Introduction

This chapter aims to advance transgressive decolonial hermeneutics (TDH) as a theoretical method in activist education research. Broadly speaking, TDH works at the intersections of decolonial, hermeneutic, and collective action theory. It surfaces from the critical ethnographic study I conducted in Honduras where I engaged in participant observation for 18 months in the university student movement. Although hermeneutics did not strictly form part of my research, the “multi-voiced interpretative praxis” (Fúnez-Flores, 2020, p. 154) inspired by Lincoln and Cannella (2009) and Santos’s (2018) interpretation of social movements as sites of knowledge production encouraged me to consider the ethico-political implications of interpretation. TDH thus evolved into a transgressive mode of interpretation entangled with social struggles. It contests the ontological and epistemological commitments and empirical methodological models of the natural sciences, namely as they are adopted paradigmatically in the human sciences. Further, it disrupts the idea that interpretation is a mode of discovering the meaning of texts and affirms rather that interpretation, understanding, reflection, and comprehension are modes of being and becoming within a living context. In the follow sections I explicate transgressive decolonial hermeneutics’ (TDH) ethico-political, theoretical, and methodological tenets and discuss how they enable the reinterpretation and hence the theorization of student activism vis-à-vis higher education reform.

Transgressive decolonial hermeneutics

Transgressive decolonial hermeneutics (TDH) is a theoretical and methodological modification of Maldonado-Torres’s (2002) “transgresstopic critical hermeneutics” (p. 293). The former draws from concepts advanced by Latin American decolonial theory and extends the interpretation of texts to collective action. TDH departs from the latter’s philosophical transgression of texts and shifts toward the ethico-political and pedagogical transgressions enabled by interpreting collective action and its concomitant discourses and practices. Further, it aims to unsettle the ontological, epistemological, and methodological
limitations imposed by hermeneutics’ Eurocentrism and positivist/empirical textualism, namely as it refuses to engage in ethico-political dialogue with others to comprehend and indeed learn from the texts and contexts outside of Europe and its Anglo-American extension. TDH is therefore characterized by “a fundamental impulse to transgress the space of the other and even one’s own space” (Maldonado-Torres, 2008, p. 233). It is transgressive since it maintains that “spaces are not fixed epistemological grounds, and that transaction between spaces [and peoples] function as enabling conditions for self-understanding and (self)-critique” (Maldonado-Torres, 2002, p. 301). My participation in, modest contribution to, and learning from the university student movement in Honduras are the underlying reasons why I am advancing TDH as a theoretical method in activist education research.

**Decolonial tenet**

TDH takes a decolonial point of departure to refer to a broader social totality reconceptualized as the modern/colonial capitalist world-system (Grosfoguel, 2007). This perspective transcends political-economic paradigms maintaining the nation-state as the central unit of analysis. The ontological assumption of a broader social totality, moreover, unsettles the methodological nationalism prevalent in the social sciences (Patel, 2017), particularly in education research insofar as it prevents the interpretation of higher education institutions as simultaneously implicated in and reciprocally structured by local, regional, and global contexts. Methodological nationalism, more importantly, effaces the possibility of conceiving of knowledge, curriculum, pedagogy, theory, and methodology as geopolitical instruments constitutive of existing imperial/colonial relations within and between nation-states. It may seem counterintuitive to think of the curriculum within a broader context since public education in the United States is seemingly structured by the national, state, and local government. In Latin American contexts, however, why do the so-called international and global trends in higher education result in mimicking the academic standards, governance practices, pedagogies, theories, and methodologies developed in Western Europe and Anglo-America? Does the curriculum, then, play an instrumental role in legitimizing dominant knowledge systems or epistemes while invalidating others? To answer these questions, we must critically examine “whose internationalization” we are referring to (Paraskeva, 2016). Indeed, schools and universities – especially their curricula and governance structures – are integrated into a larger ensemble of sociocultural and political economic relations of power. It suffices to consider international financial institutions, academic standardization, accreditation processes, and ranking systems, as adopted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development to reveal the inextricable relationship between power and knowledge (Torres, 2009). Within the context of neoliberal globalization, these mechanisms become geopolitical instruments which sustain the modern/colonial capitalist world-system. It is thus that TDH refers to social
totality to interpret the sociopolitical, economic, and cultural implications of these entanglements, while simultaneously transgressing the methodological nationalism delimiting researchers’ geographic compass to the nation-state and the dominant theories and methodologies therein.

