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ABSTRACT

This article considers the critical theory of the Frankfurt School in the context of decolonisation and asks whether it can have continuing relevance given its foundations in white, western traditions which bear the hallmarks of colonialism. Despite critical theory, particularly in its early radical figurations, situating itself as an alternative to traditional western philosophy it undoubtedly shares some of the myopic and Eurocentric traits of this tradition. Mindful of not wishing to perpetuate colonial impulses to appropriate Indigenous philosophies, this article harnesses the twin ideas of a decolonial conversation and interacting in a third space, both of which foreground historical power imbalances and injustices. Only on that basis can a genuine engagement occur between western and Indigenous thought. My aim, as a western scholar, is to explore the relevance of critical theory in this decolonial age. By highlighting intersections, while acknowledging crucial differences, between critical theory and Indigenous philosophies I seek to show that critical theory can play a crucial role in how western scholars respond to and embrace the necessary and compelling movement of decolonialisation, but only first by acknowledging their own shortcomings, particularly in relation to race, racism and colonialism.

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Introduction

'Is critical theory fit for purpose in a decolonial age?' The problems are obvious. Critical theory, particularly in the tradition of the Frankfurt School, has been dominated by white, European men from its antecedence in the work of Marx and Freud, through the first generation of Adorno and Horkheimer, the second generation of Habermas and the contemporary work of third generation Honneth. May (2012) calls on western critical theorists to become more self-aware of what he – drawing on the work of Charles Taylor – refers to as 'majoritarian particularism masquerading as universalism' (326). Rather than being genuinely universal, western philosophy has focused on its own, and assumed this to be either true for all or held a belief it should be true for all (the patronising colonial narrative). As Connell (2007) observes 'most theoretical texts in the social sciences are written in the global North, and most proceed on the assumption that this does not matter' (50). Adorno's infamous abhorrence of jazz music has also given rise to accusations of racism and Eurocentrism (Oberle, 2016). Where early critical theorists did focus on racism it was almost exclusively on anti-Semitism (Baum, 2015). Edward Said (1994) said of the Frankfurt School:

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Despite its seminal insights into the relationships between domination, modern society, and the opportunities for redemption through arts as critique [they are] stunningly silent on racist theory, anti-imperialist resistance, and oppositional practice in the empire (357).

Bardawil (2018) argues that it has become unavoidable to conclude that ‘the glaring omission of colonialism, race, and religion from critical theory render their own understanding of an increasingly interconnected world parochial, if not complicit with imperial powers’ (774). The situation, however, as with so much to do with the Frankfurt School, is hard to classify in any easy way. This article is premised on the twin ideas that critical theory has much to offer decolonialisation, but that it must first acknowledge and rectify its own lack of understanding of race, racism and colonialism.

Critical theory need not be seen as a canonical set of ideas from times past, but rather an on-going project and commitment. At its core, critical theory rejects the instrumental rationalism of late capitalism and highlights hidden and subtle distortions and pathologies that impair our ability to lead fulfilling, social lives. There could be no greater insult to the work of Horkheimer and Adorno than to preserve their works in aspic – as interesting, slightly eccentric artefacts of another time. I believe strongly in the radical potential of this early critical theory, but also insist upon the right to rethink it in a different context and era: otherwise I would be guilty of what Adorno himself terms, ‘the passive acceptance of what is merely the case’ (Adorno, 2001, 121).

Feminist critical theorist Nancy Fraser (and contemporary of Honneth) makes this point well in referring back to Marx and the original idea behind critical theory. She quotes Marx from 1843 as saying that philosophy is ‘the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age’ (Fraser, 1989, 113). We should thus see the struggles of the age reflected in the critical theory of that age. This leads Fraser to question, for example, the lack of engagement with issues around female subordination in the work of Habermas. Fraser’s position is a nuanced one and does not allow the absence of explicit engagement with feminist issues in Habermas’s work (apart from a brief discussion) to prevent her still trying to read his *The Theory of Communicative Action* with an eye to what it may contribute to feminist thought. What Fraser does, in common parlance, is not throw the baby out with the bathwater. She engages with Habermas’s work critically to demonstrate omissions and assumptions based on stereotypical views of the male-dominated nuclear family and uses these to progress the shared critical theory project, which undoubtedly must include feminism.

