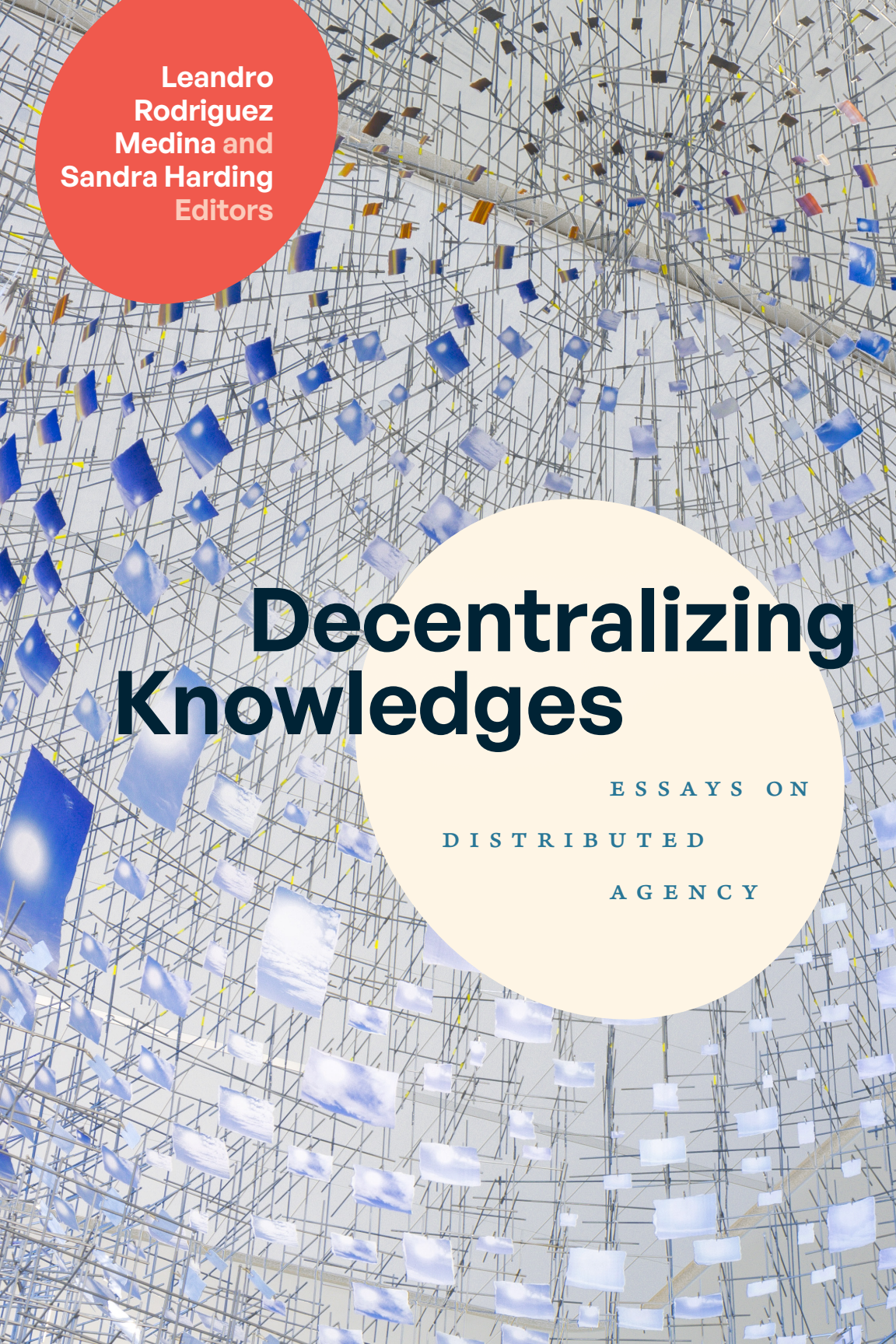




Leandro
Rodríguez
Medina and
Sandra Harding
Editors

Decentralizing Knowledges

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Decentralizing Knowledges



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*Leandro Rodriguez Medina and
Sandra Harding, Editors*

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Epistemic Decentralizing

Distributed Agency in a Context of Knowledge Asymmetries

With the critical phase of the COVID-19 pandemic over, almost no one seems to doubt that the world has changed and that the implications of this global phenomenon are yet to be seen and understood. It is a world of environmental, economic, political, and epistemic uncertainties. Climate change that threatens life on the planet, inflation rates that push millions into poverty, and a European war that threatens to become global and perhaps nuclear characterize an unstable environment. Social groups with divergent interests, from terraplanists to artificial intelligence technoptimists through antivaccine and terrorist groups, have understood that every sociopolitical struggle is also epistemic and have turned, with better or worse results, to producing knowledge in pursuit of their objectives. As in previous moments of history, generalized uncertainty, paradoxically, appears as a consequence of the proliferation of agents demanding their epistemic status (Blair 2011). Therefore, in this environment, knowledge no longer emerges as a guarantee of solutions but rather as a terrain for disputes.

During a good part of modernity, as Latour (1987) and Burke (2000) have described, some European powers have accumulated information about the rest of the world, collecting specimens, maps, diagrams, and other forms of evidence. By so doing, their scientists and engineers became able to “intensify the race of evidence. . . . The tiny number of scientists is more than compensated by the great number of resources they are able to gather” (Latour 1987, 232). By gathering and analyzing, these sites became centers of calculation (Jöns 2011), and the knowledge emanating therefrom contributed, simultaneously, to the consolidation of the

science that was produced and of the power of the empires that supported it. With differences, this centralization of knowledge continues to this day, but knowledge itself, once presented as a way to evade the demons of doubt and to exalt human reason, has been called into question in the beginning of the twenty-first century (Nieto Olarte 2019). Perhaps driven by the once-radical assertion that knowledge is a social construction, many actors have come to understand that in transepistemic arenas the laws of nature are not discussed innocently and disinterestedly, but instead alternative worlds are constructed (Law and Urry 2004). Thus, controversies about knowledge have become deep disputes over sociopolitical orderings (Law 1992), and vice versa, as was shown by the race for anti-COVID vaccines between corporations and research centers and between Western and non-Western powers (Meghji and Niang 2022).