The notion of a context (whole) is dialectically related to its texts (parts). Here, wholes and parts are understood as heuristic devices since social reality is not divided or bounded so clearly in practice, that is, in concrete everyday lived experience. The particular is understood vis-à-vis a complexly configured whole in which heterogeneous texts, contexts, social institutions, histories, and collective memories intersect, contradict, contest, or complement each other. A university, for instance, is only superficially understood if the social totality of which it is a part is ignored. The constellation of texts and practices constitutive of universities such as policy, curricula, governance structures, accreditation processes, private-public partnerships, and knowledge production are therefore not only nationally implicated. Indeed, beyond the national context, the university is intertwined with a broader context of neoliberal globalization, that is, the contemporary re-articulation of the modern/colonial capitalist world-system. This re-articulation does not result in a fixed whole but rather in a partially fixed complex ensemble of hegemonic social relations of power, discourses, and practices in which the political, economic, pedagogic, cultural, and epistemic overlap (Gramsci, 1971). Articulating itself as the hegemonic social totality, it demarcates, on the one hand, a Eurocentric geography of reason, and, on the other, a wretched colonized space of non-being, nothingness, and ignorance (Fanon, 1963). This imperial geopolitical position sustains what Dussel (1993) refers to as the myth of modernity which naturalizes the West’s power and apparent superiority over Others. At best, the Other is systematically hidden from the modern imaginary. At worst, the Other represents modernity’s negative image, becoming thus the savage, undeveloped, Third World, illegal alien waiting to be civilized, Westernized, developed, deported, incarcerated, or educated.

The coloniality of power, knowledge, and being

In relation to the modern/colonial perspective or social totality discussed earlier, decolonial theory advances at least three interrelated concepts that assist in the interpretation of neoliberal higher education reform. The primary concept is the coloniality of power which is sustained by “a cognitive model, a new perspective of knowledge within which non-Europe was the past, and because of that inferior, if not always primitive” (Quijano, 2000, pp. 533–580). This concept enables the reinterpretation of universities as simultaneously structured by and constitutive of the modern/colonial capitalist world-system. It is not surprising that universities were established in Latin America in the first half of the 16th century. Higher education in the Americas, therefore, has always been an integral part of a larger, globally entangled imperial/colonial project. Indeed, without the university’s complicity in producing the knowledges, values, and
subjectivities which sustained other institutions (e.g., religious, political, and economic), it would be difficult to imagine the longue durée of colonization (Braudel & Wallerstein, 2009). Through education, a selected few from the colonized population became complicit in buttressing imperial/colonial asymmetries of power. Rama (1996) maintains that the “lettered cities” and universities of Latin America were perfectly designed to form colonial subjectivities. These lettered cities were the intellectual nodes of domination intricately linked to imperialism/colonialism. Colonialism was, and continues to be, sustained by learned men who ruled by pen and paper, that is, through the symbolic hegemony entangled with the materiality of colonial life. Contemporary, universities continue to be instrumental spaces in which dominant discourses and practices are deposited to perpetuate dominant ways of knowing and being.

This last point leads to the coloniality of knowledge (Mignolo, 2011), which refers to the epistemic dimension of colonization and the systematic invalidation and destruction of other knowledges. Today, this cognitive model articulates itself through the internationalization and globalization of higher education reform. Further, the coloniality of knowledge unveils the reasons why European and Anglo-American ways of knowing are portrayed as universal and superior while other knowledge systems are rendered provincial, inferior, and traditional. Here, the notion of superiority and inferiority refers to the coloniality of being. Wynter (2003) describes the coloniality of being as the overrepresentation of the dominant “ethnoclass” which positions White men at the center of the historical stage of progress and development (p. 268). The coloniality of power, knowledge, and being are therefore inextricably intertwined and implicated in one another, enabling thus the conceptualization of race-based social classification as the central axis around which the modern/colonial capitalist world-system is articulated. Race becomes an effective device that is simultaneously a product and producer of epistemic and ontological structures of domination. Understanding race as a device, that is, as a socially constructed instrument of control and domination, however, does not make racism any less real. Recognizing, in the liberal sense, that different races do not exist, following a colorblind and post-racial ideology, does not elude the fact that its concrete implementation continues to structure race-based social relations of power within and between societies and institutions.

