Indigenous Epistemes

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As an institution, the academy supports and reproduces certain systems of thought and knowledge, and certain structures and conventions that rarely reflect or represent indigenous worldviews. Research has demonstrated the marginalization, institutional racism, and indifference toward indigenous peoples and their epistemologies, histories, and concerns in the academy. It has also shown how in general, academic practices and discourses are hegemonic, racist, patriarchal, and (neo)colonial (e.g., Battiste and Henderson 2000; Mihesuah 1998; Mihesuah and Wilson 2004; Kuokkanen 2007; Smith 1999). Yet intellectual discrimination is rarely addressed as an indication of the academy having failed drastically at its main objective, i.e., the production of knowledge. What is behind this ignorance and arrogance, besides the apparent desire to uphold a status quo that serves the interests of those in power and of society at large? And how does this indifference affect the objectives of higher learning? Is it acceptable for "a site of learning" to be so ignorant?

Like the critiques of colonial education and residential schools, the general indigenous criticism of the academy analyzes, first and foremost, structural and institutional legacies of colonialism. In the university, the particular struggle is over the control of academic knowledge and the contents of the curriculum: what is being taught and expected? From which perspective? For what purposes? And in whose interests? Another crucial issue for indigenous scholarship is research ethics—conducting culturally appropriate research that follows indigenous protocols and guidelines. Indigenous scholars have also criticized the Eurocentric bias that results in questioning and undervaluing the validity of their research departments and colleagues. Research by indigenous scholars is deemed irrelevant or "revisionist" because, in many cases, it either falls outside mainstream research or draws on personal experiences as a member of a "minority group." Work on an indigenous researcher's own community and issues can also be criticized as biased, and consequently dismissed as unscientific, or self-serving. However, as the late Vine Deloria propitiously observed,
The identification of scholars working in the field of Indian–white relations has this strange quality to it: proponents of the Indian version of things become "revisionists," while advocates of the traditional white interpretation of events retain a measure of prestige and reputation. (1987, 85)

Michael Dorris, in turn, contends that while Native American scholarship may be called "revisionist," it does not imply invalidity: "Europeans and Euro-Americans have not felt shy in writing about their respective ancestors and are not automatically accused of aggrandizing them; why should native scholars be less capable of relatively impartial retrospection?" (1987, 104).

These concerns reflect the broader question of hierarchies of knowledge, such as the way in which indigenous epistemologies are often regarded as inferior when compared to western scientific knowledge, which is understood as being produced through objective, neutral, and rational inquiry. As first pointed out in the mid-twentieth century by Frantz Fanon (1961, 1967) and Albert Memmi (1965), colonialism signifies not only the occupation of territories but also a certain type of relationship between the colonizer and the colonized in which the latter is considered inherently inferior ("uncivilized," "savage," "primitive").

This chapter attends to the fact that within the contemporary university, it is no longer non-western people but their systems of knowledge and perceptions of the world – what Michel Foucault termed epistemes – that are rendered inferior, and therefore dismissed. I argue that as long as the academy sanctions epistemic ignorance, it will be unable to profess its multiple truths (cf. Derrida 2001).

This chapter begins with a discussion of indigenous epistemologies and a rationale for the concept of episteme. It then introduces the idea of epistemic ignorance and explains how it operates in contemporary academia. I suggest that to take epistemic ignorance seriously is a way to draw everyone in the academy into the process of creating new, less hegemonic forms of knowledge. This is distinguished from multicultural attempts of "knowing the other," which is considered not only an inadequate response, but also an irresponsible one for it reflects a specific type of racism that enables the dominant to occupy the position of universality while consigning the other to a partial and particular one. Instead, I argue that academics are responsible for doing their homework, part of which is beginning to "learn from below."

### Indigenous Epistemologies

By epistemes I refer, by and large, to the traditions of beliefs, assumptions, and ways of relating to the world that have been dominant in certain societies, and thus have influenced the construction of predominant discourses, not individual psyches and behavior. In a way, epistemes are the invisible principles according to which a society functions. They are assumed in the sense that they are constituted of (usually unstated) presuppositions, of which individuals are not necessarily aware unless they come into contact with other epistemes. Usually we are socialized into a certain episteme at an early age; this becomes our primary socialization and thus is foundational in terms of our values, perceptions of the world, and attitudes. Later, we may acquire other epistemes,
which form our secondary socialization. As an explanation of reality, giving meaning to the world and producing certain concepts (and not others), an episteme is implicit in language and reflected in the knowledges, discourses, disciplines, institutions, rules, and norms of a society that are consistent with those statements. The concepts of knowledge, discourse, and discipline are, in many ways, intertwined, and it is not always possible to speak of one in isolation from the others. Moreover, to speak of "knowledge" is to consider not only ways of knowing and things known, but also to consider what gets defined as knowledge, who does this defining, and who benefits from the act of definition. Similarly, it is necessary to pay attention to ways in which knowledge acquires authority and legitimacy in realms other than those from which it arises.

