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Critiquing 'powerful knowledge' in school geography through a decolonial lens

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Abstract

The concept of 'powerful knowledge' has risen to prominence in the school curriculum in England, taking on a life both in educational policy and in the work of schools, teachers, teacher educators and students. This article conducts a decolonial critique of 'powerful knowledge' in school geography. We begin by critically reviewing research about 'powerful knowledge' in geography education before turning to its interpretation in education policy and curriculum framings. We then offer our decolonial critique. We argue that the concept adopts reductive binary frames and neglects the racialising politics of geographical knowledge production. In doing so, 'powerful knowledge' marginalises the everyday knowledge of people globally and glosses over their 'hidden' geographies and histories in ways that sustain racialised global inequalities. We conclude by explaining the reasons for the emergence of powerful knowledge and arguing for its demise on account of lack of analytical rigour and inattentiveness to social justice.

'The splitting and differentiation of ways of knowing is in part … the function of empire. Discipline is empire'. Katherine McKittrick, 2021, p. 38.

'Powerful academic knowledge is cognitively superior to everyday knowledge, transcending and liberating students from their daily experience' Dixons City Academy, no date; no page.

Introduction

The concept of 'powerful knowledge', first used by Leesa Wheelahan (2007) and then developed by Michael Young and Johan Muller (2010; 2013), now features prominently in debates about the school curriculum in England. It has moved out of the realm of academia, taking on a life both in educational policy and in the working lives of schools, teachers and students. Our aim is to engage decolonial critique to challenge 'powerful knowledge' as a concept which, insidiously and covertly, consolidates the hegemony of an unjust disciplinary infrastructure (Jazeel, 2017) in school settings. The research questions guiding this critique are: 1) why has 'powerful knowledge' emerged at this particular political time? And 2) How coherent, in terms of analytical rigour and social justice, is the concept of 'powerful knowledge' in relation to school geography? We show how, by hierarchising configurations of knowledge, deploying binary techniques, side-stepping the politics of geographical knowledge production and erasing 'race', 'powerful knowledge' risks sustaining the subject's imperial and colonial histories as well as reproducing traumatic psychic and embodied effects on students and teachers. Our goal is to disrupt the influence of 'powerful knowledge' in the constitution of geographical knowledge and to open the school subject to other knowledges, other voices.

We begin with a critical review of research about 'powerful knowledge' in geography education, first by considering the work of its supporters, then its critics. In the second section, we present a brief summary of the interpretation of 'powerful knowledge' in education policy and curriculum frameworks, before addressing the questions of why

powerful knowledge and why now? Adopting our decolonial lens, we next focus on issues of social justice through the writings of Grosfoguel (2007) and Wynter (2003). We conclude by returning to our research questions and suggesting how geography teachers and teacher educators might act to arrest the de-politicising, racialising and hierarchising force of 'powerful knowledge'.

Supporters of 'powerful knowledge'

The publication of Knowledge and the Future School: Curriculum and Social Justice by Michael Young and David Lambert (2014) was a landmark moment in the engagement between geography education and 'powerful knowledge'. The authors claim that the 'best' geographical knowledge is subject-based, located 'in the specialist communities of researchers' (p.67), embodies the 'broad values of objectivity' (p.76) and is 'concerned with truth' (p.77). 'Powerful knowledge' is argued to be the key building block of the ideal school geography curriculum because it builds bridges for students to advance their learning from the everyday to the theoretical; it confers a sense of subject identity on both students and teachers and provides teachers with 'the basis of their authority over pupils' (p.102). Acknowledging the provisional nature of knowledge, Young and Lambert (2014) introduce elements of fallibility (p.67), dynamism (p.101) and openness to alternatives (p.74). Other authors concur. For instance, Maude (2016) accredits 'powerful knowledge' with the characteristics of reliability and testability. He advocates scientistic approaches such as 'controlled comparisons of places', and identification of the 'effects of a specific variable' (p.73), while denouncing critics of 'powerful knowledge' as constructionists or relativists (p.71).

