

# Expanding Our Understandings of Knowledge(s):

## Plurality Beyond Coloniality

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**K**nowledge is generally understood as the acquisition and use of information through experience and education. It is crucial for human development and progress. But the production of knowledge, a shared human ability, has often been transformed into and understood as solely the production of valid knowledge, often constricted by the constraints of how valid knowledge must be produced, who can produce it, and most importantly, how it is defined. Furthermore, these distinctions of knowledge and the production of knowledge often are reflective of other institutionalized power dynamics. As Arowosegbe states:

While knowledge is power, given the unequal distribution of global economic, military and political resources, unequal access to knowledge is a major part of the asymmetries of power that historically underline North–South relations. Consequently, and for the same historical reasons, countries controlling the concentration and possession of such resources naturally dominate the global production and dissemination of knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

Reflecting on such considerations, I intend to assess one contextualized aspect of knowledge—the production of knowledge about Africa—primarily through the works of Malawian historian Paul Zeleza. To start, I will summarize his key discussions on the unequal share of Africans in the “international political economy of knowledge production,” specifically about Africa, followed by his argument for the need to increase African publishing and dissemination, both nationally and internationally.<sup>2</sup> This

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1 Jeremiah O. Arowosegbe, “African Scholars, African Studies and Knowledge Production on Africa,” *The Journal of the International African Institute* 86, no. 2 (2016): 325.

2 Paul Zeleza, “Manufacturing and Consuming: African Libraries and Publishing,” *Development in Practice* 6, no. 4 (1996): 251.

all must be understood within the context of coloniality, the denial of agency; the imposition of a people, a society, or a culture into an object of another's worldview, hierarchy, history, future, and fundamental understanding. Coloniality's foundation was the construction of race as biological difference within a hierarchy.<sup>3</sup> Such was the impact and nature of imperialism and colonization, which were based upon the fundamental beliefs of the superiority of Europeans and the cultural contempt of non-European societies.

The first section will attempt to contextualize Zeleza's arguments through discussing how and why there came to be such an uneven production of knowledge by Africans, in reference to published works, and why the call for greater African scholarly production, especially aimed at knowledge about Africa, is a necessary and righteous argument. In the second section, I aspire to complicate and bring to light the intricacies that lie in emphasizing scholarly produced knowledge as the most fruitful method to counter coloniality, discussing how exalting academic knowledge can fall into the trap of the hierarchy of knowledge, itself a relic of coloniality. To conclude, I will assess how a radical and novel understanding of knowledge(s) is necessary and long overdue, and how this can be a key in overcoming the coloniality of knowledge that has become so deeply embedded as a result of the imperialist project.

### **Historical Contextualization of the Coloniality of Knowledge**

Imperialism and colonialism were processes through which Europeans constructed and invented both themselves and those that they encountered. Such an argument is well represented in influential works such as *The Invention of Africa* by V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon, and *Orientalism* by Edward Said. These authors argued that the European encounter with the other, non-Europeans, was structured through a collection of binaries: culture/non-culture, civilization/non-civilization, civilized/primitive, superior/inferior, history/non-history, in which the Europeans always remained in the upper hand. The rise of early modern Europe in the late fifteenth century produced alongside its Eurocentrism — a worldview in which all societies, histories, and cultures had to fit into the European schema, where Europe was both the norm and the superior. Through this worldview, the European encounter with America produced the modern notion of race, previously simply signifying geographic origin such as Portuguese, then constructed into a biological structure existing within a hierarchy.<sup>4</sup> This supposed biological racial hierarchy was constructed as a justification for and legitimization of the

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3 Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," *Nepantla: Views from South* 8, no. 3 (2000): 534.