Yet, I would also suggest that the concept of episteme allows an analysis that extends beyond theories or systems of knowing. Episteme is often used to denote "of or pertaining to knowledge." Michel Foucault, however, defines an episteme as "something like a world-view" and "the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possibly formalized systems" (1972, 191). Foucault considers an episteme as a period of history organized around a certain deeply held assumption about the world, which determines what and how a society thinks, sees, and understands. The episteme is a lens through which we perceive the world, structuring the statements that count as knowledge in a particular period. In other words, it is a mode of social reality, the taken-for-granted ground whose unwritten rules are learned (and as Foucault would say, "written" in the social order) through the process of socialization into a particular culture.

Epistemes and the values they shape are dynamic and constantly evolving in time and space. Although separate and distinct in many ways, many indigenous peoples' epistemes share certain fundamental perceptions of the order of things, particularly with respect to the human relationship to, and position in, the world. Discussing indigenous worldviews and philosophical traditions does not imply that they apply to every single indigenous individual in the world. To assert so would be as inappropriate as to propose that, say, Cartesian thinking applies to every individual in dominant society. It is obvious that the longstanding domination of various colonial practices has resulted in the erosion, alteration, and alienation of many indigenous epistemes. In other words, as I talk about epistemes, I am not proposing either that all indigenous people understand themselves and the world through the lens of an indigenous episteme, or that those who do self-consciously recognize and understand their particular indigenous episteme as such. Even if there are countless contemporary indigenous individuals who have been socialized into the epistemes of their people, there are also a vast number who have had either limited or no access to them at all (if such a thing is possible). Epistemes are not necessarily taught and identified as such but are rather a way of being in the world transmitted most often unconsciously by families and communities.

In keeping with this understanding of epistemes, some have argued that in indigenous thought, "the world is not an external domain of objects that I look at, or do things to, but is rather going on, or undergoing continuous generation, with me and around me" (Ingold 2000, 108). Such a way of being in, or relating to the world shifts assumptions that are fundamental to western thought and culture. Thus, for
example, engagement and participation are conditions not only of being but also of knowledge. Illustrating this difference, Tim Ingold offers a comparison of some aspects of mainstream western and Ojibwa (or Ojibway/Anishinaabe) ontological premises:

Mainstream Western philosophy starts from the premise that the mind is distinct from the world; it is a facility that the person, presumed human, brings to the world in order to make sense of it. [...] For Ojibwa, on the other hand, the mind subsists in the very involvement of the person in the world. Rather than approaching the world from a position outside of it, the person in Ojibwa eyes can only exist as being in the world, caught up in an ongoing set of relationships with components of the lived-in environment. And the meanings that are found in the world, instead of being superimposed upon it by the mind, are drawn from the contexts of this personal involvement. (101)

Though Ingold is speaking about a specific North American indigenous episteme that cannot be generalized, on the level of ontological principles, the Ojibwa way of relating to the world corresponds to that of many other indigenous peoples. Ingold recommends considering different ontological premises in the light of genealogical and relational approaches or models. The genealogical model, based on linear and static assumptions of ancestry and cultural memory, is not only fundamentally colonial but also deeply implicated in the discourse of the state (151). It is the relational model, in Ingold’s view, which better reflects the ways in which identities, knowledge, and relationships with the natural environments of indigenous peoples are constituted. Borrowing from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, he compares the relational model to the image of the rhizome, which makes it possible to conceive the world and life in constant change. Representing the idea of multiplicity and resisting causality and hierarchy, rhizome is a mass of interrelated roots and nodes. One of the founding premises of the relational model of the world is that life is not an internal property but is instead immanent in the relations between persons and things (Ingold 2000).

