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Decolonizing Heritage:
Critical Perspectives on Sustainability through a Cultural Studies Lens

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the intersection between critical heritage studies, decolonial epistemologies and sustainability through the analytical lens of cultural studies, with particular emphasis on Stuart Hall's theoretical contributions. We argue that traditional heritage discourse, dominated by Western frameworks, perpetuates colonial power relations that marginalize local communities and knowledge systems while failing to address contemporary sustainability challenges. The "authorized heritage discourse" privileges expert knowledge over community autonomy, commodifies living cultures for tourism consumption and maintains institutional structures that exclude marginalized voices from heritage decision-making.

Drawing extensively on Stuart Hall's cultural theory – particularly his concepts of culture as a contested terrain, representation politics and post-national identity formation – we discuss alternative frameworks for heritage understanding that validate diverse knowledge systems and support community self-determination. Hall's analysis of cultural

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hegemony and hybrid identity formation provides essential tools for understanding how heritage operates as a site of struggle between dominant and subordinate groups. We integrate these insights with decolonial epistemologies, examining how concepts including cognitive justice, epistemic reconstitution and frontier thinking provide practical methodologies for creating more equitable heritage alternatives.

The article demonstrates how cultural studies methodologies, including conjunctural analysis and participatory ethnography, enable the operationalization of decolonial insights through radical inclusivity and democratic cultural practice. Central to our analysis is Hall's political economy of culture, which provides frameworks for understanding heritage commodification while developing community-controlled heritage economies as democratic alternatives. The integration of environmental justice analysis with cultural studies reveals how memory and traditional ecological knowledge offer integrated approaches to cultural and environmental sustainability.

Inspired by William's vision of "the long revolution" toward democratic social transformation, we conclude that decolonizing heritage requires coordinated transformation across governance structures, economic models and pedagogical approaches. The theoretical framework developed provides roadmaps for heritage institutions to contribute to social justice and sustainable development while supporting community empowerment and cultural sovereignty.

KEYWORDS: Stuart Hall, Cultural Studies, Decolonial Epistemologies, Heritage Commodification, Environmental Justice

Introduction

This article explores the intersections between critical heritage studies, decolonial epistemologies and sustainability, through the lens of cultural studies, aiming to challenge traditional narratives on tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Decolonial approaches are described as tools capable of reshaping the shared understandings of heritage and how they stand at the intersection between the concerns of cultural studies and the common goals of a more sustainable, fairer society. It is crucial to recognize the multifaceted nature of heritage and its profound impact on communities and their sense of self. Both tangible (physical artifacts, monuments and sites that represent a culture's history and identity)

and intangible heritage (traditions, practices, knowledge and skills passed down through generations) shape collective identities, i.e., shape the shared sense of belonging and cultural memory within communities (Harrison & Rose, 2010).

A critical approach to heritage studies interrogates dominant narratives in their power dynamics, their construction of identities and their political implications. Critical heritage studies examine how dominant narratives reflect and reinforce existing power structures in society, analyse how heritage shapes and is shaped by individual and collective identity constructions, and explore the political implications of heritage in national and international politics and diplomacy. Critical heritage studies look beyond surface-level interpretations of heritage and uncover hidden power dynamics, while creating more inclusive and representative approaches to heritage management, preservation and interpretation (Garcia Canclini, 1999).

Heritage has often been instrumentalized to serve various agendas, from political consolidation to economic gain. Indeed, political agendas have used heritage to reinforce national identities and political ideologies, often at the expense of minority cultures. The commodification of heritage for tourism has widely prioritised profit over cultural authenticity and the benefit of locals (Aitchison, 2001). The selective preservation and interpretation of heritage has also served as a form of social control, in order to maintain existing social hierarchies and power structures.

Likewise, the process of heritage construction has been influenced by colonial power dynamics, resulting in narratives that prioritize dominant perspectives while marginalizing others (Bernadino-Costa, Maldonado-Torres & Grosfoguel, 2020). This was evident in the colonial area, through the imposition of European values and narratives on local cultures, often erasing or marginalising local heritage. But the impact of colonial power dynamics over the process of heritage construction is also visible in post-colonial periods, with their continuation of colonial narratives in heritage institutions and practices, despite political independence. Contemporary challenges include the ongoing struggles to decolonize heritage practices and integrate local perspectives in preservation efforts. Within this context, recognizing such colonial legacy is crucial for developing more inclusive approaches to cultural heritage.

Reimagining knowledge on cultural heritage under a decolonial epistemology entails challenging colonial narratives, that is to say, recognising and dismantling colonial perspectives that have dominated heritage discourse (Smith, 2021). It also requires

enhancing the value of diverse ways of knowing and understanding cultural heritage by pluralizing knowledge systems. This standpoint empowers local voices by prioritising the perspectives and knowledge of local communities on heritage, because questioning the coloniality of knowledge and power fosters equitable and representative approaches to heritage management, preservation and interpretation.

A decolonial and sustainable approach to heritage implies a multi-dimensional methodology that is simultaneously environmental (preserves natural resources and ecosystems), social (promotes equity, diversity and cultural preservation) and economic (ensures long term viability and responsible resource management). In short, a multi-dimensional methodology that is cultural, as a culture is a whole way of life (Williams, 1961). Thus, this article argues for a holistic, multidimensional approach to sustainability through the lens of cultural studies, ensuring that heritage management, preservation and interpretation contribute to the global sustainable development goals while respecting cultural diversity and emphasising the active production of culture as a living activity, alongside the mere conservation of the past (Hall, 1999: 13).

1. Critical Heritage Studies

Critical heritage studies are an interdisciplinary field that questions traditional ways of understanding, valuing and managing cultural heritage (Smith, 2010, 2006; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004; Bortolotto, 2007; Taylor, 2008; Harrison & Rose, 2010). This field has grown significantly in recent decades, with several lines of research that intersect with areas such as postcolonial studies, decolonial studies, cultural studies, anthropology, archaeology, sociology, geography and urban studies.

The authors of critical heritage studies question the coloniality still present in most international and multilateral institutions and agencies dedicated to the protection, conservation and/or safeguarding of the world's cultural heritage. Under an interdisciplinary approach, what is conventionally called critical heritage studies concerns – among other topics – a denunciation of the eurocentrism embedded in the most powerful guidelines and methodologies issued by (mostly) UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, for the development, progress, conservation, preservation and safeguarding of cultural heritage all over the planet.

In general, this section will address the dominant discourses on heritage, as well as the notion of heritage as performance proposed by Laurajane Smith (2006), and as metacultural production, proposed by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004); the relationship between heritage, national identity and nation (Hall, 1999; Bhabha, 2003); the role of heritage professionals as opposed to the notion of agency by communities (Taylor, 2008); and the questionable ethics of the use of heritage for commercial purposes (Garcia Canclini, 1999).

1.1. An Historical Overview

The efforts by UNESCO to establish a protection instrument for intangible heritage date back to the mid-twentieth century (1952). However, it was from 1972 onwards, with the Convention on the Protection of the Natural and Cultural Heritage of the World, that discussions actually began on how to expand protection to "non-tangible heritage" or "living heritage". In 1989, UNESCO carried out a study entitled "The Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity", considered as a milestone because it included traditions and practices – living cultural elements – of cultures from "peripheral" countries. The "Living Human Treasures" programme, launched by UNESCO in 1993 and discontinued in 2003, was inspired by models already existing in Japan (since 1950) and South Korea (since 1964), and represented one of the organization's first significant efforts to safeguard intangible cultural heritage. The Living Human Treasures programme aimed at encouraging member states to grant official recognition to talented tradition bearers and practitioners, thus contributing to the transmission of their knowledge and skills to the younger generations. States selected such persons on the basis of their accomplishments and of their willingness to convey their knowledge and skills to others. The selection was also based on the value of the traditions and expressions concerned as a testimony of the human creative genius, their roots in cultural and social traditions, their representative character for a given community, as well as their risk of disappearance (UNESCO, 2002).