4 Ibid.

conquest and domination by Europeans of the other.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the superiority/inferiority binary of the dominator/dominated was constructed to seem like the outcome of the natural state of relations between white and non-white.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, it imposed this binary upon all that related to those who were non-white, such as their culture, knowledge, and systems.<sup>7</sup> Ndlovu-Gatsheni discusses a concept introduced by Boaventura de Sousa Santos called the “abyssal thinking.”<sup>8</sup> This concept describes the perception that upheld the imposition of a category of humans into these binaries, meaning “an imperial reason that reduced some human beings to a sub-human category with no knowledge.”<sup>9</sup> The results of this Eurocentric imposition of binaries was the forced devaluing of conquered or colonized ways of being, and in some cases, the total eradication of them. The creation of such binaries did not simply serve to invent or construct the identities of the dominated people but were deeply integral to Europe’s creation of itself as well. As Europe plundered Africa, it became more modern and developed through the riches gained, while Africa grew more underdeveloped. This argument is prominent in Walter Rodney’s *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972), which argues that development/underdevelopment are two sides to the same process, yet another binary that was constructed through imperialism/colonialism and perpetuated into contemporary times.<sup>10</sup>

The binaries constructed through imperialism and colonialism have had lasting impacts on the ways societies and their histories are interpreted. In the context of Africa, the racial binary led to another fabrication, the creation of “sub-Saharan Africa” and its definition as “Africa proper” as G.W.F Hegel called it, arguing that “Africa was the ultimate ‘undeveloped, unhistorical’ other of Europe.”<sup>11</sup> It is this fabrication of Africa that is so critically examined in Mudimbe’s *The Invention of Africa*, which still haunts historical and historiographical works on both Africa and the world.<sup>12</sup> Zeleza

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5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 535.

7 Ibid.

8 Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization* (Oxford: Routledge, 2018), 3.

9 Ibid.

10 Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Bogle-L’Ouverture Publications, 1972).

11 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. John Sibree (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1861), 109, quoted in Paul Zeleza, “The Inventions of African Identities and Languages: The Discursive and Developmental Implications,” in *Selected Proceedings of the 36th Annual Conference on African Linguistics*, ed. Olaoba F. Arasanyin and Michael A. Pemberton (Somerville: Cascadilla Press, 2006), 15.

12 Valentin-Yves, Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), quoted in Paul Zeleza, “Banishing the Silences: Towards the Globalization of African History,” paper presented at the 11th General Assembly of CODESRIA in Maputo, Mozambique, December 6–10, 2005, 4.

reveals one manifestation of this through the examination of a survey of world historiography in which the African history of Egypt is incorporated into the Western history and the African Islamic history is attributed simply to Islamic history.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the deeply influential Pan-Africanist works of W. E. B. Dubois are called the beginning of “European-American historiography of Africa,” all while Western history takes up the most space and prominence throughout the work.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, Zeleza discusses how world history often only covers the past 5,000 years, disregarding the origin of our Homo sapien species of approximately 300,000 years, which is now well known to be Africa.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, Zeleza describes how world history often uses the European trajectory as the norm, disregarding that the rise of European hegemony occurred a comparatively measly two and a half centuries ago.<sup>16</sup> The use of the European and Western societies’ historical trajectories as the standard to which all other societies are compared denies these non-Western societies epistemic freedom, what Ndlovu-Gatsheni defines as “the right to think, theorize, interpret the world, develop own methodologies, and write from where one is located and unencumbered by Eurocentrism.”<sup>17</sup> Zeleza speaking to this point makes an incredibly apt assessment:

[T]he fantasies of Eurocentric historiography [...] has inferiorized African difference by turning it into a difference in time and a difference in space. Temporal differentiation is articulated in evolutionary terms and historical stages in which the West is always ahead in a social Darwinist world of linear development, initiating progressive change that others are fated to imitate. Spatial differentiation posits central and marginal places, territorializes social development — wealth and poverty — so that levels of material accumulation become measures of human worth and historical agency in which the West, once again, is not only placed at the center but its global expansion and interventions become imperative humanistic acts of magnanimity.<sup>18</sup>

These temporal and spatial differentiations within Western history, historiography, and worldview are key elements of coloniality, as they have imposed into the understanding of humanity a trajectory of unilineal evolution, where all societies develop along a pre-destined path from

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13 Zeleza, “Banishing the Silences,” 4.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Epistemic Freedom in Africa*, 3.