Advocates of 'powerful knowledge' in school geography claim that disciplinary knowledge is 'strong or robust', (Maude, 2018, p.180), 'reliable and truthful … the best it can be' (Lambert, 2014, p.7). Yet historians of geographical knowledge have long argued against the idea that knowledge from within the discipline of geography is necessarily 'best' and that disciplinary knowledge evolves in linear ways towards progressively 'better' forms. Rather, they insist that '… past geographies need not be conceptualized as merely a stage on the road to the present conception' (Withers and Mayhew, 2002, p.25), and that geographical knowledge has always been complex, heterogenous, non-linear and contested, shaped by the rigours and performative structures of specific systems of academic knowledge production and by local contexts (Sidaway, 1997; Lorimer, 2003). Downplaying such complexity, promoters of 'powerful' geographical knowledge rest their accounts on a retelling of 'geography's liberal progress narrative' (Oswin, 2020, p.11), a retelling that neglects or ignores the exclusions, injustices and occlusions inherent to geographical knowledge production (Hawthorne and Hietz, 2018).Morgan (2014) calls for 'powerful knowledge' to return school geography to its disciplinary roots, following its 'over-socialisation' during the 'postmodern turn' (p.150). Other geography educators concur with the de-valuation of everyday knowledge (Mitchell, 2019; Enser, 2021 and Bustin, 2019). Ironically, the university discipline of geography has embraced discursivity, contextualisation, singularity and critical analysis of power relations in knowledge production through geography's 'cultural turn', thereby raising questions over the selective

nature of the 'disciplinary knowledge' that supporters of 'powerful knowledge' choose to valorise.

The theorisation of 'powerful knowledge' reifies three false binaries. The first is the opposition between powerful and everyday knowledge. Binary oppositions, as 'naturalised' structures arising from Enlightenment thinking, are usually hierarchical. Hage argues that polarising processes are 'driven by the domesticator that has an interest in the polarity' (2017, p.98). Polarities close down alternative ways of thinking, deflect attention from critique and assume the polarity categorises accurately the totality of knowledge. Rudolph et al challenge knowledge binaries, writing that '… students have to choose between artificial poles rather than being able to understand the interrelated nature of knowledge and the power relations that can keep inequality in place' (2018, p.33). Prioritising 'powerful knowledge' in geography implicitly de-values the everyday knowledge of students and the plurality of more-than-disciplinary geographical knowledges. At the same time, it forces division within communities, reminding students of experiences of structural inequalities and violence, and leads to ways of thinking about geographical knowledge that are exclusionary (Winter, 2023).

The question of where disciplinary knowledge itself originates is ignored by its proponents in the assumed 'powerful' versus 'everyday' knowledge binary, since disciplinary knowledge comes from somebody's everyday experience, whether that of the researchers themselves, or the data that is collected and analysed in the production of geographical research (Sriprakash et al, 2022). This is a blind spot in the 'powerful knowledge' argument – that it cannot account for the everyday knowledges and theorisations that themselves constitute disciplinary knowledge. Since the cultural turn in Geography, geographers in universities have recognised the everyday as an important constituent of methodology, ontology, epistemology and data. 'Powerful knowledge' advocates, however, claim its provenance to be these same university geographers, who themselves acknowledge the contribution of the everyday to knowledge production processes. This raises the question of why disciplinary knowledge is conceived as hierarchically superior and as powerful. Advocates of 'powerful knowledge' too-often neglect a long tradition within the discipline, of thinking critically about how power and authority structures geographical knowledge (Sibley, 1995).

A third false binary on which 'powerful knowledge' rests is that between curriculum and pedagogy, 'two crucially separate educational ideas', in Young's (2010, p.23) words. In this vein, Mitchell and Lambert (2015, p.375) argue for 'a greater conceptual distinction between curriculum and pedagogy' in school geography. Roberts, however, shows this binary to be flawed by demonstrating that any approach to knowledge in education must take pedagogy seriously as a site for the making of knowledge-claims, since it is through pedagogical relationships that teachers forge classrooms that produce interactive, investigative and inclusive cultures of learning (2023).