Lugones (2007) advances the coloniality of power by intersecting it with what she calls the coloniality of gender. Here, race and gender become the two central categories used to classify and measure the purity, sub-humanity, masculinity, heteronormativity, and non-being of people dwelling on both sides of the modern/colonial divide. This resonates with Crenshaw’s (1989) conceptualization of the multiple ways bodies are marked, read, and positioned distinctly within a field of power according to race, gender, class, and sexuality, as well as nationality, religion, and language. Race and gender establish the epistemic invalidation of those who are read as inferiorly positioned by these markers. The coloniality of knowledge enables the interpretation of race and gender as
instruments of control implicated in the hierarchization of bodies, knowledges, languages, regions, continents, universities, and education systems on a global scale. The modern/colonial classification and inferiorization of people by race and gender, therefore, positions White heteronormative males as the only valid producers of knowledge, namely, those who think and write in English in the Global North. This hierarchy of knowledge renders all that is expressed, known, and interpreted outside of its conceptual hegemony as traditional, a euphemistic term that hides the colonial logics demarcating non-Eurocentric epistemologies as backward and stagnant.

**Methodological and ethico-political tenets**

TDH adopts Mignolo’s (2000) pluritopic hermeneutics, a knowledge praxis that engages in meaningful dialogue with the extant plurality of topoi or places of understanding hidden by Eurocentric and Anglo-Americentric interpretive frameworks, methodologies, and pedagogies. By thinking with and from other places (institutions and contexts) of understanding or geographies/cartographies of reason (Gordon, 2011), TDH underscores the plurivocal and ethico-political dimensions of interpreting from systematically excluded texts and contexts. Further, it does not reduce texts to a singular or objective, universal meaning but rather underscores their shifting significance vis-à-vis local, institutional, national, regional, and global contexts (Ricoeur, 1974). TDH does not, however, propose epistemological relativism or subjectivism where “anything goes.” Following Ricoeur (2007), TDH instead oscillates “between the two limits of dogmatism and skepticism” (p. 160). Subjective interpretations, in this sense, are implicated in the political ontology of concrete social practices, institutions, and contexts (Fúnez-Flores & Phillion, 2019), and are conceived here as the constellation of intersubjective relations of power paradoxically constitutive and derivative of social totality.

Moreover, TDH transgresses conventional hermeneutics’ textualist, spatial-geographical, linguistic, and conceptual limits. The latter tends to enclose itself in the monotopical discourse ostensibly spoken from nowhere, hence universalizing the broader monologic narrative of Eurocentrism and Anglo-Americentrism. As a result, this bounded hermeneutic practice, enclosed in the particularity/spatiality of Europe and the United States, is engrossed in unethical interpretations inasmuch as it is incapable of engaging in dialogue with other modes of interpretation and places of understanding. Although not observed by Dilthey (1972) explicitly, he nonetheless indicates that interpretation “remains partial and can never be terminated” (p. 243). According to my transgressive reading of this text, hermeneutics is a contested practice and is contingent upon place or locus of enunciation from which all words and worlds are spoken and created (Mignolo, 2011). European reason is not the exception, despite its self-proclaimed superiority over others. TDH hence opposes these unethical distortions by engaging in socially, politically, and culturally situated interpretations that unsettle the notion of abstract universals. It opens a path
toward concrete universals (or the pluriversal), that is, toward a world in which many worlds or places of understanding may coexist (Grosfoguel, 2013). TDH presupposes, therefore, that the interpretation and theorization of the world are always already contested and interwoven with places, bodies, institutions, histories, collective memories, and enduring social struggles immersed in fields of power. Above all, TDH aims to position itself as a counterhegemonic mode of theorizing insofar as the focus is not only the myriad conflicts of interpretation unfolding in academia but also the discourses and social practices of resistance and re-existence being articulated by social movements.

Reading and interpreting the neoliberal university

Referring to the social totality of the modern/colonial capitalist world-system assists in interpreting the ways in which university students, as well as academics, are commodified or thingified through neoliberal education reform. If we consider the labor of undergraduate and graduate research assistants and academics in Latin America as they engage in fieldwork to extract data for other academics in the Global North, we find that it is analogous to the extraction of natural resources (Lander, 2008). This analogy reveals that epistemic extractivism and epistemic racism are constitutive of the modern/colonial capitalist world-system (Grosfoguel, 2013). The former extracts so-called data and situated ways of knowing to further develop and universalize theory even in academic spaces purporting to do otherwise (Todd, 2016). The latter adds a racist dimension that completely disregards the intellectual production of Black, Brown, and Indigenous thinkers within and beyond academia, while their concepts are appropriated for personal gain. Tuck and Yang (2012) brilliantly discuss these knowledge practices as moves toward innocence, “which problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity” (p. 3). These extractivist practices are integral to capitalism and colonialism, accurately conceptualized by Indigenous scholar and activist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson as an “extraction-assimilation system” (Klein, 2013, para. 11). Universities, in this regard, perform as extraction-assimilation systems of domination that enforce efficient epistemic extractivist practices. The coloniality of research practices enables the extraction and analyses of “data,” subsequently repackaged into commodifiable theory. This extractivist practice, once again, parallels the way raw materials are extracted and manufactured into commodities, which are subsequently shipped back to the Global South for consumption. Latin American autonomous universities, for instance, transfer publicly funded resources and knowledges not only to the private sector but also to “public” world-class universities whose imperial reach (Lander, 2008), in turn, provides services to the global knowledge economy for a reasonable price.

