

## Between paranoia and possibility: Diverse economies and the decolonial imperative

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**Abstract:** Here we reflect on diverse economies scholarship following Gibson-Graham's call to adopt performative practices for other worlds. Urging scholars to move from paranoia to possibility through weak theory methodology, their call provided momentum for work on economic difference that sustained critiques of capitalocentrism launched in 1996. In this clarion call to read for difference and possibility, a diverse economies framing facilitated a wholesale rejection of strong theory and paranoia. As a subdiscipline in the making, diverse economies scholars are challenged and critiqued as we seek to develop the framework. This article has been accepted for publication and undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process, which may lead to differences between this version and the [Version of Record](https://doi.org/10.1111/TRAN.12534). Please cite this article as [doi: 10.1111/TRAN.12534](https://doi.org/10.1111/TRAN.12534)

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and apply it to economic activities that exist within, alongside, and outside capitalism. Creating the language of diverse economies is continuous; here we consider a geopolitics of knowledge production in reading economic practice for difference, challenging the disuse of strong theory. We argue for deeper engagement with the power imbalances present in building livable worlds, putting diverse economies and decolonial theory in conversation to address power and strike a balance between paranoia and possibility.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

In 2008, J.K. Gibson-Graham contemplated the project of diverse economies, considering the “implications for academic subjectivity, practice, power and politics” in the pursuit of “new economic worlds” (pp. 613-614). In this paper, Gibson-Graham were hesitant to declare a new subdiscipline, but with the arrival of *The Handbook of Diverse Economies* (2020) it is clear that this is now well-established area of geography. Gibson-Graham and Dombroski, in the introduction note diverse economies as a “new field of study” that distinguishes itself by “theorizing the economy as a site of ethical action” (2020p. 2). Here, we consider how to further enrich the performative practice of research and participation in ‘new economic worlds.’ Through an examination of how the framework and its attendant weak theory deal with power, we highlight absences, geohistorical considerations, and the geopolitics of knowledge production, and suggest that closer attention to how we produce knowledge about community economies is needed and that striking a balance between paranoia and possibility is not only possible, but necessary.

In 2008, Gibson-Graham considered how the academy could relate to the changing character of economic activities proliferating around the globe and how these academic and world-making performances were shaped (614). Here the writing duo confronted a crossroads, producing scholarship that sustained the dominance of capitalist economic performances while sidelining or eliding already existing and multiple economic performances or, decentering capitalist economies and performing the work of diverse economies through research, teaching, and activism (618). Gibson-Graham recognized the power of research performance, practice, and knowledge production and urged scholars to mobilize it. A critical contribution of Gibson-Graham’s 2008 intervention was, drawing on critical and feminist

work, to facilitate a distancing from the paranoid stance—strong theory— (see: Sedgwick 2003), which is a stance that reifies and essentializes, towards a space of hope and possibility—weak theory—which multiplies and sees difference within political economic approaches to research and writing.

In this paper, we argue that weak theory approaches undertaken using the diverse economies framework while attentive to power, in some cases dismiss underlying violence and power imbalances that limit the building of, or the inclusive or exclusive character of livable worlds and the creation of knowledge about them. For example, as Bledsoe et al. (2019) note, in the case of Black and Indigenous communities, there exist systems of control and violence that restrict choice in participation in economic activities. Divorcing ourselves from capitalism does not make white supremacy and patriarchy simply disappear. Moreover, the diverse economies framework tends to have an over-reliance on a Eurocentric and/or settler approach to its geohistorical considerations of capitalism in many cases leading to the erasure of other ontologies and epistemologies. Our suggestion for addressing these absences is twofold; first, we suggest that scholars consider the geopolitics of knowledge production by reading difference through decolonial theory; a geopolitics of knowledge production is a power relation which privileges particular ways of knowing and seeing the world, often those that are white, heteropatriarchal, and western. Second, we suggest using a diverse economies framing that productively links weak and strong theory in analyses to provide a more nuanced approach to seeing and addressing power.

In attempting to push diverse economies work in productive directions and contribute to the project of building a language for the framework, we first describe the framework while also interrogating its treatment of capitalism in relation to capitalocentrism. From this foundation, we turn to a discussion of diverse economies reliance on weak theory and how it sees power. Following this, we turn to critiques of the framework and how they are addressed to date. From there, we launch an additional critique discussing how balancing weak and strong theory in their multiplicity could work to be attendant to the violence that is named in diverse economies scholarship. This critique builds on Bledsoe et al.'s (2019) claim regarding the lack of engagement with race in diverse economies to discuss the unintended colorblindness built into the framework—although race is named, with some exceptions it has yet to be fully engaged. We draw heavily on the recently published *Handbook of Diverse Economies* (2020) to show how the framework is both established and still in a work in progress. A productive

engagement with decolonial theory is one fruitful avenue that we suggest be taken up by diverse economies scholars to begin to do the hard work of recognizing geohistorical contours of power that continue to shape economic activities. The intended contribution of this paper is to show how a productive linking of the diverse economies framework methodology of weak theory with others, such as a decolonial approach—which does not reject strong theory—can make visible the messy realities, violences, and exclusions in building livable worlds and lead to greater engagement in world-making activities where they can be addressed.

## 2 A DIVERSE ECONOMIES FRAMEWORK

Since the publication of *A Postcapitalist Politics* (2006b) reading for difference within a diverse economies framework proliferated, with hundreds of papers published using the keyword “diverse economies.”<sup>1</sup> Much of this early work centered heavily on a feminist-driven critique of economic discourses, gendered labor, and class processes (Gibson-Graham 2006a [1996]; Gibson-Graham et al. 2000). Present work extends an anti-essentialist framework and urges scholars to read enterprise/business, property, work, finance, and transactions/markets for difference and as part of “taking back the economy” (see: Gibson-Graham et al. 2013). Within these studies, we are encouraged to further interrogate the ethical negotiations surrounding labor arrangements and the distribution of surplus value, the development of networks of solidarity and care, and more recently, in the context of the Anthropocene, look to the material and our non-human/earth others. In this context, a range of topics are examined, from fisheries and urban commons to healthcare and community gardening.