Thus, this geopolitical context looks like a hotbed of new actors competing to impose their truth. It appears as a game of economic and political power that mixes propaganda and fake news, and prestigious institutions and lax social networks mediated by technologies. It can also be thought of as an environment in which we have finally visualized cracks in the monolithic edifice of legitimized knowledge—generally patriarchal, capitalist, and colonial (Lobo 2022). Differently placed, taking advantage of the breaks, ruptures, and liminal spaces provided by an environment of very high uncertainty, actors seem to have decided that it is a good time to make their claims heard and to build alternative forms of social organization (Masaka 2021; Ude 2022). Indignados, Occupy Wall Street, #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, Anonymous, Just Stop Oil, and cryptocurrency enthusiasm are just a few examples of groups that have put on the table an alternative and urgent agenda—decentering. At the same time, they strive for new infrastructures and practices that are political, social, economic, and cultural, and that allow them to feed that agenda—decentralizing. Unlike other social movements throughout history, which have focused fundamentally on the conquest of political power, these understand that one of the most important areas of dispute, if not the most important, is knowledge (de Sousa Santos 2018; Hess 2009; Frickel et al. 2010). For this reason, instead of engaging in the well-known and contradictory relations with vanguards and intellectuals, they have taken into their own hands the task of producing their own knowledge, for their own objectives, with their own parameters of validity and, at times, with alternative sources of legitimization. These are epistemic-political struggles (Sinha-Kerkhoff and Alatas 2010). This crack in the modern order, an apparently fractured

and agonizing order, feeds a multiplicity of actors and, with them, a diverse set of knowledges. It is this phenomenon that is analyzed in this volume and for which we propose the notion of epistemic decentralizing as a critical and theoretical suggestion. Before describing the chapters and how the different analyses nourish this theoretical contribution, we first present a tour of the idea of epistemic decentering and decentralizing and then explain how this project builds on, sustains, and relates to others that have focused on the epistemic dimension of social transformations. Finally, we preview the chapters and show the argumentative arc that, with very varied empirical and theoretical contributions, can be observed in this edited volume.

From Centers and Peripheries to (De)centering and (De)centralizing

We will call epistemic centering the process by which some ideas acquire a prominent place within any intellectual space (discipline, field, etc.), eventually constituting a canon that has repercussions on the organization of that same space (Mora et al. 2020; Fasenfest 2022). Centering may or may not be intentional. More often, in fact, it is the consequence of a set of microlevel actions, such as designing courses for a university or launching a book, whose performative character can be perceived only when observed in aggregate. The opposite of centering is decentering. This is an intellectual process (i.e., primarily textual and, to an increasingly lesser extent, audiovisual) by which these central and canonized ideas are challenged (Patel 2021; Restrepo 2016). The challenge can operate through microactions that may eventually constitute a growing trend. The professor who decides to include in her syllabus readings by women philosophers to intersperse their views with those of canonical male philosophers is decentering philosophical thought. A website's list of readings on the intersection of Black feminist thought, culture, and politics can help influence the reading choices of an undergraduate student who is dissatisfied with the content seen in her sociological theory class (Bell 2022). Decentering, then, is the loss of centrality of some mainstream ideas in light of others that relocate, reposition, replace them. What was unique or principal ceases to be so. This is not because the mainstream ideas are unimportant, not because of their intrinsic value, but because of their rearticulation, that is, their relational value (Neubert 2022). To the extent that the relations that sustain ideas change, the ideas themselves change.

The second process, more mundane, more practical, perhaps less interesting for those who take ideas as their focus, is that of epistemic decentralizing. Epistemic decentralizing is the process by which a greater number of actors, of a more diverse nature, with broader interests and more varied resources, acquire the status of full epistemic subjects (Pickering 2005).¹ It can be argued that epistemic decentralizing refers to the distribution of cognitive authority or, in a broader sense, to the distribution of agency itself. If, as Masaka argues, “the acceptance of the epistemic contribution of those who have been historically marked as without any knowledge is necessary if their agency is to be awakened and their liberation realised” (2021, 358), then decentralizing would consist in generating the infrastructures and practices for that distribution of agency to take place.

Epistemic decentralizing has what we might call an indirect link to ideas. When more actors can produce and diffuse knowledge, it cannot be determined in advance that those ideas will contribute to the decentering of thought. For, as Schneider points out, “decentralized technology does not guarantee decentralized outcomes” (2019, 27–28). Rather, it is highly likely that if centering has been successful, epistemic decentralizing will begin with a reinforcement of canonized ideas. Put differently, the first attempts to decentralize may often be, in fact, forms of recentralizing. This is because, in the end, at any specific moment mainstream ideas constitute a parameter of what is thinkable, a limit to what should be discussed within a certain space of knowledge.²

However, if epistemic decentralizing continues, it is also to be expected that critical voices of decentering will appear, contributing to the rearticulation of those ideas that were taken as central. As a department hires academics with greater diversity of gender, sexuality, race, or class, it is to be expected that the ideas of that faculty will also gain diversity (Morgan et al. 2022; Mousa 2021). Or, in other words, that new ideas will allow for the decentering of previous ideas. In the same way, as citizen laboratories proliferate and practices known as citizen science are consolidated, nonexperts are contributing to an agenda that is more open to urgent needs and to worldviews that are not always compatible with mainstream institutionalized Western science (Krick and Meriluoto 2022).

First and foremost, epistemic decentralizing is a process of creating, expanding, and consolidating broader infrastructures. Epistemically decentralizing is infrastructuring-in-other-ways to ensure sustained temporal and spatial access of a growing number of cognizing subjects and thinking infrastructures (Kornberger et al. 2019) to the sociotechnical networks of

knowledge production. This infrastructure is neither easy to produce nor to maintain. Moreover, it often presents contradictions within itself, given that it is the product of a political project that seeks to decenter through diversifying (Molina Rodríguez-Navas, Lalinde, and Morales 2021). And diversifying inevitably brings conflict.