Higher education is thus implicated in the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being. Here, one may conceptualize coloniality as an enduring violent pedagogical act which systematically subjugates and destroys other interpretations to the degree in which the colonized Other views and interprets the world through...
the colonizer’s eyes, conceptual networks, theoretical frameworks, methodologies, and epistemological/ontological assumptions. The images reflected by these distorted lenses are precisely the negative representations of Others. It is not surprising that colonization goes hand in hand with the destruction of Other lifeworlds through genocide, ethnocide (e.g., expulsion, forced conversion, boarding schools, and missions), and epistemicide (e.g., burning of madrassahs, libraries, codices, and bodies, as well as curriculum reform) (Grosfoguel, 2013). One may argue that the dominant curriculum is nothing more than an imperial doctrine expressing a war-like knowledge system justifying the destruction of other knowledges. This destructive process may very well be conceived as the imperial/colonial geopolitics of the curriculum, since knowledge is transformed into an instrument of control and domination. Notwithstanding these colonizing effects, the collective memories and histories, as well as the “hermeneutical resources of colonized cultures” continue to resist this pedagogical, epistemic, and ontological violence after five hundred years of Euro-modern colonialism (Maldonado-Torres, 2008, p. 232). By intentionally stepping outside of Eurocentric and Anglo-Americentric modes of understanding, TDH thus enables us to think from and with excluded places and peoples.

Applications: reading university student activism through TDH

Researchers using TDH may reinterpret university student activism and neoliberal higher education reform (as well as other forms of collective action and policies) beyond, yet always already implicated with, the nation-state. For a more complex interpretation, there are several contexts, varying in scale, that must first be considered. Methodologically, TDH requires at least three steps to theorize the expression of collective action/texts in relation to context. First, to interpret and indeed theorize university student activism within a broader context, as opposed to reducing it to a local expression of institutional discontent, the primary ontological point of departure is the social totality of the modern/colonial capitalist world-system. It is the backdrop against which higher education reform and student activism are interpreted, without which our interpretations would only perpetuate the methodological nationalism TDH seeks to avoid. Second, the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being assist in interpreting and reconceptualizing the entanglement between the immediate sociopolitical context, higher education reform, and resistance. Inasmuch as neoliberal reforms are instrumental in maintaining coloniality, the emergence of collective action and articulation of social movements resisting these reforms, and the knowledges, practices, and values expressed therein, are also manifesting, in subtle ways, a decolonial political project. By theorizing from the living sociopolitical context in which education institutions are reformed and contested, university governance and curriculum reform, for instance, are conceptualized more clearly within a broader field of power and resistance. Third, researchers
employing TDH must seriously consider interpreting the tensions expressed within a particular institution. The interpretation of these antagonistic expressions is necessitated to link the institutional textures (governance–power), texts (curriculum–knowledge), and actions (practices of resistance) with the immediate sociopolitical context and social totality. The diverse actors breathing political life into the university, who are involved in implementing, resisting, or remaining indifferent to neoliberal higher education reform, are central to the interpretation of the institutional milieu.

