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Unraveling Coloniality in International Relations: Knowledge, Relationality, and Strategies for Engagement

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A wide-ranging conversation has been unfolding in the past two decades on the colonial origins and legacies of international relations (IR) and the ways in which these might be overcome. Critiques and counter-projects that draw inspiration from Latin American decolonial thinking have become an increasingly prominent part of this, particularly in the past few years. In this article, I offer an assessment of this nascent decolonial IR. I make two broad arguments: that dominant modes of decolonial critique in IR need to be supplemented by projects that unravel—that is, make sense of and disrupt—racialized power and knowledge relations as they play out across multiple political, economic, and epistemic sites; and that achieving this requires more nuanced and targeted decolonial methodologies than those that are currently available. This leads me to reframe coloniality in IR as a methodological problem, not to supplant questions of epistemology, ontology, or ethics in decolonial IR but to render them more amenable to empirical analysis. Illustrating my discussion through reference to the global governance of “traditional knowledge,” I sketch out a methodological framework for decolonial IR that is attentive to the slow, context-specific processes through which coloniality (re)emerges but is also reshaped.

A wide-ranging conversation has been unfolding in the past two decades on the colonial origins and legacies of international relations (IR) and the ways in which these might be overcome. Encompassing questions of history, ontology, epistemology, methodology, and ethics, it has drawn attention to a range of Eurocentric distortions, exclusions, and other violences in the discipline and a failure to fully address issues of race and empire in international politics (Krishna 2001; Inayatullah and Blaney 2004; Beier 2005; Gruffydd Jones 2006; Shilliam 2011; Hobson 2012; Georgis and Lugosi 2014). Critiques and counter-projects that draw inspiration from Latin American decolonial thinking have become an increasingly prominent part of this conversation, particularly in the past few years (Rojas 2007, 2016; Taylor 2012; Shilliam 2013; Nayar 2014; Sajed 2015; Hudson 2016; Vivares and Dolcetti-Marcolini 2016; Blaney and Tickner 2017a, 2017b; Capan 2017; Dunford 2017a; Gani 2017; Odysseos 2017). These have framed the distortions and exclusions of mainstream IR in relation to a “colonial matrix of power” that reproduces colonial forms of domination in international politics and contributes to ongoing Eurocentrism in the discipline (Capan 2017, 4; see also Blaney and Tickner 2017a, 74). Scholars have also set out visions of how the coloniality of IR—the reproduction of colonial patterns of racial domination, hierarchization, and marginalization in the discipline—might be overcome. These include “foreground[ing] coloniality

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and the powerfulness of racial-epistemic hierarchies” in analyses of international politics (Taylor 2012, 393); recovering knowledges, rationalities, and lifeworlds that are marginalized or erased by the colonial matrix of power (Rojas 2007, 2016); and otherwise disrupting the complicity of IR scholarship in the reproduction of colonial hierarchies and erasures (Blaney and Tickner 2017b; Capan 2017, 8).

This turn to decolonial thinking as a resource for critiquing and reconstructing IR, while opening new horizons for analyzing colonial legacies in international politics, has not been without its limitations, however. Invocations of “coloniality,” “coloniality of power,” and “coloniality of knowledge” in IR have tended, for example, to portray them as uniform, unitary systems of oppression and domination. This is misleading and does little to prompt close, detailed analysis of the dispersed practices that produce racialized hierarchies and erasures. There has also been a tendency to critique and seek to reconstruct IR through broad brushstroke portrayals of the knowledges, rationalities, and lifeworlds that are marginalized by the coloniality of power and knowledge. This not only risks homogenizing and romanticizing subalternized knowledges but also obfuscates the concrete practices and processes that contribute to their marginalization. These limitations are, in part, a reflection of the broad and abstract nature of much of the decolonial theorizing that has inspired decolonial IR (cf. Sabaratnam 2017, 136). Yet they also reflect a limited engagement so far with concrete sites and practices of decolonial struggle—the “larger projects of decolonisation” that, as Louiza Odysseos notes, are “far from a predominantly, let alone exclusively, academic or intellectual endeavour” (2017, 467; see also Lander 2001, 13).¹ This limited engagement with colonial and decolonial praxis risks reproducing what Arturo Escobar (2007, 192) has referred to as the “disembodied abstract discourse” of the Latin American decolonial research program that has provided much inspiration for decolonial IR, and undermining the transformative agenda set out by its proponents.

In this article, I aim to both prompt and facilitate deeper engagement in decolonial IR with colonial and decolonial praxis. I do this through assessing decolonial IR through the lens of my research on the global governance of “traditional knowledge”—the favored term currently in global governance institutions for the knowledge and practices of indigenous peoples—and through foregrounding questions of methodology. As my approach to coloniality and my reading of decolonial IR are shaped by my experiences of researching “traditional knowledge” as a European-born and European-trained researcher, I begin, in the first section of the article, by outlining this research context and the ways in which it is shaped by coloniality of power and knowledge. In the second section, I engage a dialogue between this research context and recent articulations and enactments of decolonial IR. I make two interrelated arguments: that decolonial critique in IR needs to be supplemented by projects that unravel racialized power and knowledge relations across multiple political, economic, and epistemic sites; and that doing so requires more nuanced and targeted decolonial methodologies than those that are currently available. This leads me, in the third section of the article, to reframe the coloniality of IR as a methodological problem, with a view not to supplanting questions of epistemology, ontology, and ethics in decolonial IR but to rendering them more amenable to empirical exploration. Illustrating my discussion through reference to my research on “traditional knowledge,” I sketch out a methodological framework for decolonial IR that is attentive to the slow, context-specific processes through which coloniality (re)emerges but is also reshaped.

¹ While there have been studies of concrete struggles and decolonial alternatives that build on insights from decolonial thinking in IR (Conway 2011, 2013; Ranta 2016; Dunford 2017a), examples of colonial or decolonial praxis have more typically, as discussed below, been marshalled as evidence of IR’s failings and the need to broaden or disrupt its fields of analysis, rather than a sustained site of reflection and critique.

