

## “Cosmopolitan or Colonial? The World Social Forum as ‘Contact Zone’”<sup>1</sup>

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### **Biographical note:**

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### **Abstract:**

Although the impressive diversity of the World Social Forum is regularly noted, there has been little analytical work done on the degree to which the praxis of the WSF is enabling communicability across previously unbridged difference and how relations of power, particularly the coloniality of power, shape these interactions. Based on extensive participant-observation and interviewing at the WSF, this article analyzes the WSF as a ‘contact zone’ that, in different facets of its complex praxis, is both cosmopolitan and colonial. The author employs the differing conceptions of the contact zone, drawing on the work of Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Mary Louise Pratt, in dialogue with notions of coloniality and colonial difference arising from Latin American studies to illumine the analysis.

### **Key words:**

coloniality of knowledge/power; contact zone; World Social Forum

### **Introduction**

Since its appearance in 2001, the World Social Forum has become the preeminent site for the encounter, transformation, and agglomeration of movement knowledges arising from subaltern struggles rooted in specific social and geographical locations/identities. Although the impressive diversity of the WSF is regularly noted, there has been little analytical work done on the degree to which the praxis of the WSF is enabling communication across previously unbridged difference -- beyond co-presence in the open space -- and how relations of power, and particularly the coloniality of power shape these interactions. In this article, I explore these questions through two analytic strategies. The first is to locate the World Social Forum as a historical praxis in the context of the “modern-colonial world system” using the work of the Latin American Research Group on Modernity and Coloniality (Dussel, 1998; 2000; 2002; Mignolo, W. D., 2000; 2002; Nouzeilles & Mignolo, 2003; Mignolo, W., 2007; Quijano, 2000; Grosfoguel, 2005). The second is to analyze the WSF as a “contact zone” drawing on two overlapping but distinct analytical usages. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2005) has explicitly employed the notion of the contact zone in analyzing the World Social Forum. In a 2005 article,

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<sup>1</sup>This article is one of a series on the World Social Forum and is the fruit of an ongoing research project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. For other related works, see Conway, 2004a; 2004b; 2005; 2006; 2008b; 2008a; 2009a; Conway & Singh, 2009.

“The future of the World Social Forum: The work of translation”, Santos argues for the need to create in every movement “a contact zone that may render it porous to and hence permeable” to the perspectives of other movements different from themselves (17). This will enable movements to mutually recognize and respect the specificity of each while making possible the cross-cultural intelligibility necessary to constructing counter-hegemonic collaboration.

Contact zones, according to Santos, are “social fields in which different movements/ organizations meet and interact to reciprocally evaluate their normative aspirations, their practices and knowledges.” Santos acknowledges that unequal power relations are likely to be present, given the history of the modern(ist) left in the 20th century. He argues that inequalities must “yield to relations of shared authority. Only then will *the cosmopolitan contact zone* be constituted.” (20, my emphasis)

Santos does not attribute the concept of contact zone to anyone in particular but the term is often linked to the work of literary theorist, Mary Louise Pratt. In her 1992 book *Imperial Eyes*, she conceives of contact zones in more highly charged ways as:

social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination--like colonialism, slavery or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today... the space of colonial encounters [is] the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict (Pratt, 1992, pp. 4,6)..

Further, she writes, her use of the term

“contact zone” is an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect. By using the term “contact,” [she] aim[s] to foreground the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed ... [A] contact perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other. It treats the relations among the colonizers and the colonized, or travelers and “travelees,” not in terms of separateness of apartheid, but in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power (Pratt, 1992, p. 7).

There are obvious tensions between the two usages. Santos assumes the possibility of more egalitarian relations undergirded by shared desires for global justice among the movements of the WSF, even as he acknowledges the existence of inequalities and incommensurabilities among them. In the context of the WSF, he recognizes as well that diverse movements of the Global South are newly coming into contact with one another and that their shared positionalities in the South do not exempt them from the work of inter-cultural and cross-movement translation. For Santos, the contact zone seems to be both an attribute of movements when they cultivate a disposition to dialogue across difference, and the social field of encounter constituted by that political project. Pratt’s conceptualization of the contact zone, on the other hand, is that of a historically-given past-present condition created by the experiences of imperialism and colonialism. It is constituted specifically by the dynamics of encounter between the historically colonized and their (former and or present) colonizers. This usage draws our attention to the

assymetrical, power-laden relations between movements that refract the myriad legacies of colonialism. In the context of the WSF, it highlights relations between movements originating in the global North or South, between descendants of invader-settlers and indigenous peoples, between the local, place-based and the cosmopolitan, and between modern-emancipatory and subaltern-‘other’, among other embodiments of colonial difference. In this article, I want to hold both these meanings of the contact zone in tension because they articulate important and distinct features of the dynamics among movements and political challenges confronting the WSF as a space of encounter among movements. More precisely though, this article is a critical engagement with Santos’ claims about the WSF as contact zone, using Pratt’s notion as a counter-concept and corrective.

