**The Neglected Legacy and Harms of Epistemic Colonising: Linguicism, Epistemic Exploitation, and Ontic Burnout**

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This paper sets out to accomplish two goals. First, drawing on the Irish perspective, it reconceptualises one of the enduring legacy-based harms of epistemic colonisation, in this case, ‘linguicism[[1]](#footnote-1)’, in terms of ‘hermeneutical injustice’[[2]](#footnote-2). Second, it argues that otherwise well-meaning attempts to combat epistemic colonisation through the inclusion of marginalised testimony can, in certain circumstances, lead to cases of ‘epistemic exploitation’[[3]](#footnote-3), which, in turn, can result in ‘ontic burnout’[[4]](#footnote-4). Both linguicism and epistemic exploitation, this paper theorizes, have the potential to bring about ontic burnout. Here is the plan: to set the scene, section I briefly surveys some key arguments supporting the call for higher education institutions (HEIs) to engage in epistemic decolonising, focusing on the importance of striking a balance between two extremes: (i) abandoning all forms of Eurocentric/colonial knowledge through the elimination of inherited thinking and conceptual schemes which result from colonization, in particular, those which remain in our thinking “owing to inertia rather than to our own reflective choices” (Wiredu 2002, p.56); (ii) the other—pursuing a more positive project where we seek to, “exploit as much as is judicious the resources of indigenous conceptual schemes” (Wiredu 1996: p.136). From here, it moves to consider harms associated with a subset of ‘epistemicide’, that is, ‘linguicism’—a phenomenon where the language and culture of the colonizer become part of the ‘civilising project’ and, in more extreme cases of linguicide, forcibly replaces indigenous languages. Section II then explores the subtleties of harmful by-products deriving from ‘inclusion’, ­namely that which scholars refer to as ‘epistemic exploitation’. Situations where marginalised scholars are finally ‘at the table but still on the menu’ arise when privileged persons, compel marginalised knowers to educate them [and others] about the nature of their oppression (Berenstain, 2016). Habitual requests to *turn themselves inside out* for emancipatory principles give rise to a phenomenon known as ontic burnout (Dunne and Kotsonis, 2022, p.9)—“a form of dissociative explanatory fatigue culminating in oppressed persons engaging in a conscious or unconscious decoupling from their socially constructed identity, from the burdens and injustices associated with being a member of a certain social kind”. This harm is, I argue, rarely discussed in the literature and worthy of further analysis.

**Epistemic Decolonisation—Can the Centre Hold?**

Broadly understood, epistemic decolonisation stress-tests the exaltation of a single or monolithic perspective as epistemically authoritative. It charts the process of challenging the unquestioned dominance of Anglophone ways of being, knowing and understanding the world. This involves a range of activities, such as critically examining Eurocentric biases and related epistemic deference in academic disciplines (Alcoff, 2017), promoting the inclusion and valency of non-Western knowledge systems and perspectives, and working to reclaim the value and importance of empowered marginalized communities and voices (see Freire, 1970). The goal of epistemic colonisation is to create more polyvocally-enriched, equitable and authentically inclusive knowledge production and dissemination practices. Part of this task likewise involves challenging existing power imbalances undermining individual and collective epistemic agency: harmful legacies long entrenched in academic and intellectual spaces. Epistemic decolonisation remains, therefore, for good reason, a rather contentious topic in HE discourses (see Mitova, 2020). Dominant epistemologies tend to act as gatekeepers to legitimised epistemic practices animating the acquisition, sharing and auditing of knowledge. Here, the Global North is *phronimos* par excellence, gatekeeper to authoritative forms of knowledge, while the Global South, the poor uncivilised ignorant cousin, is in need of being disabused of their false beliefs. Taken in its most extreme sense, marginalised agents from the Global South are portrayed as defective and inferior inquirers, chained to the wall in Plato’s cave (Republic, 514a-520a), oblivious to the fact that they are in need of epistemic emancipation (see Lugones, 2003).