The Coloniality of “Traditional Knowledge” in Global Governance

“Traditional knowledge” became part of the vocabulary of global governance relatively recently, emerging as the dominant way of conceptualizing the knowledges and practices of indigenous peoples in global governance institutions in the 1990s. It was first formalized as an object of global governance in the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), which opened for signatures at the Rio “Earth Summit” in 1992. From the CBD, discussion of “traditional knowledge” moved to other global governance forums, often focusing on the links between “traditional knowledge” and other governance frameworks. In 2000, the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) established its Intergovernmental Committee on Intellectual Property and Genetic Resources, Traditional Knowledge and Folklore (IGC), which initially served as a forum for WIPO member states to discuss intellectual property issues relating to “traditional knowledge” and genetic resources. From 2009, the IGC began to negotiate an international legal agreement on genetic resources, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions (as “folklore” is now called in WIPO). Meanwhile, in the World Trade Organization (WTO), article nineteen of the 2001 Doha Declaration formalized consideration of “traditional knowledge” and the relationship between the CBD and the WTO’s Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement as part of the TRIPS Council’s work program. The topic is still part of the TRIPS Council’s agenda but is not being treated as a negotiating priority, as attention in the WTO has shifted to finding ways out of the long-standing impasse in the Doha Round negotiations. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) have also examined “traditional knowledge” and its links with food security and traditional medicine, respectively.

Much of my research on the global governance of “traditional knowledge” has focused on the WTO and the flows of knowledge that have accompanied and shaped TRIPS Council debates about “traditional knowledge.” These flows of knowledge have been produced through national governmental processes, as well as through participation by NGOs in dialogue, consultation, and information-sharing with the government officials who carry out TRIPS Council work and the WTO officials who facilitate it (Tucker 2014). Discussions have been framed by the provisions of the Doha Declaration, which instruct the TRIPS Council to “examine, inter alia, the relationship between the TRIPS Agreement and the Convention on Biological Diversity, the protection of traditional knowledge and folklore, and other relevant new developments raised by members” (WTO 2001, Art. 19). Although interpreted quite broadly initially, TRIPS Council discussions of these issues have increasingly centered on proposals to amend the TRIPS Agreement so that it requires that the origin of any “traditional knowledge” used to develop a patentable process or product is disclosed in patent applications. Such an amendment, its proponents argue, would facilitate the “equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the utilization of [traditional] knowledge” (UN 1992, Art. 8(j)) required by the CBD, as it would provide clarity about the use of “traditional knowledge” by scientists, companies, and others developing patentable material. My research builds on ethnographic interviews and observation in Geneva, Lima, and the Peruvian Andes between 2008 and 2014, the former home to the WTO’s offices, the latter two important sites of debate about the meanings and significance of “traditional knowledge” for issues such as national development and indigenous communities’ autonomy.

I began my research in Geneva. As I interviewed officials in the WTO Secretariat, national delegates responsible for representing government positions in the TRIPS Council, and those working in the many NGOs that had established offices in Geneva, I learnt to converse in the legalistic language of “disclosure of origin,” “access and benefit-sharing,” and “prior informed consent.” I learnt to think in terms of “mandates,” “modalities,” “declarations,” and “articles” and to understand the

difference between “negotiations” and “work programs” as the formal basis for discussions in the WTO—a point that was repeatedly emphasized by WTO Secretariat officials. I became adept at using these terms to frame my questions and contributions to conversations with research participants, and although I was not sure they helped capture the breadth of debate on “traditional knowledge,” I appreciated the fact that doing so prompted fluid and natural responses. At the same time, I grew troubled that few of the issues that had first drawn my attention to the topic of “traditional knowledge” seemed to be part of discussions in Geneva. There was no discussion of the rights of indigenous peoples to freely pursue their economic and cultural development and to “maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures” (UN 2007, Art. 3, 11); very little questioning of the assumptions underpinning Western—and now global—patent law; and little mention of broader ethical issues such as the acceptability of patenting lifeforms. Every now and then, I caught glimpses of these richer, more political debates, in comments from NGO directors or government officials about themes that had fallen out of discussion, or in questions from the audience at public events I attended about “traditional knowledge.” Overall though, the WTO officials, national delegates, and NGO staff I spoke to in Geneva broadly accepted the narrow and legalistic focus on “disclosure of origin,” “access and benefit-sharing,” and “prior informed consent,” either out of conviction or resignation.

I left Geneva for Peru, and began working my way through the list of government and NGO officials that interviewees in Geneva had recommended I contact. The terminology and mode of thinking I had learnt in Geneva (albeit translated into Spanish) made sense to interviewees in this new context and prompted the same kind of fluid, open responses to my questions. Yet the more I moved beyond this initial list of contacts (and beyond those I had been told “know” the most about “traditional knowledge” in Peru), the more I found myself needing to adjust my language and concepts. Instead of referring to “traditional knowledge,” I learnt to ask questions about “ancestral knowledge,” “the practices of indigenous peoples” and “Andean cosmovision.” As I moved from Lima into the Andes, and away from those most connected to government and WTO processes on “traditional knowledge,” the topic of “Andean cosmovision” assumed ever greater presence and importance. Guided by the concerns and priorities of my interviewees, I learnt about the relational ontology of Andean cosmovision and how this informs Andean approaches to knowledge and nature. I discussed the reciprocal, nurturing relationship that binds human beings and other parts of the natural world and cosmos in Andean cosmovision and how Andean “ancestral knowledge” reflects and protects this relationship (cf. *de la Cadena 2010, 2015*). With those interviewees who were familiar with Western intellectual property law, I also talked about the tensions and gaps between Andean cosmovision and the main principles and assumptions underlying Western approaches to “traditional knowledge,” and the inadequacies of intellectual property law as a means of protecting it.