The proclamation of the "Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity", in turn, was a program established by UNESCO in 1997 and first implemented in 2001, with the purpose of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, such as oral traditions, performing arts and rituals. The program recognized cultural expressions that embody human creativity and identity, promoted awareness of endangered cultural practices and encouraged states to adopt measures for their

preservation and transmission (UNESCO, 2006). Applications were judged on the basis of their outstanding value as works of art by human creative genius, origin in cultural traditions, role in the affirmation of cultural identity, risk of disappearance and adequate safeguard plan. In 2001, UNESCO announced the first nineteen "Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity". The final proclamations occurred in 2005. Following the adoption of the 2003 "Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage", which came into force in 2006, UNESCO transitioned to a new framework. This led to the establishment of the "Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity" in 2008, which incorporated all 90 previously proclaimed masterpieces as its initial entries.

Some of the consultants who worked on the "Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity" initiative were waiting, according to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004), for results of a "more than metacultural" nature. They hoped that UNESCO would have focused on actions of direct support for the reproduction of culture, rather than on the creation of "metacultural mechanisms", such as the announced list itself. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004) denounces the disappointment at the fact that UNESCO's institutional work on the new convention on intangible cultural heritage had been reduced to the adoption of a masterpieces program, since the document became an instrument for national governments to proclaim the richness of their cultural heritage, to the detriment of the state's concern with the actual agents of culture.

The instrumentalization of culture by the state through its conversion into "heritage" for the purpose of reinforcing "national history" and the "spirit of the Nation" has been analysed by authors such as Stuart Hall (1999) and Homi Bhabha (2003), to whom this article will return. In "Whose Heritage? Un-settling 'The Heritage', Re-imaging the post-nation", Hall highlights the Eurocentric character of British heritage as well as its alignment with the concept of Renaissance and modern culture:

> The works and artefacts so conserved appear to be of value primarily in relation to the past. To be validated, they must take their place alongside what has been authorised as valuable on already established grounds in relation to the unfolding of a national story whose terms we already know. The heritage thus becomes the material embodiment of the spirit of the nation, a collective representation of the British version of tradition, a concept pivotal to the lexicon of English virtues. (Hall, 1999: 13-4).

By questioning this "retrospective, nationalized and traditionalized" concept of heritage and by affirming the active production of culture as a *living activity*, instead of a mere conservation of the past, Hall paves the way and offers analytical tools for the theoretical constructions of leading authors of critical heritage studies, such as Laurajane Smith. In *Uses of Heritage* (2006), Smith coins the term "authorized heritage discourse" to refer to the discourse that developed in Western Europe in the nineteenth century, mobilizing archaeologists, architects and art historians for the protection of the material culture that they considered as possessing innate and hereditary value. Such debate, Smith emphasizes, occurred simultaneously with the rise of nationalism throughout Europe, as European powers sought to secure their national identities (2006: 143).

In "Challenging the Authoritative Discourse of Heritage" (2021), Smith argues that the idea of heritage is "something fragile, finite and non-renewable". Smith ensures that aesthetically pleasing material objects, sites, places and/or landscapes come to be cared for, protected and revered by experts "who would have a privileged place to present themselves as conduits to the past and to understand and communicate the value of heritage to the nation" (2021: 144). Smith also questions the idea of heritage as 'inheritance', discussing how it ensures that present generations become disengaged from an active use of heritage. For the author, it is important to question how the premise that heritage should be transmitted and preserved unchanged ensures that, in the present, people are dissuaded from actively rewriting the meaning of the past and, consequently, of the present.

1.2. The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage

UNESCO's 2003 "Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage" can be understood as a milestone in several aspects. The first concerns the official formulation of the concept of intangible heritage and the recognition of the importance of preserving living cultural expressions, such as languages, dances, music, rituals and traditional practices. UNESCO defines safeguarding as the measures taken to ensure the viability of intangible cultural heritage. These measures include identifying, documenting, protecting, promoting, revitalizing and transmitting aspects of this heritage. Intangible cultural heritage is defined as the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and techniques – along with the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural places associated with them – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as an integral part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage,

which is transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups according to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, generating a sense of identity and continuity and thus contributing to promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. The convention also introduced mechanisms for safeguarding and international collaboration, while seeking to address criticism on UNESCO's narrow – or eurocentric – conception of heritage itself.

This shift towards more representative approaches to heritage is related, on the one hand, to the adoption of ideas from post-structuralist theory, cultural studies and anthropology in the arts and humanities. In this sense, it can be considered as one of the most important historical changes that occurred in the twentieth century in the field of heritage. On the other hand, it aligns with the demands by those countries interested in the political and economic benefits – particularly in terms of tourism – of having world heritage nominations submitted by member states.

Diana Taylor (2008) critically analyzes the concept of intangible cultural heritage and the lists presented by UNESCO, warning that, although they focus on and value cultural practices and performances more than in previous programs, they omit the agency of cultural producers. Taylor questions: who transmits these practices? The passive construction ("transmitted from generation to generation") suggests a transhistorical genealogy, in which communities participate ("recreate") without creating. Practitioners and communities cannot be seen as active cultural agents, they inherit places and cultural materials that they must transmit but not transform: "They are not 'ours' – they pass through us, but belong to an unembodied whole, to 'humanity'" (Taylor, 2008: 96).

In turn, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett addresses UNESCO's concept of intangible heritage as follows:

> Not only is each word in this phrase highly charged, but also the phrase itself suggests that heritage exists, as such, prior to – rather than as a consequence of – UNESCO's definitions, listings, and safeguarding measures. I have argued elsewhere that heritage is a mode of cultural production that gives the endangered or outmoded a second life as an exhibition of itself (2004: 56).

Likewise, Smith (2010) understands heritage as a subjective political negotiation of identity, place and memory. For the author, all heritage is intangible to the extent that it should be understood as a moment or a process of cultural and social (re)construction of values and meanings. In Smith's words:

> It is something that happens in sites and places that, in general terms, we can define as heritage sites, but which cannot be reduced to material objects. It is a process, or indeed a performance, in which we identify cultural and social values and meanings that help us make sense of the present, of our identities, and senses of physical and social location. Heritage is a process of negotiation of historical and cultural meanings and values that occur within the scope of the decisions we make to preserve or not to preserve certain places or physical objects and intangible elements, as well as within the scope of the ways in which these objects and elements are then managed, exhibited or safeguarded. They also occur in the way visitors or the public bond with or detach from those things – heritage is what is done with them and how they are used (2010: 141).

Among the many controversies raised by the "Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage", the respective definition of intangible cultural heritage seems to be completely merged with the concept of "culture" itself. This raises the question: can any practices of identity formation be classified as heritage or must they possess an element of tradition anchored in ancestral practices? Apart from recognizing various elements of non-Western cultures as part of the world's cultural heritage, how should the convention be applied in the real world? The challenges are many and include the profound differences between heritage experts and heritage holders around the world, as well as the challenges inherent to the process of safeguarding living assets and the inevitable effects of safeguarding over cultural heritage.

In *Understanding Heritage and Memory* (2010), Harrison and Rose observe how heritage conservation practices of non-Western and indigenous societies confront official heritage conservation practices in the modern world. Through a case study presented by anthropologist Deborah Rose on Australian Aborigines, they analyze how indigenous worldviews pose a fundamental challenge to the notions of tangible and intangible heritage of the "World Heritage Convention" and of the "Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage".

Indeed, non-Western cultures (indigenous, but not only) contest and impose limits on the Western historical model embedded in the notion of cultural heritage and, implicitly, on modernity in general, insofar as they perceive the past, present and future as integrally related and integrated with other aspects of their cultures. Harrison and Rose (2010) seek to demonstrate how the indigenous ontological systems subvert Western anthropocentrism, to the extent that they ignore or disregard the Western dualism between nature (non-human) and culture (human), as well as between mind and matter. For an

ontology in which 'culture' or 'soul' is also found in nature, not only is the nature/culture boundary questioned, but also the preservation measures proposed by UNESCO are themselves questionable.