Enter the colonial saviour—the philosopher King tasked with aiding the prisoners escape their faulty assumptions, opinions and inferences. From this epistemic high ground, the folly of crude phenomenal subjectivism, elementary relativism and epistemic naïveté are identified as being in need of overhauling, to be replaced with more defensible forms of refined rationality and knowledge, untainted by contingencies of perspectivism or time and place. To argue for epistemic decolonisation is, therefore, on first approximation, a clarion call to dismantle this blameworthy attitude alongside its self-arrogated hegemonic authority. Secondly, should we accept the popular rationale that colonialism has exalted epistemically authoritative practices and forms of Eurocentric knowledge over many competing, and in some cases, equally legitimate ones, there is an argument these epistemic vices constitute a clear case of ‘epistemicide’[[5]](#footnote-5), one element of which is ‘linguicism’, where the imposed language of the colonizer gives rise to a weaponised citizenship test of sorts, a crude ethnocentric language-assessment instrument used to determine worthiness to identify with sophisticated-colonizer-elites.

The topic of epistemic decolonisation is by no means new. Conceptual expositions, for this reason, tend to be rich and varied, and as such, no uniformly accepted definition exists. Since disagreements arise from what exactly decolonisation involves, the timelines for accomplishing same, together with the rationale we lean on when defending claims to decolonise HE curricula/knowledge, it makes sense as to why several definitions populate the literature[[6]](#footnote-6). On the one hand, some scholars conceive EC as the meaningful diversification of knowledge practices (thought, inquiry, reasons, evidence) across domains of inquiry. Let’s call this a moderate view (see van Norden, 2017). On the other end of the spectrum, strong views regard EC as the outright rejection of the taken-for-granted superiority and dominance of western thought and epistemic practices (Pillay, 2015).

This paper takes the moderate view to be more plausible. Attempts to radically eliminate ‘inert’ or ‘unreflective’ inherited western knowledge practices would be a perfect example of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. After all, how does one decolonise Darwinian principles of evolution (an ostensibly inert and unreflectively accepted scientific principle), Yeats or Dickinson’s poetry, or the discovery of penicillin? Proponents of the more moderate claim uphold that moral-epistemic and conceptual justifications mandate that western ways of knowledge be counterposed with epistemologies of the Global South (see Santos and Meneses, 2020). According to this view, there are moral (‘it’s the right thing to do’) and epistemic reasons (knowledge production would be greatly enriched if we harness marginalized epistemologies) in support of decolonisation. Given the spectrum on which these claims fall, let’s get clear about the precise nature of the claim at stake. EC is *not* *just about* reductionist accounts of epistemic decolonising in HE, focusing on instances of discarding inherited modes of conceptualization that came to us through colonization and infiltrated our thinking owing to inertia rather than to our own reflective choices. Nor is it *just about* “exploiting as much as is pragmatic and judicious, the resources of our own indigenous conceptual schemes” (Wiredu 1996, p.136). Like most complex matters, the truth is rarely pure and never simple. A more balanced approach to epistemic colonisation, on my view, then, amounts to finding a context-specific, textured, principled and reasons-sensitive accommodation between what are frequently presented as polarised or incompatible views.

**Decolonising and Linguicism**

Before going any further, it’s important to get a few conceptual distinctions clear. One of the core features of EC is that decolonising is an ongoing project rather than a one-off affair (Thiong’o, 1986). This makes sense since it is not just a singular event but rather an ongoing process of “seeing ourselves clearly” (Mbembe 2015, p.15). Talk of decolonisation gives the impression there is a *telos*, an end point at which we accomplish our goals. It might also give the false impression that only large-scale one-off structural, as opposed to repeated and cumulative micro-changes, can right the scales of moral and epistemic injustice, be them historic or ongoing.

One of the enduring legacies of the decolonising project in Ireland is arguably a form of ‘epistemicide’, an analysis of which focuses here on one of its subsets, ‘linguicism’. In this case, the coloniser insisted not just on their epistemic and cultural superiority in terms of subjugating native Irish to a predominately ‘British education’, one element of which imposed the English language in our schools and educational institutions. This, in part, led to the negative perception of Irish as “…the badge of a scattered minority in a number of restricted, remote and impoverished regions in the western fringes of Ireland” (Ó Loinsigh, 1975, p.5). The Folklore Commission in 1954 put it even more bluntly: “school […] finished Irish…Those who didn’t go to school kept their Irish.”

Stories of summary punishment for those who spoke Irish outside designated times are also well documented in the literature. Kiberd (1995) recounts the story of how:

*The man called the child to him, said nothing, but drawing forth from its dress a little stick, commonly called a scoreen or tally, which was suspended by a string round the neck, put an additional notch in it with its pencil knife. Upon our enquiry on the cause of these proceedings, we were told that it was done to prevent the child from speaking Irish; for every time he attempted to do so a new nick was put on his tally, and, when these amounted to a certain number, summary punishment was inflicted on him by the schoolmaste*r (p.143).

