "decolonial master-narrative" he suggests that these critiques tend to reproduce "a vague and divisive system of categorization" (Vickers, 2019, p. 5), which "risk[s] mirroring and exacerbating" the very essentialism (about the West and the non-West) they seek to interrupt (Vickers, 2019, p. 4). The second concern is what Vickers characterizes as the special issue authors' tendency to paint colonialism as a uniquely and quintessentially Western feature. He asks, "In so far as 'the West' can be seen as a coherent political, cultural or 'epistemic' category, how accurate or meaningful is it to equate Western influence with 'colonialism,' or to represent 'colonialism' as intrinsically 'Western'?" (Vickers, 2019, p. 4). This is arguably the point on which he spends the most time, offering an extensive engagement with Asian examples of colonialism in an effort to prove his point that the West was not the only colonial power in either the past or the present. Vickers emphasizes in particular Soviet colonialism during the Cold War, Japanese empire during the early 20th century, and Chinese hegemony today. He also notes that the framing of the West as a uniquely colonial power has been instrumentalized by the Chinese government as a means to justify its own repression of occupied peoples and domestic political dissidents. He concludes that "neither colonialism nor the attitudes associated with it constitute a peculiarly 'Western', 'Northern' or

'Anglophone' pathology" (Vickers, 2019, p. 12), and further, that to suggest otherwise results in decolonial critiques paradoxically "reinforcing the very Eurocentrism they abhor" (Vickers, 2019, p. 2).

The third and final interrelated concern identified by Vickers is that critiques of coloniality tend to rest on the romanticization of marginalized peoples and their knowledges. He expresses concern that decolonial critique "implies the legitimacy of judging scholarship not so much on the basis of what is argued as of who is doing the arguing" (p. 8). He contends that in decolonial scholarship, "those classified as victims [are] implicitly assigned moral superiority over the perpetrators," and challenges their presumed epistemic privilege (Vickers, 2019, p. 6). Related to his critique that the West is painted as uniquely evil in ways that erase non-Western colonialism and complicity, Vickers emphasizes that non-Westerners are not "uniformly victimised" and thus concludes that claims about their superiority are untenable (Vickers, 2019, p. 8). Further, he is particularly concerned that (over)emphasizing the need to create space for epistemological difference of the marginalized will lead the field of comparative and international education to lose its commitment to "evidence or logic" (Vickers, 2019, p. 18).

Under this third theme of questioning whether the role of positionality in knowledge production warrants "serious attention from their peers" (Vickers, 2019, p. 8), Vickers specifically writes from his concern that there are few circumstances in which "a 'white' European scholar" would be "entitled to debate 'coloniality'" (Vickers, 2019, p. 8). Indeed, he writes that this concern is not "purely hypothetical", as he has been previously critiqued for speaking as a "white, male, public school-and-Oxford-educated British scholar" (Vickers, 2019, p. 8). He notes: "a response to my critical review of a volume on the politics of education in Asia accused me of 'positioning' myself as 'the legitimate voice of critical Asian scholarship' in disregard of my own 'language- and race-related privilege,' and thus of attempting to set myself up as 'a modern viceroy of sorts'" (Vickers, 2019, p. 21). In an effort to contest the accuracy of this characterization, and reaffirm his own epistemic authority and entitlement to "debate 'coloniality'" (Vickers, 2019, p. 8), he offers a more detailed account of his positionality that emphasizes his proximity to marginality, engaging in what Tuck and Yang (2012) would characterize as (colonial) moves to innocence (see also Mawhinney, 1998). Vickers (2019) notes that beyond his "manifold privileges within global academia and beyond", there is more to his backstory, including:

> Irish Catholics here, an Indian ancestor there, working-class Liverpool grandparents, a Jewish great-grandfather, not to mention years spent in China as a lowly educational functionary. I now live in Japan with my Japanese wife and children, working for a Japanese university, where my foreignness entails a complex mix of marginalization and advantage. (p. 8)