We must now also recognise Indigenous thought and decolonisation as core *struggles of this age*. They do, however, prove to be perilous taxonomic territory. For Tuck and Yang (2012) decolonisation is always about land and people, while Adefarakan (2011) argues for a broader understanding that is inclusive of the African diaspora. Stewart (2018b)¹, like many, emphasises the specificity and localised nature of being indigenous, while Ahmed (2018) explores the tensions in Islam between being understood as an Indigenous form of knowledge without surrendering universal claims. Stewart et al. (2015) question whether indigenous philosophy is itself a western concept. Stewart (2018b) further argues that the concepts of ‘western’ and ‘indigenous’ are similar forms of identity labels ‘in the sense that both are general words for heterogeneous groups of peoples, who nevertheless understand themselves as aligned in some way’. (740). Thus the term ‘indigenous is a ‘placeholder for any of many specific identity names’ (740). In this article I use the term Indigenous in this inclusive sense while I use critical theory in the specific sense of the Frankfurt School tradition.

Indigenous thought and decolonisation can exist in appropriated colonial forms, or as concepts belonging to these communities (Adefarakan, 2011, Stewart et al., 2015, Martin et al., 2020). The challenge for critical theory is to engage with the latter and to resist the strong, pathological drives to do the former, however unintentionally. To update critical theory by simply bringing in some Indigenous or decolonial thought would be a form of cultural appropriation. Nor is it the responsibility of Indigenous scholars to fix the oversights in western theory. And yet not to engage with decolonialisation also seems wrong.

Some Indigenous scholars invite westerners into a conversation (eg Abdi, 2011; Adefarakan, 2011; Asmar & Page, 2018; Dei, 2011a; Townsend-Cross, 2011) to reflect on our own theoretical foundations more honestly in the context of decolonialisation. As Dei (2011a) argues: 'There is a need for new, counter/alternative and multiple knowledge forms in diverse social sites to provide critical understandings to individual and collective political action.' (2). And Mika (2015) observes, that as well as an undeniable history of domination and suppression, 'there is a great wealth of potential in the Western tradition that does not belong solely to the dominant method' (1139). It is here that I would like to position critical theory. My hope is that western critical theorists can be 'fellow travellers of sorts' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, 8). This is particularly so when Indigeneity is understood as grounded in resistance, struggle and empowerment (Adefarakan, 2011).

Other Indigenous scholars, however, are more suspicious of western interest and worry about the line between engagement and appropriation (Martin et al., 2020; Stewart, 2018a, 2018b; Tuck & Yang, 2012). As Tuck and Yang (2012) state so clearly, however nice it is to exchange ideas, real change involves the return of stolen lands: 'decolonization specifically requires the repatriation of Indigenous land and life' (21). Decolonisation is an embodied movement, not just a purely cognitive one and it further challenges the idea of a disembodied epistemology.

There are three tensions that run through this article. These are between: common ground and incommensurability; engagement and appropriation; and decolonialisation and social justice, this last point a reflection of Tuck and Yang (2012) warning that the two cannot be conflated because of the specificity of what decolonialisation stands for. It feels wrong for me to presume to write about Indigenous thought as such, and therefore this article is focused on how critical theory should respond to the imperative of decolonialisation: to find a form of engagement without appropriation. Obviously, I cannot do this without writing anything on Indigenous or decolonial thought. My aim is to refer to the Indigenous scholars who have influenced my attempts to reconsider critical theory, and not to presume to speak for them or their work. Therefore, more in-depth explanations of both Indigeneity and decolonialisation can be found in the works I cite, in the authors' own words.

This article is in four parts. The next section is a brief overview of intersections between Indigenous thought and critical theory. In the main section I consider the responses critical theory should make to decolonisation: acknowledgement of its past omissions; finding ground as a fellow traveller; and, rethinking its own empirical reference points. I conclude with personal reflections on what it means, as a critical theorist within higher education, to attempt to genuinely engage with decolonisation.