18 Zeleza, “Banishing the Silences,” 2.

traditional to modern. This single path of social evolution places the Western “modern” society as the guide and teacher to all other societies, which are assumed to be simply in the earlier stages of civilization, from which they can progress only by following the footsteps and guidance of the West. Such a perception of linear historical development is reflective of and based on the “idea of Europe as a teacher of the world and the idea of Africa as a pupil” which formed the basis of the civilizing missions of the imperialist and colonial encounters.<sup>19</sup> Such distortions of Africa’s history and culture are rooted in what V.Y. Mudimbe (1988) calls the “colonial library,” which is the Africa that was invented and constructed throughout the process of imperialism and colonialism: “Europe’s social imaginary of its ultimate ‘Other.’”<sup>20</sup> Zeleza describes how Mudimbe aptly focuses on how such a construction occurred through the framework of “Eurocentric categories and conceptual systems, from anthropology and missionary discourses to philosophy, an order of knowledge constituted in the sociohistorical context of colonialism, which produced enduring dichotomies between Europe and Africa.”<sup>21</sup> The knowledge constructed within these diverse domains by Europeans throughout their colonization of Africa functioned to affirm their search for difference and their perception of European superiority. This knowledge then served as a justification for the civilizing missions and colonial governments enacted within Africa and as a confirmation of the Eurocentric belief that Europeans must teach others their ways.

### **Countering the Coloniality of Knowledge About Africa**

In the context of such enduring constructions, the perpetuation of knowledge about Africa rooted within colonial distortions is an incredible travesty to both the human societies of the world and those within Africa, as it disfigures the genuine richness of our collective humanity through the continuation of false narratives. While there have been incredible strides to destroy such dominant narratives, coming from within and outside of the continent, there exists a damaging perpetuation of knowledge on the Africa invented through the colonial and imperial domination. Zeleza discusses the constraints that have hampered African publishing and the impact this has had on the limited information available to Africans and the outside world about Africa that comes from Africans themselves.<sup>22</sup> This manifests itself in African libraries whose collections are based on Western libraries, university and research libraries with low levels of journal subscriptions (which in the case of receiving library aid are given books and journals that are European and North American), and subscriptions to databases

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19 Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Epistemic Freedom in Africa*, 6.

20 Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, quoted in Zeleza, “Banishing the Silences,” 4.

21 Zeleza, “The Inventions of African Identities and Languages,” 16.

22 Zeleza, “Manufacturing and Consuming.”

that are dominated by Western scholarship.<sup>23</sup> As a result, Zeleza argues that Africa is often left dependent “on external sources for knowledge about itself [which] is a cultural and an economic travesty of monumental proportions.”<sup>24</sup> As we have discussed, this imported knowledge often is not reflective of the realities of Africa, instead reflective of the distorted Africa that has perpetuated itself throughout Western scholarship.

Knowledge about Africa must be informed by the people and realities of Africa, instead of solely through the understandings and perceptions of outsiders. The task at hand is what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) terms “deprovincializing” Africa, “an intellectual and academic process of centering of Africa as a legitimate historical unit of analysis and epistemic site from which to interpret the world while at the same time globalizing knowledge from Africa.”<sup>25</sup> Zeleza argues that publishing is the way forward and out of this information dependency, as it is critical for the cultural identities of Africans and “provides the material basis for producing, codifying, circulating and consuming ideas, which, in turn, shape the organisation of productive activities and relations in society.”<sup>26</sup> Zeleza is joined by authors Walter Bgoya and Mary Jay in promoting African publishing, who argue that publishing is a reflection of a society’s experiences, history, and identity and that it helps to preserve, enhance and develop a society’s culture.<sup>27</sup> Bgoya and Jay identify that, as of 2000 publishing in Africa is heavily concentrated in educational texts, while recognizing that the textbook market is still dominated by international publishers.<sup>28</sup> As of 2013, Africa holds 15 percent of the world population and published less than 2 percent of the books.<sup>29</sup> Such figures reveal that there is much progress to be made, which Zeleza identifies as necessary on all fronts of the publishing business, especially libraries. He discusses how libraries in the U.S. are responsible for up to 90 percent of scholarly journal income and that they are crucial in the venture to increase African publishing.<sup>30</sup> Libraries are one of the major places where people come into contact with books, therefore, they have power in their ability to support African publishers so that there is financial support for the internal production of knowledge about Africa. Additionally, libraries have the power to provide African consumers greater access to knowledge that reflects their own experiences. Zeleza calls on African intellectuals to

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23 Ibid., 294–7.