Michael Young bases his 'powerful knowledge as entitlement' claim for pupils from disadvantaged, working class and ethnic minority backgrounds on his belief that 'powerful knowledge' is generalisable, universal and objective, and 'cannot be reduced to its contexts or origins' (2014, p.108). He states that it would be unjust to deny access to 'the best

knowledge we have' to all pupils. Under the critical realist banner and following the same line of thought, Morgan and Lambert understand that responsibility to 'induct young people into knowledge that is not readily available to them in their everyday lives' (2023, p.180) lies with the teacher, portraying students as passive participants in the knowledge construction process. This claim ignores both the potential of student-centred learning and reveals that same blind spot in the powerful knowledge argument mentioned earlier, that the provenance of all knowledge, including that of the disciplines, arises from everyday experiences.

Biddulph et al (2020) claim to engage with social justice through 'powerful knowledge'. Researching perspectives of teachers working in 'challenging' European schools, they fail to conduct a critical analysis of 'powerful knowledge' per se. Instead, they conclude that key obstacles to 'unlocking powerful disciplinary knowledge for children' reside in the historico-political conditions and resourcing of education systems, thereby indicating the importance of politics and power relations in policy-making and implementation, but not in knowledge production. Mitchell and Stones (2022) argue that powerful knowledge is an appropriate vehicle to 'reposition' values and ethics in curriculum. From our stance, however, values and ethics are always and already inextricably constituent of knowledge[1]. Attending to values and ethics, explicit or implicit, is of crucial importance, but it is also important to attend to their discursive form and their provenance in the political processes of knowledge construction. Neither Biddulph et al's (2020) nor Mitchell and Stone's (2022) 'social justice' studies achieves this.

The question of how and why some voices are excluded from disciplinary knowledge production (Sibley, 1995) challenges the idea that 'powerful' disciplinary knowledge is different from and superior to other forms of geographical knowledge. Historical geographers suggest that who and what is made to count in the stories we tell about geographical knowledge production matter. Keighren, for example, exposes the 'evil geographers' complicit in constituting Nazi ideology through narratives of people-state-land which legitimated National Socialism and its territorial expansion (2018, p.772). Geography education's 'awkward history' is revealed by Jo Norcup (2015) in her historiographic account of the journal Curriculum Issues in Geography Education (1983-1991), edited by Dawn Gill. The journal's contribution of critical, politically radical geographies challenged both the school subject and discipline before such themes became prominent.

Critics of 'Powerful knowledge'

A number of educators effectively directly challenge the social justice credentials of 'powerful knowledge' (Rudolf et al, 2018). Zipin et al (2015) argue that 'powerful knowledge's' reliance on social realism as a basis for curriculum knowledge selection results

[1] We adopt a Derridean approach to language and meaning in the sense that knowledge comes into being through language and language is insecure in its meaning. Language is unstable and open to deconstruction which reveals its enframing values and ethics. For example, the language of a tightly prescribed, formulaic curriculum framework deconstructs to expose its underlying values and politics. In other words, deconstruction exposes the other, or what's missing from the neat calculative scheme (Winter, 2006; 2011; 2012).

in an emphasis on cognition and marginalises the what/who/how of curricular justice. Both Catlin and Martin (2011) and Roberts (2014) draw attention to the neglect of students' everyday knowledge as a learning base for geography. Implicitly castigating the 'powerful knowledge' advocates for their deficit attitudes towards children's everyday knowledge, Roberts attends to the necessity of students' active sense-making through social interaction (2014; 2023). Describing 'powerful knowledge' as 'reductive scientism' (2024, p.59), Steve Puttick assembles a well-argued critique of the concept.