Interactions between indigenous thought and critical theory

Some Indigenous scholars reject a binary between western thought in general and Indigenous thought (Adefarakan, 2011; Dei, 2011b) and advocate conversations between them based on a mutual commitment to emancipation and justice. It is also important to note that western thought has not developed in a vacuum, even if the Enlightenment and its famous writers make it seem so: for example, Islam has been hugely significant in shaping many of the ideas which we today associate as 'western' (Watt, 1994). While western thought has also shaped aspects of Islamic thought over time (Ahmed, 2018).

Yet, Tuck and Yang (2012) insist that any progress towards decolonialisation cannot come from looking for common ground, but rather in recognising the *incommensurability* of Indigenous and western thought. Tuck and Yang are suspicious of the motives of 'settler scholars' such as myself, and observe that our efforts to engage can be self-serving and motivated by an 'attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege' (10). Martin et al. (2020) question how we draw a line between genuine interest in Indigenous knowledge and appropriation. They argue that the non-Indigenous appetite

for Indigenous knowledge and culture often takes ‘a symbolic and rarefied form’ which takes no account of ‘the actual realities of a life of struggle experienced by many, if not most, Indigenous school students’ (319).

Stewart (2018a) argues that some non-indigenous calls for greater interculturalism are problematic because the focus remains on their interests as non-indigenous scholars or students, with scant recognition that indigenous people may have their own, somewhat different, interests and motivations. Thus even attempts at interculturalism frequently position the westerner as central. Western scholars who ‘herald the benefits of working across multiple knowledge systems’ stand accused of being ‘facile and ‘uncritical’ if they do not also acknowledge that indigenous people in westernised societies are invariably concentrated in deprived and non-elite sectors, even though they are fluent in multiple knowledge systems because of the colonisation process (most notably through the school system) (Stewart, 2018b). There are also clearly important points on which Indigenous thought and critical theory can never converge, most importantly perhaps that Indigenous thought is ‘place-based knowing’ (Dei, 2011b, 23).

The answer, however, cannot be for there not to be engagement between Indigenous and western thought. Hopkins’ (2018) concept of a decolonial conversation offers a way forward beyond simply ‘inclusive conversations’ between western and Indigenous thought. Writing specifically about education, Hopkins argues against the apparent inclusivity of simply inviting Indigenous peoples into our conversations because this completely overlooks the systematic exclusion that has occurred over previous centuries. There are unequal power relations between these groups and thus to simply assert an inclusive exchange fails to recognise this systemic inequality. In contrast, Hopkins argues that what defines a decolonial approach is recognition of ‘the need for groups to engage in conversations that directly and explicitly confront colonization and its enduring effects in the lived-experience’ of Indigenous communities (130). We enter into a conversation at once both between equals but recognising systemic inequalities in our past and present.

This conversation occurs in what Bhabha (2009) has termed the ‘third space’: this goes beyond simply an intercultural space (which is resonant with Hopkin’s (2018) description of ‘inclusive conversation’) and is instead a place where different cultures not only come together but do so with explicit recognition of current and historical power imbalances. It is only on this basis that they can work fruitfully together, or perhaps side by side – undertaking that journey as fellow travellers.

While the Indigenous academic community is diverse, there is little evidence of these scholars wishing to shut themselves off from all western influences. More typical, is the approach of Stewart (2018a) – who while warning about the dangers of western appropriation – also sees it as self-defeating for Māori scholars, for example, to only use work by other Māori scholars. Instead she argues for greater recognition of the *entanglement* of ‘Māori and Pākehā (settler) cultures, such that the Pākehā surrender any sense of dominance over the Māori’ (772). Using a phrase from Hoskins, Stewart (2018a) describes this as ‘diminishing rather than space opening’ (772). Thus work by Asmar and Page (2018) in Australia also occupies this opening space, as they assert the legitimacy of Indigenous thought within the Australian university system, and on this basis seek partnerships with non-Indigenous colleagues.