The more I grew to understand Andean approaches to “traditional knowledge,” the more questions I asked about the extent to which these were understood and recognized as legitimate by the government officials and NGO actors I was also interviewing. The directors of indigenous and peasants’ associations I spoke to in the Peruvian Andes were overwhelmingly negative in their replies, criticizing what one referred to as “the supreme ignorance of political decision-makers at every level when it comes the question of cosmovision.” Government ministers in Lima, meanwhile, boasted about their mechanisms for information-sharing and consultation with all types of Peruvian civil society organizations around trade policy and “traditional knowledge.” They were very critical, however, of what they saw as the “ideological” positions adopted by many of the country’s NGOs, including those working from Andean perspectives, and perplexed that Peruvian civil society organizations could be hostile to the government’s more commercially oriented

negotiating stance. “They need to be more realistic,” complained one official, “otherwise they don’t help negotiations, they make them more difficult.” The NGOs and knowledge interventions that were most appreciated by the Peruvian government were those that contributed recognized legal expertise. When I was back in Geneva to close my circle of interviews and observation in 2014, national delegates, WTO officials, and NGO staff members confirmed that Andean perspectives had made little appearance or impression in debates; a legalistic, commercially focused approach to “traditional knowledge” remained the dominant form of acceptable knowledge; and only those able and willing to use it were still involved.

As I have sought to understand the connections and disconnections amongst these different approaches to “traditional knowledge,” I have found it useful to think in terms of “coloniality of knowledge.” The concept is most closely associated with Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano, who developed it as part of a broader reflection on global structures of power, knowledge, racial hierarchization, and capitalism in the light of Latin American historical and cultural experiences from the fifteenth century to the present day (Quijano 1992, 1998). Quijano traces the origins of these global structures to Iberian colonial domination of what would become known as Latin America in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This colonial domination relied, Quijano argues, on the idea of race as a means of classifying and hierarchizing populations, the invention of the “Indian” as the basis of social classification and exploitation, and the expropriation or repression of the cultures, religions, and lifeworlds of indigenous populations (Quijano 1998, 115–18). Colonial repression fell, in particular, on the “modes of knowing, of producing knowledge, of producing perspectives, images and systems of images, symbols, modes of signification” of colonized cultures, as well as on their “resources, patterns, and instruments of formalised and objectivised expression” (Quijano 2007, 169). This repression of knowledge was accompanied by the extermination of indigenous populations across the continent and a destruction of indigenous societies and cultures (Quijano 2007, 169). The patterns of repression, expropriation, and imposition of knowledge established in the colonial period, refracted through ideas of race and racial hierarchy, continued, Quijano argues, after colonialism as “an explicit political order” was overthrown (Quijano 2007, 170). This embedded a particular set of global material relations and intersubjectivities and a colonial model of global power characterized by continued racialization and racial hierarchization, the concentration of resources, trade and economic production in Western Europe and North America, and the dominance of a particular form of Eurocentric knowledge (Quijano 2000, 537–42). Quijano refers to this model, which he sees as still central to global political, economic, and epistemic relations, as “coloniality.”

The Eurocentric knowledge identified by Quijano is a “specific rationality or perspective of knowledge that was made globally hegemonic” through the intertwined workings of colonialism and capitalism (Quijano 2000, 549–50). It works through establishing binary, hierarchical relations between categories of object and reflects a particular secular, instrumental, and technocratic rationality that Quijano situates both in relation to Western European thought from the mid-seventeenth century onward and the demands of global capitalist expansion in the nineteenth century (Quijano 1998, 117; 2000, 549; see also Lander 2001, 18; Vázquez 2011, 34; Seth 2013, 138). It codes relations between Western Europe and the rest of the world through categories such as “primitive-civilized,” “irrational-rational,” and “traditional-modern” (Quijano 2000, 542) and establishes temporal distinctions and hierarchies between them, such that “non-Europe” is associated with “the past, and because of that inferior, if not always primitive” (Quijano 2000, 552; cf. Hindess 2007). Relatedly, it codes the relation between Western Europe and “non-Europe” as one between subject and object, generating the myth that Western Europe is the only source of reliable knowledge and blocking, as Quijano (2007, 174) puts it, “every relation of communication, of interchange of knowledge and of modes

of producing knowledge between . . . cultures.” This Eurocentric knowledge acts, Quijano (2000, 556) argues, as “a mirror that distorts what it reflects,” naturalizing and legitimizing racial hierarchization and exclusion, particularly in the Latin American context (Lander 2001, 13).

“Coloniality of knowledge” thus refers to historically rooted, racially inflected practices that routinely elevate the knowledge forms and knowledge-generating principles of colonizing cultures, whilst relegating those of colonized cultures. It draws attention to the constitutive role of knowledge in the violences that characterized colonial domination and to the role of knowledge in perpetuating the patterns of racial hierarchization and oppression that were established in this period. While my approach to “coloniality of knowledge” differs in some respects from Quijano’s,² his discussion illuminates important elements of the global governance of “traditional knowledge.” It points, for example, to the colonial foundations of the concept of “traditional knowledge,” which relies on a hierarchical distinction having been established and enacted since the late eighteenth century between (practical, context-specific, identity-based) “traditional knowledge” and the (abstract, codified, universal) “knowledge” that is protected by patent regimes. This distinction mirrors the patterns of repression, expropriation, and imposition of knowledge in the colonial period, with those practices and worldviews now categorized as “traditional knowledge” largely corresponding to the modes of producing and transmitting knowledge that were (never entirely successfully) repressed or expropriated by Iberian colonial powers (Quijano 2007, 169). It also reflects the hierarchical, temporal logics of what Quijano calls “Eurocentric knowledge,” such that Western European knowledges and practices appear timeless, while the knowledges and practices of indigenous peoples are associated with the past.³

Quijano’s discussion of coloniality of knowledge also sheds light on some of the more specific issues I encountered as I carried out my research, namely the elevation of a legalistic approach to “traditional knowledge” within Geneva’s policy-making community, the “expert” status accorded to NGO professionals who use it, and the concomitant marginalization of Andean perspectives and cosmovisions. These issues might be thought of as instances of a coloniality that is still in-the-making, a coloniality that is emerging through the dialogue, consultation, and information-sharing that inform global policy-making on “traditional knowledge.” This incipient coloniality reinforces but also inflects the more established coloniality of “traditional knowledge” as a category of governance, for example through embedding legal expertise as a mechanism of hierarchization and dispossession. The elevation of a legalistic approach, and the centrality of legal “experts” as transmitters and creators of knowledge, reflect and reproduce a privileging of a knowledge form (“intellectual property”) that has been central to capitalist development in Western Europe in the past two centuries (May 2007, 2) and to capitalist expansion globally (Harvey 2005, 98; cf. Quijano 2000, 549). It also reinforces a colonial cartography of expertise, with those who are assumed to know more, or to know in more acceptable ways, typically from and/or educated in urban centers in Europe or North America. Thus, while Peruvian indigenous communities and their knowledge of plant varieties such as *camu camu*, *sacha inchi* and *maca* have been cited as evidence of the need to develop mechanisms to better protect “traditional knowledge”