Critique of 'powerful knowledge' is not restricted to school Geography. In History, Alex Ford (2022) suggests how 'powerful knowledge' supporters narrow curriculum thinking towards a traditional 'English national story' (p.3) thus marginalising the subject's 'moral and philosophical purposes' in deference to 'a belief in the neutrality of powerful knowledge' (p.4). Another History educator, Nick Dennis, attests that by ignoring the discipline's epistemic roots, everyday experience of racism is 'replicated, legitimised and given a veneer of respectability' (2021, p.229). Meanwhile, from the perspective of the teaching of English, Eaglestone (2020) has argued that Young's 'scientism' has been applied inappropriately to school subjects and academic disciplines with widely varied epistemologies.

Interpretation of 'powerful knowledge' in education policy and curriculum frameworks

Several authors set out how geography teachers might incorporate powerful knowledge into their curriculum thinking and planning (see Ashbee, 2021; Enser, 2021; Gardner, 2021; Morgan, 2011; Maude, 2016; Hawley, 2020). This breadth of teacher-facing scholarship on 'powerful knowledge' testifies to its perceived significance within the professional decision-making of geography teachers regarding curriculum content and purpose. As our epigraph indicates, one multi-academy trust has incorporated the concept of 'powerful knowledge' into the mission statement of its 'curriculum principles', and many schools refer to 'powerful knowledge' into their curriculum documentation for school geography.

The GeoCapabilities Project is a large-scale, multi-national curriculum and teacher development project that seeks to support teachers in their engagement with 'powerful knowledge'. Geocapabilities thinking offers a way to conceive of disciplinary knowledge as a resource aimed at 'the goal of developing human powers', rather than mere 'knowledge transmission' (Deng, 2022, p.613). While the project has the laudable aim of resisting the decline of teacher agency (Mitchell, 2016) it nevertheless reinforces a hierarchical view of knowledge which valorises disciplinary knowledge as a 'superior' resource for curriculum-making.

'Powerful knowledge' has a central place in educational policy making. In non-statutory guidance on a curriculum for post-pandemic education recovery, the centrality of 'powerful knowledge' to high quality curriculum thinking is emphasised (DfE, 2021). Likewise, Ofsted's (2021) research review for geography invokes the significance of the concept. Prominence was given to 'powerful knowledge' in the report of the *Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities Report* (HMG, 2021, p.89-90) by its positioning as revered 'objective' knowledge in a manner that has been critiqued as Eurocentric, ahistorical and blind to the power relations inherent in knowledge production (for example, see Tikly, 2022).

The Geographical Association's Curriculum Framework (Rawling, 2022) is a policy document designed to 'identify key concepts, significant features and distinctive approaches … in the development of the school curriculum at national level' (p.3). The document does not refer explicitly to 'powerful knowledge', but focuses on an assumed binary between 'disciplinary' and 'substantive' knowledge as representative of the totality of geographical knowledge, without reference to the partiality of the perspective offered by the authors. As Huckle proposes 'writing a curriculum framework for geography is a political act', (2024, p.25). The framework fails to unpack the notion that geography is a field of study which carries a problematic imperial history. The politics of geographical knowledge construction are missing, as is the 'critical thinking' that extends to a consideration of power geometries (to use Massey's 1999 phrase) or to the links between power and knowledge. The Curriculum Framework is underpinned by the notion of 'truth' (p.6), without acknowledging that every form of knowledge serves particular purposes. This appears to be problematic for encouraging students and teachers to critically explore the political nature of even seemingly benign forms of knowledge. The marginalisation of the politics of racialised knowledge construction in the Framework is particularly relevant, given the foregrounding of anti-racism in the teaching of geography in universities in the QAA Subject Benchmark Statement for Geography (QAA, 2022).

Powerful knowledge and geography: why and why now?

'Powerful knowledge' has become a significant, and indeed powerful idea in England across educational policy-making, curriculum development, teacher education and everyday school practice, and has been applied to school geography in a variety of ways. This raises the question of why and why now? Three main themes are relevant. These are important in considering what is at stake and why a critical discussion of 'powerful knowledge' matters. The first theme is subject protectionism. We understand and sympathise with Solem et al (2013), and Lambert et al (2015), who called on 'powerful knowledge' to rescue US and UK school geography from the pressures towards competency curricula and subject integration under a Humanities or Social Studies banner. This same threat has arisen in school History, where its knowledge brokers likewise fear the diminution of the subject's independence, status and popularity (Dennis, 2021).