Punishment for linguistic infractions (speaking one’s mother tongue) was par for the course at the time. So much so that “in 1831 the Irish-speaking population probably numbered between 1,000,000 and 1,500,000; fifty years later it had shrunk into insignificance; and the national schools, though by no means the only cause of the decline, contributed substantially to it” (Beckett, 1981, p. 313). Myriad reasons exist as to what contributed to the decline in the Irish language[[7]](#footnote-7). As such, it would be a mistake to exclusively lay the blame at the feet of the English empire. Such a notable decline was obviously not monocausal, nor entirely one-sided. Care should be taken to avoid reductionist and revisionist accounts. That said, the untested insistence on the part of the colonizer that Gaeilge was markedly inferior to English (both culturally and in terms of its commercial exchange value) did directly contribute to deleterious attitudes and stigmatisation of the Irish language (Darmody, 2016). Equally, it distorted native Irish identity-based self-conceptualisations. Since English was the language of commerce, the *perfect language to trade pigs in[[8]](#footnote-8)*, its imposition equally contributed to the steady erosion of one’s collective cultural identity, one’s sense of authenticity and selfhood, an identity whose expression finds itself in its richest form through her original language and culture (Nandy, 1983). As the poet Eoghan Ruadh Ó Suilleabháin so eloquently put it:

*Ní hí an bhoichtineacht is measa liom*, T’is not the poverty I most detest

*Ná bheith síos go deo* Nor being down forever

*Ach an tarcuisne a leanann í* But the insult that follows it

*Ná leighisfeadh na leóin.* Which no leeches can cure.

Though referring to a different context, Franz Fanon’s (1986) views about linguicism are relevant to the Irish situation. His work carefully draws parallels between linguicism and what we might later refer to as the concept of hermeneutical injustice in epistemic injustice. Taking the Franco-colonising project as the locus of enquiry, he conceives the black French colonial subject as “proportionally whiter”—that is, “he will come closer to being a real human being—in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language” (p.18). This idea that mastery of the colonizer tongue is a necessary condition for ‘being a real human being’ are some of the long-standing harms linguicism has perpetrated. Though the geo-particulars are different, the underlying principle remains the same. In terms of the British colonising project in Ireland, this was very much the legacy many students were left with until independence in 1922. In the words of Fricker (2007), hermeneutical injustice occurs when “a gap in collective interpretative resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences” (p.1). It occurs because “the powerful have an unfair advantage in structuring collective social understandings” (p.147).[[9]](#footnote-9) What this captures are situational factors where the imposition of barriers (subjugation of indigenous language and cultural practices in this case) leave subjects at a disadvantage when it comes to making their social experiences intelligible to themselves and others. These barriers arise due to their belonging to social groups, which tend to be excluded from the kinds of institutions and practices which have the most significant role in shaping a community’s shared resources for successfully interpreting one’s experiences and sharing them with others (McGlynn, 2022). British colonialism’s imposition of the colonizer’s tongue arguably locked the native Irish out of meaning and sense-making activities (through forcibly diminished epistemic agency[[10]](#footnote-10)), since under the Penal Laws (1695-1793), it was illegal to educate a child in the Papist faith, Catholics were barred from voting, holding public office, owning land, engaging in worship, and as part of the ‘civilising project’, the speaking of Irish was heavily discouraged.[[11]](#footnote-11)

What makes linguicism a form of hermeneutical injustice is that forced initiation into the colonizer’s language, and by extension, their norms of thought, culture and axiology, means there comes a point where the educated black colonial subject “feels at a given stage that his race no longer understands him. Or [indeed] that he no longer understands it” (Fanon: 1986/1952: 16). This ontological erosion, deriving from a “linguistic domination of the mental universe of the colonised” (Ngũgĩ, 1986, p.16) is well documented (see Minton and Thiesen, 2020). Colonizer linguistic norms and the aspiration to master such were often presented as the means through which one becomes a better person, a more cultured individual, a sophisticated agent, not just an object, but an actor who affects the world around them, someone who is the agent of change, not just a slave to it. To become this new, improved version, the implication was that the colonised needed to let go, to outgrow and shed their inferior former identities, at least that part inextricably linked with identity as instantiated via their mother tongue and culture.