Diverse economies scholarship emerged out of a critique against dominant theorizations in political economy that equated “The Economy” with capitalism—what they described as capitalocentric (Gibson-Graham 2006a [1996]). Gibson-Graham (1993) argue that capitalism was theorized as a patriarchal, unified, solitary, and totalizing structure. Gibson-Graham (2006a [1996]) extended their critique of political economy through a rereading of Marxism that drew on poststructuralist approaches to discourse and knowledge, feminist and queer theories, theories of class process derived from Resnick and Wolff (1989), and the anti-essentialist Marxism of Althusser (1972). Gibson-Graham (2006a) began their argument from the central point that the economy, envisioned as a solely capitalist space, is less a real representation of economic life, and more a discursive artifact which produces (and

reproduces) a view of “economy” that makes invisible economic difference that coexists, resists, and lives alongside capitalism.

Gibson-Graham (2006a; 2006b) offer a rereading of “The Economy” as plural—a diverse field of performative economic practices, relations, and formulations in which multiple forms of labor, exchange, and property coexist. A diverse economies framing decenters capitalism, making room for recognizing, analyzing, critiquing, and enacting the wide field of economic possibilities that are already in place across the planet. The framework starts from the premise that economic practices and processes and those human and non-human/earth others in participation are all always in the process of becoming. Gibson-Graham point to community economies, or those sites where the act of ‘being in common’ are underway and where and how the co-creation of economic practices take place (Gibson-Graham and Dombroski 2020). In conducting this work, Gibson-Graham encouraged scholars to take approaches that did not seek to “explain why,” but instead “examine how” to consider what is possible (2008 p. 622). In this project, a new language of economic diversity is under development so that we may do the work of deconstructing capitalocentric narratives and building livable worlds (Gibson-Graham 2006b). As diverse economies scholars, we recognize that this is a continuous process and in the sections that follow, we point out areas where the geopolitics of knowledge production come into play in the diverse economies framework. As part of thinking through a decolonial approach to diverse economies, we consider not just the epistemic-ontological, but what it means to systematically address colonial-imperial relations in this work, including entrenched racial hierarchies, dispossession, and violent legacies enmeshed in the political, for example. We start in the following section by locating a reliance on Eurocentric narratives of economic being that undergird the framework and the anti-capitalocentric stance.

## **2.1 Eurocentrism**

As we seek continuously to craft the language, epistemologies, and practices of a diverse economies framework, there is a place for introspection for how we discuss capitalism and economic histories. Although the original canonical text for the framework highlighted already existing counter-discourses of economy, such as feminist accounts of gendered labor and development work on subsistence and informal commodities (Gibson-Graham 2006b), paradoxically, much work in diverse economies starts with a history of economic activity that is centered on Europe. This standard may in part have to do with its original grounding in

Marxist theory and a focus on class as a process, however, it misses the violence of the disappearing of the very worlds that were destroyed to build capitalism and fuel the Industrial Revolution. As decolonial scholars note, capitalist modernity began with the violent invisibilization and destruction of ontologies, epistemologies, and materialities at work in the Americas, making the project of colonialism an ongoing event (see de Sousa Santos 2015; Lugones 2012; Mignolo 2011; Quijano 1997; Walsh 2018). In describing the onset of capitalist hegemony, it is often situated in its expansive growth since the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

There is a geopolitics of knowledge production at work here whereby our understanding of economy/ies starts from one place. Often the experiences of life under capitalism that are used to shape the way we understand capitalist hegemony in our efforts to decenter it are expressed somewhat homogenously as a Western or European experience. Put differently, the ways that we point to capitalism maps Eurocentric understandings onto non-European peoples and places. It further situates anti-capitalocentrism as a narrow response to economic activities undertaken in post-feudal Europe. For example, in *The Handbook* (2020), in the framing chapter on property St. Martin sets up private property and appropriation, and focuses on commoning, detailing the histories of enclosure and drawing on Bentham, noting that enclosure led to new ways of thinking about property as private that was part of a “centuries long process which unfolded in Europe” (2020 p. 275). Not to dismiss St. Martin’s description, the history of enclosure in the 1800s is certainly important to understanding contemporary practices of commoning and other diverse forms of accessing and excluding people and earth others from property, however, it neglects the theft and occupation of land that unfolded over the previous centuries of colonialism, which fundamentally changed peoples relationships to the land. There is a twofold problematic at work here: first, the European experience of capitalism is not universal; and second, diverse forms of occupying space did not live and die in Europe alone. Therefore, at its foundation, the diverse economies framework is dismissive of hegemonic power (such as colonial-imperial power) to some degree (there are exceptions in some empirical chapters of the handbook). A decolonial approach, which will be discussed subsequently, assists with reducing reliance on economic being and practice in Europe as a foundation. Moreover, in seeking to see, name, and address the violence of power differentials in all economies, in the section that follows, we discuss how weak theory, in contrast to strong theory, often restricts our ability to attend to power in ways that allow us to go beyond seeing and naming it alone.

### 3 WEAK THEORY AND POWER

In 2008, Gibson-Graham called on scholars to interrogate, seriously, their own positionality as academic subjects.<sup>2</sup> Recognizing the role that the creation and performance of knowledge plays in the (re)production of economic worlds, Gibson-Graham argue that the stance we take on as academics is “tinged with skepticism and negativity” (2008 p. 618), leaving us ill-prepared for contingency and surprise in our research. Gibson-Graham (2008) note that scholars are trained to be “discerning, detached and critical so that we can penetrate the veil of common understanding” and uncover the structures, asymmetries, and processes undergirding the “phenomenal world” (618). Weak theory became part of the political project of de-centering capitalism and avoiding capitalocentric approaches, and although examinations of power are implicit in the approach Gibson-Graham suggest (2008), applications of weak theory may lose some of the utility of naming power in the process.