Epistemic decentralizing is always conflictive and, although it can be thought of as a goal, it could be better thought of as a means, as a condition of production. Without epistemic decentralizing, any effort at epistemic decentering runs several risks simultaneously. The first is to be just a passing fad within mainstream institutions of any space of intellectual production. The second risk is to turn certain already hegemonic actors into nonlegitimate spokespersons for positions, claims, demands, and proposals that do not belong to them. A third risk also appears: decentering can become an empty discourse in which, in the end, nothing is transformed. It can become a discourse that, although full of good intentions, ends up reinforcing the power of the powerful and moving away from the commitment to empower actors to allow them access to the category of full cognitive subjects.³

In what follows, I present four scenarios from this vision of centering/decentering on the one hand, and centralizing/decentralizing on the other. As moments in a cycle, one can move toward any of the four scenarios at any time. This implies that an indisputable and permanent progression toward a greater integration of more cognitive subjects or thinking infrastructures in the networks of knowledge production cannot be taken for granted. Rather, it should be thought of as stages within cycles that can follow varied and indeterminate paths, marches, and countermarches.

Defining Epistemic Decentralizing

In the world of ideas, whether in the more radical humanities or in the more positivist natural sciences, the tendency in recent centuries has been toward centralization and centering. The former, intimately related to the action of colonial empires since the fifteenth century, consisted in the elaboration of extensive networks, some of global scope, which allowed the mobilization to their metropolises of objects, nonhuman beings (plants, animals, etc.), and even people from the margins of the empires (Latour 1987; Delbourgo and Dew 2008; Prasad 2014; Stöckelová 2012). Centralization allowed the conformation of the great centers of knowledge

accumulation (e.g., libraries, zoos, botanical gardens, archives, etc.) that made cities such as Madrid, London, and Paris imperial capitals and centers of knowledge production (Burke 2000; Jöns 2011). While these sites (universities, academies, publishing houses, etc.) gained relevance and prestige, the centralization of actors and infrastructures led to the centering of the ideas produced there, that is, to their canonization (Mora et al. 2020; Fasenfest 2022). The capacity to abstract and theorize that developed in these places was the fruit of centralization. Once high levels of abstraction were reached, and once the prestige produced by such epistemic dynamics was attained, a process of centering took place that manifested itself in the appearance of ideas with a global scope—the global designs, as Mignolo (2000) calls them. Certain ideas, although produced in specific sites (i.e., as local as any other), nevertheless had the capacity to mobilize through those same networks to explain not only their place of enunciation but the world as a whole (Livingstone 2003). Thus, it can be argued that the centrality of these ideas was due not so much to the lucidity of isolated geniuses but rather to the symbolic-material networks that empires built and producers of knowledge capitalized on almost as efficiently as merchants and bankers. Ideas were woven into the fabric of the global colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal order (Grosfoguel 2022).

In recent decades, there has been a profound revision of the idea of the canon, of the mainstream, of the centrality of some knowledge (Connell 2018; Meghji 2021; Go 2016). As historical, anthropological, and sociological studies showed how much of those central ideas had come from the periphery (Goody 2012), the belief in the universality of knowledge produced in the metropolises (and, for that matter, of any knowledge) was widely criticized. Recognizing the active role of other subjects (peoples, institutions, individuals) in the production of knowledge, as well as the epistemically extractivist nature of colonialism, became central to more recent critical academic approaches (Broncano 2020; Kunce 2022). Ideas and worldviews of indigenous peoples, women and sexual minorities, and other vulnerable groups are gradually being discussed and put into dialogue with institutionalized Western knowledge (Essanhaji and van Reekum 2022; Strasser et al. 2019). Thus begins an attempt to decenter the center (Narayan and Harding 2000) that could be defined as an intellectual hybridization to accommodate a plurality of perspectives and observe how, by incorporating them, more robust knowledge emerges (Harding 1998; Connell 2007).

Undoubtedly, decentering feeds on ideas produced at the margins and channeled toward the center by powerful spokespersons who position themselves politically and epistemically in doing so—sometimes committing epistemic extractivism. Decentering is, in short, a reconfiguration of dominant or hegemonic ideas in light of new ideas that challenge and correct them, giving rise to strong objective knowledge (Harding 2015).

In contrast, epistemic decentralizing happens when the process that began with the collection of objects and the mobilization of people from the periphery to the centers is reversed. Think, for example, of the restitution by museums in the developed world of works of archaeological or historical value to peripheral governments or institutions that claim them (Hicks 2020; Laely 2020). Another example is the creation of scientific infrastructure financed from the centers and installed and operated in marginal regions of the world (Losego and Arvanitis 2008). Yet another is the appearance of journals or editorial initiatives in the periphery that have material and symbolic resources from metropolitan institutions (Albornoz, Okune, and Chan 2020). And there are the mobility grants between countries in the Global South (Sherbondy 2017; Gray and Gills 2016), and the research platforms, such as laboratories, based on feminist values (Kaşdoğan 2020). The list can go on and on. To reverse centralization is to make some of what has been concentrated in the centers flow to the margins, including prestige, economic resources, institutional capacity, or, ultimately, authority.

Reorienting flows does not necessarily imply thinking against the tide or producing counterhegemonic thinking, but simply empowering peripheral actors, infrastructures, and practices in such a way that they can produce knowledge of themselves (and the world; see Keim 2011). There is no guarantee that empowered cognizing subjects will challenge the canonical knowledge of a field or discipline. However, it can be expected that such subjects would acquire sufficient autonomy to think about their agendas, concepts, and methodologies and, with them, address their priority issues (Mousa 2021; Neubert 2022; Patel 2021; Kreimer 2006; Alatas 2001; Rodríguez Medina et al. 2019). Epistemic decentralizing is, in essence, a way of shifting epistemic agency from the centered networks, institutions, and technologies to the peripheries.

More ideas are almost always a challenge to the mainstream. And more actors, infrastructures, and practices are almost always a challenge to the actors, infrastructures, and practices that have (re)produced

that mainstream, that are able to benefit from them and that have interests aligned with them (Pickering 2005; Law 2002; Kornberger et al. 2019). For that simple reason, decentralizing is an epistemic and political action. By decentralizing, conflict is created, occasions of confrontation are multiplied, alternative paths for knowledge and its producers are posed, the status quo is altered, and vulnerable subjects are empowered. Needless to say, there is a risk of a clash of forms of knowledge.