**Epistemic Exploitation: Being at the table but *still* on the Menu**

One of the sometimes well-intentioned attempts to combat decolonisation in the Academy has led to a marked increase in cases of epistemic exploitation. Epistemic exploitation occurs when “privileged persons compel marginalised knowers to educate them [and others] about the nature of their oppression” (Berenstain, [2016](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00131857.2022.2094249?scroll=top&needAccess=true&role=tab), p. 569). As Davis (2016, p. 8) explains more fully, it involves:

Increased risk of becoming overburdened by requests to ‘educate’ others. When extra epistemic responsibilities are routinely allocated to members of underrepresented communities, these individuals find themselves confronted with higher volumes of epistemic labour than their dominant peers. Often, this labour is not compensated (or is inadequately compensated); sometimes the labour is not even recognised as labour.

Marginalised scholars within the Academy frequently find themselves lumbered with such tasks. Scholars of colour find themselves routinely conscripted to diversity boards, social justice fora, Dignity-Respect-Equality-Diversity-Inclusion committees. Many more are invited to conferences to explain their thoughts on decolonizing the curriculum, workplace racism, marginalised scholars events, curriculum diversification, and others still, the various disguises employed by HE administrations to hide such (Reyes and Halcón, 1988). Queer and disabled scholars find themselves in a similar boat, albeit combatting distinct exclusionary and harmful practices/cultures. On paper, the rationale is intuitively persuasive: those that are oppressed are uniquely positioned to know certain things that others who lack the same standpoint do not (Toole, 2020). This double-edged sword, this ‘first-personal insider perspective’ which often gives oppressed individuals the authority to speak about the nature, scope and consequences of their marginalization is precisely that which animates exploitative practices. In the mind of the non-marginalized, what scholar of colour would willingly pass up an invitation to speak out against racism in their own university? If they do, surely they miss out on an opportunity to potentially disabuse persons of their racist attitudes and beliefs? Should they decide to attend, they need to prepare to either suffer a credibility deficit (‘surely it’s not that bad’) or essentialist-attribution (‘surely all people of social kind X experience this precise form of oppression the same way because of Speaker Y’s account’). This captures the essence of oppressive double-binds. They are choice situations in which pervasive oppressive norms leave individuals from oppressed groups facing a distinctive type of imperfect choice (see Frye, 1983). On the face of it, it is a *damned if you do-damned if you don’t choice* between pursuing short-term prudential good by co-operating with an oppressive norm that is bad in the long run or resisting the oppressive norm and thereby suffering some harm and/or punishment which undermines one’s long-term ability to resist oppression. Either way, regardless of the agent’s choice, the end result is the same: they end up strengthening oppressive structures; they become “a mechanism in their own oppression” (Hirji, 2021, p. 653).

What I want to argue for here is a richer and more other-regarding understanding of oppressive double-binds to include how they can be knowingly or unknowingly weaponised by well-meaning educators in service of emancipatory principles. To be clear: these are binds marginalized persons carry with them often. What’s more­, they can be triggered either knowingly or unknowingly based on a lack of understanding derived from attitudes of unchecked privilege and entitlement[[12]](#footnote-12). In an effort to pursue the decolonising project, there is the potential for privileged individuals, many of whom are well-intentioned, to place the promise of veritist principles (possibility of belief revision) above the emotional costs incurred by speakers engaged in such orchestrated exchanges. At risk here is outsourcing the responsibility to educate, to disabuse others of their harmful attitudes and beliefs squarely on the shoulders of already oppressed or marginalized individuals. When we think about it, such exchanges, indeed, the rules of engagement, so to speak, tend to be systematically decided by the privileged. What is more, this is done without “due regard for the burden that such ‘painful knowledge’ exacts on the oppressed, both in terms of what it costs to bear, how it was acquired, and finally, the toll it continues to take, especially when in all likelihood the oppressed person’s testimony and emotional labour will be met with a trenchant scepticism or credibility excess, both of which fail to track the nuanced, complex reality of their lived experience” (Dunne and Kotsonis, 2022, p.3). Further compounding this is the explanatory fatigue factor. Why is it that some people expect oppressed persons to openly and willingly explain *ad nauseam* what it’s like to be them? This fits well with the idea of Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF), the persistent and pervasive “physiological, psychological and behavioural strain exacted on racially marginalized and stigmatized groups and the amount of energy they expend coping with fighting with racism” (Smith, 2008, p.617) which has become the “quotidian experience of faculty, students and staff of colour on predominately white campuses (Applebaum, 2021, p.60). A strong *prima facie* case can be made that educators need to take special care to avoid feeling entitled to routinely access and appropriate the testimony of marginalised knowers in service of what they perceive to be public educational goods.