Sedgwick (2003) described weak theory in combination and contrast with strong theory as a component of reading Tomkins (1962-1992) to better understand affect theory. Gibson-Graham (2008) built from these ideas, describing a “detached” and “critical” approach as “strong theory” and a paranoid stance in which diversity is pushed into sameness through the drive to reduce surprise and increase generalizability in our research.<sup>3</sup> Sedgwick notes that it is not the efficacy of strong theory approaches which makes them ‘strong’, but is instead the “size and typology of the domain that it organizes” (2003 p. 13). Whereas a weak theory approach, described as “little more than description” (Gibson-Graham 2006b p. 8), can only account for ‘near’ phenomena, strong theory approaches have a wider reach, ordering near and distant phenomena into a single system, with a single root cause (Sedgwick 2003). Sedgwick reminds us that theory is, “among other things, a mode of *selective* scanning and amplification” (2003 p. 13; emphasis in original), warning that as a theory grows wider in its reach and more anticipatory in its stance, it risks doing little more than revealing only assumed results. Gibson-Graham (2008) argue that this approach leads many scholars to the conclusion that “everything comes to mean the same thing, usually something large and threatening” (Gibson-Graham 2008 p. 618). In the case of research on economic practice(s) this translates to dismissing so-called ‘economic experimentation’ as either insufficient to combatting capitalism, or simply as capitalism in a clever guise.

Roelvink picks up this thread, noting that strong theory is characterized by an “all-encompassing theory and affect-driven feedback loop” (2016 p. 32), which is synonymous



with much critical theory. Roelvink (2016) argues that strong theory involves looking for sameness and patterns in our observations. This renders difference either invisible, or as constituted within the observed whole of a pattern that is “linked through a singular understanding of the world” (Roelvink 2016 p. 33). As such, diverse economies scholars argue that strong theory approaches do not capture, explain, or support economic experimentation and difference without also implying their relation to capital, thus reifying the hegemony of capitalism.

*Instead* of strong theory, Gibson-Graham (2006b) call on researchers to adopt a stance of possibility to develop a ‘weak theory’ approach that is open to contingency, surprise, and the open-ended processes of becoming. Developing a weak theory approach means trading off the “comprehensiveness, exclusivity, and grand claims” (Wright 2015 p. 392) of strong theory for an approach that embraces partial knowledge, open-endedness, and multiplicity. Weak theory is described as a mode of analyzing economic practices that is deconstructive instead comprehensive, and is concerned more with understanding what possibilities exist rather than getting their representation perfectly right (Wright 2015). This juxtaposition appears to set these theories in opposition as an unproductive binary, something Sedgwick argued against, noting:

In a world where no one need be delusional to find evidence of systemic oppression, to theorize out of anything but a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naïve, pious, or complaisant. I myself have no wish to return to the used “paranoid” as a pathologizing diagnosis, *but* it seems to me a great loss when paranoid inquiry comes to seem entirely coextensive with critical theoretical inquiry rather than being viewed as one kind of cognitive/affective theoretical practice among other, alternative kinds (2003 p. 125, emphasis in original).

Sedgwick thus urges approaches that are multiple. What we suggest here then is to not throw strong theorizations out entirely, but to balance with weak theorizing to avoid the trend towards totalizing narrative, truth seeking, and paranoia. Rather than an either/or approach we consider how we can be attentive to larger structural dynamics, while also examining how these dynamics are both mobilized and resisted at the scale of the intimate and the particular (for example, feminist theorizations of the global intimate cf. Mountz and Hyndman 2006; Nagar et al. 2009).<sup>4</sup>

The value of weak theory readings of economies, as outlined by Gibson-Graham (2008; 2014), lies in the capacity for recognizing multiplicity, difference, and remaining open to surprise and possibilities, opening the door for seeing and enacting community economies. The use of weak theory alongside reframing economies and reading for difference was intended to “de-exoticize power” (2008: 619). While this avenue pushes us away from reductive approaches, it arguably contributes to a relative under-theorization of the multiple and messy relations of power and sites of choice and/or exclusion that exist within economic difference. This approach leaves us able to see power, but without effectively attending to it (Bledsoe et al. 2019; Fickey 2011; Lawson 2019; Miller 2015; Naylor 2018; 2019; 2020). If we are to read for difference, we must approach it with the understanding that it is necessarily messy.

Gibson-Graham and Dombroski (2020) explain, that a capitalocentric view of the economy is a form of strong theory. This explanation may suggest that strong theory is singular, which may have problematically signaled it as synonymous with capitalocentrism; yet strong theorizations are multiple (see: Sedgwick 2003). Still, strong theory is named in diverse economies work, as a way of thinking that “knows where power lies, that suspects how phenomena line up to consolidate power and that cannot be surprised” (Gibson-Graham and Dombroski 2020 p. 8). While in reality there is a spectrum of power ranging from positive to negative. Moreover, knowing where power lies is important and the overarching focus on capitalocentrism as strong theory sets up a ‘strong theory bad,’ ‘weak theory good’ binary that may distance us from attending to power in more productive ways.