Interestingly, the metaphor of rhizome resembles the notions of textuality in deconstructive practice. Emerging out of poststructuralist challenge to a set of false epistemological and hermeneutic certainties embedded in western philosophy, “textuality” is often misunderstood as implying that everything can be reduced to a text. Instead, the notion of “text” and “texture” implies that “we are effects within a much larger text/tissue/weave of which the ends are not accessible to us” (Spivak 1990, 25). Moreover, arguing for a new notion of the “text,” Jacques Derrida proposes that it “is henceforth no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces” (Derrida 1979, 84). In this view, “a text is never anything but a system of roots” that are endlessly interwoven (Derrida 1976, 101–102). It is possible to find similarities in the way both indigenous thought and deconstructive practice recognize the embeddedness of human existence within intricate webs that can never be fully grasped. Of course, this does not indicate that deconstructionists would unproblematically share or understand the basic premises of indigenous thought.
of indigenous epistemes. On the contrary, many theorists of deconstruction are deeply implicated in the ontological and philosophical traditions of the West.

Epistemic Ignorance

My concept of epistemic ignorance draws on Spivak’s “sanctioned ignorance” but is also informed by epistemological marginalization. For Spivak, sanctioned ignorance refers to the ways in which “know-nothingism” is justified and even rewarded in the academy. It is “of heterogeneous provenance,” and it manifests itself in various ways such as through academic practices that enable the continued foreclosure of “native informants” by not acknowledging their role in producing knowledge and theories. Borrowing from Lacanian psychoanalysis, Spivak uses the concept of foreclosure to talk about ways in which the native informant and her perspective are erased by the production of academic elite knowledge. She has defined this as “the interested denial of something” (Spivak 1990, 125).

What I call epistemic ignorance refers to the ways in which academic theories and practices marginalize, exclude, and discriminate against other than dominant western epistemic and intellectual traditions. In the process of producing, reproducing, and disseminating knowledge, these “other” epistemic and intellectual traditions are foreclosed to the point that generally there is very little recognition and understanding of them. In other words, epistemic ignorance as a concept is not limited to merely not-knowing or a lack of understanding. It also refers to practices and discourses that actively foreclose other than dominant epistemes and that refuse to seriously contemplate their existence. Epistemic ignorance is a form of subtle violence. When other than dominant epistemes and forms of knowing are not seen or recognized, they disappear.

Epistemic ignorance arises at both the institutional and individual levels and manifests itself by excluding and effacing indigenous issues and materials in curricula, by denying indigenous contributions and influences, and by showing a lack of interest and understanding of indigenous epistemes or issues. Students, faculty, and staff are all guilty of this. Yet epistemic ignorance is not a simple matter of communication, nor is it only a question of individuals acquiring a multicultural perspective or a cross-cultural understanding. It is not limited to changes in the curriculum. It is a question of epistemological racism (i.e., what is considered legitimate epistemology in the academy) as well as of sheer indifference and ignorance of the sort that takes western epistemes for granted as the only valid point of departure. Manifestations of epistemic ignorance are not random offshoots or isolated incidents; they are rooted in academic structures that are complicit in colonialism and that reproduce the inferiority of non-western epistemes (in the same way that the inferiority of peoples was produced earlier) in order to protect the interests of those in power. It is a question of the legacy of colonial histories and power inequalities but also of understanding; as Spivak notes, “to ignore or invade the subaltern today is, willy-nilly, to continue the imperialist project; in the name of modernization, in the interest of globalization” (Spivak 1990, 290). Epistemic ignorance is excused and sanctioned in many ways. For example, it is veiled in sentiments of political correctness (e.g., mainstream faculty are not permitted to teach issues pertaining to the “other”), concerns about colonialism
Knowing the Other

It has been long recognized that any attempt or claim to know (about) other peoples and cultures is loaded with problems and dangers (e.g., Asad 1973; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Geertz 1973; Mohanty 1984; Said 1978; Spivak 1985). A well-meaning but patronizing liberal-humanist tradition upholds the belief that a mere cultivation of understanding or an increase of information will facilitate the encounter with the "other" or even eradicate systemic social and power inequalities. At its extreme, this view asserts that liberal democracy is a "social strategy for enabling individuals to live the good life. It is unalterably opposed to ignorance. It trusts that knowledge and understanding have the power to set people free" (Rockefeller 1994, 91). Spivak takes the political philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre as an example of the simplistic supposition that sheer data facilitates understanding of the "other," a view that she identifies with the "arrogance of the radical European humanist conscience" (1999, 171). In his *Existentialism and Humanism*, Sartre argues: "Every project, even that of a Chinese, an Indian or a Negro, can be understood by a European [...]. There is always some way of understanding an idiot, a child, a primitive man or a foreigner if one has sufficient information" (cited in Spivak 1999, 171). Assuming the universality of epistemologies and transparent access to any episteme or system of knowledge, this view adopts a Eurocentric superiority and colonial mentality according to which western or "modern" ways of knowing and intellectual traditions are more sophisticated than others (when the latter are even admitted to exist).