Nevertheless, this empowerment is not primarily political in the sense of seeking access to public decision-making. The empowerment that decentralizing allows is epistemic insofar as it increases the capacity of actors to produce their own knowledge. Why restore works of historical value if not to produce knowledge about one's own past? Why build infrastructures based on solidarity and volunteerism if not to produce knowledge different from that which emerges from competing institutions at the heart of neoliberal capitalism? Why create a regional journal if not to influence research agendas and decouple them, even partially, from those imposed by hegemonic countries? Appropriating the means of cognitive production makes sense only if one has the capacity to put these means into operation for purposes that, for lack of a better word, we could call emancipatory.

This is not a minor issue, because the epistemic struggle (which is ultimately political) requires adopting positions that prioritize care, responsibility, and the construction of inter-epistemic links (de Sousa Santos 2014). This means that more important than people's standpoints themselves are the procedures for managing frictions and dissent (Rosenfeld 2019). Thus, epistemic decentralization depends on multiplying infrastructures and practices that articulate peaceful, constructive, and horizontal ways of resolving conflicts. Robust knowledge will not be only that which has a correspondence with reality, but also that which manages to go through the difficult process of producing inter-epistemic consensus (Hessmann Dalaqua 2017).

The idea of epistemic decentralizing that we propose in this volume is at an exploratory stage. It has the capacity to bring together divergent theoretical and disciplinary perspectives, while also allowing us to find commonalities between critical approaches to the current production of knowledge at the global level. It will be seen in the following pages that epistemic decentralizing requires analyzing who and what is at the margins and what are the operations that can be carried out from there. Then it demands looking at the existing and alternative infrastructures, their logics and dynamics, and showing the arrangements that are produced around

them. Finally, epistemic decentralizing may give rise to new spaces, often interstitial, weak, little or not at all institutionalized, in which marginal actors *infrastruct* new relations. Given its fragility and relentless enactment, we argue that epistemic decentralizing is always an incompletely realized ambition (Schneider 2019). These relationships may or may not be open challenges to mainstream orderings, but they are always indicative of the agency of these now empowered actors. Such actors take knowledge production into their own hands as an epistemic and political objective (Harding 2016). This journey is reflected in the structure of the present volume, as we will show.

Is Epistemic Decentralizing a New Idea?

Explaining what is novel about the proposal of epistemic decentralization forces us to review a considerable number of efforts, within and outside academia, to address the epistemic problems of marginalization. Given that the history of social movements itself could fit within this historical account, it is best to present analytically and illustratively the initiatives that have shed light on issues similar to those we bring up in this volume. To do so, we present these initiatives in a table in which we cross two variables (table I.1). On the one hand, we have Miranda Fricker's notions of testimonial and hermeneutic injustice. The former "occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word" (2007, 1), that is, when a person's agency is reduced due to the questioning of the validity or legitimacy of his or her word. On the other hand, hermeneutical injustice is "the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to hermeneutical marginalization" (158). In turn, hermeneutical marginalization occurs when there is unequal hermeneutical participation with respect to areas of a certain group's social experience (153). In other words, hermeneutic injustice is visible when a group cannot systematically construct and develop the concepts with which to account for its own life experience and that of the society in which it lives. Put differently, "it is only when there are no pervasive injustices, no systematic roadblocks to the development of knowledge, that responsible agents should be expected to be minimally knowledgeable about themselves, their peers, and the world" (Medina 2013, 128).

On the other hand, we can take two alternative notions of injustice, proposed by Nancy Fraser (2000a, 2000b). Cultural injustice is imbricated

Table I.1 Forms of Injustice and Social Initiatives That Address Them

	Cultural injustice	Socioeconomic injustice
TESTIMONIAL INJUSTICE	#BlackLivesMatter (Gupta and Stoolman 2022) #MeToo (Gurrieri et al 2022) Intersectionality (Hill Collins 2019)	Indignados (Pleyers 2024) Occupy Wall Street (Woodly 2021)
HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICE	Theory from the South (Comaroff and Comaroff 2015) Feminist standpoint theory (Harding 2016) Provincializing knowledge (Chakrabarty 2000) Decolonizing the canon (Mbembe 2016) Queer academia (Moussawi and Vidal-Ortiz 2020) Decolonial thinking (Mignolo 2000) Postcolonial thought (Go 2016) #CiteBlackWomen (Smith et al 2021)	Epistemic decentralizing Epistemologies of the South (de Sousa Santos 2018)

in the social models of representation, interpretation, and communication and involves cultural domination, lack of recognition, and lack of respect (Fraser 2000a). This is based on the idea that recognition designates a reciprocal relationship between subjects who see themselves as equals, which makes it an essential dimension of the process of development of the sense of self (Fraser 2000b, 109). When a group is devalued by a dominant culture, a phenomenon of misrecognition occurs whereby vulnerable groups internalize a representation of themselves that is imposed and impossible to challenge. A policy of recognition aims to produce self-representations that reaffirm the cultural dimensions of marginalized groups (Fraser 2000b, 109–10). Socioeconomic injustice, on the other hand, is rooted in the economic-political structure of society and includes exploitation, economic inequality, and deprivation (Fraser 2000a). Although, as the author argues, “properly conceived, struggles for recognition can aid

the redistribution of power and wealth and can promote interaction and cooperation across gulfs of difference” (Fraser 2000b, 109), analytical differentiation is productive, as we shall see below.

If we combine these forms of injustice, we can produce four scenarios in which we locate initiatives that have struggled against them, in academia or outside of it. Testimonial-cultural injustice has been attacked by collectives that organize testimonies of people, belonging to vulnerable or oppressed sectors, to make them visible in key social instances, such as the media or the courts of justice. These testimonies, rather than constituting alternative theorizing (original conceptualization that refutes or contradicts dominant views), are put into operation in preestablished institutional instances in an attempt to increase the credibility of the members of these groups. Testimonial-socioeconomic injustice has been denounced by initiatives that recognize that the prevailing levels of material inequality (that have increased in the last five decades of rampant neoliberalism) have conditioned the testimonial capacity, of individuals on an equal footing, of an increasingly large sector of global society. The criticisms against the concentration of wealth that have emerged in social movements such as Occupy Wall Street or Indignados, as well as in civil society organizations (Oxfam) or intergovernmental organizations (United Nations) are not limited to pointing out the economic consequences of the enormous impoverishment. They also highlight the loss of the capacity of marginalized actors to organize themselves, participate in decision-making, and contribute to thinking about and implementing forms of wealth redistribution.