An important caveat to consider is that these steps must not be understood procedurally. Indeed, one may begin anywhere in the hermeneutic process insofar as the institutional and immediate sociopolitical contexts are interrelated with the social totality of which they are an integral part. All contexts are therefore always already interconnected with other contexts, localities, and institutions. One may very well begin with step three, at the microlevel with the institutional tensions expressed by the actors involved and proceed to interpret these tensions in relation to the immediate sociopolitical context and subsequently to the broader social totality. For conceptual clarity, this complex hermeneutic circle is composed of three concentric circles. The outer circle represents the social totality of the modern/colonial capitalist world-system enclosing the remaining inner circles. The middle circle represents the immediate sociopolitical national context, while the inner circle delimits a particular educational milieu or institution, including its diverse actors, texts, discourses, and practices. Reading and interpreting higher education reform through TDH must, therefore, consider how each context (broader social totality, immediate sociopolitical context, and particular institutional milieu) is dialectically related to one another. TDH thus enables the theorization of universities vis-à-vis the social totality of the modern/colonial capitalist world-system, the immediate sociopolitical and institutional context, and the actors interpellating and thus contesting and inscribing meanings to the former three interrelated contexts discursively, politically, and pedagogically. When one context is emphasized to the detriment of the others, however, student activism and higher education are, at best, reduced to analyzable units, brute facts, and bits of information. At worst, student activism is reduced to a reaction to the latter rather than an entangled process transcending the institutional milieu and immediate sociopolitical context. It is thus that TDH aims to unveil the paradoxes of the modern/colonial reconfiguration of neoliberal globalization through higher education reform, in one instance understood as a totalizing force, and, in another, a force met with a multiplicity of resistance, subject positions, and discourses articulated in a wide range of social movements.

From particular institutions to social totality

After the coup of 2009 in Honduras, neoliberal higher education reform sought to reconfigure the sociopolitical and institutional context according to the logics of coloniality. Here we observe how the social totality of the
modern/colonial capitalist world-system reconfigured itself materially through the nation-state and ideologically through higher education. We also note the emergence of university student activism within an increasingly polarized sociopolitical context. In the process of resisting the neoliberal recolonization of the university, student activists opened alternative educational spaces to read, discuss, and interpret education policies, including the constitutional rights for which previous student movements struggled. They unlearned dominant interpretive frameworks and learned how to cocreate knowledges, pedagogies, and intellectual political cultures of their own. Student activists countered the global designs aimed at transforming the university into an efficient factory or maquila capable of producing cheap commodities and passive consumers of knowledge, as well as possessive and politically indifferent individuals. Undoubtedly, producing possessive individuals is the dominant curriculum’s primary goal; it is its modern/colonial raison d’être. Within the postcoup context, it is not surprising that insurgent practices are met with counterinsurgency and state repression. Collective action, as the recently passed Penal Code in Honduras reveals (Congreso Nacional, 2019), is forbidden and punishable by the State, making young rebellious bodies and minds “crimes against the public order” (p. 126).

While neoliberal reforms reconfigured university governance and curriculum, university student activists organized themselves into democratically governed student associations according to academic program, department, and college. These associations created the necessary conditions to articulate a broad-based social movement that would counteract these authoritarian tendencies and expressions inextricably linked to the dictatorial sociopolitical context established after the coup. Student activist associations and other student collectives organized massive protests and university occupations that paralyzed public higher education at a national level in 2016 and in 2017 (Vommaro & Briceño-Cerrato, 2018). Collective action, however, is not only that which is manifest and easily observable from a distance, that is, that which is empirically verified and quantifiable.

University students also engaged in activist work in latent forms, which is less appealing to social movement research, which is focused more on delimiting the causes and effects of collective action. They spent their days reading and interpreting higher education policies and curricula with fellow activists and thus collectively producing knowledge subsequently shared through social media (facebook.com/UNAHEstudiantes). These collective texts are often ignored in the literature — that is, the meticulous collective interpretations, discussions, reflections, autodidactic processes, and pedagogies of resistance that form part of student movements. Behind any social movement, collective intellectual work is involved. Researchers guided by instrumental interpretive frameworks, however, tend to ignore said knowledge practices. Social movements, as Angels Davis (2012) observes, are also frequently misinterpreted through a messiah complex, an individualistic frame that reduces collective action to an individual figure or icon (e.g., Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks,
Nelson Mandela, and Ernesto Guevara). TDH, on the other hand, situates its interpretation contextually and from a rearguard position, thereby carrying the potential to alter activist educational research by thinking alongside and knowing with – as opposed to knowing about – the knowledges and practices born in social struggles.

Important to note is that student activists’ knowledge practices translate into politico-pedagogies once their critical readings of the university are shared with the broader community (e.g., through WordPress journals such as unahestudiantes.org). “Little schools” (escuelitas), as students refer to their workshops, public forums, and assemblies in which students, professors, and representatives of other social movements participate (e.g., the Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH)), are the undertheorized pedagogical and ethico-political dimensions of university student activism. Consider the following statement shared by a student activist facilitating a workshop organized for freshman students interested in learning about and participating in the student movement: “The students participating in this workshop will learn reciprocally from one another since all knowledge is collective” (Fúnez-Flores, 2020, p. 141). Here knowledge becomes intersubjective and sociopolitical, aimed to be cocreated ethically with others and shared pedagogically. This is diametrically opposed to the individualist and universalist conception of epistemology constitutive of the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being. Student activists’ interpretations and collective action thus deconstruct and reconstruct the meanings assigned to higher education, thereby disrupting the idea that learning is a means to pursue an individualist and meritocratic notion of success. Certainly, these alternative educational spaces are small pedagogical openings through which an insurgent decolonial curriculum begins to emerge.