The tensions between these meanings of the contact zone also draw our attention to contesting traditions of analysis and interpretation of the WSF: between the dominant ‘public sphere’/discursive democracy understandings of open space, and one more attentive to how relations of inequality, coloniality, and incommensurability persist and distort putatively egalitarian spaces. As Pratt suggests in another context, the notion of contact zone can be used to unsettle prevailing models of community that underpin dominant theories of the social/political (Pratt, 1991).

In the discussion that follows, I begin by outlining the work of the Latin American Modernity-Coloniality Research Group and explore the implications for situating the WSF analytically within this framework and for addressing the questions introduced above. I then represent the appearance and expansion of the WSF as an emergent “transnational public space” that is developing and mutating over time and through its enactment in significantly different cultural contexts. Anchored in multiple empirical examples of how place-based, subaltern movements have made claims on the WSF in various contexts, I contend that the methodology of open space is enabling the emergence of communicative practices across previously unbridged, indeed largely unrecognized differences. However, beyond the co-presence of differently-positioned movements in the open space, the Social Forum is also marked by significant limitations and assymetries in terms of incorporating subaltern movements and engaging their knowledges. I then explore the extent to which Santos’ cosmopolitan contact zone may be said to be in formation in and through the WSF through some specific practices of inter-movement dialogue. In the final section of the paper, I return to the specific problem of *colonial* difference foregrounded in Pratt’s conceptualization of contact zones and conclude by both pointing to and arguing for a deepened praxis of decolonization in the global justice movement and by suggesting some directions for further research on the WSF as contact zone and the problem of colonial difference.

### **Recognizing colonial difference: situating the WSF in the modern-colonial world system**

Central to the work of the Latin American Research Group is the claim that coloniality is the underside of modernity and is thereby constitutive of the modern world system, from its inception in 16th century to the present.<sup>2</sup> Colonial difference is that which has been rendered

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<sup>2</sup>I cannot do justice to this body of scholarship here. See Mignolo, W. D., 2000; Dussel, 2000; Dussel, 1998; Dussel, 2002; Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, W. D., 2002; Mignolo, W. D., 2003. The work of Portuguese social theorist and legal scholar Boaventura de Sousa Santos is convergent and often referenced by these thinkers. See Santos, 1999; 1995; 2003; 2004a; 2004b. I first encountered Santos and Quijano at the WSF, where both have great prominence

different through the coloniality of power, invalidated, shunned and suppressed, and thus ‘disappeared’ from world history through the global hegemony of discourses centred on Western civilization, that is, through Eurocentrism. Furthermore, it is through their peculiar claims to universality, their systematic rejection of their own historical-geographical particularity, and their discrediting other forms and traditions of knowledge as unscientific, that Eurocentric forms of knowledge have silenced the colonial other. This “epistemic ethnocentrism,” including of the left, makes inclusive political philosophies grounded in Western traditions virtually impossible (Mignolo, W. D., 2002, p. 66). These scholars converge in their agreement that solutions to the problems created through the modern/colonial world system will not be found in the traditions of Western knowledge nor, indeed, within modernity<sup>3</sup>.

The alternative knowledges and practices that carry some possibility of redressing conditions of coloniality, i.e., the exclusion and suffering of the world’s majorities under capitalism, are those which have been suppressed by modernity (Escobar, 2004, p. 210) and which expose Western cosmologies as limited, particular, and arising from a geographically- and historically-specific cultural rationality that has projected itself as universal. Santos states bluntly that alternatives must be searched for in the South and calls for an “epistemology of the South.” (Santos, 1995, p. 506ff; 1999, p. 38) While for Santos, the South is more a positionality of suffering and exclusion than a geographical location, Walter Mignolo asserts a “ratio between places (geohistorically constituted) and thinking, the geopolitics of knowledge proper.” (Mignolo, W. D., 2002, p. 66; Grosfoguel, 2005, pp. 283–284) A decolonizing epistemology must be geographical in its historicity. (67)

In this framework, ‘the colonial difference’ is a privileged basis for knowing, an alternative standpoint. This is not a move to essentialize non-Western cultures but to recognize, in Escobar’s words, the

articulation of global forms of power with place-based worlds. In other words, there are practices of difference that remain in the exteriority (again, not outside) of the modern/colonial world system, incompletely conquered and transformed, if you wish, and also produced partly through long-standing place-based logics that are irreducible to capital and imperial globality.(221)

In the search for alternative futures, for ‘worlds and knowledges otherwise,’ Escobar advocates attention to the concrete practices of contemporary social movements from the perspective of colonial difference (210), to rethink theory through the political praxis of subaltern groups, (217) particularly the politics of difference enacted by those that more directly and simultaneously engage with imperial globality and global coloniality. (220)

Mignolo and Enrique Dussel (2000) especially are engaged in a polemic against postmodern critiques of modernity emanating from within Western civilization but which also express the ethnocentricity of Western philosophy. They are not advocating a rejection of modernity, rather a critical dialogue in which modernity’s underside, coloniality, in all its diversity, becomes an indispensable pole with which to read, critique and ultimately to fulfill the

movement-based intellectuals. Santos has become one of the most prolific and influential scholarly commentators on the WSF and its significance. For my purposes in this article, I am representing this work very selectively, particularly through Escobar (2004) whose concerns and orientations are very close to my own