Weak theory is offered as a way of thinking that can “describe, appreciate, connect and analyse, identifying strengths to build on and constraints to work around” (2020:9). Here, drawing from Sedgwick (2003), we do not see weak theory and strong theory as incompatible. We argue that finding a balance between paranoia and possibility is required to attend to power in nuanced ways that shows the messiness of participating in and building economies, or in being excluded from them. The way that strong theory is discussed by the architects of each major section of the handbook could be read as a form of capitalocentrism itself by being already always linked with capitalism. For example, Cameron, in discussing diverse enterprise, couches the discussion of strong and weak theory in the context of the class process and goes on to explain strong theory as it relates to the capture of diverse enterprise by capitalism (2020 p. 28-29). McKinnon, in the introduction to labor, situates

strong theory as capitalocentric as it relates to labor exploitation (2020 p. 124). Healy et al., in their discussion of subjectivity, note that strong theory is a way to “anticipate every move ‘capitalism’ makes” (2020 p. 392). While these are, of course topically focused essays intended to discuss economic diversity, the association of strong theory with capitalism in such a way automatically makes it a “no go” area for diverse economies scholars. Gibson-Graham (2006b) acknowledge that producing the language for a new theory is no small task, noting that some terminology falls into the trap of capitalocentrism (e.g. alternatives, see: Healy 2009). However, what we point to here is not a problem of language but of knowledge production.

In seeking to de-center an all-powerful capital, other forms of power and violence are sometimes overlooked, unacknowledged, or simply named by scholars who are more focused on the core project of reading for difference. If in 2008, Gibson-Graham challenged scholars to “become new academic subjects” in order to perform “other worlds” as part of research practice (618), it seems that in many cases the pendulum may have overreached and indeed a continued reliance on weak theory may reflect this swing. The question then becomes how do we de-center capitalism while simultaneously attending to power? This challenge is not unnoticed, and the way that diverse economies scholars engage power has come under much critique, which we discuss in the following section.

#### **4 CRITIQUES**

Major critiques of diverse economies research include assessments that the framework does not adequately attend to power relations and those constraints on diverse economies potential progressive (or not) outcomes produced (Gritzas and Kavoulakos 2016; Lawson 2019; Naylor 2018; 2019; Samers 2005; Schmid and Smith 2020). There are different ways that we can consider the critique of power in diverse economies research, here we begin by focusing on a longstanding critique that economic diversity is too celebratory, and as a result, power relations within economic diversity are not sufficiently examined. We then look at how these critiques are addressed and how diverse economies scholars are interlinking the theory with others to examine power relations.

Early critiques, which may not have been able to capture fully the emerging body of literature, point to disparities among different populations participating in the diverse economies being researched. Samers (2005) notes that much diverse economies research fails

to discern between so-called ‘alternative’ arrangements that produce progressive outcomes, and those that reproduce already standing disparities. New relations bring about new entanglements of power and difference, even under the banner of progressive politics. Fickey (2011) noted that investigations into the intersections of race, gender, and ethnicity seemed to be relatively absent from diverse economies research, leaving a gap in understanding how difference and power relations that fall along these lines change, or remain, within various economic relations. The substance of this critique does not hold true in a review of the last decade of diverse economies work, as diverse economies scholars began and continue to name these issues and in many cases examine disparities that may or may not be addressed by participation in community economies.

There is growing engagement with questions of gender, race, and ethnicity in diverse and community economies research. A number of scholars performing diverse economic research name race, class, gender, and LGBTQIA+ issues in diverse economic spaces (cf. Araujo 2018; Borowiak et al. 2018; Brown 2009; 2015; Diprose 2017; Gibson-Graham et al. 2000; Hossein 2017; Mathie et al. 2017; McKinnon et al. 2016; Naylor 2019; Oberhauser 2005). Indeed, *The Handbook* takes up topics ranging from indigenous methodologies, creating sites of inclusivity and diversity, to more-than-human agency and subjectivities, for example.

While some critique diverse economies research for undertheorizing power, it seems that these critiques point towards a lack of serious introspection of a particular form of power; that of domination, oppression, and capitalist hegemony. Scholars using the framework responded to these critiques, and the mandate to see power is clearly threaded through the work of Gibson-Graham (see also: Gibson-Graham and Dombroski 2020 p. 17-18). Weak theory approaches in diverse economies research tend to focus on the emergences of transformative action and counter-power within economic experimentation, and discussions of constraints and strengths, rather than on a hegemonic capitalistic power (Cahill 2008; Gibson-Graham and Dombroski 2020; Loh and Shear 2015; Mathie et al. 2017; Pierce and Williams 2016; Steinfert et al. 2017; Wright 2010; 2017). As Lee et al. (2010) note, challenging capitalocentrism is a key way that power is discussed as it makes a space to view the enactment of power in multiplicity. Many studies in diverse economies draw on weak theory poststructuralist readings of power to view its fragmented and multiple forms. In this way scholars are disaggregating what power we see into multiple constellations of place-

specific power/counter-power wielded and contested by people, communities, and institutions (Cahill, 2008; Loh and Shear, 2015; Mathie et al., 2017).

In writing from a post-development perspective, Mathie et al. helpfully outline this viewpoint as a “diffracted power lens” through which power relations are separated into the categories of “power over, power to, power with and power within (2017 p. 58).” Meaning, respectively, the power to dominate and oppress, to generate new possibilities and actions, the emergence of new relationships and possibilities through collaboration, and individual’s own sense of their capacity and self-worth, something that is reiterated through *The Handbook* (2020 p. 57). This approach to power maps neatly into the broader project of diverse economies through highlighting and gravitating towards configurations of power which are generative and diverse rather than focusing on the concentration of power (over) within the hands of the few (Cahill 2008; Mathie et al. 2017; Steinfort et al. 2017). What we suggest here is that when reading for diversity and multiplicity, it is not enough to see power. We must also address it as a part of our knowledge production practices. Increasingly this scholarship is emerging.