Second, it is important to understand the highly pressurised context of schooling in England today and the insecurities this confers on geography teachers working under conditions of an externally prescribed, mandatory curriculum, high-stakes assessment, teacher shortages, under-funding and the absence of politically critical professional training programmes and curriculum policies. Workload pressures and accountability systems persuade time-short teachers to grasp seemingly easy-to-understand concepts which governments promote. History educator Nick Dennis describes 'powerful knowledge' as 'a partial analytic', a 'simplified narrative', 'a slogan' (ibid p.230) expounded by curriculum experts aligning themselves with the current Conservative government's neoliberal narratives.

A third theme is thus the neoliberal educational context. The UK Government increasingly seeks to control, restructure and re-direct teachers' critical reflection around social justice issues (DfE, 2022; Little et al, 2023). Although critical voices exist (Anderson et al, 2022),

critiques of the neoliberal narrative in school geography are not as prevalent as those within the geography research community (Hesslewood, 2021; Puttick, 2023). This seems a particular weakness at a time when geopolitical crises necessitate a politically-informed geography curriculum in schools.

Having examined the pros and cons of 'powerful knowledge'; addressed the question of why now? and investigated the concept in policy, we turn now to the research question: how coherent, in terms of analytical rigour and social justice is the concept of 'powerful knowledge' in relation to school geography?

A decolonial lens

Although contributing to an assessment of the analytical rigour of the concept of 'powerful knowledge' in geography education, the broad critique above does not address directly social justice issues of 'race' and coloniality in the school geography curriculum (Sammar, 2024). We set out to achieve this in the next section.

'Powerful knowledge's' commitment to linear histories of geographical knowledge has failed to address the extent to which exclusions of class, gender, 'race', sexuality and ableism have been, and continue to be, central to the production of geographical knowledge. Advocates of the idea that 'powerful' disciplinary knowledge represents the best knowledge there is routinely fail to engage at length with criticisms of the exclusionary nature of disciplines themselves, and of the discipline of geography specifically (Oswin, 2020; Joshi-McCutcheon-Sweet, 2015). Our particular concern here is with exclusions derived from the workings of 'race', racialisation and racism. Esson and Last argue that:

> Geography as a field of study, a social institution, and a workplace, is underpinned by a 'racial project' that seeks to privilege an ideology of Eurocentric-white supremacy (2019, p.230).

They draw on Desai (2017) and Tolia-Kelly (2017) to demonstrate how the material circumstances of geography as a discipline, both in terms of those recruited to work as academic geographers and the experiences of those racialised as other-than-white in the discipline's spaces (including its classrooms and lecture theatres), remain deeply structured by a 'racial project' rooted in coloniality. Such exclusions have played, and continue to play, a constitutive role in the production of geographical knowledges. For instance, Sidaway argues that disciplinary geography struggles to include/connect with Islamic experience. Disciplinary geography structurally excludes Islam and Muslims from what it purports as spatial theorisation. He identifies how Islamophobia continues to reside in geography, past and present, embedded within an orientalist trope. He writes: 'Islam remains one of contemporary Anglophone geography's ultimate others' (Sidaway, 2022, p.6)[2].

In these ways, the commitment of advocates to framing 'powerful knowledge' as the 'best' knowledge we currently have neglects the racialised politics of the production of geographical knowledge. Yet the foundational argument of the superiority of disciplinary

[2] We are grateful to Iram Sammar for pointing us towards Sidaway's article.

knowledge has recently been challenged by two of its supporters. Lambert and Morgan ask: '… how it ('powerful knowledge') relates to other legitimate and powerful ways of knowing, such as indigenous (sic) knowledges?' (2023, p.98). We interpret this question as an attempt to shoehorn 'race' into the 'powerful knowledge' discourse. Instead of such shape-shifting, we commit to critical narratives of geographical knowledge that examine how 'the way in which a discipline develops over time – what kinds of questions it asks and of whom, what is considered 'knowable', and how we can know things – is saturated with politics' (McKittrick and Peake, 2005, p.42).