² Rather than identifying and discussing a single system of global coloniality, I prefer, for example, to foreground the plurality (and resulting politics) of knowledge within colonizing cultures and projects, and to emphasize that “coloniality of knowledge” is one of multiple, intersecting forms of oppression (cf. Castro-Gómez 2007; Lugones 2010).

³ The CBD (n.d.), for example, defines “traditional knowledge” as knowledge “developed from experience gained over the centuries,” “adapted to the local culture and environment,” and “mainly of a practical nature.” It tends to be “collectively owned and takes the form of stories, songs, folklore, proverbs, cultural values, beliefs, rituals, community laws, local language and agricultural practices.” The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO, n.d.), similarly, defines “traditional knowledge” as the “knowledge, know-how, skills and practices that are developed, sustained and passed on from generation to generation within a community, often forming part of its cultural or spiritual identity.”

(WTO 2007), no intervention based on Peruvian Andean cosmovision has been presented to the TRIPS Council in Geneva. Peru's Andean communities have been invoked as an object of knowledge in this field of global governance, but not recognized as subjects with authoritative perspectives on "traditional knowledge."

The Coloniality of International Relations

Quijano's thinking about coloniality of power, culture and knowledge, along with the work of other decolonial theorists such as Enrique Dussel, María Lugones, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, and Walter Dignolo, has increasingly served as a resource for scholars seeking ways to critique and reconstruct IR. The contributions to a decolonial IR that have emerged from this engagement have followed two broad directions. Decolonial thinking has been used, on the one hand, to critique the "colonial-modern function" (Nayar 2014, 138) of assumptions and knowledge forms that are deeply embedded in the discipline and the broader field of Western social science of which it forms part (cf. Seth 2013). Contributions in this vein have highlighted issues such as the absence or erasure of alternative knowledge systems, and the reproduction of colonial hierarchies of knowing and known subjects in the discipline (Taylor 2012; Shilliam 2013; Vivares and Dolcetti-Marcolini 2016; Capan 2017; Gani 2017). Decolonial thinking has also been used to interrogate instances of coloniality in particular political contexts, including the World Social Forums (Conway 2011, 2013), state policy in Bolivia (Ranta 2016), and United Nations discussions on food sovereignty (Dunford 2017a). Across these two broad lines of engagement, scholars have articulated visions for a future decolonial IR and outlined strategies through which it might be achieved. These have centered on questions of visibility, recognition, and the disruption of IR's complicity in the reproduction of colonial hierarchies and erasures through recovering and engaging with ontologies, epistemologies, rationalities, and lifeworlds that are marginalized or erased by the coloniality of power (Rojas 2016; Blaney and Tickner 2017b; Gani 2017, 446).

My research on the global governance of "traditional knowledge" reinforces the arguments that have been made in recent years about the coloniality of international politics. It shows how the practices of government, international organization, and NGO staff in diverse locations accumulate to marginalize and erase Andean perspectives on "traditional knowledge" and to reproduce the racialized hierarchies established by colonialism in this field of global governance. This is precisely the sort of erasure and hierarchization that motivates and necessitates a decolonial IR. My research also affirms the relevance of the visions and overall ethos for a decolonial IR that have been set out so far. In particular, it illustrates the need to recover and engage with marginalized and erased knowledges, and the value of foregrounding coloniality and "racial-epistemic hierarchies" (Taylor 2012, 393) in analyses of international politics. Yet my research also brings some of the limitations of decolonial IR into relief. These include the broad brushstroke way in which coloniality and the knowledges and lifeworlds it marginalizes have been mobilized in decolonial IR, the prevalence of discipline-oriented critique, and relatively superficial methodological reflection. These limitations reflect the distribution of decolonial critique in IR so far, with more attention directed to the structures of knowledge and reasoning that reproduce coloniality in IR than to the question of how decolonial IR might be pursued, as well as a limited engagement with concrete sites and practices of colonial and decolonial politics.

My research highlights, for example, the complex set of geographically and ontologically dispersed practices through which colonial hierarchies and erasures are (re)produced in the global governance of "traditional knowledge." These include efforts by staff of Peruvian NGOs to establish themselves as knowledgeable companions to government officials in Lima, decisions made by directors of indigenous organizations in the Peruvian Andes to focus energy and resources on local concerns,

and discussions about mandates and work programs in the WTO and WIPO. They include framings of “traditional knowledge” in other policy contexts, approved mandates for discussion in these organizations, and government procedures for dialogue and consultation with civil society. They include routinized modes of interaction amongst government officials, international organization secretariats, NGO workers, indigenous leaders, academics, and others in spaces such as networking events, public forums, and research collaborations. In conjunction, these practices elevate and embed a legalistic approach to “traditional knowledge” at the expense of Andean, non-market-oriented perspectives and objectify Peru’s Andean communities. These outcomes are not the result of practices in any single location, or of any single actor in this field of global governance, but emerge through (and can only be assessed through examining) multiple overlapping and intersecting practices. Patterns of racially inflected hierarchization and marginalization thus emerge, in this context, through knots and bundles of practices in multiple geographical locations.