This critique of Western heritage frameworks is further expanded by Smith (2006), who highlights how the vast majority of studies that explore the interface between community and cultural heritage focus on identity politics: who owns the past? Who decides what conservation measures (if any) should be taken? Who are the experts? To what extent does their link with the state guarantees the maintenance of the privileges and interests of an elite based on values aligned with the strengthening of national identity? Building on this critical perspective, Diana Taylor seems to answer in "Performance and Intangible Cultural Heritage" (2008), where the author recounts her experience as a guest of UNESCO in charge of writing one of the five manuals for the 2003 "Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage", the "Manual on Festive Events, Rituals and Social Practices". In the article, the author argues that, while represented as a way of "preserving the old", the real function of heritage policies is to act as an industry of added value through the creation of new cultural products, an industry that converts places into destinations, as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett had argued in *Destination Culture* (1998).

1.3. The Dilemmas of Cultural Heritage as Commercial Asset

This commodification of heritage, as discussed by Taylor and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, leads directly into the dilemmas explored in this section. When places become destinations within the industry of global tourism, issues of culture, identity, representation, heritage and the transformation of geographic spaces into significant places reemerge. International tourism provides a global formula where local culture is shown as a mere display of colourful leisure for wealthy visitors to enjoy, in a manifestation of Western dominance, which calls forth matters of ethics, power and cultural hegemony (Smith, 1989; Urry, 2002). Greenwood claims that culture is a peculiar, altered and often destroyed commodity, when addressed as a tourist attraction (1989: 172-3). The development of heritage tourism generates 'tourist cultures' alienated from reality, associated with the invention of communities erected from idealized images of the past. These "traditional communities" acquire a strong cultural symbology, but are rarely built in a vacuum, as they arise from – and sometimes in stark contrast with – preexisting communities, widely ignored in the decision, design and execution of heritage

projects. Moreover, the notion of "traditional" is often associated with an idea of "authenticity" that is seldom correct. The maintenance of authenticity is a phenomenon directly related to the process of continuity and change, therefore tradition does not always correspond to authenticity, as it can be invented or reinvented, just like "typical" can be artificial, imported or transposed (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1988).

Recognizing this tension between authenticity and invention, a non-condescending perspective acknowledges that cultures and their respective identities do not remain stagnant in time, as culture, by definition, is in a constant state of dynamism. However, the tourism industry is aggressive in its ceaseless pursuit of new destinations, peoples and cultures, who are marketed, typecast by advertising and sold to the international consumer (Baranowski, 2001; Rojek & Urry, 2002). The tourism industry markets living vestiges of common-sense imagination, embodied as exotic, erotic or as Rousseau's "noble savage". This myth of the primitive man that resists the threats of civilization not only overlooks the real living conditions of local communities, but also describes cultures that never existed. The descriptions about many non-Western tourist sites resonate Said's *Orientalism* (1978) as well as the monologues of redemptive ethnography (Bruner, 2005).

What the tourism industry announces as being authentic, pure and unknown has been, in fact, carefully fabricated, sold and advertised in a way that properly reflects preconceived representations. From the outside, tourists visit primitive communities; from the inside – according to the communities' perspective – tourism is a means to achieving economic development and ensure subsistence (Bell & Lyall, 2001; Howard, 2003). More often than not, communities collaborate with the production of a tourism-oriented representation, staged as a strategic essentialism. Tourists wish to experience a fictional past that is untouched by globalization. Hence, the industry invents versions of this utopian past and transforms them into consumption assets. This dynamic reveals a paradox: while tourism promises cultural preservation, it often results in cultural distortion. Tourists do not travel to experience the post-colonial present nor the territories that have emerged from economic development; they travel in order to enjoy a colonial past lost in time. That said, tourists travel to a border zone between their "civilized" culture and another culture that is "exotic" and "savage", in order to explore a fantasy territory of the Western imagination. There, the domesticated "others" work for visitors, frozen in time or out of time, fabricating a westernized version of their culture, where they participate as mere actors (Bruner, 2005: 191-5).

Through this process, the tourist gaze constructs a symbolic economy in which the "other" is commodified and consumed. Tourists can then bring back an intangible, decontextualized and pristine "other", who they own and control through the stories they tell and the images they display. Tourists reposition the post-colonial subject into a new narrative frame, where tourists become the heroes of the journey and the "other" is the object of their demand (Hallam & Street, 2000; Smith, 1989; Urry, 2002). In response to these dynamics of appropriation and distortion, a critical, sustainable approach to cultural heritage increasingly engages with decolonial epistemologies. Decolonial approaches challenge hegemonic frameworks and foster inclusive methodologies, that valorize marginalized voices and local epistemologies in heritage interpretation, management and preservation.

2. Decolonial Epistemologies

This shift toward decolonial thinking is rooted in long-standing struggles against colonial domination and epistemic violence. In *Decoloniality and Afrodiasporic Thought* (2020), Bernadino-Costa, Maldonado-Torres and Grosfoguel define decoloniality as an academic-political project inscribed in the more than 500 years of struggle of African and afrodiasporic populations. In the face of the logics of modernity/coloniality that date back to the sixteenth century, it is possible to identify several moments and actions of political and epistemic resistance that can be named, along with other designations, as "decoloniality", "decolonial turn" or "decolonial project" (Quijano, 2000; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Walsh, 2018; Mignolo, 2011, 2018; Santos, 2014). Emerging primarily from Latin America – and as a critical response to the predominance of eurocentric modes of construction, validation and global dissemination of knowledge – the decolonial struggle claims a world where different conceptions of time, space, and subjectivity are able to coexist and relate productively (Bernadino-Costa, Maldonado-Torres & Grosfoguel, 2020).

Decolonial epistemologies operate at the intersection between critical theory, postcolonial studies and the production of non-western knowledge. They clarify and systematize the critical issues involved, elucidate the coloniality of power and knowledge historically, and conceptualize strategies for transforming such reality. Some non-Western knowledge systems – each rooted in unique cultural, ecological and philosophical traditions – that may function as decolonial epistemologies are: the Yorùbá Ifá Divination

System of Nigeria and West Africa, a complex oral and spiritual system involving poetry, mathematics and cosmology, used for understanding the world and guiding decisions through the Odu Ifá corpus; the Andean Indigenous Knowledge of the Quechua, in South America, which emphasizes reciprocal relationships with nature (*Pachamama*) and includes sophisticated agricultural terraces, water management and traditional medicine; the Aboriginal Australian Dreaming, a worldview that connects land, ancestors and law through stories and songlines, while encompassing ecological stewardship, astronomy and moral codes; the Himalayan Buddhist knowledge systems of Tibet, Bhutan and Nepal, that integrate spiritual practices with environmental ethics, traditional medicine (like Sowa Rigpa) and meditative sciences rooted in centuries-old texts and lived experience; or the Quilombola Knowledge of Afro-Brazilian Communities, that blends African diasporic traditions with indigenous and rural Brazilian practices, focusing on land use, community health and cultural resistance.

Although decolonial and postcolonial studies are sometimes understood as if they were the same, they have different origins, focuses and intentions. Postcolonial theory originates in the former British colonies of India, Africa and the Caribbean, and develops from the 1970s to the 1980s, using Western academic frameworks to analyze colonial discourse. Decolonial studies question coloniality and the modern-Western project itself, and their formal origins can be located in the late 1990s, in Latin America, among intellectuals related to the Modernity/Coloniality group, such as Aníbal Quijano (2000), Walter Mignolo (2011) and Catherine Walsh (2018). In this article, coloniality is understood as the global logic of dehumanization embedded in modernity, which subsists in the absence of formal colonies. Modernity and coloniality can be understood as two sides of the same coin, hence decolonial studies question and deny modernity as an emancipatory project, presenting it as a civilizing project instead (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo, 2018; Quijano, 2000).