A third form of injustice is hermeneutic-cultural, which is perhaps among the best known in academia and to which, in some ways, this volume reacts—without necessarily opposing. Hermeneutic-cultural injustice refers to the inability of some actors, degraded by the mere fact of belonging to denigrated social sectors, to propose with their own words (concepts) a reliable—and politically operative, we might add—description of their social reality. The absence of members of certain social groups in university faculties (women and gender minorities, people with different abilities, racial or ethnic minorities, lower classes, etc.) has been pointed out, to a large extent, as a sign of the need to break with the monolithic dominance of certain groups (e.g., white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant men). Thus, provincializing knowledge, citing Black women, decolonizing the canon or the curriculum, and theorizing from the South are nothing more than calls to complement (and, in some more radical cases, replace) Eurocentric knowledge with other knowledge produced elsewhere, by other peoples,

for tackling other problems. Decolonial thought, feminist perspective theory, and queer academia seek to make visible the intellectual production of socially, politically, and economically marginalized people. All of them, in some way, understand that what is central is to bring the ideas of peripheral groups to the center of the debate, of the disciplines, of the academic, journalistic, artistic, or cultural fields. Important as they have been, they tend to produce two important effects, displacement and reification.

Questions of recognition are serving less to supplement, complicate and enrich redistributive struggles than to marginalize, eclipse and displace them. I shall call this the problem of displacement. . . . Today's recognition struggles are occurring at a moment of hugely increasing transcultural interaction and communication, when accelerated migration and global media flows are hybridizing and pluralizing cultural forms. Yet the routes such struggles take often serve not to promote respectful interaction within increasingly multicultural contexts, but to drastically simplify and reify group identities. They tend, rather, to encourage separatism, intolerance and chauvinism, patriarchalism and authoritarianism. I shall call this the problem of reification. (Fraser 2000b, 108)

It is in this context that the fourth type of injustice, hermeneutic-socioeconomic, must be read. This form of injustice refers to the systematic inability of certain groups, for reasons of insufficient access to material resources (infrastructures) and consequently inappropriate practices, to produce their own worldviews on the basis of a conceptual (theoretical) development emerging from the periphery. Here it is not so much the testimonial value of socioeconomically oppressed groups that is of interest, but rather their categories of analysis for thinking reality; a reality, it should be said, that not only refers to themselves—as Fricker's proposal of hermeneutic injustice seems to imply in part—but that can also account for the reality of privileged groups and their mechanisms of oppression. In other words, hermeneutic-socioeconomic injustice is what keeps certain groups in society in a noncognizant subject status or, what is the same, what prevents the possibility for subjects to treat each other as peers, in a framework of epistemic humility and solidarity.

In this sense, de Sousa Santos's proposal called "epistemologies of the South" is perhaps the one that has best accounted for the consequences of socioeconomic injustice in their hermeneutic dimension: "The epistemologies of the South concern the production and validation of knowledges anchored in the experiences of resistance of all those social groups

that have systematically suffered injustice, oppression, and destruction caused by capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy. The vast and vastly diversified field of such experiences I designate as the anti-imperial South. It is an epistemological, nongeographical South, composed of many epistemological souths having in common the fact that they are all knowledges born in struggles against capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy” (2018, 1). Within this epistemology, he proposes a sociology of absence that consists in showing the many practices, knowledges, and agents that exist in nonmetropolitan societies and sociabilities that are actively produced as nonexistent by dominant ways of knowing, especially when confronted with the exclusions proposed by neoliberalism in accepting capitalist, colonial, and patriarchal forms of oppression (de Sousa Santos 2018, 8). His proposal even gives rise to the extreme case in which forms of knowing are directly extinguished within the ecology of knowledges, which he calls epistemicide. There are two central aspects that distinguish the notion of epistemic decentralization from epistemologies of the South.

The first is that epistemic decentralization does not start from the idea that the point of view of the oppressed is always an emancipatory, anti-capitalist, anticolonial, and antipatriarchal knowledge. There are plenty of examples of intellectual production in the Global South that reproduce part of the dependence and conceptual subordination that characterizes the peripheral condition. It is not enough, in this sense, to consider that such production is simply the epistemology of the North, given that in many ways it is anchored to conditions of production of the South, in the exact sense given by de Sousa Santos. Put differently, the notion of epistemic decentralization accepts that the inclusion of marginalized sectors in the production of knowledge does not necessarily mean, although it does amplify the chances of, counterhegemonic knowledge.

The second difference is tactical, as Østmo et al. state in chapter 5 of this book. de Sousa Santos understands systems of oppression in a monolithic way and, therefore, overestimates the power of each—and, to some extent and tangentially, problematizes the capacity to confront such systems. Neither patriarchy, nor capitalism, nor colonialism are all-powerful monolithic entities, but sociotechnical systems maintained, with effort, by actors who benefit from their operation and, therefore, from the privileges anchored to such operation. By not reifying these social orders, epistemic decentralization calls for alliances between North and South (and their epistemologies) that make it possible to produce infrastructures and practices that give rise to a diversity and plurality of ideas and knowledge.

Thus, not only does the focus on infrastructure that we propose allow us to distinguish this project from de Sousa Santos's epistemologies of the South, but we also seek to emphasize the relational character of the parties involved in the production of knowledge. What is at the center is, perhaps and in certain places, neoliberal, but it could be otherwise. Epistemic decentralization contributes to other knowledge always having a presence in the debate and intellectual exchange over time and without the need for spokespersons among the powerful actors.

Insofar as all the forms of injustice mentioned above have been denounced and attacked by initiatives such as those included in the table, it is clear that the idea of epistemic decentralization is based on numerous previous experiences and seeks to expand their capacity to attack the main forms of injustice in force. Trying to put back on the table the issue of material asymmetries (in addition to the symbolic ones, almost permanently at the center of attention nowadays), epistemic decentralization connects with traditions of classical critical thought, but highlighting the epistemic (basically, hermeneutic) dimension at stake. Thus, and as the reader will see in the following pages, light will be shed on concepts and experiences that will resonate with the vast literature and casuistry in which epistemic decentralization is embedded.