In what follows, we present our decolonial lens, formed from Ramón Grosfoguel's 'locus of enunciation' (2007) and the work of Sylvia Wynter (2003). We begin with Grosfoguel:

> This is not only a question about social values in knowledge production or the fact that our knowledge is always partial. The main point here is the locus of enunciation, that is, the geo-political and body-political location of the subject that speaks. In Western philosophy and sciences the subject that speaks is always hidden, concealed, erased from the analysis. (2007, p.211)

Western traditions of thought are informed by Eurocentric world views, founded on concepts of rationality, neutrality, universalism and objectivity. Such concepts dominate the Western knowledge production process, at the same time as erasing and concealing their coupling to particular power structures. In a call for 'epistemic disobedience', Mignolo asks: who, when, why and where is knowledge generated? (2009, p.160). Decolonial geographers reply that knowledges are always situated and partial, that we think and write from a position which is shaped by complex intersections of social, cultural, historical, and geopolitical factors which Grosfoguel calls the 'locus of enunciation' or our 'geo-political and body-political location' (2007, p.213). In other words, how we perceive the world is profoundly influenced by our positionality within broader power structures. This concept underscores the importance of recognizing and valuing the voices and perspectives of those marginalized or silenced by dominant discourses, in order to foster more inclusive and equitable knowledge production and social transformation.

According to Asher (2013) hegemonic Eurocentric world views are infused with 'colonial modernity' characterised by racialised tropes and practices which are deeply implicated within the system of capitalist globalisation. Quijano describes this as the 'coloniality of power' (2007, p.171). It relies on the relationship between 'race', colonialism and political economy, and is sustained by racialised systems of social classification. It constitutes a geopolitics of knowledge production that 'powerful knowledge' discourses enshrine rather than contest.

'Powerful knowledge's' articulation of geography's liberal progress narrative[3] (Kinkaid, 2023; Oswin, 2020) has been particularly neglectful of the relationship between the discipline of geography and empire. Despite the rapid growth of research on the relationship between

[3] Oswin (2020) argues that disciplinary geography is trapped in the pretence of an inclusive and progressive trope: its 'liberal progress narrative'. This narrative promises geography's intellectual advance towards a progressive future, 'whilst ignor (ing) the complicities and violence of the present' (Kinkaid, 2023, p.2).

geography and coloniality (Daley and Murrey, 2022; Radcliffe, 2017), substantial engagement with this work by advocates of 'powerful knowledge' is missing. This could be read as an instance of what Rudolph et al (2018) refer to as 'powerful knowledge's emphasis on the 'shine' of disciplinary knowledge, to the neglect of the 'shadow' side of its entanglement with epistemic and material violence. The authors argue: 'knowledge claims associated with disciplines (and thus, the concept of 'powerful knowledge') cannot be extricated from the power relations of colonial-modernity' (2018, p.24). Erasing the 'shadow' side of the colonial-modern era renders opaque colonial power relations and leads to the risk of 'co-option into a cycle of epistemic violence' (ibid, p.24). They argue for critical reflection on the role of historic and contemporary violence in the formation of disciplinary knowledge.