24 Ibid., 299.

25 Ndlovu-Getsheni, *Epistemic Freedom in Africa*, 4.

26 Zeleza, “Manufacturing and Consuming,” 299.

27 Walter Bgoya and Mary Jay, “Publishing in Africa from Independence to the Present Day,” *Research in African Literatures* 44, no. 2 (2013).

28 Ibid., 22.

29 Ibid., 23.

30 Zeleza, “Manufacturing and Consuming,” 300.

shed their inferiority complexes about their own work by publishing, without apologies, in journals they control; by reading and citing each other; by demonstrating a greater faith in their own understanding of their complex and fast-changing societies—for no one else will do that for them.<sup>31</sup>

In such a way, Zeleza makes a compelling argument for publishing as the means for Africans to regain control over the history of, reality of, and knowledge about Africa.

### **Constraints of Scholarly Publishing**

While publishing does not necessarily mean scholarly publishing, scholarly works are often the most elevated, especially in the context of changing dominant narratives, which is why I will assess this aspect. Though scholarly publishing certainly offers one route to dismantling the coloniality of knowledge about Africa, it is fundamentally crucial to recognize that it is not the only way, nor even the best way. Such reflections must be made in consideration of the coloniality of knowledge itself. Zeleza contends that higher education is “historically the most important site of knowledge production,” a valid justification for his emphasis on scholarly publishing.<sup>32</sup> Yet, it is necessary to recognize how such an emphasis on scholarly production can become a victim to the same coloniality of knowledge that it aspires to overcome by playing into the hierarchy of knowledge. Based on the scientific method, academic or scholarly knowledge are perceived as the basis for valid knowledge, positioning themselves at the top of the invented hierarchy of knowledge. Such a hierarchy is rooted in the Eurocentric belief of universal knowledge, that knowledge is not based in the cultural context it is produced within but transcends the identities and realities of who and where it is produced, positing a mind that could reason itself out of its body. As a result of such a framework, all knowledge that is produced outside of the Western scientific system is considered invalid, or at the most, inferior.

Such an epistemology is evident within higher education and academia, where the highest standard for producing valid knowledge through research is based on isolating objects of study from their context, “putting them in simplified and controllable experimental environments — which also means that scientists [researchers] separate themselves from

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31 Ibid.

32 Paul Zeleza, “Knowledge, Globalization, and Hegemony: Production of Knowledge in the Twenty-First Century,” in *Knowledge Society vs. Knowledge Economy*, eds. Sverker Sörlin and Hebe Vessuri (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 80.

nature, the object of their study.”<sup>33</sup> In recognition of this, there must be caution in placing scholarly publishing as the most effective route in countering the coloniality of knowledge, as it disregards the contexts of universities and research methods, themselves often mired in coloniality. Morgan Ndlovu discusses how universities are critical “producers and repositories of knowledge” and realizes how crucial it is to recognize whether universities in Africa “are African universities or merely Westernized universities on the African continent.”<sup>34</sup> Ndlovu argues that “even though some of the universities in Africa were conceptualized and erected by nationalist-led post-colonial governments, their epistemic foundation remains Eurocentric.”<sup>35</sup> This allows us to consider how African scholars, themselves, can partake in the construction of illusory, Eurocentric knowledge that they are aspiring to counter through the process of scholarly production. Thus, as a result of its invisibility, the coloniality of knowledge can reproduce itself through institutions of higher learning, perpetuating the same Eurocentric conceptualizations of Africa and the world.<sup>36</sup>