Considering the ways that power dynamics play out, transform, and/or are reproduced within economic activities represents the widest area of growth for future diverse economies research. It is not enough to ask the questions laid out by Gibson-Graham (2006b) regarding how the production and distribution of surplus value is negotiated. Researchers cannot simply re-read for difference, name issues, and report. Equal attention needs to be paid to diverse economic relations which are transformative in some ways, but which can also reproduce already existing problematic relations (Ferreria 2021; Naylor 2018) and are built upon or out of violence and exclusion (Hosseini 2019; Lyne and Madden 2020; Naylor 2019; Waitoa and Dombroski 2020). Performing this kind of research entails a nuanced dance between the extremes of paranoia and possibility; we argue that in many cases this requires diverse economies framings to be in conversation with other theorizations to create this balance.

Recent work, including chapters in the handbook—especially those that deal with colonial legacies or are written from the “majority world” (see: Gibson-Graham and Dombroski 2020 p. 4)—provide examples of approaches that engage in reparative critique, either attempting to strike a balance or attend to the geopolitics of knowledge production by viewing the performative practices of building livable worlds through multiple lenses (Araujo 2016; 2018; Chlala 2019; Naylor 2019; Nicolosi 2020; Sarmiento 2017; Schmid and Smith 2020;

Sweet 2016; Tucker and Murphy 2019). What is notable about much of this work is the reliance on bringing diverse economies into conversation with other strands of critical thought. Sweet (2016) relies on a diverse economies approach informed by intersectional analysis to trace the ways that race, gender, and citizenship operate within diverse economies. Nicolosi (2020) employs a diverse economies framing and “feminist killjoy” (Ahmed 2017) lens within a Lefebvrian reading of space to explore the creation of counterspaces, their possibilities and shortcomings. Chlala (2019) engages queer theory and feminist political geography with a diverse economies approach to embed studies of non-capitalisms into broader processes of racial and homonormative power. Both Sarmiento (2017) and Tucker and Murphy (2019) deploy Actor-Network Theory and assemblage to consider power relations and challenges faced in building and sustaining community economies. Schmid and Smith (2020) draw on practice-theory to bring in discussions of power, politics, and scale to understand the tensions in community-driven transformation. Finally, Naylor (2019) and Araujo (2016; 2018) put diverse economies in conversation with decolonial theory to address the geopolitics of knowledge production as they relate to indigenous livelihoods and collective work in Mexico. Specifically, Naylor (2019) uses decolonial theory to dismantle diverse economic exchanges through fair trade markets, arguing that the way fair trade is mobilized in Chiapas is harnessed and put to work as a site of resistance as well as economic activity. Araujo (2016; 2018), applies decolonial theory as part of a participatory effort to create and maintain a moneyless economy in Chiapas and argues that how we build knowledge about the benefits of economic exchange can stand outside of Western episteme. Both authors argue that decolonizing knowledge production provides new avenues for thinking about how to live well in places and circumstances that are actively exclusionary, oppressive, and/or grounded in struggle.

Calls to decolonize, and emergent examples of places and possibilities for change are proliferating at present. Examples outside of diverse economies thinking include indigenous futurity (Daigle 2019a; 2019b), global health (Büyüm 2020), gender equality (Zaragocin 2017), as well as, language and knowledge production in geography (Müller 2021). Such examples show us that if we maintain this momentum that we can seize on the ‘portal’ possibilities of worldmaking for the better (Roy 2017 in Sparke and Anguelov 2020). Common to these examples is a mode of explanation that focuses on strengths and constraints, openings and erasures. Within diverse economies theorizing, understanding how economic practices push on and are shaped by intersections of race, gender, sexual identity,

and citizenship (to name a few) opens avenues for capturing the dynamics of diverse economic practices without missing the messiness of power relations and the violent process and practices that undergird them. Community economies themselves have successes and failures, can be inclusive or exclusive, and can be sites of joy or struggle (for example, and these are not mutually exclusive). At the core of these are multiple types of power dynamics that can and should be examined.

In addressing an anti-essentialist approach to reframing economic ontologies and epistemologies, it is implicit that power resides in economic interactions. So much so that there is an expectation that scholars deploying a diverse economies framework would reflect on power as an absolute necessity of the research performance. Moreover, how and where these relations are sited becomes another question that needs to be addressed. Simultaneously, scholars critiqued these ideas via considerations of the power and privilege of being able to conduct research that examines economic difference (Miller et al. 2017; Naylor 2019). Indeed, diverse economies scholars acting reflexively call for an opening up of epistemology in reframing and rereading. Distancing from a strong theory approach appears to have had the unfortunate consequence of gazing at power, naming it, and in some cases dismissing it in a bid to maintain a more hopeful stance. In this distancing, systems of oppression that undergird capitalism, such as racism, remain on the horizon, undertheorized and requiring a new lens. Following from Bledsoe et al. (2019) we see this dismissal particularly around weak theory discussions of race.

#### **4.1 Addressing Race**

In distancing ourselves from capitalism, as Bledsoe et al. argue (2019), we distance ourselves from racial capitalism/racial formations of capital. Thus, by not having capitalism as a part of the conversation, despite being deeply intertwined with race, we neglect it. Economic spaces, whether capitalist or outside and alongside capitalism remain structured through racialization and otherization (see: Bledsoe et al. 2019; Ferreira 2021; Gilmore 2017; McKittrick 2011; McKittrick and Woods 2007). Furthermore, the community economies and other economic practices and exchanges by racialized communities are often elided (Hosseini 2019).

Here we look to *The Handbook* (2020) treating it as an updated canonical text to focus explicitly on how race is addressed. For those familiar with the diverse economies framework, the iceberg and the inventory of economies challenges thinkers to de-center

capitalism (tip of the iceberg) and see it alongside various other economic activities (below the water line). These are then parsed out into enterprise (business), labor, transactions (market), property, and finance. The inventory reveals a range of activities, which among them include: enslavement, feudal relations, theft, poaching, debt bondage and bribery. The presence of these is fully acknowledged by the authors as they carefully worked through earlier critiques. Gibson-Graham and Dombroski explain that the point of showing these “undesirable and unwanted practices” is “not to condone them, nor is it to neutralize them.” They go on to explain that the anti-essentialist framing “affirms that life unfolds in a pluriverse” (2020 p. 18). We agree, however argue that naming these activities is not enough. Yes, naming these practices shows the range of power, including power over, power with, and power to, and exposes the impact through addressing capitalocentric takes as Gibson-Graham and Dombroski suggest (ibid p. 17). However, the violent character of these activities and the messy entanglements of building livable worlds must be further addressed.

