

# Epistemic Violence and the Exclusion of Subaltern Voices from the Academy

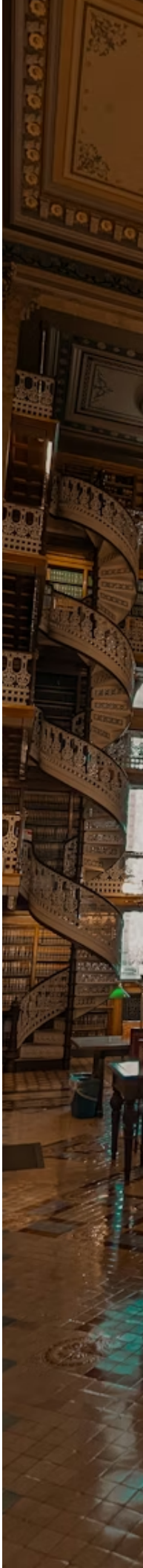
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When scholars of colour articulate ideas about knowledge and power, their words are often quoted poetically and celebrated for their experiential wisdom. Yet, these same insights are rarely engaged as rigorous theory in the humanities and social sciences. Instead, white scholars frequently translate these ideas into what is deemed “accessible” academic language, building careers on ideas originally developed by scholars of colour. This process constitutes epistemic theft, a form of structural extraction embedded in academic knowledge production and dissemination (Manuel & Derrickson, 2015).

This pattern reveals a problem that plagues efforts to decolonize the social sciences. The academy systemically devalues knowledge produced by marginalized scholars while simultaneously appropriating their insights. This paper argues that the social sciences have long operated on ontological and epistemological assumptions rooted in a Eurocentric understanding that conflicts with efforts to dismantle extractive practices.

The paper further examines how assumptions within the social sciences perpetuate epistemic violence against marginalized communities, focusing on four key interventions: Donna Haraway’s (1988) critique of objectivity, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s (1988) analysis of subaltern silencing, Zoe Todd’s (2016) examination of Indigenous knowledge appropriation, and Dipesh Chakrabarty’s (1992) challenge to Eurocentric historical narratives.

This body of contemporary sociological scholarship reveals patterns of epistemic exclusion, false universalism, extractive appropriation, and institutional complicity that continue to marginalize subaltern voices while elevating Western epistemologies as the default. Their work demonstrates that the theft and devaluation of subaltern knowledge are structurally embedded in the social sciences. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for decolonizing the academy and recognizing how epistemic theft operates as a contemporary colonial practice that extracts intellectual value



from subaltern communities already dispossessed of material resources and political power.

Donna Haraway's (1988) essay *Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective* challenges the social sciences' conceptualization of objectivity and knowledge production. She critiques the assumption that researchers can occupy a position of nowhere, an omniscient standpoint producing context-free truths. This disembodied objectivity is deeply political, systematically privileging the perspectives of those who have historically wielded epistemic authority: the white man. Instead, Haraway (1988) maintains that all knowledge is produced from somewhere, by someone, and shaped by particular experiences. She contends that acknowledging this situatedness, or the positionality of a scholar, strengthens knowledge production by making it more accountable and transparent.

Crucially, situated knowledges must prioritize the perspectives of subjugated peoples whose voices have been excluded from knowledge production (Haraway, 1988). This is not about romanticizing marginalized perspectives as automatically

more true, but about recognizing that those who experience oppression often have insights into its workings that are invisible from positions of privilege. In the context of decolonizing the social sciences, this means centring the knowledge systems not as alternative viewpoints to be incorporated into Western systems of knowledge, but as legitimate knowledge systems in their own right. Haraway's critique thus exposes a foundational problem in the social sciences in which the voices of marginalized scholars are dismissed as "belief" or "tradition" while Western frameworks are treated as the neutral standard. This form of epistemic violence is not an accident, but built into the assumptions of how objectivity itself is conceived.





Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) seminal essay *Can the subaltern speak?* extends Haraway's critique by examining the mechanisms through which the subaltern, or marginalized communities, are rendered voiceless. Spivak (1988) introduces the concept of "epistemic violence" to describe how colonial and patriarchal knowledge systems actively erase subaltern agency by forcing their experiences through frameworks that render them illegible. This violence operates through outright exclusion and through the distortion of marginalized knowledge into forms that strip away its potential.