The Structure of the Book

This volume attempts to answer three main questions. The first is, what are the consequences of the historical process of concentration of knowledge in certain places and subjects (Livingstone 2003) and how can they be reversed? The second asks, what epistemic conditions and sociotechnical arrangements must be established for reversal to take place? The last question is, what do reassemblages that seek to challenge and reconfigure the capitalist, patriarchal, and colonial global order look like? Around these questions, the book is organized in three parts.

The first part explores the cognitive and sociotechnical displacement of thinking produced from the margins. The margin is a concept whose vagueness indicates that there are many forms of concentration (and, therefore, centers) that shape more or less effective, and more or less global, structures of exclusion. Every process of concentration, whether material or symbolic, ends up forming a center that capitalizes on some kind of resource and a periphery or margin that is relegated and, to a certain extent,

exploited. Chapters 1 through 4, by Alcoff, Rodriguez Medina, Kleinman, and Traweek, explore these marginal positions. These chapters map the consequences of the historical concentration of knowledge, reviewing extractive epistemologies, the social production of ignorance, and the voices that, while situated in the center, consciously move to marginal positions. Taken together, the chapters review central debates in current science and technology studies and in epistemology and sociology of knowledge that have focused on epistemic asymmetries caused by enduring structures of oppression, such as patriarchy, colonial order, or cognitive capitalism that permeate social life. They contribute to the conceptual framework (in particular Alcoff and Rodriguez Medina) but also show connections to widely discussed literature in the field (e.g., sociology of ignorance) and advance methodological recommendations, for example by claiming the value of certain practices (gossip or joke) to make marginal positions observable within academic fields.

Alcoff reflects on the effect of colonialism and imperialism on knowledge practices, arguing that extracting resources, material or intellectual, always involves an epistemic component (chapter 1). In a propositional manner, the author suggests four corrective epistemic norms that seek to replace extractivist epistemologies with collaborative forms of knowledge production. They are (1) acknowledging the incompleteness of all knowledge, (2) developing approaches that recognize plural epistemologies and seek productive relationships of inter-epistemology, (3) practicing relational epistemic humility, and (4) regularizing the assessment of epistemic relationships in projects of knowing. The relevance of Alcoff's argument for understanding epistemic decentralization is twofold. On the one hand, it brings to the forefront the ultimate reason why the process of centering of ideas takes place: they are valuable, in the sense of commodifiable, within contemporary extractive capitalism. On the other hand, by recognizing that knowledge production practices need to be sustained by certain epistemological ideas, Alcoff is showing a connection between decentering and decentralization: justification. Thus, for epistemic decentralization to occur, it follows from this chapter that a profound revision of the postulates behind the current extractivist epistemology that characterizes the metropolitan academy is needed.

In a similar vein, Rodriguez Medina argues that, in order to understand the relationship between centers and peripheries of knowledge production, it is necessary to combine two variables: the degree of decentering of ideas and the degree of decentralizing of epistemic infrastructures and

practices (chapter 2). This proposal allows him to construct four types of links, which he calls (1) epistemic indifference, (2) epistemic co-optation, (3) epistemic extractivism, and (4) epistemic mutualism. In some sense, it can be argued that the corrective norms pointed out by Alcoff are the mechanisms to reach the phase of epistemic mutualism that is inferred as overcoming in Rodríguez Medina's chapter on epistemic decentralizing. The stage of epistemic mutualism appears, in the chapter, not as an inevitable destiny but as a possible scenario to which academic fields or disciplines may or may not be heading. Moreover, the cases show that epistemic decentralization is never a finished process, but one that is constantly being updated. In this sense, knowledge production is always in some process by which actors are empowered or disempowered as epistemic subjects, which allows us to think of the theoretical concept suggested as an evaluative framework of concrete epistemic initiatives.

Kleinman, for his part, illustrates the effects on ignorance of the decentralization of actors and practices and the decentering of agendas (chapter 3). In the case of AIDS treatment research, under pressure from patients/activists, scientists considered new models of clinical trials and allowed new lines of research to emerge. Thus, the ignorance that can result from unrealized science was eliminated, and more comprehensive and robust knowledge was produced. In contrast, the knowledge production of beekeepers went unnoticed, unrecognized, or ignored by mainstream scientists, regulators, and corporate stakeholders. As a consequence, a whole area of decentered research concerns and questions remained unknown due, in no small part, to the degree of centralization imposed by conventional science practices and actors. The chapter's main contribution to the understanding of epistemic decentralization is that more actors and more perspectives do not always translate into more knowledge. Kleinman's cases teach that the acceptance and validation of knowledge produced by peripheral actors rests, in no small measure, with powerful actors in the field working as gatekeepers to new understandings. Without the epistemic humility that Alcoff and Rodríguez Medina bring to light in their chapters, it is practically impossible to assume that the mechanisms through which knowledge from the margins is accepted in the center will be constituted, respected, and enhanced.

The first section culminates with Traweek's personal account, which has profound institutional implications for understanding epistemic decentralizing at a micro scale (chapter 4). An expert in the construction of scientific authority, she argues that we must study practices at the edge

of epistemic authority to understand how that authority is constructed, maintained, and sometimes subverted. Hence the relevance of stories, gossip, whisper cultures, and even jokes, which are not made or circulated in the same way as institutionalized knowledge. It is emphasized in the chapter that the shift to the margins is not only a product of epistemic asymmetries in operation, but also, at times, the conscious decision to seek places of enunciation more apt for critical thinking of those asymmetrical structures. With Traweek's chapter, epistemic decentralization becomes not only a process of opening up to marginal ideas and actors, but a strategy of some powerful actors to disrupt mainstream ideas. The importance of this approach cannot be underestimated. On the one hand, marginalization can be voluntary (against that imposed by an unequal structure of knowledge production) and, even so, serve the same ends: de-canonizing, de-centering. On the other hand, when betting on this strategy, central actors of the field or discipline must opt for subtle, fragile, deinstitutionalized, almost ethereal actions, with which the invisible might become visible.