The handbook shows attention to these things, naming issues with the economic activities that are being described, stepping away from any overly celebratory takes or excluding less pleasant findings. This approach has the potentially dangerous (yet likely unintended) consequence of appearing to say, yes these things exist and they are not good, but look over here at the good stuff that is happening. There is a particular violence to this near-exclusion. If we are to do the hard work of creating livable worlds, it is not enough to note that there are race, class, or gender issues (to name a few), but to acknowledge the power of the violence of those issues (strong theory) and examine them in depth alongside what are viewed as the more positive aspects of community economies. Diprose acknowledges this matter in discussing cooperatives and time-banking, noting that our examination must center on the “actual practices” as well as their ‘naming and representation’ (2020 p. 242-3). Yet in setting up the framework, violent practices are consistently named and unaddressed, looking to more hopeful spaces. For example, McKinnon notes that:

While a diverse economies take on labour provides an expanded scope of what *counts*, it does not distinguish between the forms of work that may be desirable and the forms that may be harmful. [en]Slave[d] labour and precarious labour are part of diverse economy, alongside wage labour and unpaid labour... While there is a politics in this project of revealing diversity, its true value lies in the foundations it sets for the next step. Thus, understanding the potential for certain



labour practices (and by extension certain economic formations) to do harm in a given place, or for a given group of people, provides the impetus to look for which existing practices offer more nurture (2020 p. 125; emphasis in original).

Other authors take a similar approach in very carefully naming and acknowledging oppression, Roelvink explains:

This does not mean diverse economies researchers are unaware or unaffected by existing oppression and suffering. In fact, they are just affected as critical political economists are about the terrible situations which people and other species face. Equally depressed by current events then, the difference is that diverse economies researchers are able to accept oppression but, rather than continuing to confirm it, they instead deliberately seek out possibilities for the world to be otherwise (2020 p. 461).

This statement is followed by noting that weak theory is what allows for this approach. This is a powerful and hopeful way to shape the production of knowledge about economic diversity. However, we cannot undertake this task without these deeper examinations, which address the power of violence (strong theory) and juxtapose it with the surprise and positivity of those efforts to build livable worlds (weak theory). For we are not all in this together, yet. The trauma being experienced by people and earth others is heterogeneous and disproportionately distributed. Indeed, a diverse economies approach challenges power and makes it multiple, but it does not yet address it. Simultaneously, if we are seeking to build a vocabulary of anti-essentialist language, we must look to how we are describing violent practices, for example using enslaved person or enslavement rather than “slave labor” and “slavery.” As Waldman notes on the shift in academic language, “the heightened delicacy of enslaved person—the men and women it describes are humans first, commodities second—was seen to do important work: restoring identity, reversing a cascade of institutional denials and obliterations” (2015, np). Thus, we see such work as a potential emergent chapter in crafting the vocabulary of the framework.

A review of the index of the handbook illuminates the efforts to name, for example, the index item “race” has nine entries in the 500+ page volume. Upon closer examination, the way that authors are addressing race is to point to “toxic masculinity” drawing from hooks (1984),

(Walenta 2020 p. 108); who performs care work (Dombroski 2020 p. 154); diversity problems in community supported agriculture programming (White 2020 p. 219, 221); gentrification (Templer Rodrigues 2020 p. 419); and affect (Roelvink 2020 p. 434).<sup>5</sup> Some of these chapters take up race explicitly (Dombroski) and others make mention that race needs to be addressed. There is already work underway that is taking up issues of race and power in diverse economies (see: Araujo 2016; 2018; Bledsoe et al. 2019; Naylor 2019; 2020) these approaches appear to find a balance between paranoia and possibility. A number of scholars too are beginning to make these connections and take up a decolonial approach. We suggest, in the next section that we as diverse economies scholars should consider the geopolitics of knowledge production as we undertake this emergent work—arguing that this approach may assist with decentering not only capitalism, but dominant ways of knowing and being in economic practice.

## **5 ATTENDING TO THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE: THE DECOLONIAL IMPERATIVE**

Alhojärvi, writing in a special issue on gazing at power in community economies (see: Gabriel and Sarmiento 2020), raises concern over the movement towards post-critical affirmations in diverse and community economy research; “a reading that positions critique and critical gestures as past and/or unfruitful tendencies” (2020 p. 288). Arguing that the movement away from paranoid, critical readings towards affirmation turned the concept of capitalocentrism into an already settled, undesirable theoretical object. Alhojärvi (2020) calls for scholars to “delink capitalocentrism from an a priori sense of undesirability,” and stick with the trouble of capitalocentrism to ask “what capitalocentrism is and does in each different situation” (ibid p. 305). Holding onto the trouble of capitalocentrism keeps a steady eye on how postcapitalist imaginaries and actions are implicated and connected to the “fabric of sedimented layers of capitalocentric hierarchies and violence” (ibid p. 306). We seek to push this thinking forward. If we are to stay with the trouble of capitalocentrism (on trouble see: Haraway 2016) in our own postcapitalist readings—to hold onto the inheritances of racialized, gendered, and class violence that came with the production of capitalism and capitalocentrism—we need to consider the production of capital within the 500 years of epistemic and physical violences enacted through colonization, neo-colonialism, and imperialism (Araujo 2018; Naylor 2019; 2020). Bringing diverse economies theory and community economies research into conversation with decolonial thought provides a

foregrounding on which to actively promote and affirm postcapitalist economic projects, while seriously contending with the ongoing privileging of Western/Eurocentric, white epistememes, and universals as well as material realities and consequences grounded in the political economies of worldmaking.