This sort of complexity is not widely reflected in discussions of colonial domination, hierarchization, and marginalization in IR. “Coloniality,” “coloniality of power,” and “coloniality of knowledge” are generally presented in both decolonial thinking and the decolonial IR that it has inspired, as simple, smoothly operating structures of racial and epistemic domination. Quijano’s discussions of global power, knowledge, race, and capitalism, for example, identify and critique a single, undifferentiated system of global coloniality, a global system of power, knowledge, and racial hierarchization that does not appear to be rooted in any concrete, identifiable practices (Quijano 2000, 540; cf. Garzón Lopez 2013, 307). In decolonial IR, similarly, coloniality is typically presented as an abstract, undifferentiated system of racial and epistemic domination. References to “the colonial project,” “the coloniality of power,” “colonial and capitalist modernity,” and “the prison of colonial modernity” abound, but there is little detailed discussion of the concrete, manifold forms that colonial oppressions and struggles have taken around the world (Thomas 1994; de l’Estoile 2008). Neither is there much effort to specify and unpack the diverse elements and mechanisms that contribute to colonial patterns of racialized hierarchization and oppression. While Zeynep Gulsah Capan (2017, 4), citing Ramón Grosfoguel (2011), notes that “coloniality of power can be conceptualised as an ‘entanglement’ or ‘intersectionality of multiple and heterogeneous global hierarchies (‘heterarchies’),” this approach is atypical; coloniality is more commonly invoked as a uniform and unitary system of oppression and domination. This is not only misleading, flattening centuries of colonial rule by diverse colonial powers and homogenizing their legacies, but it also does little to prompt the close, detailed analysis required to identify the dispersed practices that produce racialized hierarchies and erasures and to analyze how these can be countered.

My research also draws attention to the dynamism of Andean knowledges and the ways in which they fuse, fracture, and evolve through encounters with other knowledge traditions, including IR knowledges. It is a common misconception that “traditional knowledge” represents a timeless, hermetic knowledge that is mimetically passed on from generation to generation within indigenous communities. My interviewees in the Andes made great efforts to ensure I appreciated the dynamic, evolving nature of Andean knowledges and the always present potential for innovation or influence from communities of interaction. Similarly, when Andean actors interact with NGO and governmental officials in their attempts to communicate their perspectives on the governance of “traditional knowledge,” these encounters leave traces in the framings and conceptualizations of what is at stake in both sets of actors. Indigenous actors have learnt, for example, to articulate and defend Andean approaches to knowledge in contradistinction to intellectual property law; Peruvian government officials have sought to incorporate concerns from indigenous communities into the design of protection mechanisms for “traditional knowledge,” such as national registries. Andean knowledges thus dynamically interact with the

knowledges and perspectives of other actors in the global governance of “traditional knowledge” (cf. [Kuokkanen 2007](#), 58; [Watson and Huntington 2008](#): 259; [Sundberg 2014](#), 34). The knowledges mobilized by IR scholars and other social scientists are also part of this dynamic. Every autumn, tens, if not hundreds, of scholars descend on the annual Public Forums organized by the WTO in Geneva, where they present their latest analyses, participate in book launches, and roam the halls of the WTO in search of research participants and networking opportunities. They also initiate research collaborations with Geneva-based NGO researchers and WTO officials, and, to a lesser extent, with the sorts of research centers, NGOS, and community-oriented organizations whose directors I interviewed in the Peruvian Andes.

Decolonial IR, however, tends to present the knowledges, realities, and lifeworlds that are marginalized by Eurocentric biases and universalism in the discipline in broad brushstroke and one-dimensional ways. There are abundant references to “multiple realities” and “different realities” ([Blaney and Tickner 2017b](#)); “realities proscribed by modernity” such as those voiced by indigenous peoples ([Rojas 2016](#), 374); and “identities and ideas proposed by grassroots social forces” ([Vivares and Dolcetti-Marcoloni 2016](#), 873). There are some snapshots of marginalized knowledge orders and the ontological politics surrounding them in places such as Paraguay, Colombia, Peru, and New Zealand ([Blaney and Tickner 2017b](#), 305–6). There are, however, very few examples of in-depth work on the knowledges and lifeworlds that are marginalized or erased by Eurocentric assumptions in the discipline from a decolonial theoretical perspective ([Shilliam 2013](#); [Sajed 2015](#); [Ranta 2016](#)); nor have there been any tracings of the intersections and interrelations between colonized and colonizing knowledge orders. Marginalized knowledges, realities, and lifeworlds thus appear in decolonial IR as blank spaces, as empty signifiers in the critiques that decolonial scholars have made of dominant modes of producing and organizing knowledge in the discipline. This not only replicates the colonial patterns of knowledge and ignorance that decolonial scholars seek to overcome in IR, but means that decolonial IR cannot grasp the significance of the dynamism and relationality I encountered in debates about “traditional knowledge” in Peru and Geneva for the (re)production of colonial knowledge relations.

This homogenizing approach to coloniality, and the broad brushstroke way in which marginalized knowledges and lifeworlds are evoked, are partly a function of the relatively recent turn to decolonial thinking in IR. It is only in the past few years that scholars have integrated concepts from decolonial theory into their critiques of IR, and a decolonial IR as a distinct approach to questions of knowledge, race, and power in the discipline has become distinguishable. Yet this homogenizing, broad brushstroke portrayal of coloniality and the knowledges it marginalizes also reflects, and is prone to reproduce, a centering of disciplinary critique in decolonial IR. The references to “multiple” and “different” realities and snapshots of alternative knowledge orders mentioned above, for example, are enfolded into critiques of disciplinary assumptions; they are not given space in their own right, but are mobilized in support of discipline-focused arguments, such as the need to pay greater attention to ontological politics in decolonial IR ([Rojas 2016](#); [Blaney and Tickner 2017b](#)). The “critique of IR” serves, in other words, as an implicit or explicit master-frame for decolonial IR. This master-frame structures engagement with coloniality as a problem space in the discipline, making disciplinary assumptions and conventions the focal point of decolonial critique ([Taylor 2012](#); [Blaney and Tickner 2017a](#); [Capan 2017](#)). Yet, as has been noted in IR and elsewhere, decolonial struggles extend well beyond disciplinary and academic boundaries ([Lander 2001](#), 13; [Tuck and Yang 2012](#); [Noxolo 2017](#), 343; [Odysseos 2017](#), 467). Centering disciplinary critique sidelines the struggles for autonomy and territory that animate decolonial politics from the Biobio highlands in Chile ([Azócar et al. 2005](#)) to the Okanagan Valley in Canada ([Gahman and Legault 2017](#)), to give just two examples, as well as the realities and lifeworlds that these struggles expose. Unless “critique

of IR” is displaced as a master-frame, this limited horizon can only be expected to persist.