Response to Vickers' Concerns

Having summarized Vickers' concerns, we offer our response to each. First, Vickers argues that critiques of the West/Western colonialism tend to mis-represent the West as a monolith, which fails to account for its significant internal diversity and complexity. Undoubtedly, there is indeed significant heterogeneity on both sides of the colonial line. However, this heterogeneity does not in itself alter the overall impact of colonial power. Furthermore, this unequal power shapes the ways

that academic arguments are both articulated and received. In a context where decolonial perspectives are already marginalized, and perspectives in general are increasingly polarized, offering an overarching critique of the colonial patterns that are reproduced within Western knowledge production may be the only way for that critique to be heard. Indeed, "non-Western knowledge" has been represented in oversimplified ways throughout the history of Western colonization (Alcoff, 2007); to effectively speak back to those generalizations may require the strategic mobilizations of generalizations about Western knowledge as well. Or as Edward Said (1994) put it,

> No one can escape dealing with, if not the East/West division, then the North/ South one, the have/have not one, the imperialist/anti-imperialist one, the white/colored one. We cannot get around them all by pretending they do not exist; on the contrary, contemporary Orientalism teaches us a great deal about the intellectual dishonesty of dissembling on that score, the result of which is to intensify the divisions and make them both vicious and permanent. (p. 327)

Yet for Vickers, by naming the endurance of colonialism in comparative and international education as a problem, the special issue authors have *become* the problem (Ahmed, 2012). That is, efforts to name these colonial dynamics are portrayed by Vickers' as the reason for the reproduction of those dynamics – a move that paradoxically helps to ensure their reproduction by silencing critique. Indeed, he challenges the "racialised language in the CER special issue" (Vickers, 2019, p. 8), a framing which in turn implies that mainstream scholarship within the comparative and international education field is not always already racialized. Perhaps Vickers' refusal to take seriously this enduring racialization is what enables him to suggest that scholarly arguments operate on a flat, static, depoliticized terrain. In other words, it is only by ignoring the ongoing, uneven geo-political economy of knowledge production that can one suggest that these kinds of dynamics do not matter – and by implication, suggest that Western higher education is not still overwhelmingly dominated by Western thought (in all its internal variety).

Furthermore, if this critical point about the persistence of overarching Western epistemic dominance is not accepted as a baseline starting point for conversations about coloniality, then there is a significant risk that emphasizing heterogeneity on both sides of the colonial divide will be weaponized against marginalized populations, and instrumentalized to discredit important (if often imperfect) efforts to interrupt that colonial relationship. For instance, the complexity and heterogeneity of Indigenous communities has been used as an excuse to ignore the need to secure their consent for various social, political, and intellectual projects. In these instances, emphasizing heterogeneity becomes a means of bypassing the difficult, complicated work of building equitable and ethical relationships premised on trust, consent, accountability, and reciprocity (Whyte, 2019). This is not to say that complexity and heterogeneity are unimportant, but rather that there are important, strategic questions to be asked about when and where they should be invoked and emphasized. Thus, instead of Vickers' implicit suggestion that these complexities invalidate the need for decolonial critique, we suggest the need to view decolonial critique as an ongoing, context-specific conversation that shifts as relevant debates move both within academia and the larger social milieu.

In response to the second concern, in which Vickers critiques the lack of engagement with other

forms of colonialism – especially Asian colonialism – as an ironic form of Eurocentrism, we agree that all forms of colonialism can and should be critiqued. However, Vickers' choice to emphasize the relative lack of engagement with a specific geographic area operates as a bit of a strawman, even as it offers an interesting glimpse into some of the scholarship about Asian imperialism and its educational implications. He paints the special issue's focus on Western colonialism as a "lapse in historical accuracy" (Vickers, 2019, p. 6), rather than accepting it as a decision on the part of the editors and authors to focus on one area instead of others. While undoubtedly Western colonialism was the overarching focus of the special issue, none of the articles claimed that colonialism was a uniquely Western phenomenon, nor that it was their intention to offer a comprehensive analysis of colonialism across time and place. The theme of the issue was focused on the enduring coloniality of comparative and international education as a field of study. Given the Western origins of the CIE field, it only makes sense that the emphasis would be on the ways that Western colonialism has shaped knowledge production in this area. Furthermore, this focus is undoubtedly influenced by the fact that it is specifically *Western* colonialism that has indeed had the greatest impact globally in the last six centuries.