There are larger calls to ‘decolonize geography,’ which recognize that as a discipline we are still engaged in colonial-imperial worldmaking processes and, to disrupt these, calls for deep introspection (see: Jazeel 2017; Noxolo 2017a; 2017b). This includes engaging these epistemological positions in research and embedding them in our methodologies and queries.

Decolonial thinking is fundamentally about ontology, epistemology, and futurity. Similarly, decolonization and the decolonial are ways of knowing, being, and existing outside of Eurocentrism and white supremacy at their foundation. Tuck and Yang’s interventionist work reminds us that decolonization is not about improving existing (largely) settler colonial systems or seeking justice, but about the “repatriation of indigenous land and life” (2013 p. 21). Decolonial defined is a refusal. Daigle and Ramírez affirm this definition, noting that it refuses white supremacy and violence and requires the dismantling of systems of oppression (2019 p. 80). Decolonial thinking is not synonymous with decolonization but is part of a broader push for praxis that can dismantle structures of oppression. However, while decolonization and decolonial thinking are imperative, they are not impervious to the very critique we launch here with regard to diverse economies framings as they are a political project that has its own power dynamics and can be exclusionary (see: Sexton 2016; for additional critiques of decolonial theory see Asher 2013). It is because of this dynamic that we frame it here as the geopolitics of knowledge production—because power resides in and between places and peoples in uneven ways.

Decolonial theory pushes scholars to tangle with processes of knowledge production that “contribute materially and discursively to marginalize people, places and thinking” (Radcliffe and Radhuber 2020 p. 2); processes which continually reinstate norms, privileges, and the visibility of Western epistememes and universals. Decolonial scholars recognize that while a *de jure* colonial period came to an end a *de facto* coloniality and a colonial-modern world continues. Decolonizing knowledge production is a practice of documenting social injustices and recovering invisibilized knowledges while challenging paradigmatic racism, sexism, and colonialism and disrupts coloniality (Tuhiwai-Smith 1999). In decolonizing, we multiply knowledges and create distance from universalizing, normalizing, and exclusionary

tendencies in knowledge production. As Naylor argues, “at the core of the decolonial project is the decentering and multiplying of knowledges and power” (2019 p. 37). In this decentering, the where and the how of knowledge production must be considered—locating knowledges outside of universalizing Western perspectives.

Decolonial scholars use ideas from decoloniality/decolonization to decenter and delink Eurocentric forms of knowledge and power from scholarly work, requiring scholars to rethink and theorize “from alterity and multiplicity in knowledge production” (Naylor et al. 2018 p. 200). Much like diverse economies core argument that the processes and discourses of capitalocentrism continue to make invisible other forms of economic activity, decolonial scholars look to the ways that colonization and the colonial-modern present continue to erase indigenous and multiple ways of knowing and understanding the world while continuing colonial and imperialist relations of power (Mignolo 2009; Naylor et al. 2018; Naylor 2019). Moreover—as it relates to indigenous experiences with economic exchange—Radcliffe notes that the “epistemic starting points” for engagement with economies are grounded in “western economic geography,” despite the variety and intricacies of economic exchanges (2020 p. 384; 375).

The diverse economies framework relies on an epistemological critique of economic discourse that reifies a totalizing, universal understanding of economy as capitalism (Gibson-Graham 1993; 2006a; Sarmiento and Gabriel 2020). Tracing and deconstructing economic discourse remains a powerful starting point in producing an economic imaginary that is always multiple, fluid, and diverse. The difference here is a further attempt to capture the production of economic knowledges as they exist and are produced outside of/alongside capitalocentric, white supremacist, and colonial pathways. Sarmiento and Gabriel (2020), drawing on Nietzschean and Foucauldian traditions, call on diverse economies researchers to re-engage with the genealogical practices that were at the forefront of Gibson-Graham’s (2006a) initial tracing of capitalocentric discourse. Tracing the genealogy of storytelling of both capitalism and non-capitalisms, they argue, brings into view the messy articulations of power present in all forms of economic discourse and practice (Sarmiento and Gabriel 2020). Taking this pathway of tracing the construction of power and economic discourse with Alhojärvi’s (2020) call to focus again on the development of capitalocentric discourse can be further enriched through an active effort to decolonize our own thinking and research.

Much research practice maintains a colonial power/knowledge dynamic as its foundation (Naylor et al. 2018 p. 199). This holds true for the critique of capitalocentrism at the center of diverse economies research, which relies heavily on Eurocentric tellings of the development of capitalism and Western theoreticians. Further, Western forms of value, transactions, work, and enterprise serve as the other from which we distance ourselves in “uncovering”, or, highlighting diverse economic practices. It could be possible at this point for those of us who identify as diverse economies theorists to throw our hands in the air and scream that diverse economies theory cannot do it all. However, what is needed alongside this work is a careful, critical eye towards the systems of violence and epistemicide enacted on peoples the world over through conquest and colonization (Araujo 2018; Naylor 2019). Araujo (2018) uses decolonial economic praxis to highlight “economic interactions that do not replicate a standard version of capitalism, but rather express a plurality of economic relationships,” opening avenues for understanding systems of exchange and value outside a Western episteme.