Spivak's (1988) analysis of sati, or widow immolation, in colonial India reveals how this silencing operates in practice. Colonial authorities condemned the practice as barbaric, positioning themselves as civilized saviours rescuing Indian women from backward tradition. In turn, Indian nationalist discourses defended sati, presenting women's self-immolation as an honourable tradition.

In both cases, the voices of the women were not present in the conversation. The women were spoken about and spoken for, but never given the space to speak for themselves.

This pattern persists in contemporary social science research on non-Western societies, as when Western researchers study "developing" nations or colonized peoples, they rely on models that cannot accommodate alternative understandings of community and progress. These models are overwhelmingly derived from cultures labelled as Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD; Henrich et al., 2010), yet are treated as universal frameworks for understanding social life.

The resulting scholarship may include words of research subjects, yet still commits epistemic violence by filtering their experiences through epistemological categories that misrepresent them (Spivak, 1988). Even when subaltern scholars produce work, it is treated as raw material that needs to be refined in Western academic writing rather than engaged as theory that might challenge disciplinary assumptions. For Spivak (1988), meaningful decolonization then requires more than including marginalized voices in existing academic conversations. It demands confronting the conditions that make certain voices unheard as theory in the first place.



This means examining how peer review systems and publication standards all function to delegitimize knowledge that does not conform to Western epistemological norms. Adding subaltern perspectives as case studies within unchanged theoretical frameworks reproduces the very power dynamics that decolonization seeks to dismantle.

Zoe Todd's (2016) essay *An Indigenous feminist's take on the ontological turn* brings Haraway's and Spivak's concerns into conversation with specific practices of Indigenous knowledge appropriation in contemporary academia. Todd (2016) shows how even seemingly progressive academic trends can reproduce colonial extraction when they commodify Indigenous concepts while excluding Indigenous scholars from conversations about their own knowledge systems. Her intervention makes explicit that the problem is not just exclusion, but an active attempt to extract and appropriate knowledge created by Indigenous scholars. The appropriation of marginalized knowledge for career advancement while denying its originators recognition or compensation is a form of epistemic theft.

Todd (2016) draws on the example given by Inuk author Rachel Qitsualik (1998) of the Inuit concept *Sila*, which refers to the environmental interconnectedness of all things. When Western environmental studies engage with *Sila*, it becomes reduced to an abstract theoretical resource, stripped of its embeddedness in Inuit language and intergenerational knowledge transmission. What results then is not respectful engagement with Indigenous knowledge, but appropriation that advances Western scholars' careers while offering nothing to Indigenous communities. Those who conduct this extraction often present themselves as allies translating Indigenous knowledge for broader audiences, yet this "translation" functions as theft when it divorces concepts from their roots and credits Western scholars as the primary inventors of the concept.

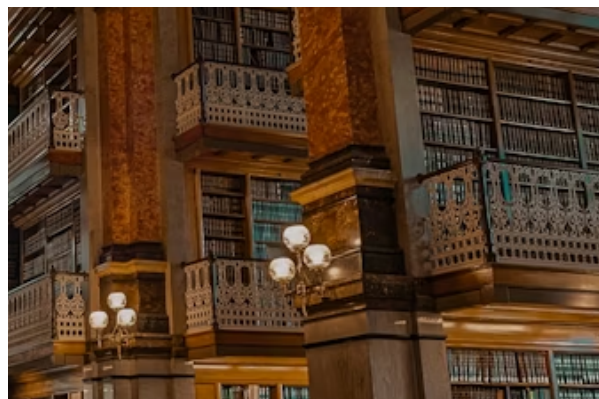
This appropriation operates through several interconnected mechanisms. First, Indigenous knowledge is translated into Western vocabularies in ways that alter its meaning. For instance, *Sila* becomes "atmospheric conditions" or "environmental consciousness," losing the relationship it carries in Inuit contexts (Todd, 2016).

Second, the translated knowledge circulates in academic publications that cite white scholars discussing Indigenous concepts rather than Indigenous scholars articulating their own knowledge systems. Third, the institutional structures of academia, including peer review and tenure requirements, remain dominated by non-Indigenous scholars who determine which Indigenous knowledges are sophisticated enough to be legitimized within the academy. Fourth, Indigenous scholars who resist having their knowledge extracted face marginalization within the academic community.