The second perspective of our decolonial lens is Sylvia Wynter's 'over-representation of Man' (2003). Wynter argues that since the 18th century, humankind has been understood through a biocentric[4] account of a universal human identity constructed on a narrow understanding of "Man" as the normative human being. This concept of "Man" has underpinned philosophy, science, literature, and other fields, often to the exclusion or marginalisation of women, people of colour, and Indigenous cultures. Wynter contends that this deferral to "Man" has perpetuated hierarchical systems of knowledge and power, reinforcing colonial, patriarchal, and Eurocentric structures. By the 19th century, the biocentric account had infused the development of the disciplines (including geography), which themselves were founded on the notion that 'all of reality was governed by discoverable laws' (Myers, 2023, p.92) by which phenomena could be identified, calculated, classified and differentiated through objective, rational science. McKittrick claims that 'Discipline is Empire' (2021, p.37), in the sense that modern Western disciplines, underlain by the biocentric account, segregate types of knowledge in order to support and be supported by global capitalism as a self-referential system of control. Under the logic of a calculative and classificatory biocentrism, people are differentiated on the basis of identity markers. McKittrick writes of Wynter's work:

> She teases out how racism and self-alienation are part of a larger self-replicating system that, within the context of capitalism, profits from maintaining a biocentric order wherein the figure of the black is assigned the status of less-than-human (2021, p.37).

Wynter calls us to challenge the dominance of the universalised human experience and its associated disciplinary thinking, represented here by the 'powerful knowledge' discourse. She advocates for an alternative, more inclusive and equitable approach to knowledge and social relations through interdisciplinarity and creativity that nourish new ways of thinking, being and living. She looks to voices outside the biocentric and colonial to voices of the

[4] Biocentrism refers to biological determinism, or scientific racism. McKittrick writes: 'As science studies of race have shown, race is socially produced, yet our belief system perpetuates biological differences by nesting these socially produced differences in infrastructures and discourses that are *already* embedded with the racial differences they seek to make plain' (2021, p.134).

marginalised. She challenges the hierarchical importance of disciplinary knowledge and its exclusions.

We highlight below one way in which the violence of colonialism has shaped geographical knowledge: the relationship it has to the violence of enslavement. The Caribbeanist historian David Lambert has argued for the need to 'reveal the tangled relationships that bound geography and slavery, knowledge and subjugation' (Lambert, 2009, p.65; see also 2013). Lambert's research, centring on the figure of pro-slavery advocate James MacQueen, reveals how:

> … the individuals and organisations associated with the development of new forms of geographical knowledge and the institutionalisation of new conceptions of geography … were implicated in Atlantic slavery and/or its ending' (Lambert, 2009, p.65).

Enslavement and its multiple violences are inextricably part of the 'racial project' that sits at the core of geography as a field of study (Esson and Last, 2019).

Nor is this confined to the past. As McKittrick argues, the violence of enslavement was involved in normalising a way of thinking that maintained white superiority and a racialised classification system based on difference (2021). This way of thinking placed colonialism and imperialism at the heart of the production of geographical knowledge (Clayton, 2003), and this remains important to the production of geographical knowledge within racial capitalism (Anderson et al, 2022; Gerrard et al, 2022). Although McKittrick critiques the categorising power of the disciplines and the disconnect between these and experiential knowledge, crucially, she does not wish to abandon academic knowledge-production altogether. Rather, she joins others in seeking to explore how Black studies and extra-academic black thinkers 'offer rebellious and disobedient and promising ways of undoing discipline' in the 'fight against inequity and racism' (McKittrick, 2021: 41; See also Myers, 2023; Andrews, 2020; Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly, 2021).

This critical re-working of the history of geography as a discipline enmeshed in the historical production of the colonial-modern era and its systems of racialisation, and the quest for extra-disciplinary modes of knowing that reframe geographical knowledge in emancipatory ways, are far cries from the liberal progress narrative implicitly articulated by advocates of 'powerful knowledge' in geography. The latter's attention to the 'shine' of geographical knowledge has not been matched by an engagement with its 'shadow' (Rudolph et al, 2018).

