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History of Knowledge through the Global South

A Case for Entangled Ecologies

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ABSTRACT: In this brief discussion, I reflect on the significance of using the category of the global south for reconfiguring the scope of the history of knowledge. While I see this as a productive paradigm shift that has already given rise to mould-breaking works, I focus here on the cross-hemispheric histories of extractive capitalism and how both colonial violence and anticolonial resistance have shaped knowledge-making. I argue that thinking through 'entangled ecologies' can be a tool for countering the existing conceptual order, which has led to the north-south division in the first place. Attending to epistemic and ontological entanglements would enable us to ask better and deeper questions about the increasingly complex interconnections across human and nonhuman worlds, especially given the planetary crises we face today.

KEYWORDS: entangled ecologies; global history; Global South; history of knowledge; Latin America; periphery

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LOCATING KNOWLEDGE

When researching the history of epistemic production originating outside of the Euro-Anglo sphere, I am faced with geographical, theoretical, and methodological challenges. What does it mean, for example, to think from or through specific localities like Latin America, Africa, or Asia? Is this a valid question in the first place? How does one deal with established historiographical binary categories such as modern and traditional, as well as western and non-western?¹ What methodologies are needed when, for

1 In this essay, I have used uncapitalized versions of all regional terms, such as west/western, south/southern, and so forth, to acknowledge the power dynamics that determine the changeable geopolitical significance of their usage.

example, studying multilingual sources? What are the implications of using the global south framework alongside disciplinary approaches such as global history?

These are some of the questions that I bear in mind in my work as an intellectual historian studying the production of eco-social knowledge in Latin America as part of the global dynamics of violence, resistance, and exchange. The multiplicity of localities that have shaped my intellectual self adds further complexity. After deeply formative schooling in the Latin and Greek classics alongside the canon of western philosophy and literature in my southern Italian hometown, I studied and later researched the literature and history of Latin America, mostly in UK academia with a few south-bound turns along the way. How does my own intellectual locatedness as a southern European producing scholarship in the north further complicate this picture?

There is, however, a question that pre-empts all the previous ones: What is considered knowledge, and who is deemed able to produce it? Acknowledging the title of cultural critic and literature scholar Hamid Dabashi's book, *Can Non-Europeans Think?*,² in the brief discussion that follows, I will reflect on the significance of using the category of the global south to reconfigure the history of knowledge, which continues to largely coincide with the history of western thought and western science. I use 'knowledge' here to include diverse ways of relating to the world that may not fall neatly within the methodological boundaries of disciplined epistemologies.

While it is relevant, and even urgent, to theorize from and about the global south, it is also necessary to bear in mind the geopolitical nature of the category, which

2 Hamid Dabashi, *Can Non-Europeans Think?* With a foreword by Walter Dignolo (London: Zed Books, 2015).

overlaps with those countries that until recently were grouped among the developing or underdeveloped economies. Therefore, even though I see this as a productive paradigm shift that has already given rise to mould-breaking works, I argue for a framework that can grasp the cross-hemispheric histories of extractive capitalism and how both colonial violence and anticolonial resistance have shaped knowledge-making. Reading these dynamics as ‘entangled ecologies’, I suggest, would enable us to ask better and deeper questions about the increasingly complex interconnections across human and nonhuman worlds in processes such as environmental, economic, and financial extractivisms, human and nonhuman migrations, and ecological and cultural loss. Perhaps this perspective leads to a more fitting version of my preliminary question: What modes of knowledge production do we need to cultivate in an age of climate breakdown and mass extinction?

WHERE IS THE GLOBAL SOUTH?