<sup>3</sup>For elaboration on their understanding of modernity, see Quijano, 2000, pp. 543–7.

promise of modernity. Dussel has proposed “transmodernity” (rather than postmodernity) as a way of naming this possibility of a non-Eurocentric dialogue with alterity which “engages the colonialism of Western epistemology (from the left and from the right) from the perspectives of epistemic forces that have been turned into subaltern (traditional, folkloric, religious, emotional, etc. ) forms of knowledge.” (Mignolo 2000, 11, cited by Escobar, 2004, p. 219). Further, according to Mignolo, coloniality is “the platform of pluri-versality, of diverse projects coming from the experience of local histories touched by western expansion; thus coloniality is not a new abstract universal, but the place where diversality as a universal project can be thought out.” (personal communication cited by Escobar, 218).

Within this analytic framework, the movements of the WSF are encountering each other on a historically unequal playing field constituted by the coloniality of power. Recognizing the character of contemporary world order as one of “global coloniality” (Escobar, 2004) puts decolonization on the agenda of movements world-wide, not just in their frontal contestations with hegemonic powers, but in the relations between movement themselves, especially across North/South, non-indigenous/indigenous, and modern emancipatory/subaltern ‘other’ divides. The movements of the first halves of the foregoing couplets have been hegemonic relative to their ‘others’, historically and currently, in and beyond the Social Forum. Those ‘others’ remain far more excluded and ‘subaltern’, including in the WSF.

For the most part, these authors do not address very concretely the conditions for movement dialogues across modernity/coloniality divides other than asserting its theoretical possibility. While Mignolo acknowledges the continued importance of the monotopic critique (i.e., critique from within a single unified space) of modernity by Western critical discourse, he suggests that this has to be placed in dialogues with critique arising from the colonial difference. The result is a ‘pluritopic hermeneutics’ a possibility of thinking from difference spaces which finally breaks away from Eurocentrism as sole epistemological perspective.<sup>4</sup> In this dialogue between subaltern and hegemonic knowledges (in this case, the hegemonic knowledges of oppositional movements arising from within modernity), the articulation must be from the perspective of the subaltern in that the oppositional movements arising from within modernity must be critically aware of the eurocentrism of their knowledges. They must be ready to engage with movements marked by colonial difference by first, recognizing their alterity and second, reading themselves and the dialogue through the lens of colonial difference.

While I have some reservations about this body of theory as a whole,<sup>5</sup> these arguments are provocative and potentially insightful both in analyzing what is underway at the WSF, both its potentialities and its limitations. They see subalternity and colonial difference and they see it on a world scale. They see Eurocentrism as a knowledge order that is central in the creation and maintenance of coloniality and that thinking from inside Eurocentric modernity, even if revolutionary, will not deliver a different world. This recognition is central --for feminisms, Marxisms and other progressive, and preeminently modernist discourses, whether emanating

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<sup>4</sup>For elaboration see Santos, 1995, pp. 268–74.

<sup>5</sup> This body of work (by Dussel, Mignolo, and Quijano) is so macro-historical that it is almost metaphysical in its style of argumentation. Indeed, with some exceptions by Mignolo, it is abstracted from any concrete political practice. For this reason, I am favouring Escobar’s and Santos’ *use* of it in their theorizing place-based social movements and the World Social Forum, respectively.

from the historic-geographic first or third worlds-- and is the condition of possibility for dialogue with colonial difference. In important ways, this perspective illuminates the WSF as a praxis both grounded in and reaching for an epistemology of the south, how central this is and needs to be to the WSF's opposition to neoliberalism and equally foundational resistance to the hegemony of any one way of thinking. As often as this is repeated in WSF spaces, including by key leaders, this perspective is not secure, as will be demonstrated below. It remains that discourses and practices that evince a thorough-going defense of diversity and multiplicity as central both to the global struggle against neoliberalism and to the construction of alternative worlds are carried most consistently and disproportionately by women's and indigenous movements.

### **The World Social Forum: Concept and history**

Originally conceived as an alternative to the World Economic Forum held annually in Davos, Switzerland, the World Social Forum (WSF) was initiated at the height of the anti-globalization mobilizations to convene groups and movements of insurgent civil society from around the world. The idea was to create an 'open space' for the free and horizontal exchange of ideas, experiences and strategies oriented to enacting and generating alternatives to neoliberalism. The forum would be 'self-managed' with the majority of its programming being generated by the participants themselves. It would be a 'non-deliberative' space in that it would issue no statements and make no decisions, thereby freeing its participants to encounter each other rather than contesting for hegemony over the forum. The gathering would be thoroughly international but anchored geographically and experientially in the global South.