By questioning the birth of "civilization" after the "discovery of the New World" in 1492, decolonial epistemologies demonstrate how such "discovery" involved the collapse of intersubjectivity and otherness and the distortion of the meaning of humanity (Maldonado-Torres, Grosfoguel & Bernadino Costa, 2018). The authors refer to the discovery of the Americas as a metaphysical catastrophe standing at the heart of the transformation of epistemology, ontology and ethics, that also supports the foundation of both modernity/coloniality and of modern European sciences. The great contribution to

the critique of modernity by Aimé Césaire (1950) and Enrique Dussel (1994) is underlined by Grosfoguel (2010). In the words of Césaire and Dussel, modernity is a project of genocidal death of life (both human and non-human) and of destruction of "other" ways of knowing, existing and being in the world. From the Cartesian elaboration "I think, therefore I am", one can infer that "others" do not think, do not exist and lack sufficient ontological resistance. As Fanon mentions in *Black Skins, White Masks* (2008):

> The privilege of the knowledge of some has as a corollary the denial of the knowledge of others. Similarly, the affirmation of the existence of some has as its hidden side the denial of the right to life of others. Epistemic disqualification becomes a privileged instrument of ontological denial. (Maldonado-Torres, Grosfoguel & Bernadino Costa, 2018: 12)

Decolonial studies also seek to demonstrate how the long tradition of scientism and eurocentrism gave rise to abstract universalism, which decisively marks the production of knowledge and all other related spheres, such as economics, politics or the environment. Decolonial studies affirm that abstract universalism is, in fact, a type of particularism that establishes itself as hegemonic and is presented as disembodied, disinterested and unrelated to any geopolitical location. Contrary to this disembodied knowledge without geopolitical location, the decolonial project states that existence itself is an act of epistemic qualification and assumes the need for a corporeal-geopolitical affirmation of the production of knowledge (Grosfoguel, 2010).

By understanding modernity as a revolution within the paradigm of discovery –which is colonial by nature –, the "beyond modernity" project becomes the main objective of decoloniality. In this sense, decoloniality works towards an anti-systemic worldview, capable of transcending the values and promises of modernity as a civilizing project and of constructing a distinct civilizational horizon, with new values and relations that communalize power. Maldonado-Torres, Grosfoguel & Bernadino Costa sustain the need for anti-systemic political projects that break with the civilizing project of modernity, where only one world is possible. The new civilization beyond modernity will produce a world where, based on values shared by epistemic diversity, other worlds are also possible (2018: 65).

2.1. Central Concepts of Decolonial Epistemologies

Some of the central concepts of decolonial epistemologies are "cognitive justice" (Santos, 2014), "epistemic reconstitution" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018), "frontier thinking" (Anzaldúa, 1987; Bhabha, 1994), "geopolitics of embodied knowledge" (Grosfoguel, 2010), "pluriversity" and "transmodernity" (Dussel, 1994). The concept of cognitive justice (Santos, 2014) refers to the understanding that there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice. In this sense, cognitive justice requires the validation of forms of knowledge historically disqualified by the dominant scientific paradigm, the challenge of monocultural scientific knowledge through the "ecology of knowledges", as well as the dialogue between different epistemologies without preexisting hierarchies.

In *Epistemic Freedom in Africa*, Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) interrogates the enduring legacies of coloniality in African knowledge systems. He argues that colonialism imposed eurocentric epistemologies that persist in African institutions, marginalizing indigenous ways of knowing. The book advocates for epistemic freedom as a foundational element of decolonization. Ndlovu-Gatsheni frames this freedom as the ability of Africans to think, speak and write from their own existential realities. He critiques global knowledge hierarchies and the "provincialization" of African thought. Central to his thesis is the concept of "epistemic disobedience", which resists cognitive imperialism. He calls for a deprovincialization of western knowledge and a re-centering of African epistemologies, drawing mostly on the decolonial theory of the Latin American modernity/coloniality school. Ndlovu-Gatsheni links epistemic struggles to broader political and social liberation. Ultimately, he envisions a pluriversal world anchored in knowledge diversity and justice. The process of epistemic reconstitution proposed by Ndlovu-Gatsheni implies the dismantling of colonial epistemic hierarchies, along with the recovery, revalidation and regeneration of indigenous and marginalized epistemologies, in order to ensure that colonized subjects can produce knowledge from their own histories, geographies and experiences.

Frontier thinking refers to thinking *from* the borders, thinking in the liminal spaces between different logics, knowledges and subjectivities. While acknowledging the epistemic violence of western modernity, frontier thinking does not dismiss its contributions. Instead, it critically repositions such contributions under the lens of subalternized perspectives, cosmologies and epistemes. This generates what Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) calls "mestiza consciousness", an awareness of boundaries that

transcends the binary divisions of western thought. Homi Bhabha's (1994) theory of interstitial spaces, where processes of translation and cultural negotiation occur, offers an important theoretical complement to frontier thinking, emphasizing the productive (and not just critical) nature of the contact zones between different epistemic and cultural systems.

Through the perspective of the embodied geopolitics of knowledge, Ramón Grosfoguel (2010) takes up the Cartesian "I think, therefore I am" and replaces it with "I am where I think", in order to emphasize how the socio-historical, embodied and geopolitical experiences of the knowing subject inevitably influence the production of knowledge. This perspective recognizes that the material, historical and cultural conditions of the embodied existence in specific geopolitical locations shape the ways of knowing and understanding the world. Grosfoguel critiques both political economy and postcolonial studies for reproducing eurocentric epistemologies. He argues that these fields often ignore the persistent structures of global coloniality that shape knowledge and power. Grosfoguel introduces the concept of "transmodernity" as an alternative to modernity/coloniality, advocating for epistemologies rooted in the experiences of subaltern subjects. He also emphasizes "border thinking" as a critical stance emerging from colonial difference and aligns with the Latin-American decolonial school, challenging the neutrality of modern epistemology. Decolonial thinking, for him, must displace eurocentric universalism sustained by epistemic hierarchies. Grosfoguel seeks to provincialize the West, while legitimizing epistemologies from the Global South, ultimately promoting a pluriversal approach to knowledge, grounded in historical and geopolitical diversity.

Last but not the least, the transmodern project of Enrique Dussel (1994) does not simply reject modernity or argues for the return to an idealized premodern past, but instead recognizes the contemporary coexistence of multiple temporalities and rationalities, that have long been denied by abstract universalism. Dussel challenges the foundational narrative of modernity as a european self-creation, that emerged through the conquest and exploitation of the Americas. He critiques eurocentric historiography for erasing the contributions and sufferings of colonized peoples. His work introduces the idea that modernity is inseparable from systemic domination and epistemic exclusion. Dussel proposes a "transmodern" alternative rooted in intercultural dialogue and ethical responsibility towards the oppressed. He reinterprets history from the perspective of the

colonized rather than the colonizer. *1492: El encubrimiento del otro: Hacia el origen del mito de la modernidad* is a foundational book to the modernity/coloniality school of thought, as it calls for a rethinking of modernity beyond eurocentric myths, ultimately seeking to uncover suppressed histories and promote a more just global order. Dussel's "pluriversity" and "transmodernity" open room for a pluriverse where different worlds can, in fact, coexist.

2.2. Indigenous and Afrodiasporic Research Methodologies

First published in 1999, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, by the Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith, has become a reference in the sanctioning of indigenous epistemologies by breaking with the traditional paradigms of Western academic research and denouncing their active participation in colonial projects. Smith proposes an ethical and epistemological turn by claiming the right of indigenous peoples to define how they want to be researched, what questions matter, and what methods respect their values and ways of life. Smith also provides proposals for building methodologies rooted in indigenous epistemologies, based on orality, collectivity, community responsibility and intellectual sovereignty. Her work has become a reference for combining critical theory, political activism and methodological practice, inspiring movements for the decolonization of academia in different parts of the world.