The discipline-oriented gaze in decolonial IR is reflected, moreover, in the absence of explicit reflection on how decolonial IR might be pursued as an empirical, political project. While the need for methodologies that “forg[e] connection and mutually supportive relations across ontological difference” has been noted (Blaney and Tickner 2017b, 310), and several strategies for accessing marginalized knowledges have been proposed,⁴ methodological discussion has been oddly peripheral in decolonial IR. There have been no detailed discussions of the principles that could inform the design or conduct of decolonial inquiry, or underpin engagement with those involved in concrete, decolonial struggles and the lifeworlds that their practices create. Neither have there been any attempts to elaborate decolonial methodologies on the basis of decolonial ethics or decolonial approaches to race, power, and knowledge. This lack of explicit methodological reflection is unfortunate, as it leaves unaddressed the vital question of how scholars might actually practice the disruptive, multi-ontological, decolonial IR that has been envisaged in recent years. It also provides little impetus or guidance for those seeking to undertake multi-ontological research that aligns with decolonial politics and ethics.

The broad brushstroke way in which coloniality and the knowledges and lifeworlds it marginalizes have been mobilized in decolonial IR, the prevalence of discipline-oriented critique, and the lack of explicit methodological reflection, limit, in summary, the analytical and transformative potential of decolonial IR. Critique of dominant forms of visibility and modes of producing knowledge in the discipline of IR is necessary but not sufficient; it needs to be accompanied and enriched by empirical research that makes sense of, and disrupts, racialized power and knowledge relations as they play out across concrete political, economic, and epistemic sites. Doing so calls for nuanced and targeted methodologies that facilitate engagement with colonial and decolonial praxis, and, importantly, with those engaged in decolonial struggles beyond the confines of disciplinary IR.

Unraveling Coloniality in International Relations

Decolonial IR, as a nascent approach to questions of race, power, and knowledge in international politics and IR scholarship, has produced a range of critiques and counter-projects that seek to address ongoing colonial legacies. Inspired by Latin American decolonial thinking, these have drawn attention, on the one hand, to instantiations of coloniality in international politics (Taylor 2012; Dunford 2017a) and, on the other, to Eurocentric thinking in the discipline that reproduces colonial patterns of power, knowledge, and visibility (Capan 2017). These have been accompanied by calls to, *inter alia*, undo the “effacement of alternative worlds” in IR scholarship (Blaney and Tickner 2017b, 293; see also Rojas 2007, 2016), undertake “more decolonial scholarship on non-modernist epistemologies and practices” (Gani 2017, 446), and pay greater attention to the significance of racial-epistemic hierarchies when analyzing international politics (Taylor 2012). Such endeavors, it is hoped, will disrupt the (re)production of colonial patterns of racial domination, hierarchization, and marginalization in IR scholarship and the normalization of the colonial violences, categories, and erasures that shape international politics. The lack of explicit methodological reflection in decolonial IR limits, however, the extent to which decolonial IR can act as an impetus and guide for research on marginalized knowledges, lifeworlds, and realities, as well as on the knots and bundles of practices that produce racialized hierarchies, erasures, and appropriations

⁴These include border thinking and *mestizaje* consciousness (Taylor 2012; Capan 2017), Robbie Shilliam’s approach of “walking with peoples and places in deep relation,” (Blaney and Tickner 2017b, 308; cf. Sundberg 2014) and shifting the locus of inquiry to encompass non-elite practices and worldviews (Dunford 2017a, 146).

across multiple political, economic, and epistemic spheres. Realizing decolonial IR as a disruptive, multi-ontological project requires more explicit methodological reflection than has so far emerged, particularly in relation to the question of how decolonial IR scholars should engage with colonial and decolonial praxis. It also requires more nuanced and targeted methodological practices: practices that help unravel—that is, make sense of and disrupt—racialized power and knowledge relations as they play out across multiple political, economic, and epistemic sites.

It is to precisely such tasks that my attention now turns. Building from my research on the global governance of “traditional knowledge,” current articulations of decolonial IR, critical and collaborative methodologies in anthropology and IR, and the growing literature on indigenous methodologies (Nicholls 2009; Botha 2011; Leyva 2011; Smith 2012; Kovach 2015), I sketch out a methodological framework for decolonial IR. This framework consists of four methodological practices: *starting small*; *centering reciprocity*; *thinking relationally and holistically*; and *following colonial and decolonial struggles across multiple sites*. These practices are not “methods,” in the sense of specific techniques for generating and analyzing data, but elements of a decolonial methodology, understood as an “intellectual process guiding . . . self-conscious reflections on epistemological assumptions, ontological perspective, ethical responsibilities, and method choices” (Ackerley, Stern and True 2006, 6; cf. Tickner 2005, 3). To provide clarity and context, I illustrate my discussion through reference to the global governance of “traditional knowledge,” and the colonial and decolonial politics that shape the ways in which it is emerging. In developing such a framework, I am not seeking to prescribe one single methodological approach for decolonial IR. I am, rather, trying to open up thinking space on how decolonial IR scholars can research colonial and decolonial praxis in ways that align with decolonial ontologies, epistemologies, and ethics. I pay particular attention to the question of how decolonial IR research can be conducted without reproducing colonial hierarchies of knowing and known subjects, that is, producing IR scholars as knowing subjects while those engaged in decolonial struggles emerge as subjects to be discovered and known. Decolonial IR research cannot be a project of knowledge extraction; it needs, rather, to facilitate collaborative shaping and building of knowledge as a route to revealing—and disrupting—colonial hierarchizations and erasures in international politics (cf. Falcón 2016, 174; Todd 2016; Noxolo 2017, 343).