In the foreword to Dabashi’s book, Argentine decolonial theorist Walter D. Mignolo suggests that it is necessary to undiscipline thinking because western philosophy is not the only way to think.³ This seems to be a productive reflection that bears not only on the content of knowledge (what is worth thinking and theorizing about) but also, and perhaps even more importantly, on its methods (how thought can be accessed and processed to produce plural avenues for interpreting and creating complex interactions across multiple worlds). For example, I have recently explored community-based practices of knowing-with in Colombia’s Caribbean region that unsettle the body-mind

3 Walter Mignolo, ‘Foreword: Yes, We Can’, in Dabashi, *Can Non-Europeans Think?*, pp. viii–xlii (pp. xi–xii).

dichotomy central to dominant western epistemologies and encourage the cultivation of alternative methodologies.⁴ Theorizing through the global south is a crucial step towards the urgent task of undertaking an ‘ecology of knowledge’ in order both to acknowledge erasures and to reveal plural knowledge systems.⁵ In this respect, the framework of entangled ecologies that I am proposing further emphasizes the planetary interconnections underlying knowledge-making.

The first step is to consider the geopolitical significance of the category of the global south as it results from its institutional constitution. The term ‘south’ was already circulating in the 1970s and was relatively well-established by the 1980s as a means to roughly indicate ‘Third World’ countries and to mark a north-south distinction. The key document that validated the global south as an identifiable geoeconomic region was the 2004 United Nations report ‘Forging a Global South’, and it did so largely in terms of economic development.⁶ Although geographically ubiquitous, the term combines the north-south polarization with an increasingly integrated market economy. Many scholars claim that the unevenness shaping the material and discursive conditions that constitute the global south should

4 Michela Coletta, ‘A World without Objects: Epistemic Bordering for a Transformative Future’, *FORMA — A Journal of Latin American Criticism & Theory*, 2.1 (2023), pp. 109–31.

5 Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

6 Michela Coletta and Malayna Raftopoulos, ‘Counter-Hegemonic Narratives and the Politics of Plurality: Problematising Global Environmental Governance from Latin America through the Case of Bolivia’, *Iberoamericana — Nordic Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, 47.1 (2018), pp. 108–17 <<https://doi.org/10.16993/iberoamericana.429>>; Arif Dirlik, ‘Global South: Predicament and Promise’, *The Global South*, 1.1 (2007), pp. 12–23; United Nations Development Programme, Special issue ‘Forging a Global South’, United Nations Day for South-South Cooperation, 19 December 2004.

be considered from the perspective of continued western imperialism.⁷ While this new geopolitical assemblage disarranges the traditional boundaries of earlier world-system divisions, it once again masks those sets of historic relations instead of replacing them. The global south coincides with those countries previously under the umbrella of the underdeveloped and developing world.

While it is, then, critical to acknowledge new possibilities of agency whereby ‘the global south names the places where decolonial emancipations are taking place and where new horizons of life are emerging’,⁸ it remains challenging to overcome the extractive economic and epistemic relations that underpin the north-south division. Consequently, as Dabashi claims, we must be wary of continuing to uphold stark distinctions, because ‘[t]his “we” is no longer we folks in the global South, for some of us have migrated to the global North [...], [and it] includes all those disenfranchised by the global operation of capital whether in the north or south [...]’.⁹ I reflect on this statement as a migrant academic working in a Global History Department in Berlin, which encourages me to envisage rewriting the history of knowledge through and from the global south as a vital project of epistemic reparation towards the wider undertaking of what I call ‘entangled ecologies’.

Thinking through ‘entangled ecologies’ is a tool for countering the existing conceptual order, which has led

7 *Handbook of Transnational Governance: New Institutions and Innovations*, ed. by David Held and Thomas Hale (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

8 Caroline Levander and Walter Mignolo, ‘Introduction: The Global South and World Dis/Order’, *The Global South*, 5.1 (2011), pp. 1–11 (pp. 4–5) <<https://doi.org/10.2979/globalsouth.5.1.1>>.