The first WSF, held in Porto Alegre, Brazil in January 2001, attracted 15,000 participants. Its astounding success led organizers to commit to the WSF as a permanent process. Each January since then, the event has taken place, growing exponentially in size, diversity, complexity, and importance so that it is now regularly attracting over 100,000 people annually.

After three years in Porto Alegre, Brazil, the WSF moved to Mumbai, India in 2004 and in 2007, to Nairobi, Kenya. Brazil remains the homeplace of the WSF but there is a widespread commitment to moving the world event geographically to other sites in the global South. This is a strategy for expanding and deepening the Forum's inter-continental and cross-cultural character, while retaining its critical positionality in the global South. In a related move, at the second WSF in Porto Alegre in 2002, organizers called on participants to organize similar processes in their own places, defined by their own priorities, and at whatever scale made sense to them. Social forums have proliferated inspired by the world event and organized in accordance with the WSF's Charter of Principles, with regional scale processes emerging with particular vigour and importance.

The civil society entities present at the World Social Forum vary considerably depending on the location of the event but are in every case significantly diverse in their demographic make-up, organizational forms, cultural expressions, geographic roots and reach, strategies, tactics, and discourses.<sup>6</sup> In any analytical discussion about the WSF, it is critical to maintain a distinction between the World Social Forum and its constituent social movements and networks. The latter act in and beyond the WSF but also help constitute the WSF as event and space. The

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<sup>6</sup>The WSF is open to any group anywhere in the world who professes opposition to neoliberalism, who is not a political party and who is not engaged in armed struggle. See the WSF charter of principles at <http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br>.

WSF is both more than and different from the sum of these movements; and the movements are more than and different from the sum of their practices vis-a-vis the WSF. The WSF and its constituent movements all have their own particular and evolving praxes.

The development of the World Social Forum, understood as an annual event, is central to most discussions, but it is important to recognize that the WSF is more accurately represented as a world-wide, movement-based, multi-scale, and multi-sited cultural process. The world event/process is significantly re-created when it is taken up by groups in different parts of the world, and this changes what follows, locally and globally, although not in any mechanistic or predictable way. Likewise, when the Social Forum is enacted locally and regionally, it assumes specificities that flow from place and scale, the historical-geographic conjuncture in which the process/event occurs, and the discourses, practices, preoccupations and strategies of its constitutive social movements.

### **Co-presence in the contact zone: the contested praxis of ‘open space’**

The WSF is an in-gathering of the groups and movements of civil society of unprecedented scope and scale. Even though there are antecedents--in the UN conferences and parallel NGO fora, in the *encuentros* of the Zapatistas, in the mass anti-globalization demonstrations-- the expanding array of forces now regularly convened in one space by the WSF is unprecedented. This is true in terms of the diversity of groups, movements, modes, issues, and constituencies represented, the expanding geographic and cross-cultural reach, the sheer numbers of participants, and in the accessibility of the Forum and the program to any group anywhere who can mobilize the resources to participate. It is a public space and contact zone imbued with the ethos of the anti-globalization movements in their stunning diversity: simultaneously militant and oppositional, alternative and innovative, affirmative and festive. Its pluralist, multi-centric and non-deliberative character allows the movements and groups of globalizing civil society to make themselves visible to one another on their own terms, and to encounter and transform one another in new ways.

For already well-established transnational networks, the WSF allows activists to advance their work in focused and concrete ways while simultaneously communicating it to a broader audience and building broader alliances. For highly localized movements, who are just finding their ways into transnational civil society spaces, or those who have little cross-sectoral coalitional experience, the WSF is a place both to learn of new ‘others’ and to assert one’s own right to be present in and to this worldwide convergence against neoliberalism. Impressive transnational networks on subsistence issues such as land and water rights have been facilitated through contact at the WSF and prominently include subaltern movements.

From the beginning, there has been a *de facto* recognition and valorization of the emergence of resistance and alternatives to neoliberalism from the most local to the most global. The creation of conditions for contact, recognition and inter-change among movements and organizations working at a variety of scales, in a range of modes, and on a multiplicity of issues and fronts, and with a pluralism of strategic approaches has been one of the most significant innovations of the World Social Forum. Each instantiation of the WSF in whatever place at whatever scale is characterized by the participation and valorization of activists operating at a variety of scales, and the (possibility of) horizontal exchange among them.

Valorizing the local has particularly enabled the growing presence, role and status of ‘place-based’ subaltern movements. A dramatic claim by ‘local’ movements on the ‘world’ event

took place in Nairobi in January 2007. A slum-dwellers' organization called the People's Parliament stormed the gates and disrupted a press conference to protest the cost of registration fees which they claimed made the World Social Forum inaccessible to poor people from the city. At an assembly of social movements on the last day of the Forum, their spokesperson, Wangui Mbatia, had this to say:

For many of us this is the first WSF. What I like about the WSF is that it brings the world to me as a Kenyan poor person: not only the world but the best of the world. In this room, I have met people who believe in the same things as the Peoples Parliament and people who are courageous enough to believe that a better world is possible. I am concerned that there are many Kenyans have not been able to attend the WSF. We have had to come every single morning to get those doors open so that ordinary Kenyan citizens can attend the WSF. We believe the WSF is a conversation by, between, and amongst people. It is not fair that 90 per cent of the people in the rooms are not Kenyans. That is not just. We have fought day after day after day to get in. But we are not just fighting to get in: we are fighting to be recognized because we are people too (*Short report of the Social Movements Assembly, World Social Forum, Nairobi, 16h-18h, 24 January, 2007*).