Practice One: Start Small

Decolonial IR, I argued earlier, needs to be rooted in detailed discussion of the concrete, manifold forms that colonial oppressions and struggles have taken around the world. As a basic orientation, then, decolonial IR research needs to attend and respond to instantiations of coloniality in concrete sites and fields of political activity, rather than approaching coloniality as a uniform, unitary system of oppression and domination. Methodologically, this means that rather than taking the coloniality of power and knowledge as a primary object of analysis and critique, decolonial IR research should start from local constructions of racialized, colonial power and knowledge relations (cf. Coleman and Rosenow 2016). This implies situating decolonial research in concrete sites of colonial and decolonial praxis, rooting the development of research questions and lines of analysis in the particular nexus of historical legacies and contemporary practices through which colonial hierarchizations, erasures, and struggles are (re)produced there. In the global governance of “traditional knowledge,” such sites might include the meeting rooms and margins of WIPO’s Intergovernmental Committee on Intellectual Property and Genetic Resources, Traditional Knowledge and Folklore (IGC); government ministries, bodies, and research institutes in biodiverse countries such as Brazil’s National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) or Peru’s Institute for Research on the Peruvian Amazon (IIAP); and indigenous-led initiatives to preserve and develop Andean agricultural practices, such as the *Parque de la Papa* in Pisac, Peru. Through attention to

racially inflected techniques of categorization, hierarchization, or boundary work that constitute relations between knowledges and groups of people in these sites, as well as practices that subvert or reconstitute colonial relations, decolonial researchers could attune themselves to the dynamics and exigencies of each site and use these to develop questions and lines of inquiry. This could lead to detailed examinations of colonial praxis in all its knotty specificities in these sites and the broader fields of political activity of which they are part. The outcomes of such research could, in good ethnographic fashion, disrupt the “erroneous neatness” (Crang and Cook 2007, 13) of dominant discussions of coloniality in international politics, adding nuance, depth, and detail to decolonial IR.

Practice Two: Center Reciprocity

Starting decolonial analyses from the concrete, situated practices through which coloniality of power and knowledge are (re)produced implies working closely with those who are engaged in different forms of colonial and decolonial struggle. This makes finding and centering ethical principles that can facilitate noncolonizing and nonobjectivizing encounters across ontological and epistemological difference a central concern in decolonial research methodology (cf. Blaney and Tickner 2017b, 310). One principle that could facilitate such encounters is “reciprocity.” My thinking about reciprocity is informed by conversations about knowledge production and community I had in the Peruvian Andes. Reciprocity, sometimes expressed as the Quechuan “ayni,” is an ethical and practical principle around which collective life is organized across the Peruvian Andes and neighboring communities. A central pillar of Andean cosmovision, *ayni* helps construct and maintain balanced relationships and is expressed in practices such as collective harvesting and sharing of resources and a nurturing approach to relationships with all elements of the cosmos (Radcliffe and Laurie 2006, 239; Walsh and Argumedo 2016, 167). As part of a methodology for decolonial research, centering reciprocity has at least three ethical benefits. It can, firstly, prompt researchers to reflect on the relationships that sustain empirical research and conceive of themselves as part of a community rather than an isolated pursuer of knowledge, creating opportunities for collective forms of knowledge production that are responsive to decolonial struggles (cf. Falcón 2016, 184–86). It can, secondly, disrupt hierarchical conceptualizations of the relationship between (knowing) IR researchers and those engaged in decolonial struggles (who are to be known) (Capan 2017, 5). This can promote more symmetrical, reciprocal relationships among partners in decolonial research and opportunities to “articulat[e] in symmetrical terms the worlds/realities that the colonial difference articulates hierarchically” (Blaser 2010, 23). It can also direct attention to the balance of relationships with research participants, prompting actions and exchanges that move the research process beyond one-directional, potentially extractive encounters.

Centering reciprocity could, to illustrate, be enacted through seeking out and nurturing relationships with research partners—those affected by contemporary forms of colonial praxis—as a central mechanism of knowledge production in the conduct of decolonial research. This could take the form of creating opportunities for the reciprocal exchange of resources (including information, skills, and energies) before research plans are finalized and placing a priority on carving out time and space for trust-building, learning, and meaning-making amongst research partners in the conduct of research projects (cf. Brown and Tucker 2017, 1198–99). In the case of research on the global governance of “traditional knowledge,” centering reciprocity could take the form of building reciprocal, mutually beneficial relationships, and creating opportunities for collaborative meaning-making with indigenous activists contesting Eurocentered approaches to knowledge and the natural world in global governance institutions, or with lawyers developing indigenous intellectual property mechanisms in countries such as Brazil and New Zealand (Rimmer

2015). Balance could be pursued in the form of ensuring that research partners' knowledges appear in research outputs not as empty signifiers but as knowledge orders that are just as complex and knotty as the practices that marginalize them. This might entail disseminating findings in multiple formats, such as storytelling and video, that can reflect the complexity of marginalized knowledge traditions and prompt multiples modes of engagement with research findings (Blaser 2010, xv; Leyva 2011, 127–28; Smith 2012, 331; Brown and Tucker 2017, 1192).

Practice Three: Think Relationally and Holistically

Decolonial IR has tended to rely on reductive, broad brushstroke portrayals of coloniality and the knowledges and lifeworlds it erases, obscuring the diversity of colonial oppressions and struggles. A third practice, then, for decolonial IR research is to prioritize relationality and a holistic approach to the knowledges and lifeworlds that are marginalized by colonial patterns of hierarchization and domination. By “relationality” I mean a research sensibility that emphasizes connection and inter-relatedness amongst individuals, communities, histories, and knowledges, as well as the worlds—both past and present—in which these are rooted (cf. Qin 2016; Shilliam 2016; Rojas 2016). Like “reciprocity,” my thinking about “relationality” is informed by conversations with research participants in the Peruvian Andes about the limits of intellectual property approaches to protecting “traditional knowledge.” Knowledge and knowledge-making practices, in the relational ontology of Andean cosmivision, are understood to be rooted in dynamic relationships amongst individuals, communities, past and present practices, nature, and the cosmos.⁵ Thinking relationally and holistically about coloniality of power and knowledge implies moving away from approaching them as singular, fixed objects of analysis to exploring their dynamic constitution through layers of knowledge, history, and material practice. In the global governance of “traditional knowledge,” contemporary colonial processes are constituted through the layering and conjunction of political and epistemic practices such as framings of problems and mandates and implicit and explicit distinctions between “traditional knowledge” and other objects of governance. These unfold in a broader relational context that includes historical patterns of repression, expropriation, and imposition of knowledge, and a model of production and commercial development premised on bioprospecting. Thinking relationally and holistically can lead to research designs that encompass and provide an opportunity to grapple with such messy webs of relationships, knowledges, historical resonances, and material practices and to avoid constructing and exploring coloniality of power and knowledge as reductive, one-dimensional processes (cf. Capan 2017, 8–9).