The fact that certain governments have used the notion of a uniquely violent colonial West to justify their own violence does not invalidate the need to critique Western colonialism. To suggest as much is immobilizing, and actually forecloses upon a deeper examination of the ways that the current global system remains dominated by a form of Western colonialism that is nonetheless increasingly challenged by other forms of colonialism – that is, a competition characterized by "colonialism against colonialism." For instance, when French President Emmanuel Macron criticized Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro for his handling of the Amazon fires, Bolsonaro fired back that Macron was acting as a colonial power toward Brazil, thereby deflecting critiques of the Bolsonaro administration's support for violence against Indigenous peoples. As Mignolo (2014) suggests, dewesternization, or changing the rules of the global political economic game of accumulation and influence set by Western nations so as to give non-Western nations a better shot at "winning" that game, is not the same thing as decolonization, which would require changing the game entirely (see Stein & Andreotti, 2017).

Finally, Vickers' dismissal of the importance of positionality in knowledge production appears rooted in concern that decolonial critiques challenge the presumed neutrality of scholarly debate, and the presumed universality of (Western) rationality. Indeed, he perceives these challenges, alongside the demand for more space for non-Western knowledges, as an outright attack on the value of Western knowledge. This includes a personal concern about challenges to his own epistemic authority and autonomy, and specifically his presumed entitlement to be viewed as an expert on colonialism, as is evidenced by his reference to previous critiques he has received in this arena. In this way, Vickers provides the counter-argument to his own argument, by offering clear evidence of the continued need for decolonial conversations that denaturalize the universalism and neutrality of Western epistemology.

Vickers seeks to represent himself as a victim of decolonial critique, eclipsing those victims who have actually been subject to colonial violence, both epistemic and otherwise.

This sense of victimization and the tendency to mobilize critique as a form of transgression of a perceived imposed dominance (of decolonial critique in this case) goes beyond Vickers himself, and has been expressed by several other scholars with a white male, postionality, perhaps most notably Jordan Peterson. This perceived victimization is rooted in the perception (whether accurate or not)

that their entitlement to epistemic authority is coming under question in ways that it previously had not. This response is rooted in colonial investments that both presume and naturalize white male epistemic authority, but it is also related to the common presumption that knowledge production and epistemic value are zero-sum games in which the players can only be "plus-1" or "minus-1". From this perspective, decolonial critiques can only be seeking to replace one (Western) hegemony with another hegemony, which in turn is perceived as a threat to the relevance or even the existence of those who currently occupy the position of hegemony. Similarly, the presumption is that if one is critiquing Western hierarchies, then one must be seeking to invert those hierarchies, only with the marginalized communities now at the top.

Rather than consider the possibility that there might be systems and relations between knowledges that are not premised on competition, exceptionalism, and hegemony-seeking, but rather on an ecology of knowledges (Santos, 2007) in which each knowledge system has contextual relevance and is both indispensable and insufficient, Vickers instead focuses on dismissing what he reads as decolonial claims about the superiority of non-Western knowledge (and authors). He specifically dismisses the notion of non-Western moral superiority and epistemic privilege by pointing to the complicity of non-Western peoples in colonial violence. Apparently, because it is not "plausible to entertain a neat division of the world between victims and perpetrators of 'colonialism' or 'epistemic violence'" (Vickers, 2019, p. 8), then any concern about colonialism or epistemic violence is misplaced; if there are no perfect victims or pure villains, then structural power inequalities are not worth examining.