This eruption by a poor people's organization politicized the question of who the 'open space' of the WSF is for, which constituencies should have privileged access to it, and whose presence should not simply be left to their own self-organizing capacities, especially in terms of resource mobilization. Furthermore, it intensified the questions of place and scale: which places and scales of activism should be privileged at any particular Forum? Should a *World Social Forum* in Nairobi privilege the participation of Nairobi slum-dwellers? Kenyan organizations? Or strive first and foremost to be a pan-African edition of a world process, as the leadership of the African Social Forum had in mind? The protests by the Peoples' Parliament, which attracted much support from WSF delegates and some organizers, signalled a boiling point for issues that have been simmering from the beginning of the Social Forum process with varying intensity in different places and with various responses by different organizing committees: how 'local' should the world event be? how cosmopolitan? what kind of international? how subaltern? how intellectual?

Perhaps most notably, these issues had come to the fore in the 2004 edition in Mumbai, India. Of the 80,000 official delegates,<sup>7</sup> about 30,000 were dalits (untouchables) and a great number of these were adivasis (tribals). Of these, 40-45% were women. The presence of these movements in such numbers transformed the political culture of the WSF. It foregrounded issues central to the survival of tribal peoples: their subsistence rights to lands, rivers, forests, and water against the destruction wrought by mega-development projects, resource extraction, privatization and corporate control of nature. These movements are rural, communitarian, oriented to subsistence livelihoods and embody the links between bio- and cultural diversity. Their survival struggles forced ecological questions to the centre of the WSF's agenda which, before and up to the 2009 WSF in Belem, had been relatively marginal. Their presence also posed deep challenges to the modernization, urbanization, and development discourses that continue to

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<sup>7</sup>It is commonly claimed that over 150,000 participated in total.

underpin the utopias of much of the ‘anti-globalization’ movement. These movements of extremely poor and marginalized people had heretofore been largely invisible on the international stage despite impressive levels of self-organization and forays by individual leaders into UN-sponsored international fora. These groups recognized and helped construct the WSF in India as a contact zone of a new kind—even relative to earlier instantiations of the WSF itself.

In the Americas, indigenous peoples have also been organizing to claim space and voice in the Social Forum after years of marginality in the WSF in Brazil. Hemispheric social forums in Quito, Ecuador in 2004 and Guatemala City in 2008 were deeply informed by the presence and political perspectives of indigenous movements of the host countries, who were active protagonists in the organizing processes. In the WSF in Brazil however, despite a serious effort to organize an indigenous peoples’ space at the 2005 event in Porto Alegre, indigenous perspectives have remained barely audible. This may be changing, assisted both by the choice of the Amazonian city of Belém for the 2009 WSF and developments within the indigenous movements themselves, notably the emergence of a continental indigenous movement that is now actively intervening in anti-globalization spaces (Becker, 2008; Conway, 2009b). For the Amazonian indigenous peoples of Brazil and their relationships both to non-indigenous movements and to the Social Forum process in Brazil, the Belém event seemed a watershed event in the sheer numerical strength and visibility of the Amazonians who numbered well over 1000 in a historically high participation by indigenous persons whose numbers totaled about 2000. In an important development, Andean indigenous groups are spearheading the organizing of a thematic forum in 2010 on “the crisis of civilization” which will prominently feature the alternative discourses and cosmovisions produced by these movements, such as the struggle for plurinational states, climate justice, and *buen vivir* (living well not better) as a critique of consumer society.

These claims on the Social Forum by localized subaltern groups appear to be growing over time and as the WSF moves geographically, as place-based movements recognize the potential for their own struggles in the Social Forum’s arrival in their city, country or region. The degree to which place-based subaltern groups can make these claims is also, of course, contingent both on their organizing capacity and on the particular politics of in/exclusion practiced by the local organizing committee. In the practical politics of organizing Social Forums, some groups of organizers have actively sought to compensate for historical marginalization and contemporary inequalities. Indian organizers sought out the *dalit* movements. In Nairobi, organizers subsidized the participation of 6,000 slum dwellers. Organizers of the Caracas edition of the 2006 polycentric World Social Forum actively supported and subsidized the participation of poor peoples’ organizations from the US and of indigenous peoples from the Andean region.<sup>8</sup> As the world process has unfolded and each major social forum event throws up new problematics and plural visions of both the Forum and the movement, organizers have demonstrated considerable reflexivity and constant innovation. The process is not perfectly linear, systematic, nor comprehensive, and certainly not conflict-free, but the culture of learning and the openness to experiment seems deeply entrenched and is creating

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<sup>8</sup> Curiously, these practices and other kinds of political decisions by organizers affecting the character of the space of any particular event have not informed the discourses about the praxis of ‘open space’, which continues to be an abstraction posed over against attempts to turn the WSF into a “movement” that would make decisions and take unified action.

conditions for expanded contact, enhanced communicability, and with this, great political creativity.