Eurocentric assumptions of knowing (inferior) others have been contested on various grounds and by different discourses over the past couple of decades. Postcolonial theories denounce attempts at knowing the other through a colonial, imperial bias, while feminist critiques remind us of the implications and legacies of the patriarchal gaze through analyses of the androcentric biases of supposedly gender-neutral knowledge. Anti-racist and critical race theorists consider the idea of learning about other peoples and cultures a liberal strategy aiming at improving the control of difference, while many anthropologists and ethnographers continue to struggle with the crisis of cultural representation. Poststructuralists, in turn, ask how one can imagine knowing other peoples and cultures when a person can never even fully know herself. In indigenous scholarship, it is often argued that other peoples cannot be known through cultural lenses that are based on entirely different assumptions and perceptions of the world.

The question of knowing other peoples and cultures is further complicated by the argument that appreciation of other cultures does not necessarily prevent violence. This is the case with Hernando Cortés, the Spanish conquistador who seized the kingdom of Montezuma in what is now Mexico. Conquistadors' writings indicate that, at least on a certain level, the Aztecs inspired admiration in Europeans – but the marvel of the Spaniards was, by and large, limited to the objects produced by the Aztecs:

Like today's tourist who admires the quality of Asian or African craftsmanship though he is untouched by the notion of sharing the life of the craftsmen who...
produce such objects, Cortés goes into ecstasies about the Aztec productions but does not acknowledge their makers as human individualities to be set on the same level as himself. (Todorov 1987, 129)

"Understanding of other cultures" in terms of architecture, design, and material culture cannot be conflated with understanding of different worldviews or immaterial, intellectual culture. The separation of the products of a culture from the actual producers is a convenient way to avoid recognizing and addressing human beings on either an individual or a collective level. It also enables the simultaneous appreciation of the material culture (both in past and present) on the one hand, and a perception of indigenous people as the "social problem," on the other. Such sophisticated appreciation of art and cultural property, which ignores the actual histories of the producers and peoples who give shape and meaning to this art and culture, continues today in contemporary museums and galleries. As Homi Bhabha argues,

In fact the sign of the "cultured" or the "civilized" attitude is the ability to appreciate cultures in a kind of musée imaginaire; as though one should be able to collect and appreciate them. Western connoisseurship is the capacity to understand and locate cultures in a universal time-frame that acknowledges their various historical and social contexts only eventually to transcend them and render them transparent. (1990, 208)

Through this potent association of knowing with acquisition and inscription, to "know" becomes a mode of power and control. Postcolonial criticism has long argued that producing and having (or claiming to have) knowledge of other peoples reflects the desire of the knowing subject to tame and consume, if not to possess or devour, that "other." Knowledge — both its production and imposition — has also been a means of controlling and gaining power over indigenous peoples.²

Rousseau was among the first to point out, in his Discourse on Inequality, that European voyages to, and colonial exploits of, other parts of the world have amounted to nothing more than "ridiculous prejudices" and further knowledge of the European self. He criticized the way European explorers and colonizers utilized their cultural relativism to maintain their own sense of superiority and normativity.³ Spivak (1985) calls the process of containing the other for colonial purposes "othering"; domesticating an incommensurable and discontinuous other in order to consolidate the imperialist self. In this way, the other is conventionalized in the dominant discourse, the epistemic discontinuity that might have existed is neutralized and the "subaltern" — defined in this context as those barred from speech and (self-)representation — is constructed as monolithic. The violence of a specifically European mode of knowing and understanding cannot, however, be put to rest or made to disappear simply by declaring it suspect. Even if one might occasionally be tempted to adopt the more pessimistic view of the incommensurability of modern and indigenous epistemes, the only viable path forward appears to be in committing ourselves to building a responsible (response-able) academy. This can be done only by extending the dominant, western intellectual conventions beyond their normative limits.
Responsibility for Doing Homework

Look, you’re an academic. Do your homework. If I weren’t supposed to teach you something, why are you in class?