The second part of the book analyzes new infrastructures that make it possible to challenge asymmetries of knowledge and power. The chapters in this section produce double analyses. On the one hand, they show how current structures in certain fields, such as academia, political decision-making, or agroecological innovation, tend toward cognitive, political, and economic centralization respectively. In pointing this out, they take the approaches of the first section a step further by showing that marginal positions are reproduced through complex technologies that are very difficult to disassemble, or to reassemble. Moreover, the chapters show how the epistemic norms behind knowledge production practices, analyzed in the first chapters, are imbricated in the technologies and infrastructures that make them viable. Thus, the political nature of the processes of centralization and decentralization becomes evident. In the face of forms of domination by powerful actors (be it the Norwegian state, large Brazilian agricultural producers, or multinational academic publishers), the work of infrastructuring otherwise becomes an act of ethico-political resistance. At the same time, the chapters illustrate that alternative infrastructuring has high costs, touches on entrenched interests in the sociopolitical and economic order, and is often precarious in nature, which also complicates the possibility of making them paradigmatic cases in other contexts.

Østmo et al. focus on Sápmi narratives to show the contradictions between ancestral indigenous practices and contemporary political arrangements in Norway that do not capture (and, in fact, put at risk) ancestral

forms of survival and their cultural manifestations (chapter 5). Østmo et al.'s analysis of epistemic decentralization may seem contradictory. While acknowledging that centering, decentering, centralizing, and decentralizing are tangled together (something science, technology, and society [STS] has taught us as we move freely in sociotechnical networks), they also point out that knowledge practices have performativity—that is, they produce an effect beyond the content of that knowledge. It is infrastructural practices that allow the researcher to see hidden agendas, a task that includes looking at the politics of language, meeting dynamics, archives, reports, and other mundane forms of knowledge materialization. But in doing so, the chapter leaves two fundamental corollaries for continuing to decentralize knowledge: (1) there are no monolithic centers (nor mainstream, nor canons) and, in their inconsistencies, there is room for alliances; and (2) decentralizing is a tactical matter, that is, there are no definitive rules but opportunities. The heterogeneous and fragile, but also powerful and transformative, nature of decentralization processes is evident in this chapter.

Okune et al. provide numerous examples of ways of dealing with the processes of infrastructural concentration that affect the current academy (chapter 6). The academy seems tied to practices and technologies that favor exclusion, such as article publication charges from large publishers or forced internationalization at the university level. However, initiatives such as IstanbulLab in Turkey and Kaleidos in Ecuador show that other forms of infrastructure are both possible and desirable. Okune and her colleagues demonstrate that, when epistemic decentralization begins to operate—what the authors call *remooring*—the fields or disciplines tend to retrenchment, that is, to return to a certain previous status quo, to reestablish hierarchies, to reconstruct canons. Not only does this show that decentralizing and decentering do not always go hand in hand, as Rodríguez Medina shows in his classification in chapter 2, but that many times decentralizing and decentering will be judged in the light of current mainstream ideas, with their metrics and assessment mechanisms. Moving away from canonized ideas, then, is a tedious task in which there is a back-and-forth between the new and the old and which, always, involves infrastructuring in other modes.

Levidow, in chapter 7, shifts the focus and shows that decentering and decentralizing of knowledge are also economic and political issues that touch food and nutrition, as well as other areas. Looking at solidarity economy initiatives in Brazil, Levidow describes short supply chains that

seek to connect more closely producers and consumers, whose purchases come to play not only an economic but also a political role, given that they support cooperative work organization and environmentally sustainable practices. Thus, it is clear that epistemic decentralizing must transcend the academy and contribute to rethinking how to reorganize work and consumption, even within the limited liminal spaces of global neoliberal capitalism. Levidow's chapter brings clarity and precision to a key aspect of understanding epistemic decentralization. Equivalent to the idea of epistemic humility that Alcoff and Rodriguez Medina claim for the academy, Levidow concludes that solidarity within the extended networks of agrifood producers and consumers is central to epistemic decentralization. By seeking to decenter agrifood knowledge by the mainstream economy and to decentralize the infrastructures that make that knowledge possible, *circuitos curtos* of producers and consumers construct affective sociocultural meanings that reconnect people from different contexts and localities. Without these affective networks, it seems impossible that the meanings produced by the new actors included in the networks can move and, ultimately, challenge ideas accepted as truths within certain spheres—such as agribusiness. And, as expressed by Okune et al., Levidow points out that the opportunities opened up by recent crises, especially the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change, are not an invitation to return to a status quo that is seen as part of the problem. As the case shows, inasmuch as decentralization depends on solidaristic economic forms, this process could be considered a response to the need to reorder and reorganize social life, to a large extent to make room for other forms of knowledge.

In the third and final section, it is shown that when at work, infrastructures and practices supporting voices from the margins end up decentralizing knowledge by producing new sites of knowledge production. These spaces, originally interstitial within spaces governed by hegemonic practices, institutions, and actors, are proof that alternatives to current sociotechnical orders, whether at the level of global powers or mainstream medicine, as Østmo et al. show in chapter 5, are always unstable and fragile. The chapters in part III show that, from infrastructures and practices, there is a boundary work that delimits alternative spaces, in line with Okune et al.'s findings. These new spaces, sometimes with preexisting logics (as in the intergovernmental conferences studied by Keim and Sitas, chapter 10) and sometimes with new dynamics (such as the palliative care centers in Taiwan analyzed by Kuo, chapter 8), have the difficult task of articulating with other spaces, either challenging them (mainstream) or producing

strategic alliances (peripheries). Likewise, spatialization allows us to think of scales for the process of epistemic decentralizing. While in some cases this process may involve individuals or organizations (as shown in chapter 8), in others it occurs at the national (as illustrated in chapter 9, by Cancino et al.) or global scale (as pointed out by Keim and Sitas focusing on the BRICS countries). The mechanisms inherent at each level, however, are different and invite reflection on the growing political will that is necessary to convert a process that has been basically intended for understanding academic fields' and disciplines' organization to the level of international geopolitics.