These close readings of student activism indicate that TDH is not simply another methodology academics need to consume. It is rather a praxis engaged researchers embody as they theorize with, from, and alongside social struggles manifested in and beyond educational institutions. As indicated previously, TDH entails a transgressive ethico-political interpretation of collectively written texts and contexts. It is through these collective expressions, as Holloway (2010) illustrates, where flashes of light of hope assist in reimagining alternative ways of being together in an uncertain world. Theorizing or interpreting collectively written texts permits us to envisage, even if for a fleeting moment, an alternative to the neoliberal/neocolonial university and a future horizon from which a radical democracy may emerge. What is more destabilizing to coloniality, which is dependent on indifference and possessive individualism, than a collective interpretive praxis? Inasmuch as student activists have reinterpreted and acted upon the university to change its indifference and authoritarian governance structure, they have also created the conditions of possibility of decolonizing the university which has, for nearly five centuries, served as a partially fixed nodal point articulated to the modern/colonial capitalist world-system. Through TDH, theorizing the possible disarticulation of the university
from the modern/colonial matrix of power thus becomes a counterhegemonic and decolonizing practice.

**Theoretical implications**

In articulating the theoretical method of transgressive decolonial hermeneutics (TDH), I realized that, if decolonial theory is to transcend the literary criticism of postcolonial theory, it must refuse to be academicized and completely institutionalized for it to stay in touch with the places of understanding from which it emerged. It must not decontextualize itself from ongoing sociopolitical and cultural struggles, independent of how unfashionable it may seem in academic circles dominated by “post” philosophies, theories, and methodologies that may unjustly label these arguments as excessively humanist or Marxist. Further, decolonial theory ought to go beyond hermeneutic practices that solely engage in theoretical dialogue with border thinkers already established in academia. Instead, decolonial scholars must position themselves as rearguard theorists (Santos, 2018) – that is, as transgressive decolonial hermeneuts – as they work alongside non-academic activist intellectuals and collective actors who are building a decolonial future in the present by cocreating discourses and social practices of resistance and re-existence.

A salient point to observe regarding higher education is that we cannot decolonize the university curriculum if an undemocratic and indeed colonial governance structure remains intact. This observation is too often omitted from discussions around the decolonization of higher education and public education in general (Bhambra, Nişancıoğlu, & Gebrial, 2018; Grosfoguel, Hernandez, & Velasquez, 2016). Decolonial work, furthermore, is more than a hermeneutic practice aimed at citing established decolonial scholars. Indigenous activist intellectuals in Latin America thinking and acting to make another world possible also criticize dominant modes of decolonial interpretation since decolonial work is frequently reduced to academic work (Cusicanqui, 2012). The decolonization of the university and of social relations of power must, therefore, be born out of collective struggles. Claiming to decolonize knowledge without first taking into serious consideration the concrete struggles creating the conditions of possibility of decolonizing the university’s ontological, epistemological, methodological, pedagogical, and political economic commitments, will only result in personal gain as decolonial scholarship integrates itself into the political economy of ideas emanating from privileged epistemic, social, institutional, and geographic positions.

I recognize the contradictions of making these claims as I, too, am feeding into a modern/colonial structure that consumes and assigns exchange value to knowledge. This contradiction is part of the double bind researchers employing TDH will encounter. Researchers must learn to navigate these contradictions intentionally, tactically, and strategically in order to contest academic spaces and their entanglement with colonial social structures that implicate the university as well as the geopolitics of knowledge sustained by publishing.
companies. Bhattacharya (2020), for instance, reflects about the political economy of knowledge and her place in academia as she refuses to align herself with dominant “post” philosophies, theories, and methodologies. She recalls Yvonna Lincoln asking her, “What will you achieve by giving up your seat at the table? Exactly what will you change?” The metaphoric table is often used as if gaining a seat at this exclusive table in some way adjusts the structural inequalities in place. Maybe the table is fortified by our liberal recognition and multicultural inclusion, or perhaps gaining a seat at the table is the first step in “changing the terms of the conversation” and dismantling the table to make it anew (Mignolo, 2011, p. 161), one that revolves around the ethico-political principles of pluralism, power of difference, and radical democratic equivalence (Mouffe, 2020). Like Bhattacharya’s reflective response to these questions, I, too, “have yet to find an answer” (p. 2).