(Spivak 1990, 93)

For Heidegger, responsibility is "a response to which one commits oneself" (cited in Gasché 1995, 228). Spivak, whose notion of responsibility also reflects Mikhail Bakhtin's articulation of "answerability," elaborates this idea of responsiveness or response-ence.4 Spivak posits that response "involves not only ‘respond to,’ as in ‘give an answer to,’ but the related situations of ‘answering to,’ as in being responsible for a name (this brings up the question of the relationship between being responsible for/to ourselves and for/to others); of being answerable" (Spivak 1994, 22). Responsibility signifies the act of response, which completes the transaction of speaker and listener, as well as the ethical stance of making discursive space for the "other" to exist. She maintains that "ethics are not just a problem of knowledge but a call to a relationship" (Spivak 1996, 5). If responsibility cannot be merely the mechanical expectation to answer, what it means, then, to call for a willingness to give a response and for the ability to respond? What is the response-ability of the academy?

Responsibility links consciousness with conscience. It is not enough to merely know one’s responsibilities; one must also be aware of the consequences of one’s actions. Without this awareness, there is a risk of the arrogance of a “clean conscience,” a stance of studied innocence by privileged, hegemonic academics who can afford to be indifferent and not-knowing. Spivak has argued that doing one’s homework implies unlearning one’s privilege and learning. This starts by addressing one’s privilege and the prevailing "ideology of know-nothingism" in a way that will make visible the various forms that elite racism takes. It requires the critical examination of one’s beliefs, biases, and assumptions as well as an understanding of how they have developed and become naturalized in the first place.

Derrida calls for "new ways of taking responsibility" in the academy – ways that critique while also moving beyond the professionalization of the university. These new ways would signify a rethinking of the university as well as an examination of its disciplinary structures (Derrida 1983). Importantly, for Derrida, these "new responsibilities cannot be purely academic. If they remain extremely difficult to assume, extremely precarious and threatened, it is because they must at once keep alive the memory of a tradition and make an opening beyond any program, that is, toward what is called the future" (1983, 16). New ways of taking responsibility in the academy are linked to the question of what constitutes a "good" university. If the new responsibilities cannot be purely academic, the answers will not always be found in the academy; thus we will have to make an opening beyond the academy.

We may approach the question by considering the Okanagan concept of En'owkin. This concept signifies a process of group commitment to find appropriate solutions through a respectful dialogue within a community. En'owkin is a collective process that seeks ways to include those voices that are in a minority; but this is not inclusion for the sake of inclusion. Rather, the concept of En'owkin recognizes that minority voices are necessary and that understanding them is vital to good governance and a healthy, viable community. As practiced in community and extended family circles, En'owkin is not about

about non-local or single issues. One’s own body and psyche, the survival of one's own family and community, one's place in the world, and one's desire to fulfill a mission all come together to create a place in the world to which one belongs.

Furthermore, responsibility is not about being able to do things alone. Responsibility is about being able to do things in a community of equals. Responsibility is about being able to do things with others who are as concerned about the well-being of others as you are about your own.

According to En'owkin, responsibility is about being able to do things that are good for the community. Responsibility is about being able to do things that are good for others. Responsibility is about being able to do things that are good for the world.
about making decisions but about hearing all voices. The premise of Enwɔkin is that no single individual can have all the answers and that if someone is arguing forcefully for his or her own point, there is no need to listen to that person. The point is not to stage an argument but to ensure that every perspective and view is heard. In other words, Enwɔkin implies that one is not participating in the process in order to debate or enforce one’s own agenda but rather to understand the view that is most oppositional to one’s own and to recognize its importance. In this way, difference becomes diversity, part of a multitude of perspectives that can be further debated. When these aspects of listening and dialoguing are not taken into account, there can be no rational outcomes and the following generations will suffer for it (Armstrong 2004).

Furthermore, doing homework must involve analyzing the typical “moves of innocence” – that is, those claims to the right to not know – as well as the simplistic breast-beating that allows business to go on as usual (Spivak 1990, 121). Instead of taking the position of the politically correct (yet dominant) academics who argue that they can no longer speak, one needs to examine the historical circumstances and articulate one’s own participation in various forms and practices of silencing. As Spivak puts it, “rather than simply say, ‘O.K., sorry, we are just very good white people, therefore we do not speak for the [other]’ those who conduct hegemonic discourse need to dehegemonize their position by learning how to occupy the subject position of the “other” and how to behave as a subject of knowledge within the institution of neocolonial learning (Spivak 1990, 1992).