9 Dabashi, *Can Non-Europeans Think?*, p. 43.

to the north-south division in the first place. Postcolonial studies have uncovered the continued material and intellectual dependency of post-independence countries as well as the local genealogies of universalist worldviews. However, postcolonial scholars, having been trained in the same methodologies from the humanities and social sciences, have been largely drawing upon the same theories whose long-lasting effects they propose to debunk. In contrast, over the last few decades, global south intellectual movements have been much more closely involved with social and environmental struggles than before. For example, the Latin American decolonial turn initiated by the Modernity/Coloniality group in the late 1990s has an activist component, which, while not being an advantage in and by itself, marks a significant shift that has helped to reposition cultural production at the centre of political change.¹⁰

While participating in and building on the much-needed work of south-centred scholarship, I suggest that ‘entangled ecologies’ of knowledge are necessary to account for south-north contaminations in view of processes of coloniality that are increasingly planetary through a convergence of multiple lines of extractivism, which are not only environmental and economic but also financial and technological.¹¹ Therefore, understanding the realm of knowledge production through entangled ecologies refers, firstly, to the historical approach of entangled history, which has already addressed the limits of postcolonial theory by drawing attention to the interconnections between

10 The extent to which the academy is co-opting and disciplining grassroots methodologies is an important element of the critiques directed to Latin American decolonial scholars.

11 Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, ‘On the Multiple Frontiers of Extraction: Excavating Contemporary Capitalism’, *Cultural Studies*, 31.2–3 (2017), pp. 185–204 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2017.1303425>>.

and across societies. Secondly, it evokes the idea that the separation between humans and nature is no longer tenable and that new exchanges between organic and inorganic matter have reached an unprecedented scale. Let us think, for example, of how plastics are transported by rivers, follow ocean currents, and are ingested by fish and water birds. The conception of knowledge-building processes as partaking in complex relations involving human and nonhuman encounters resonates with what Karen Barad calls 'posthumanist performativity'.¹² In order to address the dangerously unbalanced politics of knowledge and, as importantly, to account for the political, economic, and ecological interconnections that exist in knowledge production, we need to look at the global south in more expansive terms.

'The interstitial South is the otherness within the North; therefore, it can be defined essentially in relation to the North rather than in absolute terms', writes Marco Armiero in his analysis of the environmental campaigns against waste management in Italy's southern region of Campania.¹³ 'The interstitial South', he continues, 'is, of course, a matter of money; the poor are everywhere, even within the rich societies of the so-called developed countries. The urban space reproduces segregation and social stratification, creating the interstitial South of ghettos.'¹⁴ Armiero's image of the south as an interstitial space that

12 Karen Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28.3 (2003), pp. 801–31 <<https://doi.org/10.1086/345321>>.

13 Marco Armiero, 'Is There an Indigenous Knowledge in the Global North? Re/Inventing Local Knowledge and Communities in the Struggles over Garbage and Incinerators in Campania, Italy', *Estudos de Sociologia*, 1.20 (2014) <<https://periodicos.ufpe.br/revistas/revsocio/article/view/235511>> [accessed 16 September 2022].

14 Ibid.

opens gaps of economic poverty and social marginality through the north helps convey the idea of the porous and fragmented nature of geographical divisions such as north and south. My question is, then, what this means for epistemic production. In my research on Andean and Amazonian paradigms of ‘Living Well’ (*Buen Vivir*), I find global history methods useful for looking at the long-standing, and often violence-driven, intersections within and across cultures located as either ‘indigenous’ or ‘western.’ How should these north-south entanglements traversing local, regional, and global scales be addressed when studying knowledge production?

ENTANGLED ECOLOGIES OF KNOWLEDGE

For Dilip Menon, ‘doing theory from the Global South stems from the exigent demand for decolonizing knowledge and developing a conceptual vocabulary from traditions of located intellection.’¹⁵ This focus on the locatedness of intellectual production stands out in relation to the global dominance of Euro-American episteme. Menon addresses this issue by framing it largely in terms of (un)translatability: ‘Not all conceptions are translatable across cultures and this gives us occasion to think about the hubris of the universal assumptions of our academic practices.’¹⁶ This idea of (un)translatability reminds us of the relevance of knowledge that arises from specific human and ecological environments. It is also critical for enabling a fuller — if never complete — validation of lost or marginalized cultural practices in an attempt to account for those experiences of violence that