Indigenous Research Methodologies, by Bagele Chilisa (first published in 2011), is a fundamental reference in the field of decolonial epistemologies. Chilisa develops her analysis from the perspective of the global African south, especially from Botswana and other sub-Saharan African countries, significantly broadening the geopolitical scope of the debate on methodological decolonization beyond the contexts of Australia, New Zealand and North America. The book carries out a unique work of integration between different critical currents and traditions (such as postcolonial studies, feminist theories, indigenous perspectives and participatory paradigms), while describing a detailed methodological framework in order to operationalize indigenous epistemologies in practical projects. Chilisa's emphasis on relational and circular methodologies underpins the circular nature of knowledge in indigenous African epistemologies and introduce concepts such as "I-we-community-environment", that question Western methodological individualism.

The Brazilian *quilombola* writer Antônio Bispo dos Santos, known as Nego Bispo, is the author of *Colonization, Quilombos: Modes and significations* (2015) and *The Land*

gives the Land wants (2022), among other titles. Although his work has unique characteristics that set it apart from other strands of academic decolonial thought, his approach values "afro-pindoramian" cosmologies, knowledge and practices, a term he uses to refer to the knowledge of the original and afro-descendant peoples of the Americas. Among the analytical categories created by Nego Bispo, "biointeraction" (as opposed to development) and "countercolonization" stand out, emerging from the experiences and cosmologies of *quilombola* communities that, in his understanding, do not need to be decolonized.

Leda Maria Martins, a professor emeritus at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, is one of the most important Brazilian intellectuals dedicated to the study of Afro-Brazilian performances, especially the "congadas", "reinados" and other cultural manifestations of the African diaspora in Brazil. In her works *Afrographies of Memory* (1997) and *Performances of Spiral Time* (2003), Martins develops the concept of "oralitura" to describe the processes of inscription of knowledge through performance and corporeality in Afro-Brazilian cultures. Martins challenges the colonial dichotomies between orality and writing and transitions towards a more complex understanding of the forms of transmission and preservation of knowledge. Her analysis of the body as an archive and a vehicle for collective knowledge and memory in Afro-Brazilian performances directly confronts the coloniality of knowledge based exclusively on western textualities. Martins also proposes a conception of non-linear time called "spiral time", as opposed to the progressive linear temporality of western modernity. This conception establishes a direct dialogue with decolonial critiques of the imposition of a single eurocentric temporality.

Under the influence of decolonial studies and indigenous research methodologies, universities around the world have begun to engage in calls to decolonize their methodologies and curricula on cultural heritage, albeit with varying degrees of commitment and success. Beyond a mere diversification of reading lists, substantive transformations involve questioning disciplinary boundaries, canonical texts and pedagogical approaches. Notable initiatives include the University of Cape Town 2019 "Curriculum Change Framework" and the London School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) 2018 "Decolonising SOAS Vision", both of which attempt to systematically address epistemic injustices in institutional contexts.

These institutional efforts reflect a broader shift toward epistemic justice, aligning with the decolonial critiques discussed earlier. In Portugal, the revision of academic curricula – especially with regard to the teaching of cultural heritage related to maritime "discoveries" – has been influenced by recommendations of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, that underline the need to address Portugal's colonial past and role in the transatlantic slave trade in a more critical and inclusive way. The Commission noted that textbooks often maintain a heroic and one-sided narrative about historical events related to maritime expansion, colonization and slavery, neglecting the experiences and perspectives of colonized peoples. In response to these critiques, Portugal developed the "National Plan to Combat Racism and Discrimination 2021-2025", which includes, among other measures, contents that address diversity, the perspective of discriminated groups and the historical processes of colonialism and slavery. Such measures advance sustainability by fostering critical reflection on global injustices and their environmental, social and economic consequences. They also contribute to the creation of safe spaces in higher education, where all students – especially those from historically excluded groups – can engage in learning without fear of discrimination. Ultimately, such integration aligns academic institutions with the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, because addressing historical power asymmetries encourages the ethical engagement of higher education with transformation, inclusion, justice and resilience.

3. The Lens of Cultural Studies

In the context of decolonial and sustainability-oriented transformations in higher education, cultural studies emerge as a critical and interdisciplinary framework particularly suited to interrogate the power structures embedded in heritage discourses. Since their inception at the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies of the University of Birmingham, cultural studies have adopted interdisciplinary methods from sociology, anthropology, literary studies, media studies and other areas of the social and human sciences, in order to analyse contemporary culture in a comprehensive way. Cultural studies engage in the critical study of culture in its broadest sense – including everyday practices, media and subcultures – and recognize the importance of culture in shaping social experiences and identities. Cultural studies examine the way in which cultural practices are incorporated into power relations and ideologies in force in society, while

establishing a commitment to social justice. In the long term, cultural studies have built a counter-hegemonic scientific discourse that confronts established powers and self-enclosed epistemological territories, because they include not only objects of knowledge that have been ignored, excluded or subordinated, but also agents of knowledge – people – likewise ignored, excluded or subordinated by power structures. Accordingly, cultural studies put Judith Butler's "return of the excluded" (2000) into action, under an approach that is not merely prescriptive or descriptive, but rather critical and political, by deconstructing subalternization from within and navigating peripheral territories unapologetically. This standpoint is a pervasive condition of off-centeredness, a state of being in culture while looking at culture, by questioning key concepts such as identity and representation, encoding and decoding, hybridity and diaspora, power and ideology, among others.

In this sense, cultural studies offer a methodological and conceptual framework that complements decolonial approaches. As a discipline of intersections, reinterpretations, and repositioning within hierarchies, cultural studies function as a third space of hybridity, subversion and transgression, to quote from Homi Bhabha (1994). Hybridity is the space where binary divisions and antagonisms, typical of western conservative political and academic conceptions, cease to work. For Bhabha, the potential for change lies in the peripheries, characterized by hybridity, where Butler's "excluded" return and confront the strategies of power. Those peripheries function as "contact zones" (Pratt, 1991), "thresholds" (Davcheva, Byram & Fay, 2011) or "intersecting discursive fields" (Tsing, 1993), reflecting the multiple and dialogical nature of cultural studies. Butler (1996; 2000) contends that hegemonic universals can only be conceptualized in conjunction with their own peripheries, the aforementioned "contact zones". In this way, what has been excluded from the concept of universality leads that same concept – from the outside, from the margins – to accept and include it again, which can only happen when the concept has evolved enough to include its own excluded, thus rearticulating universality and its power.

This rearticulation is central to a decolonial approach to heritage and sustainability. By drawing on Stuart Hall's legacy of doing cultural studies in intersectional peripheries, it becomes possible to articulate a decolonial approach to heritage that is both critical and transformative, as expressed by Hall in the aforementioned "Whose Heritage? Un-settling 'The Heritage', Re-imaging the post-nation" (1999). This radical inclusivity (Mehan,

2020) assumes the plurality of knowledge systems, permanent evolution and also the challenge to hegemonies. As a critical practice, radical inclusivity in cultural studies offers a unique opportunity to produce encounters and bring different communities, objects, epistemologies and practices into debate, not as a mere imitation of pre-existing models, but rather as "an act by which the very idea of a model or privileged position is challenged and overturned" (Deleuze, 1994: 69).

Such an approach demands a rethinking of how knowledge is produced, validated and disseminated within institutional and cultural frameworks. The production of knowledge is validated by social practices of consensus situated within historical and political contexts, power structures and ideologies that, ultimately, decide what type of knowledge is acceptable, valid, who can produce it, to whom it can be disseminated, where, how and when (Kiwan, 2024: 13). In this sense, studying cultural heritage from an inclusive and decolonial perspective constitutes not only an academic exercise but also a form of political intervention. A decolonial approach to heritage and sustainability through the lens of cultural studies enables a nuanced understanding of global dynamics and local tensions – between margins and canon, centers and peripheries – even within societies that appear culturally homogeneous. As Hall reminds: "Who is the Heritage for? (…) It is intended for those who 'belong' – a society which is imagined as, in broad terms, culturally homogeneous and unified" (Hall, 1999: 16). Again, this process replicates the evolution of cultural studies themselves and their construction of a comprehensive and dynamic concept of culture, which includes objects, practices and communities traditionally silenced, excluded or subordinated. This inclusive and critical stance opens the way for the formation of co-created marginal spaces – safe environments for dialogue, resistance and transformation – where identities, languages and cosmologies can be expressed and negotiated.