### Diverse Knowledges

It is imperative to recognize and assess the hierarchy of knowledge that has come to be so internalized within academia and societies. As mentioned, Western scientific knowledge has been placed in a binary with traditional and, frankly, all other forms of knowledge. Furthermore, within this hierarchy, scholarly or academic knowledge based on expertise substantiated by credentials is often validated in opposition to embodied knowledge, or that which arises from experience. This embodied knowledge is often diminished to the status of local knowledge as opposed to the scholarly universal knowledge. Based on the scientific method, the supposed universality of Western knowledge is what upholds it as the valid knowledge from which we can gain value, placing Western knowledge at the top of its own hierarchy. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni states, “the signature of epistemic hegemony is the idea of ‘knowledge’ rather than ‘knowledges.’”<sup>37</sup> The roots of the hegemonic Western knowledge are a materialist worldview, the separation of secular and spiritual, and in “narrowly focused scientific disciplines that neglect the interconnections of natural phenomena.”<sup>38</sup>

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33 Fulvio Mazzocchi, “Western Science and Traditional Knowledge. Despite Their Variations, Different Forms of Knowledge can Learn from Each Other,” *EMBO Reports* 7, no. 5 (2006): 464.

34 Morgan Ndlovu, “Coloniality of Knowledge and the Challenge of Creating African Futures,” *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* 40, no. 2 (2018): 100–01.

35 *Ibid.*, 101.

36 *Ibid.*, 99.

37 Ndlovu-Getsheni, *Epistemic Freedom in Africa*, 8.

38 Anders Breidlid, *Education, Indigenous Knowledges, and Development in the Global South: Contesting Knowledges for a Sustainable Future* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 35.



These characteristics are themselves revelatory of how knowledge is deeply intertwined with and dependent on the worldview of the society that it is derived from, as they are representative of an inherently Western conception of the world. Due to this, it is crucial to recognize that there are different forms of knowledge that arise from disparate worldviews, cultures, and experiences—not simply reducible to a hierarchy—but that can be represented and understood through the concept of knowledges.

### **Indigenous Knowledges**

In an attempt to discuss the characteristics of indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing that distinguish them from Western knowledge, we must emphasize the most common characteristics. Breidlid discusses the difficulty of describing indigenous knowledge systems without engaging in reductionism or essentialisms by contextualizing that the cultural experiences of different members within or between different societies are diverse and that, therefore, their knowledge and ways of producing knowledge can be divergent as a result.<sup>39</sup> Such a recognition substantiates the reality that diverse experiences lead to diverse knowledges. Despite this difficulty, Breidlid makes some general descriptions of indigenous knowledges that allow an understanding of how varying cultures and worldviews have shaped knowledges that are disparate from the hegemonic Western scientific knowledge. He illustrates indigenous knowledges as embedded in a worldview which sees the material and the spiritual as compatible, where there is a holistic understanding of the “interrelationship between nature, human beings, and the supernatural,” and an emphasis on the relationship “of human beings to both one another and to their ecosystem.”<sup>40</sup> One possible consequence of this divergent worldview and its resulting knowledge(s) is a success in sustainable development and ecosystem management, which is commonly related to the holistic conception of nature and the sacred and spiritual notions of land, as opposed to the Western exploitable, tame-able, and commodity notions of land.<sup>41</sup> The connections between these successes in sustainability and indigenous knowledges are documented in research from 2000 and 2010, which Breidlid uses to support his arguments.<sup>42</sup>

### **Breaking Through the Binary and Hierarchy**

Instead of partaking in the binaries of knowledge, which demand the opposition of indigenous knowledges to Western knowledge, or at their best the hierarchies that impose a submission of the former to the latter,

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39 Ibid., 43.

40 Ibid., 34–5.

41 Ibid., 38.

42 Ibid.

within a hierarchy of validity, there must be a recognition of the plurality of knowledges, each rooted within their cultural context.<sup>43</sup> This is not to say that there are distinct, separate knowledges that have mutually exclusive ways of understanding and criteria, because cultures and ways of life, themselves, are not so neatly separated, nor so stable.<sup>44</sup> It is to recognize that knowledges and cultures have permeable boundaries, where one way of thinking and being is only as valid as it is applicable and useful, without binaries or hierarchies among them. Ultimately, we need to realize that there is simply the incredible diversity of humanity that must be appreciated and understood on its own terms, in its own context.