15 *Changing Theory: Concepts from the Global South*, ed. by Dilip M. Menon (Milton Park: Routledge, 2022), p. 24.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

are neither ‘indigenous’ nor ‘modern’, such as in the case of the Caribbean.¹⁷ From this perspective, addressing the entangled ecologies of knowledge production complicates binary systems such as global north and global south by revealing those ‘miscegenated genealogies.’¹⁸

Recently, I have revisited the notion of the peripheral as a prolific epistemic state through the work of Aymara-Bolivian sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui. I have proposed the framework of *epistemic bordering* to theorize the expansion of the peripheral condition of living across multiple worlds at once.¹⁹ As a scholar who has migrated from the south to the north of Europe and mingled with communities of migrant scholars, I have lived and worked through those economic, social, and intellectual intersections across such geopolitical divides. Bordering knowledge also means allowing for intellectual and linguistic impurity, contamination between the spheres of theory and practice, and un-disciplinarity. ‘The wandering gaze’, writes Rivera Cusicanqui, ‘understood as peripheral and fully awake to its environment, has the potential of being all-encompassing and is capable of relating at once to itself and to everything else’, thereby ‘transcend[ing] the anthropocentric nature of the social.’²⁰ This concept of the peripheral draws from anticolonial indigenous resistance as much as from Walter Benjamin’s writings on history and modernity, especially given their critique of the modernist notion of linear movement. While this notion is governed

17 Malcolm Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World*, trans. by Anthony Paul Smith (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022).

18 Menon, *Changing Theory*, p. 11.

19 Coletta, ‘A World without Objects’.

20 Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, *Un mundo ch’ixi es posible. Ensayos desde un presente en crisis* (Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón, 2018), p. 41. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my translation.

by the principle of exclusion, which leaves behind what does not conform to its forward direction, the peripheral perspective is anticolonial insofar as it is multidirectional and multilayered.

An entangled ecology of knowledge helps us to address Menon's central question about the temporality of knowledge production in the global north: 'What is lost when one reflects with the social theory of modernity, and its abbreviated sense of time, that creates a timeline from the Enlightenment in Europe?'²¹ Entangled ecologies account for multiple temporalities that coexist, as the periphery is no longer a geographically identifiable place but enmeshed within planetary relationships of material, technological, digital, financial, and human mining. Peripheries travel by following the routes of the financial exploitation of human labour or by being connected through the carbon offset schemes that big polluters like oil and gas corporations use to compensate for their emissions.²² However, through these capitalocentric dynamics of coloniality, multidirectional systems of interactions emerge, as well as possibilities to imagine alternative ways of building assemblages that flourish from the coexistence of difference.²³ For example, in reformulating the temporality of modernity, Rivera Cusicanqui advocates for the 'project of long temporality' of what she calls 'indigenous modernity'.

21 Menon, *Changing Theory*, p. 10

22 Josh Lederman, 'Corporations Are Turning to Forest Credits in the Race to Go "Carbon-Neutral." Advocates Worry about "Greenwashing"', *NBC News*, 5 December 2021 <<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/corporations-are-turning-forest-credits-race-go-carbon-neutral-advocat-rcna7259>> [accessed 18 December 2022].

23 For a perspective on the Anthropocene that arises from a critique of capitalism, see *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. by Jason W. Moore (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016).

This perspective recognizes the temporal and geographical intersections that need to be accounted for in order to re-view how categories like ‘modern’ and ‘indigenous’ have been pitched against each other by post-Enlightenment histories.²⁴

One of the concepts that Rivera Cusicanqui offers for rethinking not only the historical complexities of coloniality but also how we imagine and build communities is the Aymara term *ch'ixi*. *Ch'ixi* refers to the colour grey, which, when observed from a close distance, reveals the black and white points that make up its texture. It is used to describe fluid beings, like the snake, who travel across borders and connect different worlds, like those of land and water. *Ch'ixi* beings embody multiple identities; they are neither male nor female, neither human nor nonhuman, and they flow like the serpent, which is also water.²⁵ The notion of *ch'ixi* designates interdependent worlds; on the one hand, it allows us to understand relationships of coloniality across boundaries, including those between north and south, while, on the other hand, it creates possibilities of commoning that elude the logic of duality. ‘Perhaps’, she writes, ‘it will be possible to weave a *ch'ixi* epistemology of planetary value that will enable us to fulfill our common duties as human beings’, while ‘becom[ing] even more rooted in our own local communities, territories, and bioregions.’²⁶