3.1. Safe Spaces for a Decolonial Reading of Cultural Heritage

The concept of "safe spaces" becomes central to the implementation of decolonial approaches in contexts marked by epistemic violence and cultural erasure. In their article "Teaching foreign languages at the U-diversity: Exploring pathways towards decoloniality and critical interculturality", Ortiz Medina, Arismendi Gomez and Londono Ceballos (2022) explore methods of decoloniality and critical interculturality, underpinned by the negotiation of identities and power relations. Their study suggests that higher education can contribute to the construction of a decolonial project that is

consistent with Colombian and Latin-American realities and diversities, thus fostering the production of local knowledge and the dialogue with indigenous and afrodiasporic research methodologies from peripheral regions. Their approach is grounded in Latin American social theory and guided by the objective of detaching from the colonial matrix of power, while opening space for epistemologies historically denied by eurocentric paradigms. The authors develop new understandings characterized by a strong connection with their own subjectivities, a greater awareness of the intercultural relationships that sustain the interaction between teachers and students, and a recognition of the complex power dynamics involved in any cultural exchange.

A similar perspective is offered by Arias-Gutierrez and Minoia in their article "Decoloniality and Critical Interculturality in Higher Education: Experiences and Challenges in Ecuadorian Amazonia" (2023), published in the *Forum for Development Studies*. The authors describe some successful programmes that actively decolonize education, a goal that has been part of the agenda of indigenous organizations for decades. Both Medina, Gomez and Ceballos's and Arias-Gutierrez and Minoia's works conceptualize a critical approach to education that represents and revitalizes knowledges, cultures and languages that have been for too long subjected to processes of invisibility and annihilation. In line with the broader context analysed in this article, the study by Arias-Gutierrez and Minoia also focuses on decolonial higher education programmes, more exactly at the Amazonian State University in Ecuador. Conclusions reached by the authors reveal that eurocentric approaches that deny the validity of indigenous and afrodiasporic methodologies coexist with the construction of decolonial spaces in higher education. Although the Amazonian State University substantially ignores contributions from non-western cultures, on the grounds that they are empirical and unvalidated by science, there are interstitial spaces at the academic institution where students negotiate the right to express their cultural identities, languages and cosmologies. In these co-created safe spaces, mostly during non-academic times, students use storytelling as a decolonial strategy to communicate their identities, heritage and narratives, and to (re)connect with their ancestral cultural practices.

Again, decolonial methodologies underpinned by non-western knowledge systems bring forth Stuart Hall's "Whose Heritage? Un-settling 'The Heritage', Re- imagining the Post-nation" (1999) and the need to confront uncomfortable truths and integrate marginalized perspectives into public memory. By interrogating the selective nature of

heritage narratives in post-imperial Britain, Hall argues that heritage is not an innocent recounting of the past but a constructed discourse shaped by power and ideology, that privileges white, eurocentric histories and excludes the voices and experiences of colonized and diasporic peoples. Hall stresses that national heritage masks the violent legacies of empire and slavery under nostalgic representations of unity and tradition, reinforcing monocultural narratives of national identity. Thus, Hall calls for a re-imagining of the nation as a "post-nation", embracing hybridity, multiplicity and historical complexity, where cultural institutions serve as sites of critical engagement rather than mere preservation. He suggests that unsettling dominant narratives transforms heritage into a dynamic space for negotiation and renovation that, ultimately, reflects the lived realities of all citizens, especially those historically silenced. This directly supports the creation of safe spaces in academia for the decolonization of cultural heritage through the lens of cultural studies, in order to achieve a more equitable production of knowledge:

> The institutions responsible for making the 'selective tradition' work develop a deep investment in their own 'truth'. The heritage inevitably reflects the governing assumptions of its time and context. It is always inflected by the power and authority of those who have colonised the past, whose versions of history matter. These assumptions and co-ordinates of power are inhabited as natural – given, timeless, true and inevitable. But it takes only the passage of time, the shift of circumstances, or the reversals of history, to reveal those assumptions as time- and context bound, historically specific, and thus open to contestation, re- negotiation, and revision. (Hall, 1999: 16)

How such assumptions of selective tradition were established as an unquestionable truth, how their representation of reality is confused with reality itself, what is the intention and consequences of such confusion, are some of the questions raised by cultural studies, when fulfilling their mission of producing rigorous knowledge about the life of communities and contextualizing the images and discourses produced about them. This perspective often produces uncomfortable descriptions that deconstruct social myths, forcing a rereading of established identities.

In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Clifford Geertz states that the anthropological text is a narrative construction (in)formed by previous encounters with other similar constructions: "In short, anthropological writings are themselves interpretations […] the line between mode of representation and substantive content is as undrawable in cultural analysis as it is in painting" (1973: 15). This perspective also influences the role that

narrative constructions play over individuals or groups distant in space and/or time from the cultural structures that generated those narratives. However, there is a difference between culture – which exists in reality – and science built on that culture, which exists only in the form of books, lectures, museum objects or documentaries. For Geertz, the authority of ethnographers rests on two factors linked to the writing of the text: experience, which makes them the supreme authority, and their disappearance from the text, which provides them the required scientific authority. In both cases, we are talking about the power of speaking, naming, representing and categorizing, which is seldom granted to the "subalterns" who have no platform to express their concerns and no voice to affect policy debates or demand a fairer share of society's goods (Spivak, 1988).

Clifford Geertz's interpretive anthropology is closely related to James Clifford's textual meta-anthropology, whose central theme has been the textual construction of authority, established by the verbalization of the experience of the terrain, a narrative space where the identity of the individual and the group is played, the current order is built, and culture and power coexist closely. For James Clifford, ethnographic description is inscribed in the network of powers of the ethnographer's society, so he proposes the principle of egalitarian dialogue between the ethnographer and the individuals under study, instead of the "objective" description of the distant and politically equivocal "other" (Clifford, 1988; Clifford & Marcus, 1986).

The continuity between Geertz's and Clifford's thought is visible in the essays collected by James Clifford and George Marcus in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. This seminal work is the result of the "advanced seminars" on "the making of ethnographic texts", held at the School of American Research in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in April 1984. "Eight of the ten participants had backgrounds in anthropology, one in history, one in literary studies", inform Clifford and Marcus in the preface, that James Clifford continues in "Introduction: Partial Truths":

> Margaret Mead, Edward Sapir, and Ruth Benedict saw themselves as both anthropologists and literary artists. [...] And though ethnographers have often been called novelists manqué (especially those who write a little too well), the notion that literary procedures pervade any work of cultural representation is a recent idea in the discipline. To a growing number, however, the 'literariness' of anthropology – and especially of ethnography – appears as much more than a matter of good writing or distinctive style. Literary processes – metaphor, figuration, narrative – affect the ways cultural phenomena are registered, from the first jotted 'observations', to the completed book, to the ways these configurations

> ‘make sense’ in determined acts of reading. (Clifford & Marcus, 1986: 3-4)

The common principles of the essays compiled in Writing Culture address culture as being composed of codes and forms of representation in constant reformulation. In the same way, the poetic and the political are allied in the production of ethnographic writings which, like scientific writings in general, derive from ideologically marked historical processes. The focus on textual and discursive production makes it possible to distinguish what is artificially constructed in ethnographic description, hence undermining authorial voices and drawing attention to the historical contingencies that shape the invention – and not the simple representation – of culture. As Bakhtin (1981) demonstrated when writing about the novel, dialogical processes proliferate in any space where different voices cry out for expression. The vocal plurality of the informants cited or paraphrased is submitted, in traditional anthropological narratives, to the singular voice of the observing authority. Once polyphony is recognized as a mode of textual production, the author’s monologue is questioned and disclosed as being characteristic of a science that assumes itself as representative of the cultures studied. Therefore, a completely neutral or definitive approximation should be challenged, since culture is not a static and unified set of symbols and meanings that can be unequivocally interpreted. Culture is contestable, variable and inconstant, and this mutability includes the representations and explanations of both participants and observers.