**Examples of Epistemic Exploitation**

Nora Berenstain (2016, p.576), in her paper on epistemic exploitation, asks us to picture a scene where Amina, a Black woman, is out with a white male acquaintance. At some point during the meal, a white woman approaches her, reaches out to touch her hair, and exclaims how soft it is. Amina, as politely as possible, tells the white woman not to touch her hair. Offended, the white woman, responds, “I was just trying to give you a compliment,” and leaves angrily. Ben then asks Amina why she was “so rude” to the woman who was “just being nice.” Amina is tired and does not feel like defending her right to bodily autonomy or explaining the history of white objectification of Black women’s bodies and the racist entitlement that is inherent in a white person touching a Black woman without her permission (see Dabiri, 2019 for further examples). However, she knows that if she refuses to explain herself or simply says, “I don’t want to talk about it,” she runs the risk of being painted as overly emotional, irrational, hypersensitive, unfriendly, and aggressive. She thus faces a double bind: she can either engage in the coerced labour of explaining why the white woman’s action was racist and justify her response to it, or she can risk being seen as confirming the misogy-noiristic controlling image of the angry Black Woman.

Now, suppose for a moment that you are Amina. The above happens on a Monday. On Tuesday, you are out with work colleagues for drinks where a similar exchange occurs. On Wednesday, on your way to work on the bus, upon learning that you are an academic, a well-meaning person sitting beside you repeatedly queries your assessment that it is harder for a woman of colour to progress professionally because of structural inequalities. ‘Surely it is a meritocracy’, they suggest, and ‘race or gender doesn’t come into it at all?’ Thursday is no better when a male colleague despairs about gender and diversity quotas in university settings, asserting defiantly that his promotion application was turned down because he ‘wasn’t woke enough; wasn’t the right colour or gender’. Friday wasn’t exactly much fun either. At a faculty meeting, your department head informs you that you must head up a new committee on diversity and inclusion. Already overstretched and doing comparatively more objectively speaking than your colleagues, your petition to politely but firmly decline falls on deaf ears. Saturday delivers further unwelcome news. Your Head of Department emails to request you offer a seminar to colleagues and students on anti-racism to mark diversity week. When you reply that you cannot oblige due to existing commitments, your response is met with a sense of disbelief and pointed mention of ‘a missed opportunity’.

So, what sort of harms are in play here? Here I employ the NIWA (Negative Influence on Well-Being Account), according to which, “what it is for an event *e* to harm an individual *S* is for *e* to adversely affect *S’s* well-being” (Johansson and Risberg, forthcoming, p.3). Seeing as some marginalised and/or oppressed individuals are bombarded with requests to ameliorate ignorance on almost a daily basis, it’s no wonder that some are tired. Others are wrung out. Others still feel their daily struggle is enough of a battle. Some feel “angry at the fact that the privileged expect real-time access to their hurt-locker testimony to change hearts and minds; that consciously or unconsciously, standpoint theory is weaponized to designate it the responsibility of the oppressed to stamp out prejudice and injustice” (Dunne, 2022b). Though not just confined to issues of race, in the words of Cooper (2015), some might feel:

*asking black women and other women of colour always to explain, show and prove to white people what is so wrong about what they have said or done, when we have no guarantees that they will change, shift or grow, is unacceptable. I demand better conditions of work.*

At stake here is marginalised people feeling free, and moreover, being able to say ‘no’ to repeated requests to educate, without fear of self-loathing or being labelled a defector/reluctant part-time labourer in service of one’s ‘own’ cause. To exercise due sensitivity and understanding of the nature of oppressive double-binds, I suggest privileged persons recalibrate their expectations around the extent to which such attitudes are driven by unmerited feelings of deservingness (*you owe it to me*) and demandingness (*you need to give this to me* *regardless of the toll it takes on you*), otherwise better known as entitlement. Such expectations, arguably the progeny of self-serving rational motivated ignorance, see marginalized persons as an educational tool—public property—a commodity to be willingly offered and accessed, without question, in service of the public good. Marginalized persons are thus forced into a dilemma—double down on their efforts to educate and somehow endure the emotionally exhausting attempts to constantly justify and substantiate what one’s painfully acquired situated knowledge to those who do not have ‘the ears to hear’ or “be labelled negatively” (Jones, 1999, p.308). This is another oppressive double-bind. This is, yet again, a recipe for ontic burnout.