In times of empire perhaps no one is innocent; however, we are not all equally complicit. To reduce our complicity, TDH offers an alternative to engage in decolonial theoretical work through its transgressive ethico-political commitment and modest contribution to strengthening social struggles discursively and practically. The following suggestions may be a good start for researchers interested in employing TDH: communicating analyses and interpretations in accessible language through alternative media; becoming a rearguard intellectual always positioned as a learner behind a movement; working alongside social movements and activist intellectuals to strengthen their struggle – as opposed to claiming to be part of the vanguard intelligentsia (Santos, 2018); collaborating in activist research projects off the academic grid; and recognizing that being an ally to a social movement also implies sharing concrete risks with collective actors while also acknowledging one’s privileged position.

Methodological implications

Previously, I referred to Eurocentric and Anglo-Americentric places of understanding that claim neutral, objective, acontextual, and solipsistic epistemic positions. The imperial epistemological position echoes Haraway’s (1988) “conquering gaze from nowhere” (p. 581). Similarly, decolonial scholar Castro-Gomez (2005) reconceptualizes dominant epistemic positions as the hubris of a zero-point epistemology, which enunciates the objects to be known while hiding the locus or place from which all words and worlds emerge. The monotopical researcher, in this sense, behaves as the Deus absconditus (hidden god) who sees and knows all things without ever being seen. TDH, however, departs from these god-like acts of knowing and objectifying, which simultaneously sustain imperial logics and perpetuate the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being. It transgresses the univocal presuppositions of the absolute meaning of texts and contexts by thinking from other places of understanding and sites of resistance.

Univocity or certitude is not only manifested in quantitative research. These epistemological assumptions are implicitly adopted by research practices in
qualitative inquiry. The description, explanation, and analysis of data is underscored at the expense of alternative interpretations that transgress the boundaries of collecting (extracting) and analyzing (breaking down) brute facts. One may easily forget that facts depend on the institutions and social contexts in which they emerge. In other words, there are institutions that change the facticity of each fact, datum, or text (Searle, 2006). Empirical qualitative researchers, in this sense, are not immune to the potential pitfalls that “obscure the need to ground and test theoretical excursions and abstractions from the data in the structures of the context in which they are produced” (Delamont et al., 2010, p. 753). The data effectively collected by the interviewer, for instance, are transcribed to produce a copious supply of facts about the interviewee’s lived experiences, thoughts, teaching practices, et cetera. What is often ignored, particularly when interviews outweigh other methods such as TDH, is the relational, situated, and interactional dimensions of communication. The transcript, in other words, omits the “setting’s discursive conventions” that are implicated in the way the interviewee narrates their life according to the situation (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008, p. 247), that is, the narrative environment in which the interviewer intervenes. One may argue that the data materialized in the form of an interview transcript silence the hermeneutic process involved, since what is obscured is the ways in which the interviewer and interviewee simultaneously participate in reading, interpreting, and creating the interactional context.

Brute facts, therefore, tend to hide the empirical qualitative researcher collecting data within a particular social context or institution. The analysis of data and the themes that apparently emerge therefrom tend to negate the existence of social institutions and contexts in which said facts/data are expressed. TDH’s ontological commitment, in contrast, takes as an ontological point of departure the social totality to read and interpret the ways in which education institutions, policies, reforms, curricula, knowledge practices, interpretations, and collective action transgress or perpetuate the modern/colonial capitalist world-system. This ontological assumption also assists in unsettling the methodological nationalism extant in education research. By countering the search for certainty, data collection is no longer portrayed as the search for observable objects and facts but rather as a historically, contextually, sociopolitically, and culturally situated knowledge practices in which researchers participate to contest, reconfigure, or perpetuate dominant discourses and institutions. Remaining impartial or objective is not an option.