There are many more examples which I will not include, partly due to space, but partly because my focus here is on critical theory specifically. Similarly there are examples of western scholars engaging with Indigenous thought, such as Ellsworth’s (2005) creative challenge to the privileging of white, western canon, but while she is broadly a critical social theorist, she does not locate herself in the Frankfurt School tradition. Thus I turn to the specific engagement of Indigenous scholars with Frankfurt School critical theory. The most famous example is Freire (1996) who took the critical theory of the global North and applied it to the lived realities of the global South. There are two other examples I would highlight. Firstly, the influential Māori scholar Tuhiwai Smith (2000) refers to Kaupapa Māori as a localized critical theory – where place,

context, history and agency all come into play. In general terms she argues that discussions about Kaupapa Māori are also discussions about critical theory because they share 'notions of critique, resistance, struggle, and emancipation' (228). In her work we see the possibility that critical theory does not need to occupy a universalist or standardising territory. Secondly, Townsend-Cross (2011) focuses on critical pedagogy, and particularly the work of Stephen Brookfield to try to move Indigenous studies in Australia beyond the mindset of assimilation and into a more empowered place. She notes the similarities between what Brookfield (2005) describes as the three core assumptions of critical theory and the standpoints of Indigenous scholars. These are: firstly, that modern democratic societies are inequitable; secondly, that there are dominant ideologies which sustain this inequity; and thirdly 'that this is a situation to be revealed, challenged, and changed' (Townsend-Cross, 2011, 73, adapted from Brookfield). Here we have a strong reinforcement that Indigenous scholars do not see their work as about romantic yearnings for times past, but as a commitment to genuine, radical change today.

Turning the discussion around to critical theorists' engagement with Indigenous thought proves not to be a simple process because the historical power imbalances remain. Indeed, Weheliye (2014) observes – with Foucault clearly in mind – that white western thinkers are often given 'conceptual carte blanche' to explore any issues while people from minorities looking at the very same issues may be confined to an ethnographic fringe (6). Moreover this reinforces the danger of western scholars adding a bit of Indigenous thought without genuinely engaging with historic issues of power, and particularly race and colonialism.

Baum (2015)² and Allen (2015) both seek to decolonialise critical theory and yet they tend to remain located in a western paradigm: to rethink critical theory only from within. While I appreciate the importance of immanent critique, decolonialisation simply cannot occur in a bubble of western thought. And critical theory cannot, in Marx's terms, respond to *the challenges of the day* without looking beyond its own western self-interest, nor can it ever understand capitalism without understanding race and colonialism.

Two writers in the Frankfurt School tradition who have sought to explicitly engage with decolonial issues are Nancy Fraser and Susan Buck-Morss – both north American women. Buck-Morss (2006) response to the September 11th attacks was to argue for a rethinking of critical theory through Islamic scholars. Buck-Morss challenges western scholars to not simply have a benevolent or cosmopolitan idea of inclusion or multiculturalism but to actually acknowledge that, as westerners, they occupy a 'minority position' (15) and any perceived dominance should not be attributed to intrinsic intellectual merit. Buck-Morss, however, also rejects the notion of the incommensurability of different global realms and argues instead that we must always proceed on the basis of tolerance and of not being 'placed on the defensive because of who we are' (31). And yet brave and impressive as Buck-Morss's book is, the emphasis on Islamic thought only extends briefly and incompletely to broader issues of colonialism. She points to the way in which the 'dialectic of Enlightenment has morphed out of recognition from its original post-World War Two articulation' (105). But this does not address the problem that even in the 1940s the world was not the universal-western entity assumed by critical theory and the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Again it is the link between colonialism and capitalism and between colonialism and race that is missing.

Fraser (2016; Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018) goes further to address race and colonialism as a critical theorist. She does make the connection with capitalism, although it must be noted that postcolonialism/colonialism occupies just five pages of a whole book in which Fraser and Jaeggi rethink capitalism (2018), and Fraser's own contribution is more about contemporary social movements than about the historical explanatory power of race. This theme is, however, much clearer in her earlier article (2016) where she discussed the role of racialized accumulation. The challenge remains, however, as to how we rescue (if we do at all) the explanatory and radical power of earlier critical theory – and this is where I turn in the next section.

A critical theory response to decolonisation

There are three dimensions to the way in which the critical theory of the Frankfurt School needs to respond to the rightful demands of this decolonial age: acknowledgement; common ground as fellow travellers; and further action.