According to Spivak, doing homework is an ongoing practice that includes learning as much as possible about the areas where the hegemony of the dominant and privileged subject is being challenged (Spivak 1996). However, familiarizing oneself with areas one knows little about still amounts to hegemonic practice if we do not engage in the “home” part of the homework. Calls to scrutinize the historical circumstances and to articulate one’s own participation in the structures that have fostered various forms of silencing (including self-censorship) represent a shift away from the idea of fieldwork toward the idea of homework. Whereas fieldwork is more often than not conducted elsewhere and “out there” – not least because for so many academics, it does not even cross their minds that universities and their campuses are in fact physical places, concretions of specific histories and labor – homework starts from where we are, from our homes. In the context of the academy’s homework, home is a broader concept than just one’s house or apartment (or office, or classroom, for that matter). The traditional Sami concept of home knows no walls; rather, it encompasses the surrounding environment with which they interact on a regular basis and without which they would not be fully human (Valkeapää 1994). Home, in this sense, and the act of sitting down to do homework thus compels us to examine this more complex reality. Who is at home here? Who was here before this became “my” home? Are there others who are at home here? What and where are our academic homes? What are their historical circumstances, and what is and has been the institution’s role in participating in them? The responsibility of academics cannot be limited to neutral descriptions of who we are, as has become common practice within the more self-reflective, critical academic circles; it must also link itself to the concrete, physical locations of our enunciation.

Instead of assuming that it is possible to know the “other,” we need to recognize the fundamental openness of learning. Epistemological curiosity, which is at the heart of
the academy, demands fundamental openness to the world, toward the “other.” The will to know implies an enclosure, a hegemonic monologue, and the colonial logic of domination. Instead of thinking that “we must know” or that “we are entitled to know” — positions that, by retaining a sense of ownership as well as distance, allow very little room for hospitality, the gift, or reciprocity — we need to make a distinction, however provisional, between knowing and learning (Spivak 1995). This distinction marks a departure from the methodologies of disengagement and the politics of neutrality and impartiality, both of which are associated with the conventional epistemologies of knowledge production, and both of which are characterized by the absence of responsibility and respect for what is studied and known. From this departure, we will arrive at an engagement with learning as participatory reciprocity, which acknowledges that “knowledge is a social activity, not the passive and ‘neutral’ reception of raw, ‘pure’ observational data by presocial individuals” (Plumwood 2002, 43).

“Learning from Below”

Since her earlier argument, Spivak has become somewhat cautious of the idea of “unlearning one’s privilege” because it can sound too pious and self-nobbling (Spivak and Sharpe 2002). Instead of unlearning one’s privilege, she argues, the privileged should use their privilege, make it downwardly mobile, and go where the subaltern feels normal (Spivak 2006). We also need to inquire, as Ahmed suggests, into what we are actually learning when we learn to see privilege. Does learning to see one’s privilege imply unlearning it? And does this learning, by definition, result in equality and justice? If learning takes place in contexts shaped by privilege such as the university, one’s learning about privilege may end up only increasing the cultural capital of the privileged (Ahmed 2004). Thus, Spivak (2000) has modified her earlier call for unlearning one’s privilege as “learning to learn from below.” She argues that “learning from below” occurs through teaching:

Learning from the subaltern is, paradoxically, through teaching. In practical terms, working across the class-culture difference (which tends to refract efforts), [...] the teacher learns to recognize, not just a benevolently coerced assent, but also an unexpected response. For such an education speed, quantity of information, and number of students reached are not exclusive virtues. (Spivak 2004, 537)

Discussing the relationship between learning and teaching, Paulo Freire similarly argues that teaching is “part of the very fabric of learning” (1998, 31). In his view, there is no teaching without learning, because “to learn” necessarily precedes “to teach.” Teaching was and is made possible through everyday processes and practices of learning. To “learn from below” also echoes the Okanagan principle of Enlōwkin: the goal is to learn and hear, not to process it into what one already knows or try to digest the material for academic production (cf. Spivak and Sharpe 2002).