### **The WSF as cosmopolitan contact zone?**

The WSF as an autonomous, open, pluralistic and non-deliberative space is allowing -- in theory, and to significant extent in practice -- for increasing communicability of struggles across different kinds of difference, including across colonial difference. In the WSF, movements do recognize each other as friends and allies, across barriers of language, caste and class, gender, sexuality, religion, way of life, political practice and civilizational difference. However, it is important not to over state how far along this process is or that simply being in the same space makes communicative relations an inevitability. Huge chasms, including civilizational divides across regions, religions, and world views remain apparent in the WSF. It is possible to attend the WSF and speak only to those you know or whose political discourses are familiar.

Inequalities among movements get reproduced in the open space unless there is affirmative action to ensure that marginalized and minority populations are present and their voices and perspectives amplified. Feminist commentators on the WSF have been most insistent about this, noting that women regularly make up half the participants but only a tiny fraction of the speakers at the WSF, and protesting the historical marginality of feminism as a perspective despite the founding presence of feminist networks in the WSF (Conway, 2007; Vargas, 2003; Alvarez, Faria & Nobre, 2004).

Drawing on public sphere theory, dalits, tribals, feminists, queers, indigenous peoples and others may be said to constitute “subaltern counterpublics” within the WSF, in that they expose and contest the exclusions of the formal, official, putatively egalitarian and universally accessible ‘open space’ (Fraser, 1997, pp. 75,81). They participate in the WSF, intent on the need for their own spaces on their own terms. They are also simultaneously making a claim on the WSF as a whole and on its constitutive movements, agitating for recognition, inclusion and solidarity. Their voices are still muted in the deliberations about the WSF process in the International Council, but the WSF methodology allows space for “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs.” (Fraser, 1997, p. 81).<sup>9</sup>

Simple co-presence in the space, even with amplified visibility and voice does not automatically produce mutual intelligibility however, much less genuine dialogue across cultural and colonial divides. Co-presence does not redress pre-existing inequalities that are barriers to communication and collaboration, nor transcend the centres and margins of the WSF process. It is striking to note how many of the “subaltern counter-publics” in the WSF regularly note that, despite their active engagement in the WSF, they feel the knowledges carried by their movements are not incorporated into the heart of the WSF.

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<sup>9</sup>Drawing on Fraser and public sphere theory as I have here is more resonant with Santos’ faith in the possibility of cosmopolitan contact zones than with Pratt’s more intense sense of how coloniality shapes such cross-cultural encounters. I will return to these tensions below. For more extended engagement with Fraser and the Critical Theory tradition in terms of the WSF, see Conway, et al., 2009.

For Diane Matte of the World March of Women, speaking about the WSF organizing process: “it has been a struggle to get feminism recognized as an answer to neoliberal globalization...as a social movement that is bringing something that is central” and not simply as one of an infinite number of groups, identities, and strategies. “The central analysis [operating at the WSF] is still Marxist.” (Matte, 2005)

For Ravi Kumar, leader of the National Dalit Forum, commenting on dalit participation at the 2004 WSF in Mumbai: “At the WSF, the dalit issue has not been well represented... visually, the dalit forms and cultural forms are there. But when it comes to content of the WSF, or the intellectual discourses, they are not given adequate space.” (Metni, 2004)

For indigenous peoples of the Americas in the lead-up to the Belem WSF: “it is important that the indigenous peoples’ spaces in the Forums unfold in a manner in which they encourage and make possible the integration with other movements and that this space not become an isolated indigenous ghetto... we need to re-think the Forums from the perspective of indigenous peoples ” (Working Group on Indigenous Peoples, 2008). During the Belem WSF, Miguel Palacin, leader of CAOI, went on to say: “In the search for an alternative, we believe that we, the [indigenous] peoples, have an alternative distinct from [traditions of] Western thought.” (Palacin, 2009)<sup>10</sup>

From these points of view, feminist, dalit, and indigenous movements are each themselves radical projects of social transformation, with their own specific and essential analytical and mobilizational resources to bring to the heterogeneous field of social struggles constituted by the WSF, but which consistently feel somehow intellectually and politically marginalized in the putatively open space. How to name and analyze the power-knowledge hegemonies within the WSF remains a complex and difficult question; these observations do suggest however that dynamics of domination-subordination persist, reproducing in a myriad of complicated ways, entangled hierarchies of patriarchy, subalternity, and coloniality. To the extent that one wants to recognize and confront these power relations, Pratt’s understanding of the contact zone as the space of encounter between groups differently located in terms of the coloniality of power/knowledge and therefore, riven through with asymmetrical power relations seems indispensable when considering the World Social Forum.