Todd (2016) emphasizes the whiteness of academic departments and the exclusionary practices of peer review as central obstacles to decolonization. Following Sara Ahmed's (2017) call for a citational rebellion, Todd (2016) advocates for intentionally centring Indigenous scholars, women of colour, and other marginalized thinkers who have been systemically erased from intellectual recognition despite producing serious contributions to the humanities and other fields. The question then is not about tokenism, but about restructuring whose knowledge is valued and who gets to define the standards of academic excellence.

It requires recognizing that when Black feminist scholars, Indigenous knowledge keepers, and other subaltern scholars are cited only as case studies while their theoretical contributions are translated and credited to others, the academy participates in ongoing colonial extraction.

Importantly, Todd (2016) argues that respectful engagement with Indigenous knowledge requires more than citation; it demands recognizing Indigenous ontologies as autonomous knowledge systems rather than material for Western theory building. This means working in relationship with Indigenous communities and being accountable for how their knowledge is represented. The decolonization of the social sciences, in this view, requires Western academics to accept limitations on their access to and use of Indigenous knowledge and to recognize that epistemic sovereignty belongs to Indigenous peoples themselves.





Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* examines how Eurocentric historical narratives position non-European societies as backwards and waiting to catch up (Chakrabarty, 1992). Chakrabarty (1992) critiques the assumption that all societies follow a linear path from traditional to modern, with Europe leading the way and others lagging behind at various stages of development. This narrative frames non-European histories as defined by absence.

For instance, they lack capitalism, lack bureaucracy, lack secular institutions, and lack industrial development. In this way, their histories become comprehensible only in terms of what they are not yet rather than what they are. This understanding also functions as epistemic theft by appropriating non-European historical experiences only to the extent they can be made to conform to European developmental models while dismissing alternative possibilities.

By examining Indian historiography, Chakrabarty (1992) shows how even anti-colonial historians have internalized this by organizing Indian pasts into a colonial schema of "medieval" transitioning to "modern" that homogenized diversity into a

binary that made sense only in European terms. The wide variety of Indian political formations and social organizations became illegible except as incomplete versions of European modernity. Indian subjects appeared in this history as always striving towards European ideals of progress and civilization that remained out of reach.

When Indian scholars developed alternative historiographies grounded in Indian epistemologies, their work was frequently marginalized as insufficiently theoretical. This reinforces the binary of the progressive West and traditional East, ensuring that European frameworks remain the universal standard while non-European intellectual traditions are dismissed as locally particular.

Chakrabarty's (1992) alternative, which he proposes as "provincializing Europe," means decentring Europe as the universal subject of history and recognizing the plural nature of modernity itself. This requires repositioning European histories as one set of experiences among many, rather than the universal template for human development, and creating space for non-European societies to articulate their histories in their own

categories rather than translating them to the European standard. Chakrabarty (1992), however, acknowledges the limitations of this approach, as the discipline of history itself emerged from European modernity, embedding European assumptions in its basic methodologies and categories of analysis.

Scholars who attempt to work outside this understanding are often told their work is not academic enough, while those who master European methods often find their work appropriated as evidence for European universalism rather than recognized as a challenge to it.

This paper has argued that the social sciences have long operated on ontological and epistemological assumptions rooted in a Eurocentric understanding that conflicts with efforts to dismantle extractive practices. Through the interventions of Haraway (1988), Spivak (1988), Todd (2016), and Chakrabarty (1992), four interconnected themes have emerged that expose conflicts between social science epistemologies and decolonial projects, including epistemic exclusion, false universalism, extractive appropriation, and institutional complicity. These themes demonstrate that

marginalized knowledge is simultaneously deemed theoretically insufficient and extracted for the professional advancement of Western scholars. Meaningful decolonization of the humanities and social sciences requires transformation on multiple levels. This involves recognizing diverse knowledge systems as legitimate on their own terms; developing research practices that are accountable to the communities studied and prioritize their epistemological frameworks; and adopting citation practices that recognize subaltern scholarship as theory, not as raw material requiring academic translation.

The social sciences must choose whether to remain complicit in colonial knowledge production or embrace the difficult work of epistemic decolonization, opening possibilities for knowledge production that is more accountable and adequate to the diversity of human experience.