Conclusion

Our interpretation of the potential dangers of 'powerful knowledge' reaches into several spheres, and can be addressed via consideration of research question 1) why has 'powerful knowledge' emerged at this particular political time? We have already discussed subject protectionism and the high-stakes performativity and accountability regime in schools as catalysts for its popularity. Added to these is the Government response to the rise of an anti-racist, decolonising education protest movement in the UK following the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement globally. Demands to decolonise the school curriculum in

England were rebutted in Parliament by Kemi Badenoch's declaration that: 'Our curriculum does not need to be decolonised, for the simple reason that it is not colonised' (2020, col. 1011). Such declarations serve to fuel the culture wars, stoked by the populist section of the Tory Party against anti-racist, social justice educators, to divide the population along so-called 'patriotic' and 'non-patriotic' lines and deflect attention from serious political crises affecting the UK today (Lester, 2023). 'Powerful knowledge' in school geography, with its false binaries, disregard of the politics of knowledge production and of racialisation and coloniality provides a convenient epistemic device to sustain racialised hierarchies in society by shifting the school curriculum away from alternative, critical and anti-racist constructions of knowledge.

Our second research question is: How coherent, in terms of analytical rigour and social justice, is the concept of 'powerful knowledge' in relation to school geography? Our analysis exposes a number of analytical mis-steps on the part of supporters of 'powerful knowledge' in school geography. These include the assumed superiority of disciplinary knowledge over everyday knowledge, false binaries, ignoring the politics of curriculum knowledge construction and failing to account for partial perspectives in curriculum policy development. These theoretical critiques, whilst important, do not address the significant psychic and embodied impact of 'powerful knowledge' on students and teachers. Dennis states:

> … the experience of racism that a person might face in their everyday life is replicated, legitimised and given a veneer of respectability by ignoring the epistemic roots of the discipline and the school subject (2021, p.229).

He writes of school History here, but the affective influence of 'white', colour-blind approaches to knowledge is evident in school geography too (Pirbhai-Ilich and Martin, 2022; Winter, 2023). Normalisation of hierarchically racialised frames, together with erasure of historical context and politics by advocates of 'powerful knowledge' lead to the concealment of white epistemologies in ways that risk reproducing traumatising effects on students and teachers who must be safeguarded by their educational institutions.

'Powerful knowledge' serves as a quick relief antidote in a fragile political climate to domesticate the very soul of geography, to silence resistance to inequality and to hide geography's bedrock epistemology of differentiation and extractivism in its widest sense. Although we focus on 'race' here, the work of Grosfoguel and Wynter illuminates how the concept of 'powerful knowledge' de-politicises, sanitises all knowledge and silences the everyday, Indigenous knowledges, knowledges about gender, sexuality, religion, class, disability. It operates as an hierarchising process under the guise of a curriculum innovation committed to reasserting teacher autonomy. In contrast, we concur with those committed to pluriversality (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018; Escobar, 2018; Pashby et al., 2020). Pluriversality challenges the West's dominant universalising tendency by arguing that many worlds co-exist (Mignolo, 2018, p. x). Yet co-existence of many worlds does not exclude Western epistemology. For example, Radcliffe (2017) commits to Indigenous knowledges of geography alongside disciplinary knowledge. This does not mean focusing only on the particular at the expense of the universal, but combining both in a way that … 'generates

sharp analytical insights into power …' (ibid, p.330). In other words, we are not arguing here for the rejection of 'powerful knowledge' and its replacement with everyday, or any other knowledge configuration, but for a view of knowledge that is expansive, open, where no one knowledge configuration is classed as 'more powerful' than another, but where all knowledge is subject to rigorous critical historico-political analysis and openness to the other.

What can school geography teachers and teacher educators do to arrest the de-politicising, racialising and hierarchising force of a concept like 'powerful knowledge' that is increasing in popularity nationally and globally? Along with Rudolph et al (2018), we propose the following: a decolonising analytic to expose the politics, ethics and power relations of knowledge production; a decolonising pedagogy to teach critical historico-political analysis to students; a decolonising eye on the constant look-out for racialising binaries, generalisations, decontextualisation, differentiation and competition and finally, a decolonising self-reflexivity to address our own racialising thoughts and behaviours. Embracing a decolonising methodological approach to geographical knowledge which recognises its in-built capacity to address social injustice allows school geography to open the door to political and ethical engagement with the major crises of our present.

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