Acknowledgement: the splinter in the eye of critical theory

Those who embrace critical theory should have a clear-sighted acknowledgment of the multiple and subtle ways in which power and social pathologies are reproduced. In so doing, we have to acknowledge that, by omission or deliberate choice, critical theory has aided this reproduction. Early critical theory is one and at the same time brilliant as a visceral examination of human history, and totally blinkered by its own western privilege and position. When Adorno (2005) wrote, 'the splinter in your eye is the best magnifying glass' (50) he suggests that the pain of recognition helps sharpen our focus. And it is just this pain that critical theory needs to now endure. Ironically, Adorno seems unaware of his own enormous splinter of assumed western universalism; and the fact that it did not trouble him is actually a weakness in his work that needs to be addressed. Those who look to critical theory as a means to greater social justice, have to accept the painful splinter in our eye of past western centrism, and use this to magnify better understandings of race, racism and colonialism. We must listen to and read more Indigenous thought and understand colonialism through the eyes and words of those who were colonised. We must be prepared to acknowledge the failings and shortcomings in those whose work we continue to admire and use, but in a constructively critical way, as Fraser does with Habermas.

It was reading Weheliye (2014) and Césaire (2000) on race and the holocaust that brought this issue to the fore for me, the particular nature of that unrecognised splinter in the eye of early critical theory, but also its potential for magnification and illumination. Their work demonstrates that the Nazi pursuit of racial "purity" and belief in a "superior" race, that the early critical theorists tried so hard to explain, was not a completely new phenomenon in western experience. Rather it was the perpetuation of beliefs about race and humanity that saw categorisations of 'full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans' (Weheliye, 2014, 3). The difference was that this belief-system was now being applied to whites and Europeans (Césaire, 2000): an observation Césaire first made in the original publication in 1950. In contrast, Adorno and Horkheimer (1997) stayed true to their view that Nazism was the triumph of instrumental rationality inherent in capitalist history: they did not link this to race or colonialism. Which is not to say that they were wrong about instrumental rationality but rather that their interpretation was partial in not seeing the profound links to race and colonialism.

There were earlier opportunities too for Adorno to engage with colonialism and to see the fate of western society through this lens. In the 1940s he met with the black, Marxist writer CLR James, who was ground-breaking in taking Marxism down this post-colonial approach. But accounts of their uncomfortable meeting suggest that rather than an exchange of perspectives, 'they met only to acknowledge their mutual dislike and incomprehension' (Traverso, 2016, 167). And yet Said (1997) demonstrates there was potentially great resonance between these two thinkers, intellectually and in terms of their non-conformist styles. Adorno, whose writing was so wide reaching that one observer remarked 'no place seemed to be protected from Adorno's pen' (Goehr, 2005, xix), appears, however, to so steadfastly avoid engagement with issues of colonialism that we can reasonably assume the decision was deliberate. While there are brief mentions of race these tend to be undeveloped (Baum, 2015) and show little sign of engagement with non-western thinkers.

Baum (2015) provides an interesting outline of how critical theory could be decolonised, but it falls short when he argues that Adorno's and Horkheimer engagement with issues of anti-Semitism can be a proxy of sort for issues of broader racism. This is hugely problematic. For a

start, as Baum acknowledges, early critical theorists were ambivalent about whether or not Jewishness was an issue of race. But further, issues of anti-Semitism and racism may well interconnect, but they cannot be conflated. The other problem with Baum's approach is that the focus he gives to race does not strongly enough connect to colonialism, and it is this tripartite link – race, colonialism, capitalism – that has largely eluded critical theory. Indeed, according to Said (1994) Habermas himself had stated in an interview published in the *New Left Review*, that this was a deliberate abstention, and while it may be considered Eurocentric, he had nothing to say on anti-imperialist or anti-capitalist struggles in the so-called third world. The problem here is the complete failure to understand that the colonisation of the so-called third world is also at the heart of western capitalism – and, that colonisation was based on issues of race.

The position of third generation critical theorist, Axel Honneth, is more nuanced. As Baum (2015) argues, we can see in his theory of struggles of recognition clear resonance with issues of race, both historically and in the world today. While Honneth clearly has more interest in the non-western world than Habermas appeared to be, his perspective is still largely European and could again benefit from the magnifying power of acknowledging race and colonialism as the splinter in the eye of critical theory.