Furthermore, he claims that the concept of epistemic violence "threatens open academic debate" (Santos, 2007, p. 12), which not only significantly overstates the institutional power of decolonial critiques, but also conflates his and others' ability to actually articulate his academic position (including against those critiques) with the presumption that this position will be received with deference and social legitimacy. He also suggests that the notion of epistemic violence takes much needed attention away from "actual violence" (Santos, 2007, p. 12), a stance that ignores voluminous scholarship that traces the impacts (symbolic, psychological, material) of colonial efforts to invalidate and eradicate the knowledge systems and ways of knowing of Indigenous and other marginalized populations (e.g., Ahenakew, 2016; Simpson, 2014; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012).

Overall, Vickers concludes that while it is important to challenge "unreflective Eurocentrism", this can only be done on terms that he finds acceptable – particularly through a "comparative history of colonialism and imperialism" (Vickers, 2019, p. 20). He suggests that, by contrast, "decolonial discourse" is "ahistorical" and rooted in an "anti-Western essentialism" that "threatens the respect for our common humanity necessary to effective scholarly collaboration across cultural boundaries" (Vickers, 2019, p. 20). Here, decolonial scholars are again identified as the cause of social divisions, rather than as those who are drawing attention to the ways that those divisions are reproduced.

Gesturing Beyond Colonial Entitlements

It is important to note that the dynamic of debates related to decoloniality and its discontents tends to be circumscribed by an intellectual, affective, and relational grammar that is extremely difficult to overcome. This grammar is rooted within a modern/colonial system, and includes particular parameters with regard to intelligibility, desirability, and relationality. Elsewhere, we have mapped the parameters of intelligibility within this grammar as being restricted by certain referents that cannot be entirely dismissed if one intends to be intelligible within academia (see Andreotti, 2016;

Ahenakew, 2016; Stein, 2018). Indeed, even the discussions in this paper, and in this conclusion in particular, might appear unintelligible to some. These modern-colonial referents are grounded on a Cartesian ontology that reduces being to knowing ("I think, therefore I am") and that imposes certain forms of reasoning as parameters for legitimacy and legibility, including teleological, anthropocentric, allochronic, logocentric, universalist, utility-maximizing, and dialectic forms of reasoning. Paradoxically, we need to strategically use this grammar – at least in selected ways – in order for our critical efforts to be intelligible within dominant scholarly discourses and institutions.

While drawing on this grammar to offer decolonial critiques may be necessary in order to shift academic and social debates and achieve certain immediate equity-enhancing measures, it can also become a circular trap – in particular if we forget that we are working strategically and start to employ and embody the grammar in earnest. This is particularly the case for its affective and relational dimensions, at least some of which might be or become unconscious habits of being. With regard to academic economies, the affective dimension of this modern/colonial grammar creates and feeds desires for totalizing forms of knowledge, mastery, certainty, superiority, protagonism and control, as well as authority, autonomy, sovereignty, and universal validation in its aspiration to order and engineer the world through a universal form of rationality. The relational dimension of this grammar restricts what is politically possible by grounding politics in (different) economies of exceptionalism, "enlightenment", purity, virtue and/or innocence that manifest as competitions for entitlements to different forms of material or onto-epistemic privilege.

Unless we can get to the limits of what is possible within this grammar, and become dissatisfied with what it offers, we may continue to circularly reproduce modern/colonial patterns – even in our efforts to critique them. To crack this grammar and the habit of being that it supports, we will need to learn to disinvest from its promises, and activate viable but currently unimaginable possibilities for co-existing differently. Until we develop the stamina and courage to do this difficult, uncomfortable, ego-effacing work, we will likely continue to invest (increasingly scarce) resources in unsustainable academic economies that are limited in their ability to interrupt modern/colonial patterns of knowing, desiring, and being. As Burman (2012) points out, this might require us to lose our satisfaction with the circularity of most academic debate itself, since "there is no way we are going to intellectually reason our way out of coloniality, in any conventional academic sense. There is no way we are going to publish our way out of modernity. There is no way we are going to read our way out of epistemological hegemony" (p. 117).

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