William James was perhaps right when he stated that “you can’t pick up rocks in a field without theory” (Agar, 1980, p. 23). Today, however, rather than submitting to already existing theories, it is more urgent to advance alternative theories and modes of interpretation that enable the conceptualization of the interrelationships between contexts, institutions, and human action. For a more profound interpretation of specific actions, situations, texts, and contexts, TDH proceeds dialogically from a rearguard position to learn from, theorize alongside, and contribute to the myriad of social struggles creating
the conditions of possibility of articulating counterhegemonic discourses, knowledges, practices, and institutions. The aim is not to privilege or re-center theory as method over empirical research but rather to point to the limitations of the latter while theoretical frames are currently being unsettled. As Mannheim (1936) expressed long ago, the problem lies in the fact that “in certain disciplines empirical investigation goes on as smoothly as ever while a veritable war is waged about the fundamental concepts and problems of the science” (p. 103). Empirical research thus is employed as though the interpretation of the world were fixed instead of being continuously transformed symbolically by emerging sociohistorical and cultural interpretations and materially by political economic forces. Moreover, ontological and epistemological assumptions are always already informing data collection, analysis, and interpretation, not to mention the formulation of empirical research topics. The search for certitude through empirical research thus hides the hermeneutic process of understanding, a process that is expressed in everyday knowledge practices. Empirical verification, therefore, disregards the radical, political, and transgressive potential of reinterpreting/retheorizing the world and rewriting discourses, institutions, and social practices. It assigns scientific value to that which is observable, classifiable, measurable, and conformable to dominant theories and methodologies. Knowledges, lived experiences, and collective action are reduced to bits of information and are subsequently fixed and forever enclosed in a theme. The knower, in this sense, captures all that is to be known.

These extractivist colonial knowledge practices prevent researchers from reading and interpreting the ways in which institutions, actions, and discourses intersect, transform, and implicate one another. The methodological obsession with data collection and extraction is indeed an expression of coloniality. Fals-Borda (1970) warned politically engaged researchers about this obsession 50 years ago, which, according to him, would only lead to intellectual colonialism. TDH, conversely, unsettles this obsession by emphasizing that interpretation, that is, theorization, is a (geo)political act of knowing always already entangled with the social totality of the modern/colonial capitalist world-system in which social struggles unfold.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have advanced transgressive decolonial hermeneutics (TDH) as a theoretical method in activist education research. I aimed to contribute to the discussions around decolonizing methodology by intersecting the transgressive ethico-political dimensions of activist research with pluritopic hermeneutics and decolonial theory. TDH entails thinking from other places of understanding since the aim is to unsettle the exclusive, decontextualized (solipsistic), authoritative, and colonizing practices of academia. The symbolic and epistemic extraction, appropriation, and classification of other ways of interpreting and knowing the world are analogous to material extractivism. There exists, as
I discussed, a dialectical relationship between the material coloniality of power and the symbolic coloniality of knowledge and being.

I also pointed out that university student activism is not only a reaction to higher education reform. Rather, student activists transcend the institutional constraints of the university. Their organized resistance is indeed a collective expression opposing the coloniality of neoliberal discourses and practices that impose dominant ways of knowing and being. Moreover, I pointed out that universities and neoliberal higher education reform in particular are institutions and instruments of domination constitutive of the modern/colonial capitalist world-system. By developing an alternative interpretation of student activists’ collective action, I was able to underscore the extent to which student activists intervened in resisting the neoliberal recolonization of the university while also creating the conditions of possibility of democratizing and decolonizing the university.

Reinterpreting the world through TDH hence becomes a counterhegemonic ethico-political act seeking to disrupt dominant interpretations and resist the colonization of Other places and institutions of understanding. TDH expands the notion of texts to actions and thus enables researchers to reinterpret and theorize student activism, as well as other forms of collective action, within a broader symbolic field in which discourses, institutions, and social relations of power are enmeshed. Transgressive decolonial hermeneutics thus moves toward the globally entangled social totality articulated by a multiplicity of texts, contexts, discourses, practices, interpretations, and social struggles.

Lastly, taking student activism seriously through transgressive decolonial hermeneutics (TDH) potentiates alternative ways of engaging in activist research, more relevant today with the resurgence of protests in Chile, Ecuador, Brazil, Columbia, Honduras, Haiti, and, most recently, in the United States within the context of the Black Lives Matter movement. The Americas are simultaneously the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic and social movements, both of which are pedagogical events unveiling historically embedded, colonially structured, and racially coded inequalities. While the historical conjuncture of the pandemic begins to expose the coloniality of university governance and curriculum, the politico-pedagogical gestures of varying social movements provide the impetus for researchers to employ transgressive decolonial hermeneutics (TDH) to reinterpret and hence theorize the political-economic, sociocultural, and institutional implications of an unstable, contested, and geopolitically embroiled contextual landscape.

References