Shifting from the arrogance of “knowing the other” to “learning to learn from below” requires a radical revision of previously held assumptions and conceptions of learning. As Freire (1998) contends, we are able to learn only when we recognize our “unfinishedness” — the fact

that we are always learning and not merely learning about the other. Freire illustrates how a non-metacognitive education individuates and reproduces the hierarchy of the hegemonic. His reflexive praxis (1998, 102) argues that education must be a process of self-actualization by the individual, from individualism to the entire community: the process is realized through the dialectic between teaching and learning:

“Learning from below” for Freire is not a subject-granted capacity to learn, but is the actual process of learning (102). It is a process of learning that offers a new epistemology of knowledge and the possibilities of social transformation between subject and object of knowledge.

Acknowledgments

This chapter is adapted from Epistemic Encounters: Learning with Children, with permission of the author.

Notes

1 “Epistemic Encounters: Learning with Children” by Raulna Kuokkanen. Copyright 2023 by the author.
that we are always learning and never done with knowing. This understanding challenges the standard academic arrogance, will to know, and premise of knowing the other. Further, “learning from below” implies “trying to learn outside of the traditional instruments of learning” (Spivak 1993, 25). The academy, both at the institutional and individual levels, has to be willing to reconsider the existing, dominant modes of learning and ultimately to learn a new way of learning – learning to learn from below without hegemonic assumptions of salvage, progress, or containment. It requires willingness to stretch into different modes of perceiving the human relationship to the world and depends on recognition of the human responsibilities toward that interdependence. Ultimately, learning from below necessitates transforming the conventional modes of thinking and knowing embedded in modern, Eurocentric epistemes, often characterized by linearity and monocausality, to relational, participatory, and narrative modes of being and knowing the world. Spivak maintains that the process of learning to learn from indigenous philosophies amounts to a powerful mobilizing discourse from which the entire globe would benefit, not only the Fourth World. She argues that this deliberate and heedful process seeks mind-changing on both sides and is attainable only through ethical singularity: an intimate, individual engagement with the “other” that occurs in non-essential, non-totalizing, and non-crisis terms (Spivak 1999).

“Learning to learn” must take a specific form of “learning to receive,” which calls for explicit attention to the act of receiving rather than arrogant, colonial “taking for granted.” It necessitates active participation in the process, in the form of responding and reciprocating. What is more, an indispensable part of this learning to receive is the ability and willingness to perceive indigenous epistemes “not only as repositories of cultural nostalgia but also as part of the geopolitical present” (Spivak 1999, 102). Indigenous epistemes are not residual artifacts of archaic societies, but ways of being and modes of thought and action that continue to shape people’s behavior, practices, and thinking today – and, even more importantly, indigenous epistemes offer new ways of enhancing our critical understanding and broadening our intellectual inquiry.

- see CHAPTER 7 (DELHI/AHMEDNAGAR FORT – WASHINGTON, DC/ BIRMINGHAM JAIL – PRETORIA/ROBBEN ISLAND 1947–1994; OR, RACE, COLONIALISM, POSTCOLONIALISM); CHAPTER 28 (DECOLONIZATION)

Acknowledgments


Notes

1 “Epistemological racism” is defined as racially biased ways of knowing in dominant epistemologies, which tend to distort the realities of people outside the mainstream or the dominant group. These epistemologies govern the current range of research paradigms
and originate from a certain history and society (or a group), reflecting and reinforcing assumptions of that particular society or group and excluding epistemologies of other peoples and societies. Epistemological racism ensures that all epistemologies except normative ones remain inferior and subordinate. See Scheurich and Young (1997).

2 See Smith (1999), particularly ch. 3. See also Said (1978) and Spivak (1985) on "worliding," the process by which imperial discourse is inscribed upon the colonized space by acts of mapping, naming, and colonial presence.

3 See Bonnett (2000).

4 See Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*, ed. Vadim Liapunov and Michael Holquist, trans. Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), for his philosophy of answerability. Bakhtin's concept is discussed, for instance, by Greg M. Nielsen, *The Norms of Answerability: Social Theory between Bakhtin and Habermas* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), 136–137. Central to this concept is the creative dimension of action and the question, "How should we act toward other cultures?" Nielsen notes that for Bakhtin, "action is more than an intelligent reasoned response to a problem or situation. The act or deed has the two-sided form of answerability."

**References**


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What to do for others in order to understand or disagree with them (e.g., a critic, a politician, or a member of a community) can be hard. In this “the “cozy” A: peacefulness that we are trying to promote better. Just as we do for the world (the end of criticism).