Kuo shows that such spaces for the production of counterhegemony—or, at least, of ideas that challenge the mainstream—can be institutionalized. Based on fieldwork in a Taiwanese medical center, Kuo presents palliative care as a decentralized profession. Palliative care wards emerge both as therapeutic and as knowledge spaces that nurture the profession. This does not mean that the biomedical scheme should be overridden, but rather that it should be understood as part of the total effort to achieve a favorable end of life. The chapter opens the door to think of epistemic decentralization not only as a way of making a field or a discipline more plural, but also as a way of practicing a profession in a different way. As in chapter 7 (Levidow), the disciplines are transcended to enter the world of practitioners who seek to reconfigure a space based on practices that, in principle, have no validity in the core of the medical field. What is remarkable in the chapter is that, even in the difference, the epistemic perspectives do seem to find a common ground: the observation of the care of patients in the terminal phases of their illnesses. Thus, the chapter sheds light on one way of evaluating the reorganization of a field, as Okune et al. also showed: by paying attention to the type of outcome that the new practices give rise to. Far from being an incompatible and incommensurable alternative, the decentralized knowledge produced in palliative care wards is inserted into the biomedical sciences, that is to say, they maintain a dialogue, insofar as both are perceived as complementary to guarantee a dignified end of human life.

Cancino et al. go a step further and take the issue of epistemic decentralizing to the national level, with the case of the current political reforms in Chile that are intended to decentralize its science and technology system (chapter 9). The authors have found that certain relevant issues in these territories, such as salmon farming and forest fires, show how local demands generate the decentering of scientific agendas through processes of

decentralizing of actors, capacities, and decision-making. In other words, socioenvironmental conflicts and/or sociotechnical controversies decentralize local knowledge, activate citizens and governments, and contribute to the production of social and political changes that generate decentered agendas linking local priorities with global issues. The findings in this chapter present a challenge to the conceptualization presented in this introduction and in conceptual chapters in the first section of the book. Here it is the decentering of ideas (attention to a local agenda of problems) that leads to the decentralization of knowledge (through greater stakeholder participation). How is it possible that highly concentrated forms of knowledge production even allow the emergence of a decentered agenda? The answer is in the chapter itself and is key to understanding the transnational nature of any process of epistemic decentralization. Cancino et al. find that the transnational character of local problems is fundamental to understanding the will to decentralize knowledge production. Differently put, the local agenda of salmon farming and forest fire experts has an inescapable international dimension that prevents the understanding of these issues from an exclusively local perspective. Thus, the chapter would suggest that the less local a problem is, the more easily decentralizable is the network of actors, practices, and infrastructures that can address it.

The section ends by taking the question of epistemic decentralizing to the highest level, that of the geopolitical rearticulation brought about by the appearance of emerging powers, the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). Keim and Sitas argue that beyond economic and international relations policy, the BRICS countries have set out to decentralize science and the global academic scene and have created particular institutions that connect actors from previously nonhegemonic countries (chapter 10). In a twist that seems paradoxical but is not, the authors show a decentralizing strategy led by states that have tended to centralize their decision-making processes in relation to the formation and extension of the BRICS alliance. However, the key is that through this centralized decision-making, states seek to empower subnational actors (universities, professional associations, national academies, etc.) in the process of beginning to construct a vision of themselves beyond that which has been imposed on them from the centers of knowledge production. The BRICS countries know that they are acting (and thinking) from the straitjacket of Eurocentric knowledge and that this limits their possibilities of understanding themselves, their global alliance, and their possible actions to reconfigure the world order. Hence, epistemic decentralizing would aim,

at the end of the road, to enable the construction and dissemination of their own representations. By showing and also criticizing political centralization as a condition for the existence of decentralized epistemic infrastructures and practices, the chapter raises urgent questions about the best strategies for producing non-Eurocentric knowledge—questions whose resolution is beyond the scope of this volume.

The three sections are articulated to show possible paths and present any potential obstacles to them. They combine micro and macro perspectives. They come from empirical work, philosophical reflections, and historical analysis. They answer key questions but also raise deeper ones. In short, they begin to fill a void that our three trigger questions sought to bring to the fore: how knowledge has been concentrated and centralized, what arrangements allow both processes to be reversed, and what such rearrangements do or could look like. It is no small matter that, in many cases, the chapters have been written by author collectives that, in themselves, are an example of epistemic decentralization, combining generations, nationalities, disciplinary backgrounds, and, consequently, standpoints. Similarly, the fact that this volume is available in open access, thanks to the generous support of UCLA, is also indicative of the commitment of the editors and chapter authors to avoid forms of centralization, which, in the end, also leads to a certain (albeit unintended) centering of the debate. Instead, the multiple, rich, and sometimes contradictory answers that each chapter provides to the questions that triggered this collective reflection open up the debate and invite further exploration.

Notes

- 1 One of the few works in which decentering and decentralizing are used for the study of the production and circulation of knowledge is Mora et al. (2020). There, unlike in the present chapter, a slightly more limited use is made. “When we talk about decentering and decentralizing as two related ideas, we emphasize the need to move the conversation away from historically dominant groups (decenter) and geographical locales (decentralize)” (Mora et al. 2020, 313). This chapter recognizes practical dimensions of both processes, such as the use of a lingua franca, the marginalization of epistemologies from the Global South in educational contexts, the conceptualization of what is valid data, and how research hierarchies are established. Infrastructures, however, are neglected.
- 2 It could be argued that a key characteristic of centers of knowledge production is diversity and plurality in terms of the ideas they radiate or, in

other words, their capacity to produce mainstream (plural) ideas. In that sense, advanced epistemic decentralization is likely to produce not only counterhegemonic ideas (Keim 2011) but rather a multiplicity of influential ideas, some of which may present challenges to previous canons and others of which may reinforce or extend them.

- 3 The consequences of this disempowerment cannot be underestimated. For example, a recent study has pointed out that “Africa’s emigration crisis is traceable, inter alia, to the epistemic imbalance in the very structure of modernity. This imbalance results from the stifling of Africa’s epistemic resources under Western epistemic hegemony. Epistemic coloniality, of course interacting with some material factors, creates a sufficient condition for emigration” (Ude 2022, 3).

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