Weheliye argues that race must be understood in embodied terms, as lived experiences of people subject to profound marginalisation, and thus the challenge for critical theory is more than just the cognitive or conceptual. Indeed, there is a visceral element in Weheliye which should resonate with Adorno:

The particular assemblage of humanity under purview here is habeas viscus, which, in contrast to bare life, insists on the importance of miniscule movements, glimmers of hope, scraps of food, the interrupted dreams of freedom found in those spaces deemed devoid of full human life (Guantanamo Bay, internment camps, maximum security prisons, Indian reservations, concentration camps, slave plantations, or colonial outposts, for instance). Beyond the dominion of the law, biopolitics, and bare life they represent alternative critical, political, and poetic assemblages that are often hushed in these debates (12).

Consider Weheliye's language here: 'miniscule', 'glimmers', 'scraps': how it resonates with the language of *Minima Moralia* (Adorno, 2005) or the sub-title of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1997) 'philosophical fragments'.

Understanding: how could critical theory be a fellow traveller?

The second thing critical theory needs to do is to consider its core features and which of these remain relevant in a decolonial age. If critical theory is to form part of Hopkins' (2018) decolonial conversation or Bhabha's (2009) third space, what elements can it bring to the table, after first full and open acknowledgement of past failings? I suggest that there are five planes on which we could find ourselves fellow travellers.

Firstly, critical theory and Indigenous thought both, in their own ways, have a commitment to change, based on the past. Indeed, in his famous essay in which Horkheimer first used the phrase 'critical theory' he wrote:

critical theory maintains: it need not be so ... and the necessary conditions for such change already exist (Horkheimer, 1995, 227).

Horkheimer's statement resonates well with that of Dei, who writes:

We place Indigenous knowledge and philosophies within the terrain of contemporary critical intellectual traditions that articulate emancipatory discourses for particularly colonized and oppressed subjects (Dei, 2011a, 3).

Indigenous thought also mediates between past, present and future, grounded as it is in respect for the past, to which they bring an understanding of the present that challenges the legacies of colonialism and marginalisation, thus calling for change. Change does not come

through throwing off the shackles of the past (as the western Enlightenment assumed of previous so-called less rational times) but of harnessing the wisdom of the past and one's ancestors to continue improvement today and for the future.

Secondly, critical theory and indigenous thought occupy the plane which challenges the dominance and assumptions of the western Enlightenment. Indigenous scholars see the Enlightenment in terms of an assumed linearity of thought (Martin et al., 2020, Stewart, 2018a) with an implied sense of unfettered progress: one generation builds on the previous and forward progress is always made. This is hugely problematic for philosophies with a more holistic understanding of human life and which balance respect for the past with commitment to future change. But critical theory is also distinctive within the western tradition for its simultaneous support and critique of the Enlightenment, and certainly the early critical theorists are both products of the Enlightenment and its fiercest critics. This is most obvious in Adorno and Horkheimer (1997) *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. For many this work is the best representation of critical theory, and its most radical. Adorno and Horkheimer reject the basis of the Enlightenment as a progressive liberation from myth in favour of science. In contrast, they see the Enlightenment as heralding a new form of domination, namely over nature, in the cause of the developing capitalist system: this domination of nature diminishes the human sphere. While Stewart (2018a) critiques western approaches as having a belief that everything can be known and tamed, this is not true of Adorno and Horkheimer, and this is the distinctive contribution of early critical theory within the western tradition.

Thirdly, there is the shared plane of a focus on hidden forms of power and oppression. In Adorno's and Horkheimer work this also means that such oppression can be found in everyday things as much as formalised expressions of power. This is one of the aspects of critical theory which seem to have made it so useful for Indigenous writers such as Tuhiwai Smith (2000) and Townsend-Cross (2011). Like critical theory, Indigenous philosophies do not just look at formal expressions of power, or of resistance. Their approach is grounded in a holism (Martin et al., 2020) that understands the interconnections in human life. The idea that these power imbalances may be hidden is important to both Indigenous philosophies and critical theory. As Patel (2016) observes, while it may no longer be acceptable to say things that are overtly racist, this can, ironically, mean that 'longer standing patterns of coloniality and oppression can be easily invisibilized' and thus 'unproductively obscure the pervasiveness of coloniality' (15).