Building *ch'ixi* alliances means adopting the logic of impurity, through which human and nonhuman communities are recognized in their fundamental interconnectedness rather than divided by exclusionary categories. Thus,

24 Coletta, ‘A World without Objects’.

25 Ibid.

26 *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa: On Practices and Discourses of Decolonization*, trans. Molly Geidel (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), p. 81.

this perspective also enables us to switch into an ecological epistemic mode where both individual and collective entities can be understood as participating in multiple worlds. In this respect, these theorizations are by no means abstract, but rather are attentive to material processes that are imbricated in the dialectical nature of oppression and resistance. The Nordic and Germanic etymology of ‘entangle’ refers back to ‘seaweed’, which ensnares wood, fish, and nets. In the same way, we are trapped in complex sets of relations whose contaminations can be revealed more fully through an entangled ecology perspective. ‘Not being able to be in the middle’, suggests Timothy Morton, ‘is a big problem for ecological thinking. [...] [I]t edits out something vital to our experience of ecology, [...] the hesitation quality, feelings of unreality [...], feelings of the uncanny: feeling *weird*.’²⁷ A sense of possibility lies in the interstices that break dichotomic narratives of identity and follow the migratory routes of workers, plastics, foods, technologies, and ideas.

TOWARDS NON-ANTHROPOCENTRIC ALLIANCES

In approaching the category of the global south from the perspective of the history of knowledge, I hope that this brief reflection has offered a small contribution towards contaminating boundaries while recognizing the timely and necessary work done by global south scholarship. In his influential book on the history of knowledge, Peter Burke asks an important question: How do we determine what and who contributes to knowledge besides what falls

27 Timothy Morton, *All Art is Ecological* (London: Penguin Books, 2021), p. 2.

within western 'science'?²⁸ From this perspective, Menon's point about localism helps to assign political value to knowledges produced in any location, irrespective of claims to universality. I seem to steer back towards my initial question: '[W]ho is and who isn't deemed capable of knowing?'²⁹ This question can be expanded in a number of ways. For instance, one version may go like this: What kind of knowledge production is considered to be a viable tool for political decisions? This is where the global south as a framework is crucial in contributing not only to reshaping the debate about what constitutes knowledge but also to reviewing both the agents and the methods through which knowledge is produced.

However, as I have tried to suggest in the previous few pages, deeper lines are running across north and south, and I can trace these lines in my own professional and intellectual crossings, even if only anecdotally. The urgency to avoid abstract universalisms makes it relevant to challenge new forms of separation, which may otherwise continue to hinder the possibility of promoting critical alliances. Tracing the history of socio-ecological knowledge, as I have suggested, requires a conception of these relationships as impure, contaminated, and deeply entangled across those boundaries that continue to be anthropocentric and capitalocentric. Raising questions specifically about southern globality illuminates the political and economic hierarchies at play in any attempt at categorizing. At the same time, it is an opportunity to enrich existing epistemic frameworks for imagining new ways of making communities. For

28 Peter Burke, *What is the History of Knowledge?* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2015), p. 7.

29 Lukas M. Verburgt, 'The History of Knowledge and the Future History of Ignorance', *KNOW: A Journal on the Formation of Knowledge*, 4.1 (2020), p. 5 <<https://doi.org/10.1086/708341>>.

example, posthumanist philosophy struggles to find a way out of speciesism, and it largely continues to conceptualize the human as distinct from the animal. A *ch'ixi* worldview breaks this pattern by avoiding duality altogether. Similarly, disrupting the exclusionary dualism between indigeneity and modernity gives way to a shared sense of responsibility towards the unfolding of a planetary catastrophe. Building a non-anthropocentric future that responds to planetary threats requires planetary alliances.

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