**The Harms of Ontic Burnout**

Acts of linguicism, repeatedly triggered double-binds and epistemic exploitative practices, be them on an individual or collective scale, have the potential to lead to ontic burnout. A novel concept, ontic burnout captures a form of “dissociative explanatory fatigue—a specific subset of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion (harms) triggered when privileged persons (in this case, educators) repeatedly or otherwise compel marginalised or oppressed knowers to educate them [and others] about the nature of their oppression” (Dunne and Kotsonis, 2022, p.9). Fatigue of this kind leads oppressed persons to pre-emptively dissociate themselves from being members of a certain social kind. Similar to ontic injustice, where, “an individual is wronged by the very fact of being socially constructed as a member of a certain social kind, where that construction consists, at least in part, of their being subjected to a set of social constraints and enablements that is wrongful to them” (Jenkins, 2020, p.191), it is the culmination of a life lived on the precipice of explanatory fatigue, of emotional, physical and mental exhaustion—a burnout triggered by others’ entitled-driven-expectations reducing you to an on-call 24/7 educator; that somehow *just because you happen to be a member of a certain social kind*, you not only owe it to your kin, but also those who hold opposing views, to fight the good fight, and in so doing, be willing and able to burn the candle at both ends to liberate people from harmful, mistaken attitudes and beliefs. In what follows, I briefly examine two harms of ontic burnout, I categorise: (i) *the Sisyphean Trap* and (ii) *Never Good Enough Guilt*.

**The Sisyphean Trap**

Sisyphus, in Greek mythology, was the founder and king of Ephyra. Hades punished him for cheating death by forcing him to repeatedly roll a boulder up a hill only for it to roll back down every time it neared the top. This action he was doomed to repeat for eternity. Here I suggest that the omnipresent expectation to educate the privileged about the nature of oppression is akin to a Sisyphean task. Like Sisyphus, there is no end in sight for marginalised persons though; no glory when they almost reach the top of the hill. The tantalising promise of ‘just one more try’ or ‘this is part of my public service/lot given who I am’ is all-consuming and a shortcut to frustration, disillusionment and despair. This is why I label it the *Sisyphean Trap*. However, unlike Sisyphus who has no choice in the matter (a fact that perversely enough carries some solace), marginalised persons are free to lay aside the boulder. But just as pushing up a boulder up a hill carries costs, so too does declining to educate. Efforts to resist that which is expected necessitates declining the opportunity to resist oppression. Should they choose to ‘accept’ the request, they then carry an even bigger burden to represent their constituency well and somehow bring about a *metanoia* of sorts in their audience, some of whom will attribute them a credibility deficit or excess (see Davis, 2016). This can lead to ‘ontic burnout’.

Oppressed suffer because of existing identity-based prejudices and injustices (Medina, 2013). Being members of a certain social kind leaves them susceptible to the ‘Sisyphean trap’. Having an identity that lies outside the norm—an identity that carries with it, for some, a lifetime’s subscription to public service (rolling that rock up a hill), based on *turning yourself inside out* to strangers, to draining explanatory gymnastics in pursuit of emancipatory ideals, is a recipe for ontic burnout. There will be times when it comes apparent that even though oppressed persons have “joined the table, [they are] are still on the menu” (Bilge, 2020, p.317). All that’s left is the understanding that epistemic decolonising can be a zero-sum game, a situation where one person’s gain (ideally an individual you disabuse of a mistaken belief/s) is cancelled out by the losses you incur as part of the educative process. What makes this type of burnout ontic is that it encapsulates the situationally triggered dissociative erosion of an oppressed person’s sense of self. They no longer want to be a member of a social kind because the job-description, the contract, is written on other peoples’ terms, according to their expectations, none of which are aligned with duty of care principles or a respect for your well-being. Let’s be clear: this is not what they signed up for. They deserve better conditions of work. They deserve better. They deserve more. Marginalised deserve a role and task they have an input into, a role that doesn’t seek to commodify their painfully acquired knowledge. To be sure, carrying what it means to be them exacts enough of a toll as is without lumbering them with the additional weight of ever-present expectations to educate others about what it means to be marginalized or oppressed.