Fourth is the plane of epistemic mess and difficulty. Indigenous scholars make a number of observations about western/colonial forms of thought, arguing that they seek to define and tie down knowledge of all aspects of the world (Stewart, 2018a, Dei, 2011b) and that they follow a 'metaphysics of logic, clarity, and linearity that underpin colonization' (Martin et al., 2020, 319). Dei argues that 'Indigenous knowledges are contested All definitions are limited and it is crucial that we focus on issues and questions rather than search for neat definitions' (Dei, 2011b, 23). But it is also a feature of critical theory that it eschews artificial clarity and appreciates the epistemic messiness of the social world (McArthur, 2012). Critical theory rejects the false clarity of positivist approaches.

Finally, we move to the plane of the interconnection between individual and social wellbeing. Much of this article has focused on early critical theory, particularly that of Horkheimer and Adorno. Indeed, I have suggested that modern critical theory could learn much by revisiting the radical and uncompromising work of these writers, not as canonical knowledge but as a dynamic resource to shape the critical theory of today. I have placed this emphasis on these first generation critical theorists because the points I have made so far relate more to them than to their successors such as Habermas or Honneth. But there is one aspect of critical theory that has been a resilient feature through its different iterations, and this is the dialectical relationship between individual and social wellbeing. We see this stated in Horkheimer's first address as Director of the Institute in 1931:

The destiny of the particular is fulfilled in the fate of the universal; the essence or substantive form of the individual manifests itself not in its personal acts, but in the life of the whole to which it belongs (Horkheimer, 1993, 2-3).

More recently it is at the heart of Axel Honneth's work on mutual recognition and what he terms intersubjective self-actualisation (Honneth, 2004). For me, this intimate interconnection between the individual and the social is one of the most powerful conceptions that critical theory offers western thought. Again, I am not claiming that what critical theorists mean by this interconnection is the same as what Indigenous scholars mean, but it is a plateau on which they could exchange ideas. As Dei (2011a) explains, 'Indigenous knowledge speaks of the inseparability and inter-dependence of selves and the collective'. Shroff (2011) expresses a similar idea: 'All beings are seen as interdependent and inseparable' (55). We can start to see here, however, one of the critical differences between Indigenous philosophies and critical theory; for Shroff is referring to a holistic approach that extends beyond the individual and the social in the human world. Indeed, this is why Patel (2016) observes that critical approaches in the Marxist tradition suffer from an inbuilt anthropocentrism. Indigenous philosophies have a holistic sense of inter-connectivity that ranges across social, spiritual and psychological aspects (Shroff, 2011, Dei, 2011b). And finally, Martin et al. (2020) reflect on decolonizing itself in this same holistic way: 'as an embodied and embedded practice of wisdom(s) is in part about coming to know self in relation to others (past and present, cosmos, land, seas, and skies) (317).

Thus critical theory's conception of the individual as a social being is not the same as that in Indigenous thought, however, it is also very distinct from traditional, liberal and western views of the individual. This, I believe, is a crucial contribution that critical theory can play within the global North to support decolonialisation. For example, in science one may need to challenge traditional individualism in order to embrace decolonialisation in a genuine way (Blackie & Adendorff, 2020).

Further action: rethinking critical theory's empirical reference points

Fraser (2003) refers to the 'distinctive dialectic of immanence and transcendence' (202) in critical theory: the need for 'a foothold in the social world that simultaneously points beyond it' (202). Further, this foothold must take the form of some sort of empirical reference points for the claims of critical theory. As the debate between Fraser and Honneth (2003) demonstrates, the foundations for this empirical point are fraught and contested. The looking beyond the current social world, to which Fraser refers, cannot in critical theory terms be idealistic. Adorno and Horkheimer particularly are rooted in a radical pessimism that adds the much-needed edge to critical theory.