These textual and epistemological questions demonstrate how the writing and reading of ethnographic texts are undeniably influenced by forces that are far beyond the control of an author or community. These rhetorical, political and historical contingencies must be openly confronted during the process of writing and reading. The “truth” in a text is, in fact, a construction, comparable, according to Vincent Crapanzano in “Hermes’ Dilemma: The Masking of Subversion in Ethnographic Description” (Clifford & Marcus, 1986: 51-76), to Hermes’ mythological promise not to lie but also not to tell the whole truth. Like the messenger Hermes, ethnographers represent cultures in all their opacity, exoticism and complexity, in order to better achieve their mission of decoding and interpreting cultures. Crapanzano provides examples of descriptions of the American West in the first half of the 19th century, full of repetitions, generalizations, simplifications, moralizing comments, hyperboles, metaphors and other stylistic devices, employed to prove the veracity and immediacy of the narrative. Crapanzano proceeds, then, to analyse Clifford Geertz’s own studies on cockfighting in 1958 Bali, published in

The Interpretation of Cultures. Here, too, the scientist-protagonist is presented in a stereotyped way as a mediator of worlds. However, such a presentation confers individuality to the author, while the communities under study are always described in collective, essentialist terms, devoid of any individual agency or critical capacity.

In the chapter "On Ethnographic Allegory" (Clifford & Marcus, 1986: 98-121), James Clifford explores the concept of redemptive allegory as related to discursive and ideological patterns with educational purposes. The image of heritage as a source of indisputable wisdom, as an aesthetic solution to a spiritual life in decay, is a recurrent redemptive allegory in ethnographic texts, alongside the trope of the impending extinction of purely traditional cultures. But the fact that these havens of tradition disappear preferentially at the moment of their textual representation requires a critical analysis. The object at risk of extinction becomes a rhetorical construction with practical implications: when an "emergency" ethnography is put into practice, the objects of study are allegedly disappearing in space and time, but not in the text. This rhetorical mechanism leads Clifford to question the scientific and moral authority of the ethnographer as a "saviour", who assumes that the community under analysis is fragile (inferior), needs to be represented by a (western/european) stranger, and only matters for its past, never for its present or future. However, all human groups "write", as long as they cultivate oral literature or symbolic rituals, where they inscribe their world and respective meanings. Hence, the redemptive narrative of ethnographic writing is revealed to be another allegory of western power, as stated by Jacques Derrida (1967). For Derrida, language, regardless of its form, invariably structures a manifestation of hierarchy, by ordering, classifying, grouping and separating according to a system of differences, thus applying subjective values to objective entities. In this sense, ethnographic writing functions not only as representation but also as imposition, reinforcing existing structures of power. As a consequence, a decolonial approach to heritage highlights, revaluates and challenges, both politically and epistemologically, what is constructed and imperative in the representative authority. Such a critical methodology legitimizes the search for new options for research, writing and reading, i.e., for alternative and decolonial epistemologies, in the face of the decreasing coherence of metanarratives, grand structural theories and eurocentric worldviews.

3.2. Decolonizing Heritage towards Sustainability

Building on the critique of ethnographic authority and the need for alternative epistemologies, this section addresses how decolonial approaches to heritage contribute to sustainability. Human cultures are inseparable from the economic and social conditions that make them possible, they are part of the very particular social universes that are the fields of cultural production, in which the respective agents are involved (Bourdieu, 1984, 1994). Though cultural heritage reflects an inherited process of learning to live within the characteristics and contingencies of those fields of cultural production, an increased sense of vulnerability has arisen, due to climate change, social inequality and widespread unsustainable practices. In this context, local knowledge eventually intersects with large-scale transformation processes that have developed over time. Decolonial epistemologies acquire a special relevance within the global climate crisis, as they voice the concerns of communities, identify those they hold responsible and point out possible solutions. This knowledge has been passed down from generation to generation through oral traditions, observation and practical experience, forming the basis for practices that are simultaneously sustainable, culturally relevant and ecologically sound.

Traditional ecological knowledge is a significant resource for global movements that seek to balance ecological preservation with cultural integrity (Menzies, 2006; Robinson, Gellie, MacCarthy et al., 2021; Ndidzulafhi, 2023). Traditional ecological knowledge represents a cumulative body of knowledge, practice and belief – evolving by adaptive processes and handed down by cultural transmission – about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment (Berkes, 2012). Within this framework, and in the context of cultural heritage and ecosystem management, Gadgil, Berkes & Folke (1993) emphasize the knowledge held by indigenous and local communities, highlighting its specificity and complementarity in relation to scientific ecological knowledge. This perspective anticipates UNESCO's "Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage" (2003) and its recognition of traditional ecological knowledge as a valid and valuable form of knowledge.

This intersection of cultural knowledge and resistance is further developed by Nixon (2011), who refers to the "environmentalism of the poor" because, although vulnerable communities are being treated as disposable by neoliberalism, they resist through site-specific actions, while practices of remembering and of building safe spaces become increasingly valuable (Knox, 2005). Territories shaped by affective maps that

communities have devised over generations are alive with names, routes and stories (Nixon, 2011: 17). Internal and external narratives – the stories told and the social context that sustains the framework of their interpretation – express site-specific dynamics and sustain a complex network of meanings. In this sense, territoriality is not just physical but symbolic, forming affective and epistemic landscapes. These site-specific forms of preserving memories and building affective maps create multi-layered territories that combine knowledge and politics, as they tell the stories that actually matter for the community while resisting the successive crises, challenges and transformations of history.

Such layered and embodied forms of knowledge demand alternative frameworks of understanding and engagement. A decolonial participative alternative, with its multiple layers of memory, provides an organic understanding of territories, communities and experiences. This can be articulated with the concept of slow memory, and its analysis of how the past is made meaningful in everyday experiences and practices of the present (Wüstenberg, 2022). The transitions of slow memory may be difficult to understand, because they do not have to be related to specific calendar dates, as officially celebrated historical events. Rather, they are anchored in the longue durée of lived experiences and in the subtle transformations of culture and ecology. Grounded in the surrounding environment, slow transformations – like the aforementioned effect of colonial power dynamics over cultural heritage – are yet far more impactful and meaningful for the community. Therefore, a decolonial approach to heritage in the pursuit of sustainability is always political, if only because it is ontologically transgressive and forces powers to look, see and perceive what should otherwise remain invisible: "the majority, mainstream versions of the Heritage should revise their own self- conceptions and rewrite the margins into the centre, the outside into the inside" (Hall, 1999: 21). Again, we are referring to the "return of the excluded" (Butler, 2000) and to alternative, hybrid spaces (Bhabha, 1994).

The potential of participatory methods – such as oral history, co-produced mapping, storytelling or traditional ecological knowledge – to empower communities and foster a more inclusive management, preservation and interpretation model for cultural heritage intersects with the importance of building interdisciplinary bridges between critical heritage studies, decolonial epistemologies and cultural studies. This triangulation offers a more holistic and justice-oriented approach to heritage, moving beyond static representations. Likewise, although international bodies such as UNESCO are

increasingly emphasizing the interconnection of cultural and natural heritage, this principle still needs to produce concrete, interdisciplinary approaches that can account for the complex hybridity of lived landscapes. In this context, the interdisciplinary dialogue between critical heritage studies, decolonial epistemologies and cultural studies emerges as a form of thinking in the liminal spaces between logics, knowledges and subjectivities, i.e., as a form of hybrid or frontier thinking (Anzaldúa, 1987; Bhabha, 1994).