### **Beyond co-presence: towards cosmopolitan contact zones?**

As suggested above, there are different kinds of difference operating within the WSF that produce variable marginalities, that also vary across the time-places of the WSF. For these reasons, it is problematic to talk about difference and marginality, or dialogue across difference, in the abstract, at the WSF or elsewhere. In the case of inter-cultural difference among movements, Santos proposes: (1) that dialogues should arise from practical recognition of similar aspirations or converging concerns; and (2) dialogue must start from the recognition that the ‘truths’ of one’s own culture are partial, that all cultures are incomplete and will be enriched by dialogue and confrontation with others. “The recognition of reciprocal incompleteness and weakness is the condition-sine-qua-non of a cross-cultural dialogue.” (Santos, 2005, p. 18)

Santos sees in the WSF extraordinary forces of attraction among diverse movements but weak aggregation, or low-intensity articulation. Santos calls the dialogical and political task of building articulation, aggregation and coalition among all the different movements the work of

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<sup>10</sup>Both quotations translated from Spanish by author.

“translation,” which allows for mutual intelligibility across difference. In thinking about the work of translation, he is interested primarily in the conditions that will give rise to greater capacity by a range of diverse movements to act together in counter-hegemonic ways that are coherent and coalitional, while honouring the pluralism and diversity of the movements. The problem and goal of mutual intelligibility is instrumental to this end of constructing articulation among diverse struggles for the struggle for social transformation via a strategy of counter-hegemony.

The task of translation is to generate new knowledges and practices capable of confronting neoliberal globalization and oriented to plural conceptions of social emancipation. Global social justice is not possible without global cognitive justice -- the recognition of and engagement with the subaltern knowledges suppressed by modernity and rendered backward, primitive, or traditional by eurocentrism, on their own terms towards new and *plural* understandings of emancipation (Santos, 2005).

Without prior consensus that there is not and can be no general theory of social transformation, translation is a colonial undertaking--no matter how postcolonial it claims to be. “The work of translation is to turn incommensurability into difference, a difference enabling mutual intelligibility among the different projects of social emancipation. The goal is to construct an ethical and political position without grounding it in any absolute principle.” (Santos, Nunes & Meneses, 2007, p. xl) Santos argues that the extraordinary power of the WSF lies precisely in its refusal of the idea of a general theory. The alternative to a general theory, he suggests, is the work of translation. He and his colleagues further argue that “dialogues between knowledges may lead to regional or sectoral universalisms constructed from below, that is, to counter-hegemonic public spheres -- or ... ‘subaltern cosmopolitanism’” which start from recognition of the plurality of knowledges and of world views.

For this to take place in a way in which the specificities, identities and autonomies of the various movements are respected, he argues that an enormous effort at mutual intelligibility will be required: “the cosmopolitan contact zone starts from the assumption that it is up to each knowledge or practice to decide what to put in contact with whom.” There are strong echoes here of rationalist communicative ethics: each movement is conceived of as rational, autonomous and bounded, and deciding the terms on which they will be in the exchange. Indeed, Santos goes on to say, the goal of the work of translation is the development among the movements of “a cosmopolitan reason based on the core idea that global social justice is not possible without global cognitive justice.” (21).

However, according to Santos, there are features in every culture<sup>11</sup> deemed too central to be exposed and rendered vulnerable, or aspects that are inherently untranslatable. Due to histories of extreme oppression, there are also aspects that have been rendered unpronounceable. “These are deep absences, made of an emptiness impossible to fill; the silences they produce are too unfathomable to become the object of translation work.” (21) Discerning these differences and making/respecting these decisions are part of the work of translation. For example, Santos acknowledges that indigenous peoples have contested what is open for sharing and translation vis-a-vis non-indigenous societies and claims they are conducting a similar process vis-a-vis non-indigenous movements in the WSF (21) although he provides no details.

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<sup>11</sup>Santos does not clearly conceptualize ‘culture’ so it is not clear what kind of difference he is thinking of. In some places, culture seems to map onto to the historical geographies of the major religions/civilizations.

There are important insights here about the problems and conditions of communication across difference and inequality, but power relations and the legacies of coloniality within the WSF remain largely unproblematized in Santos' work. In an interesting contrast, rather than translation, Pratt speaks of "transculturation" as a phenomenon of the contact zone. By this, she means "processes whereby members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture." (Pratt, 1991, p. 35) She observes "the absolute heterogeneity of meanings," the inevitably asymmetrical character of communication, and the frequency of incommunicability, mistranslation and incommensurability in the contact zone (Pratt, 1991). In this, she departs decisively from the fictions of the 'ideal speech' situation of Habermasian communicative ethics because she recognizes that the coloniality of power remains operative and, by extension, that a more self-conscious decolonizing praxis beyond simple 'inclusion' will be required to confront it.<sup>12</sup> Santos, on the other hand, in the public space of the WSF, constituted by oppositional movements most of whom are rooted in the global South, assumes a shared communicative culture not significantly distorted by power imbalances.