In light of the recognition of the plurality of knowledge(s), we can reconsider how to counter the coloniality of knowledge, especially about Africa. As mentioned, the promotion of scholarly publishing is an important path, but it is one that must be understood within its context as having limitations and constraints. It is also to be understood that this is simply one of many paths, just as the African scholarly representations of Africa are but one portion of society's perceptions. To quote the decolonial revolutionary Frantz Fanon, "nobody has a monopoly on truth . . . the search for truth in local situations is the responsibility of the community."<sup>45</sup> Such a perception allows us to recognize the need to caution against exalting academic publishing as the best means to counter the coloniality of knowledge about Africa. It forces recognition of the diversity of people's ways of living, which are likely to produce divergent ways of understanding, resulting in a plurality of knowledges that are representative of their respective realities. In such a context, the effective countering of the coloniality of knowledge about Africa can only be the result of the opening of dialogue with the diverse populations and societies of Africa. Therefore, all may contribute to the shaping of shared, divergent, and constantly in flux conceptions of their culture, history, and society.

### **Expanding Notions of Libraries**

One illuminating example of honoring the knowledge produced by all sections of society is by widening of our understanding and conceptions of what a library is, referring to where knowledge can be acquired. Cherry-Ann Smart offers a novel conception of a library that incorporates the knowledge and memories of enslaved Africans transported to the New World, with a specific focus on "Africans brought to the West Indies between the 1650s and the 1850s."<sup>46</sup> The basis of her argument is that enslaved

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43 Paul Feyerabend, *Farewell to Reason* (London: Verso, 1987).

44 *Ibid.*, v–vi.

45 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 139.

46 Cherry-Ann Smart, "African Oral Tradition, Cultural Retentions and the Transmission of Knowledge in the West Indies," *IFLA Journal* 45, no. 1 (2019): 17.

Africans brought with them a repository of knowledge, skills, and talents that were passed down through generations, producing novel technologies and techniques in their new localized context.<sup>47</sup> This is assessed in the context of White's definition of library that is "a means by which we can gain access to knowledge."<sup>48</sup> In conclusion, the transmission of knowledge by enslaved Africans is representative of these enslaved African's roles as libraries, through their facilitating of access to knowledge. This is implicative of the incredibly varied sources of knowledge that exist. These imposed hierarchies based on credentials, such as scholarly produced knowledge, distort the reality that there is not a section of society without a valid claim to knowledge whose specific perceptions and conceptions are crucial for understanding their society, and our human society, as a whole.

### Conclusion

Producing knowledge is a human ability, which historically has had binaries and hierarchies imposed upon it, distorting its reality. Perceptions such as the beliefs that there is only one way to acquire knowledge, that there is one universal way of knowing, or that there is an objective, universal knowledge to be discovered, have mutilated knowledge. To counter this coloniality of knowledge there must be a recognition of the extremely contextual nature of all knowledge: socio-historical, cultural, individual, etc. In attempting to dismantle the coloniality of specifically African knowledge, the call for an increase in scholarly production offers one valid means for doing so. As a method, scholarly production offers unique limitations and important considerations, such as its commonly Western epistemic roots and its historically dominating position within the illusory hierarchy of knowledge. In consideration of this, we should feel pushed to truly recognize how claims to knowledge cannot and should not be monopolized, as all sections of society are entitled to them. Recognizing this leads to the realization that the plurality of knowledges within societies and among societies are manifestations of diverse, yet equally valid conceptions of reality. Ultimately, it is only through celebrating, disseminating, and appreciating the incredible diversity of humanity and its resulting knowledges that can offer a path to any meaningful dismantlement of the coloniality of knowledge.

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47 Ibid.

48 Ben White, "Guaranteeing Access to Knowledge: The Role of Libraries," *WIPO Magazine*, August 2012, quoted in Cherry-Ann Smart, "African Oral Tradition, Cultural Retentions and the Transmission of Knowledge in the West Indies." *IFLA Journal* 45, no. 1 (2019): 17.