Townsend-Cross (2011) considers the dilemma this poses for critical theory. She refers to Horkheimer's (quoted in Brookfield) lament about the impossibility of knowing critical theory to be right until change actually happens in the future. Townsend-Cross argues, however, that Indigenous epistemologies are not simply proposing 'a socially just or idea society, but *remember knowing* social justice, freedom, morality, and equality. Indigenous epistemologies have a "concrete perception" of the fundamental goal of critical theory that has been realized in the recent past. In this way, Indigenous epistemologies validate critical theoretical assumptions.' (73).

As many of us still grapple with the compelling arguments of both Fraser and Honneth (2003) about the empirical reference points of critical theory in terms of recognition or redistribution, Townsend-Cross's suggestion that critical theory looks outside itself is helpful. But to engage with decolonialism and Indigenous thought, must mean an engagement with race and racism. This is an urgent point of action, to which Fraser has begun to show the way, but I am also arguing that this lens of race should also be shone back onto the earlier work of critical theory to ensure its continued relevance and conceptual power. As Townsend-Cross argues,

Indigenous thought can enrich the immanent grounding of critical theory. But to be open to this future, critical theory must address its own past, and particularly the neglect of race and racism in embodied and complex ways. Thus they can avoid the pitfalls of someone like Foucault, who sought to engage with race but never understood the disembodied western centrism of his own vision (Weheliye, 2014).

Reflections and conclusion

For genuine transformative change to occur, which is the core purpose of decolonialisation, we all need to change, and this includes western scholars. Indigenous thought tells us this. Critical theory tells us this. This is the ultimate plateau on which we must join as fellow travellers. How do we know if we have reached this place? We know because we see changes in ourselves, in our practices, our relationships – and our most treasured beliefs – and not simply see change as something that happens to others. This interconnection between human life runs through Indigenous thought and, I argue, is also central to critical theory's dialectic understanding of individual and social wellbeing. But universities and schools are institutions adept at adjustment rather than radical change. Thus many universities will superficially embrace decolonialising the curriculum but do nothing to reverse the accumulation of wealth over centuries based on colonialism and exploitation (there are a small number of exceptions to this). At the heart of decolonialisation – and critical theory – is a sense of community formed through personalisation. As we treat others as individuals, we come together more as a society. But despite a rhetoric of student engagement and personalisation, many universities are moving to more standardised and centralised forms of provision. Where problems exist – such as poor academic writing – they opt for technocratic solutions like a piece of plagiarism software, rather than working with students and building stronger pedagogical relationships. Thus decolonisation is not about universities making adjustments – if genuine, it is about transformative change to fundamental assumptions and practices about how we treat one another, how we understand knowledge and how we value and reward both student and staff achievements.

On an individual level, what I take from this *decolonial conversation* in this *third space*, is the scale of change I must be prepared to accept, and yet the *miniscule, ordinary, everyday* ways in which it must happen; in me as a teacher, researcher, writer and in every relationship I have with my students. Like a palimpsest, decolonialism must leave its marks on who I am if any genuine engagement is to have occurred. Beyond a decolonial policy or improved reading lists, it is only this change in who we all are as academics, that can lead us forward. And to move forward, we need to look back with clear sighted acknowledgement of the illuminating splinters in our eyes.

Notes

1. Stewart prefers the lower case indigenous to Indigenous as it better demonstrates the plurality of indigenous thoughts. I have tried throughout to use the form that each writer prefers, rather than imposing unnecessary uniformity.
2. Baum does refer to black Marxist Frantz Fanon, but otherwise the discussion takes place largely in a western paradigm.

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My research interests span two themes: education and social justice, and the nature of higher education. I am interested in inter-relationships between education and society, and between theory and practice. I have explored different interpretations of critical pedagogy, and particularly the ways in which conceptualisations of knowledge impact upon social justice. Much of my work is informed by critical theory, and I have a special interest in the work of Theodor Adorno. My recent work has looked at the nature of assessment and feedback the role of failure in learning including the relationship between conceptions of failure and social justice. My latest book *Assessment for Social Justice* explores the potential to further social justice within and through HE assessment and draws on the critical theory of Axel Honneth. I am Australian and engagement with Indigenous issues was a formative part of my schooling. I now live in Scotland but work in England.

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