Colonial relations, Araujo notes, act as fundamental drivers of the construction of political and socio-economic systems for the past 500 years. As colonial relations were mapped onto indigenous spaces across the world, there was an erasure of multiplicitous epistemologies of power relations, expressions of gender, understandings of land use accompanied by an imposition of western ontologies and epistemologies (Mignolo 2011). Foregrounding coloniality in our understandings of the development of capitalocentric world systems is necessary in understanding the effects of structural violences (strong theory) enacted on heterogenous communities worldwide on projects that seek to proliferate multiple economic systems that decenter and challenge capitalist relations. Describing a “multi-ethnic, women’s moneyless economy, called *El Cambalache*” Araujo notes:

In enacting decolonial praxis one must acknowledge the importance of existing epistemes and ontologies while recognizing that much damage has been done to these ways of knowing and being. In creating a decolonial economic project like *El Cambalache*, it is important to see the people participating in the project not as poor or empty of those resources necessary to be successful in a capitalist economy. Rather, we can envision the economy as a space that understands each person to be full of resources in accordance with both how they experience the world and the cultures that they come from (2018, np).

Thinking through decolonial praxis when discussing diverse economic formations requires meeting people where they are (see: Walsh 2018 in Mignolo and Walsh 2018). This means understanding the practice of producing diverse, livable economic worlds within the multiple histories of violence and resistance, erasure, and persistence that communities across the globe experience(d) through colonization and capitalist development. Rather than “reducing to sameness” as is suggested in the rejection of strong theory, decolonial praxis also sees difference, thinking through border knowledges, ‘from below’ and the ‘undersides’ of the colonial-modern world and simultaneously critiques existing arrangements of knowledge production (cf. Naylor et al 2018; Radcliffe and Radhuber 2020).<sup>6</sup> In tandem with seriously engaging with diverse forms of power and violence (strong theory), we need to take seriously the epistemological and ontological systems that continue to exist outside of a Eurocentric understanding of class, transaction, and ownership as they appear within our own theorizations as diverse economic scholars. It means recognizing that power relations are messy, multiple, and fluid; that many voices are necessary in building diverse livelihoods; and, that there are many things (beyond a focus on capitalist relations) that must be challenged, dismantled, and reshaped while recognizing that there is no one correct path to follow. Further, it ‘sticks with the trouble’ of the already acknowledged difficulty of developing a non-capitalocentric vocabulary (Gibson-Graham 2006b).

## **6 CONCLUSION: MULTIPLE POWERS, MULTIPLE KNOWLEDGES, MULTIPLE ECONOMIES**

Over the past two decades, diverse economies research continues to widen our understandings of economic practices through recognition of the diverse, multiple ways people work to build livable worlds. Grounded in an approach that places capitalism as but one of many economic forms in existence today, this research continues to be a powerful tool for building and proliferating more ethical economic systems. While this approach received sustained critique for the way it treats power, we find recent scholarly work from within the diverse economies community that seriously contends with the different ways power operates as a necessary and hopeful way forward (Alhojärvi 2020; Araujo 2018; Bledsoe et al. 2019; Naylor 2019; Sarmiento and Gabriel 2020).

Adding to the growing attention to power within diverse economies, we call for more scholarly work that engages with decolonial theory and confronts the continued production of Eurocentric economic epistemologies, colonial violence, and white supremacy. This

engagement presents us with exciting new challenges. How do we situate the development of capitalocentric discourse within the 500 years of genocide and epistemicide that unfolded through colonial, neocolonial and decolonial processes? What strategies need to be co-created to develop a language of economic difference that is uncoupled from Eurocentric framings, and is fully enmeshed in the multiple ways of knowing and being of the people and communities we work with? In what ways do economic experimentation challenge, resist, *and* reproduce local and global power relations linked to the violence of the colonial present?

Diverse economies research is a hopeful and necessary endeavor in the ongoing struggle against capitalism and the discourse of capitalocentrism. To sustain and further enrich Gibson-Graham's (2006a; 2006b; 2008) critique of political economy we need to deepen our engagement with power, violence, and erasure. Here, we offered decolonial theory as but one pathway forward to achieving this goal. To strike the balance between paranoia and possibility – between the unproductive binary of weak and strong theory – will deepen our attempts to build more just, equitable, and livable worlds.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> In 2008, Gibson-Graham included a digital bibliography of over 200 papers published up until their article went to press. There is an 8-year gap in the bibliography, however, Joanne McNeill began to track publications for the Community Economies Research Network in 2016. Between 2016-2019, members of CERN alone reported 200 publications written in 6 languages. A repository of work by the CERN network is available on the Community Economies Institute website: <http://www.communityeconomies.org/publications>

<sup>2</sup> As such, we refer to our own positionality as authors of this paper. We are both U.S. citizens, with English as our first language, living and working in the U.S. For the purposes of this paper we focus heavily on Anglophone work in diverse economies research, although we recognize scholars are publishing work in other languages (see endnote no. 1). Naylor is a white woman from a middle-class background with a PhD in geography who is at the time of writing a pre-tenure faculty member at a research university and is the chair of the PhD committee for Thayer (pronouns she/her/hers). Thayer is a white man, first-generation college graduate, from a low-income family who is, at the time of writing, a geography PhD candidate (pronouns he/him/his). We are both members of the Community Economies Research Network, and Naylor is a founding core member of the Community Economies

Institute. The authors recognize that providing these brief biographies is a simplified way of recognizing our positionality and does not absolve us of the particular lens with which we shape the analysis in this paper.

<sup>3</sup> Reviewers noted that “paranoia” is perhaps not the most productive way to think about strong theory and we recognize this push here, despite it being threaded throughout diverse economies scholarship; strong theory can be used to examine and explain structures of power that are experienced by people in violent and traumatizing ways. Please note that those experiencing such inequitable power dynamics and trauma are not here being described as “paranoid.”

<sup>4</sup> Here we signal that a feminist approach undergirds this work.

<sup>5</sup> Likely through an indexing error, three of the entries are about the “race to the bottom” and are not dealing directly with racial issues.

<sup>6</sup> Radcliffe urges geographers to adopt new frameworks that instead of “positing an agency-less Indigenous subject confronting a de-personalized but all powerful capitalism” (2020: 378); one that sees structure and agency and the resistances and appropriations undertaken by indigenous groups.

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