**Never Good Enough Guilt**

The second harm worth considering is: *Never Good Enough Guilt* (NGEG). In a world marked by unjust and oppressive structural and interpersonal dynamics, simply being a member of a certain social class is enough to expose you to further injustices and barriers. For the second type of harm to obtain, we need to take a closer look at the oppressive emotional demands at the centre of ontic burnout. Such demands, while not exhaustive, comprise almost daily exposure to a combination of unrealistic expectations triggered by oppressive double-binds. It is the latter expectation I focus on here. To be sure, ‘recognition-failure’ (Giladi, 2018), that is, failure to see you as a potential source of knowledge, a situated knower, explanatory fatigue, vulnerability-instrumentalization, educator-induced oppressive double-binds played out in recalcitrant epistemic environments, and chronic situational stresses, whether taken individually or collectively, take a toll. So too does turning yourself inside out for testimonial exchanges.

All of the above are painful reminders that you are different, a deviation from the statistical norm. In a sense this renders encounters of this nature a potentially harmful exercise in asymmetrical expectations: educators expect too much from marginalised persons; marginalised persons too much of themselves. The latter is what interests me here. Having a first-personal experience of oppression equips individuals to offer a critical perspective on the lived experience of structural and interpersonal injustice (Toole, 2022).[[13]](#footnote-13) Nonetheless, might we speculate there are occasions when marginalized persons are haunted by those they cannot reach? In a room of 100 people, might there be a tendency to agonise over the ones they did not reach? Is there a chance that oppressed persons see it as a ‘failure to reach their audience?’ Instead of placing the responsibility for epistemic formation squarely on the shoulders of others’, might oppressed persons partly or otherwise blame themselves, and carry guilt around same, seeing as some privileged individuals present it as ‘their problem to fix’? Questions like: Maybe I didn’t explain properly? Perhaps I made it sound better than it is? If only I wasn’t so tired and frazzled! Did I come across as angry? (see Bailey, 2018) What does the lecturer who invited me to speak think of my talk? Did they really like it? Questions such as these no doubt linger in the mind of those who are only too painfully aware that even their best efforts will never be good enough.

Like the Sisyphean Trap, endeavouring to rationally move others to see the world through your eyes is intoxicating. After all, the mere possibility of ‘shared perspectives’ is powerful. Seeing as the stakes are so high, perhaps those who succumb to NGEG, pay the price for a lifetime bearing the unrealistic expectations of others’ to liberate the ignorant and/or the prejudiced. As a representative for your constituency, you carry the expectations of your own kin AND those who seek to employ your services in pursuit of emancipative ideals. At the end of the day, marginalized persons long for meaningful educative exchanges—for their work and testimony to be valued, to matter, not just by those who receive it positively, but even more so by those who don’t have the ears to listen. Soon enough the asymmetry of this situation eats away at their spirit, NGEG becomes all-consuming, and there comes a time when spokesperson work offers negligible personal reward. This, much like the Sisyphean Trap above, can lead to a dissociation from being a member of a certain social kind. Willingly engaging and falling short at times, or even refusing to engage, both have opportunity costs. On this basis, NGEG also has the potential to lead to ontic burnout.

**Conclusion**

This paper has covered a lot of ground. It began by identifying the need to strike a balanced and context-specific approach to epistemic decolonising, so as to avoid throwing out the proverbial ‘baby with the bathwater’. From there it critically examined the phenomenon of linguicism, focusing first on the Irish perspective with the imposition of Anglo-linguistic and cultural norms, the overarching aim of which culminated in the grand ‘civilising’ Anglo-colonising project, where becoming “closer to being a real human being [was] in direct ratio to mastery of the [colonizer’s] language” (Fanon, 1986, p.18). To explicate the legacy of linguicism further, links were forged with the concept of hermeneutical injustice, to capture, and moreover, better understand, barriers related to self-other understandings—arguably, a neglected legacy of colonisation. Epistemic exploitation as a well-meaning attempt to engage in ameliorating ignorance and epistemic injustice to combat epistemic colonisation, was then examined in light of two novel harms: the *Sisyphean Trap* and *Never good Enough Guilt*. Finally, a survey of each harmful phenomenon as it plays out in real-world situations was presented to further convince the reader to critically examine some of the neglected harms arising from misguided ameliorative approaches to challenge epistemic colonising in higher education.