Nevertheless, this integrative potential is undermined when cultural heritage is reduced to economic utility. While cultural heritage relates inevitably to economic impacts, its reduction to market-based evaluations corrodes the epistemological, symbolic and political depth of an interdisciplinary critical approach. What is at stake is not simply the act of recognition, but the deeper question of who defines what is valuable, and according to which criteria. In this sense, critical heritage studies, decolonial epistemologies and cultural studies bring valuation into the political arena, they confront the uneven power structures that historically marginalize indigenous and local knowledge systems, posing challenges that go beyond technical assessment and into the realm of ethical and political responsibility. This raises urgent questions: how can local or indigenous knowledge systems be recognized without being exploited, essentialized or denied agency? What mechanisms can ensure that communities maintain control over their cultural assets, narratives and epistemologies? These are not merely technical questions but touch the foundations of democratic governance, equity and epistemic justice. The challenge is methodological and epistemological as much as ethical and political, within the framework of the ongoing climate crises and the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

From this perspective, concrete proposals must be developed to counter the economic reductionism in heritage practices. Although cultural heritage undeniably possesses an economic impact in several fields and especially in tourism, the risks of reducing it to a mere economic asset require specific solutions. One of such risks is the reduction of heritage to purely picturesque representations, which can be addressed by implementing inclusive, dialogue-based representations that acknowledge integration, diversification, change and complementarity. Another key challenge is the predominance of visitors' cultural influence, which is mitigated by responsible tourism and economic diplomacy grounded in information reviewed by the actual agents of cultural production. A further concern is the persistence of an idealized image of the past, which is countered

by decolonial narratives supported by critical interpretations, memory collections and participatory methods. Analogously, cultural symbolism that has become detached from reality may be reconciled with authenticity through the creation of comprehensive, inclusive and cocreated narratives. Likewise, the exclusion of communities is remedied by engaging local populations in heritage management, preservation and interpretation, and by prioritizing local human and material resources. The unequal distribution of heritage-generated wealth can be addressed by ensuring the accountability of mediating agents and promoting social entrepreneurship. Cultural commodification, another critical issue, is countered by initiatives that prioritize community-led management and control over cultural narratives, alongside rigorous environmental planning, as these efforts preserve authenticity while resisting exploitative commercialization. Similarly, the issue of invented traditions is resolved by the reinvention of traditions that offer authentic yet innovative experiences. The critical topic of the repatriation of heritage assets brings to the fore issues of ethical responsibilities in curatorial practice, enhances institutional accountability while fostering the establishment of collaborative relationships with source communities. The complexities of repatriation can be faced through digital repatriation, that employs technology to make cultural artifacts accessible to source communities. Finally, the polarized stance of prohibiting all changes or accepting all modifications can be reconciled by adopting a model of productive yet sustainable development. All these measures reflect a deeper objective: to transform cultural heritage from a static, commodified object into a living, dynamic process rooted in justice, participation and sustainability. These critical perspectives are an opportunity for decolonizing cultural heritage – also from an economically driven perspective – and for transforming monological affirmative actions into dialogical sustainable actions.

Conclusion

Critical, decolonial approaches to cultural heritage challenge traditional eurocentric views, proposing more inclusive and plural understandings of cultural significance and preservation. This may be performed through the questioning of authorities, the promotion of plurality and the empowerment of local knowledge. Authorities are questioned when their assumed expertise in defining, representing, preserving and managing global cultural heritage is called into question. Plurality rises when the multiplicity of approaches to understanding and preserving cultural heritage is recognised

and valued. Empowering local knowledge prioritises the expertise and perspectives of local communities in heritage-related decisions. In this sense, decolonial strategies do not merely oppose existing structures but actively seek to reconfigure the frameworks of recognition, legitimacy and participation. This shift towards decolonial approaches to cultural heritage empowers local communities and validates diverse knowledge systems, when applying a critical and sustainable perspective through the lens of cultural studies.

Following this logic, decolonizing memory and representations becomes a key dimension of transforming heritage practices. Decolonizing memory and representations involve reimagining how cultural heritage is showcased and interpreted. This process goes beyond physical preservation, focusing on creating more inclusive and accurate representations of history and culture in public spaces and institutions. The decolonization of memory requires rewriting dominant narratives through the challenge and revision of colonial historical accounts, in order to include marginalized perspectives. It also requires a more inclusive curation, management and interaction with economic activities – namely tourism – in order to develop practices that actually benefit and represent diverse voices and experiences. Thus, memory becomes both a terrain of dispute and a site of potential transformation.

Integrating local knowledge in heritage management and preservation not only ensures more authentic and sustainable practices but also empowers communities to take ownership of their cultural legacy. The process includes actively involving local communities in decision making processes through community consultation; incorporating traditional practices as well as local techniques and materials in conservation efforts; validating and documenting oral histories and traditions as effective sources, and capacitate local communities to manage heritage-related initiatives. Such measures reinforce the agency of communities and establish heritage as a living, evolving resource rather than a fixed and externalized object. This approach leads to more holistic, sustainable and culturally sensitive conservation and management efforts.

At the intersection of heritage and sustainability, a decolonial lens redefines the very meaning of sustainable development. Reimagining sustainability through a decolonial perspective involves recognizing and integrating local knowledge and practices. This requires economic empowerment, in order to ensure that communities will benefit from heritage related economic activities; ecological wisdom that integrates local environmental practices in sustainability efforts; knowledge exchange to guarantee the

dialogue between scientific and traditional knowledge systems, and cultural sovereignty that recognises the right of local communities to define and manage their own heritage. This integrated approach resists extractive models and emphasizes reciprocity, autonomy and resilience. This perspective ensures that efforts towards sustainability, under a critical approach to heritage, are culturally appropriate, environmentally sound and economically beneficial for local communities.

Accordingly, decolonial and sustainable approaches reject the universal application of western frameworks that often separate culture from nature and prioritise economic concerns over cultural continuity. Reimagining conventional sustainability through a decolonial perspective entails the transition from expert-driven assessment and planning to community-led definitions of sustainability; from universal standards and metrics to contextual approaches that respect local knowledge; from economic viability as primary concern to cultural continuity and community well-being; from the binary separation of nature and culture to the recognition of their interconnectedness, and from the focus on technological solutions to the integration on traditional ecological knowledge. By embracing pluriverse understandings of sustainability, decolonial perspectives offer more comprehensive and contextually appropriate ways to maintain both cultural and ecological systems for future generations.

This reorientation is especially urgent in the field of heritage tourism, where tensions between sustainability and commodification are most visible. A critical, decolonial approach to heritage tourism is necessary to ensure lasting sustainability and respect for local cultures. Problems like overtourism, cultural commodification, economic disparities and environmental strain demand – respectively – an active assessment of their negative impacts over heritage sites and local communities; a critical examination of how tourism can lead to the commercialization and loss of authenticity in cultural practices; a deep analysis of the uneven distribution of benefits within local communities, as well as a careful assessment of their ecological impact over the territory. Only through such multifaceted assessment can tourism be reframed as a tool for empowerment rather than exploitation.

As we move forward, embracing critical, decolonial approaches to cultural heritage through the lens of cultural studies offers a path to more equitable, inclusive and sustainable practices. When decolonizing cultural heritage for a sustainable future, heritage itself is redefined in order to embrace broader, all-encompassing definitions and

representations, that reflect diverse worldviews. Communities are empowered through a shift in decision-making in heritage management and conservation. Dialogues between scientific and traditional knowledge create integrated knowledge systems, while ethical tourism models prioritize cultural authenticity and the benefit of communities. Ultimately, this approach affirms heritage not as a static remnant of the past, but as a dynamic field of negotiation, identity and transformation. By challenging dominant narratives, empowering local communities and integrating diverse knowledge systems, a new future becomes possible, where the preservation of heritage contributes to global sustainability while respecting and celebrating cultural diversity.

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