Practice Four: Follow Colonial and Decolonial Struggles across Multiple Ontological, Epistemological and Geographical Sites

Thinking relationally and holistically about coloniality of power and knowledge can be facilitated by a fourth practice for decolonial IR research: explicitly following colonial and decolonial struggles across multiple ontological, epistemological, and geographical sites. The rationale for this practice comes from two sources: decolonial ethics, on the one hand, and the multisitedness of the practices through which colonial hierarchies and erasures are (re)produced in the global governance of “traditional knowledge,” on the other. As several scholars have emphasized recently, a decolonial IR needs to recognize and engage with multiple realities (Rojas 2016;

⁵ Dominant intellectual property approaches to “traditional knowledge,” in contrast, assume that this knowledge can meaningfully be divided into units that are attributable to a specific group or community at a specific point in time (that can then become the recipient of “benefit-sharing”).

Blaney and Tickner 2017b; cf. Savransky 2017). As David Blaney and Arlene Tickner have put it, “it is not only that people believe different things about reality, but that different realities are enacted by different practices” (2017b, 303). Building on Robin Dunford’s (2017b, 11) discussion of pluriversal ethics, this not only establishes a methodological imperative to recognize “a world in which many worlds are possible” (cf. Falcón 2016, 180) but to adopt methodological practices that “remain compatible with the existence of other worlds” (Dunford 2017b, 12). One such practice, building on George E. Marcus’s discussion of multisited ethnography, is to design decolonial research around “chains, paths, threads, conjunctions or juxtapositions of locations” (Marcus 1995, 105), through following “people,” “things,” “metaphors,” “stories,” “lives,” and “conflicts” (Marcus 1995, 106–10) across multiple ontological, epistemological, and geographical locations. Research findings might then be developed and presented, as Mario Blaser (2010, 23–26) proposes, from the standpoint of the dialogue that such juxtaposition of realities and experiences enables.

In the global governance of “traditional knowledge,” this could involve following government officials who visit Peru’s *Parque de la Papa* back to their ministries in Lima or neighboring countries to see how their epistemic practices produce or reshape colonial knowledge relations. It could involve following particular agricultural practices to the “earth beings” of Andean cosmovision (de la Cadena 2015) or following the concept of *in situ* conservation to similar knowledge-recovering projects in the Philippines or to discussions on food sovereignty in the United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization. It could entail following a conflict over the acceptability or not of genetically modified crops to regional government efforts to outlaw their use or historical practices of seed-sharing. These threads and juxtapositions would take researchers from the relational ontologies of Andean cosmovision to the market-oriented logics of trade policy, from sites of decolonial knowledge production to sites of marginalization and erasure. Such research is demanding, requiring what Rauna Kuokkanen (2007, 155) calls “multi-epistemic literacy”—the “ability not only to read and write but also to listen and hear, to learn”—from the lifeworlds encountered along the chains of association and juxtaposition. This does not mean, however, that it is not worth pursuing.

Conclusion

Latin American decolonial thinking has increasingly served as a resource for scholars seeking ways to interrogate and disrupt the connections between colonial patterns of hierarchization, domination, and erasure and the discipline of IR. Its mobilization has led to a wave of articulations and enactments of decolonial IR in the past few years that have centered questions of visibility, recognition, and the disruption of IR’s complicity in the reproduction of colonial hierarchies and erasures through recovering and engaging with marginalized ontologies, epistemologies, and lifeworlds. My research on the global governance of “traditional knowledge” illustrates some of the ways in which decolonial thinking, particularly Quijano’s discussion of “coloniality of knowledge,” can illuminate analysis of contemporary international politics. These include highlighting the continuities between the global governance of “traditional knowledge” and the repression, expropriation, and imposition of knowledge in the colonial era, and exposing the colonial cartography of expertise that shapes current global policy-making on “traditional knowledge.” Yet my research also brings some of the limitations of decolonial IR into relief. These include the broad brushstroke way in which coloniality and the knowledges and lifeworlds it marginalizes have been mobilized in decolonial IR, the prevalence of discipline-oriented critique, and the lack of explicit methodological reflection. These limitations obscure the diversity of colonial oppressions and struggles around the world, the dynamism and relationality of marginalized knowledges, and the

dispersed practices through which colonial hierarchies and erasures are (re)produced in international politics. They also leave decolonial IR vulnerable to reproducing colonial patterns of knowledge and ignorance, such that disciplinary norms and debates become the focus of decolonial critique, while little impetus or guidance is provided for carrying out empirical research in ways that are respectful of decolonial politics and ethics.

To counter these limitations, I have, in this article, centered the question of methodology in decolonial IR. I did this not with a view to supplanting reflections on decolonial epistemologies, ontologies, or ethics but to articulate a process that connects ontological, epistemological, and ethical reflection with the practicalities of conducting decolonial research (cf. Ackerley et al. 2006, 6). Following such a process can, I have argued, both prompt and facilitate deeper engagement in decolonial IR with colonial and decolonial praxis. I have emphasized in particular the complexity and relationality of marginalized knowledges and the need to adopt research practices that disrupt hierarchical relationships between knowing IR researchers and those who are to be known and to engage with decolonial struggles on multiple ontological, epistemological, and political registers. Incorporating these practices into decolonial research can expand the problem space of coloniality in IR to ensure it meaningfully responds to the diverse colonial oppressions and struggles for autonomy, territory, and recognition still playing out in international politics.

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