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1. Linguicism refers to "ideologies, structures and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and immaterial) between groups which are defined on the basis of language" (Skutnabb-Kangas 1988/2015, p.13). It can relate to both languages and their speakers and precedes, but does not necessarily lead to, linguicide and/or language death. This paper focuses on ‘linguicism’—situations where the legacies of colonial powers have negatively impacted intergenerational attitudes around indigenous language. As a moral-epistemic harm, for those who see it as inextricably linked with cultural identity and expression, it has the potential to lead to ontic burnout. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Augmenting Fricker’s (2007, p.155) original analysis, this captures contextual and situational factors where the imposition of barriers (subjugation of indigenous language and shared cultural practices in this instance) leave subjects at a disadvantage when it comes to making their social experiences intelligible to themselves and others. These barriers arise due to their belonging to social groups which tend to be excluded from the kinds of institutions and practices which have the most significant role in shaping a community’s shared resources for successfully interpreting one’s experiences and sharing them with others. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Davis (2016, p. 8) defines epistemic exploitation (EE) as the **“**increased risk of becoming overburdened by requests to educate others,” while Berenstain (2016) classifies it as situations where marginalised knowers are compelled to educate those around them about the nature of their oppression (Berenstain, 2016). This paper employs an integrated understanding of the phenomenon. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ontic burnout is “a form of dissociative explanatory fatigue culminating in oppressed persons engaging in a conscious or unconscious decoupling from their socially constructed identity, from the burdens and injustices associated with being a member of a certain social kind” (Dunne and Kotsonis, 2022, p.9). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Epistemicide refers to “the extermination of knowledge and ways of knowing” (Grosfoguel 2013, p.74). Grosfoguel argues that the entire current western knowledge enterprise, most notably the university, is largely founded on four distinct epistemicides in the long sixteenth century—against the Jewish and Muslim populations of Al-Andalus, against the indigenous populations of the Americas, against Africans who were captured as slaves, and against women accused of witchcraft in Europe. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I leave aside objections to the EC project, most notably, the concern that EC undermines the validity of western knowledge/pursuit of objectivity or that EC amounts to a form of reverse discrimination, guilty of the moral vice ‘two wrongs don’t make a right’. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Douglas Hyde in his impassioned speech ‘De-Anglicising Ireland’ in 1892, suggests: “In order to de-Anglicise ourselves we must at once arrest the decay of the language. We must bring pressure upon our politicians not to snuff it out by their tacit discouragement merely because they do not happen themselves to understand it. We must arouse some spark of patriotic inspiration among the peasantry who still use the language, and put an end to the shameful state of feeling — a thousand-tongued reproach to our leaders and statesmen — which makes young men and women blush and hang their heads when overheard speaking their own language”. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. English became a necessary sin; the perfect language to sell pigs in (Kelly, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. As Medina (2012) points out, marginalized often develop their own epistemic resources, concepts that make their experience intelligible amongst themselves. The problem is this: even though they have the concepts, their road to self (see Nandy, 1983) and shared understandings is still hampered because they “still remain systematically misunderstood by others…when they try to communicate those experiences” (p.207). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Epistemic agency is the capacity of a person to successfully inquire, acquire, share and audit knowledge (see Gerken, 2019) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Here you can see the Catholic response to such laws: <http://opac.oireachtas.ie/Data/Library3/Library3/DCT075004.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Entitlement is characterized here as a vicious attitude/personality trait animating an unfettered sense or feeling of unmerited deservingness and demandingness (see Grubbs & Exline, 2016 pp.1204-1226). Put another way—it captures the feeling that one deserves better or more than others’—that being a member of a certain social kind authorises them to access, exploit and appropriate others’ testimony (epistemic and emotional labour) for their own ends, even if those ends are rooted in other-regarding emancipatory principles. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Standpoint epistemologists according to Toole (2022, p.3) must reject the following two widely held principles in epistemology: (i) aperspectivalism-an epistemic agent’s justification for some proposition must be accessible to other epistemic agents who are exposed to the same salient epistemic features of a situation; (ii) atomistic knowers- epistemic agents are generic, interchangeable or fungible. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)