While conceiving of the WSF as a cosmopolitan contact zone in the way imagined by Santos may occlude too much in the way of power relations, the concept may indeed be fitting when applied to some specific movement practices within the WSF. Feminist-sponsored cross-movement dialogues have been among the most explicit efforts to construct the cosmopolitan contact zones in the context of the WSF, in ways imagined by Santos. Breaking down sectoral silos in movement politics emerged as key priorities in feminist strategy sessions preceding the 2004 WSF. A transnational feminist collaboration went on to host an inter-movement dialogue in Mumbai involving two speakers from each of four movements: women's, sexuality rights, labour and dalit rights/racial justice movements. Each was asked to speak to how their movement had incorporated class, gender, race and sexuality questions, the dilemmas and problems they had confronted and the strategies they had employed. Activists from the other movements were asked to respond. Then the second speaker from the original movement was asked to comment, refute or clarify. This proceeded through four rounds and was moderated. This format was repeated in subsequent years in Porto Alegre in 2005, Nairobi in 2007 and Belem in 2009 (Shah, October 2005; Gandhi & Shah, 2006).<sup>13</sup> Such inter movement dialogues are communicative practices that are critical in fostering intelligibility across difference and are themselves constitutive of movement-building across issues, sectors, and regions. However, it is also important to note that these dialogues proceed largely in the terms set by their feminist organizers, notably through analytical discourses of intersectionality.<sup>14</sup>

Gandhi and Shah, two organizers of the inter-movement dialogues see this initiative as contributing to the evolving methodology of the WSF which seeks to promote exchange among diverse visions and struggles. They are also aware of the inherent tensions and contradictions in the movements' attempts to simultaneously recognize difference while avoiding essentialism. They write:

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<sup>12</sup>For more on this, see (Pratt, 1991)

<sup>13</sup>See also, <http://feministdialogues.isiswomen.org/>

<sup>14</sup>See Desai, 2005, p. 327 for convergent observations. Feminist work on intersectionality offers an alternative theoretical tradition by which to consider the problems raised in this paper about communication and collaboration across difference in movement politics. This will be the subject of future work.

In our experience, social movement activists who have to strike a balance between pragmatism, theorization and strategy agree to a rejection of sweeping categorizations but usually retain the concept of categories itself. However, most have not sufficiently come to grips with the politics of differences and the notion of conflicting identities. As movement activists, we need to not only accept difference, diversity and plurality but try to incorporate these ideas within our movements and strategies. This was the underlying motivation behind the organizing of the ‘Inter-Movement Dialogues’ as a methodology for a collective reflection on inter category and intra category approaches to deepen our theory and bridges across movements (Gandhi, et al., 2006, p. 73).

Another example of such a cosmopolitan contact zone emergent in the WSF is the World Dignity Forum, a dalit-driven, transnational and cross-movement dialogue built around the concept of dignity. This emerged as an initiative by some sectors of the dalit movement in India towards the 2004 WSF in Mumbai, where it attracted 8000 participants. The Dignity Forum was reprised in Porto Alegre in 2005, with 3000 participants, and was again visible in Nairobi in 2007. Organizers of the World Dignity Forum report that they had to fight to participate in the India Organizing Committee because caste was not seen as a “global” issue. In their own view, insisting on a World Dignity Forum was an intervention into the WSF process, including in

evolving a concept on dignity, which is comprehensive, dynamic, inclusive, and analysing its global contours while basing it in the status and situation of India’s dalits, other backward classes, minorities, women and the physically disabled. The WDF was to complement the World Social Forum by focussing on social discrimination and indignities that remained neglected...The World Dignity Forum process interwove the issues that are principal to the World Social Forum and complemented them with the issues such as casteism, racism, social discrimination and exclusions that WDF felt were missing from the WSF discourse.”” (World Dignity Forum, 2004, pp. 23–24, 30)

In Mumbai, the World Dignity Forum simultaneously functioned as a space by and for dalits, a strategy to communicate the caste issue to an international audience, and an effort at bridge-building with other subaltern movements on basis of ‘dignity’ -- grounded in dalit realities of South Asia, yet reaching out to other oppressed groups, notably Africans and Afro-descendants, indigenous peoples, Palestinians and religious minorities. In Porto Alegre in 2005, the Dignity Forum featured dialogues with the landless movement from Brazil, Andean indigenous organizations from Ecuador and Bolivia, Afro-Colombian communities, and Quilombolas (Afro-descendants) in Brazil.

In a speech to the 2005 World Dignity Forum, organizer Mukul Sharma elaborated:

The question of diversity is one of the central contexts to specify the political context of dignity today. This is regarding the clarity and the consistency of the dignity agenda with the preparedness to engage with the politics of difference. The plurality of our societies means that such differences are potentially mobilisable in a wide variety of forms, of which caste, race, gender, nationality, ability, sexuality are among the most prominent.

Here the emphasis on, diversity and difference is not only on identity, rather more on social, politics, economic or anti-colonial motivation and intervention for assertion of autonomy...the politics of difference with dignity is also essential to challenge the essentialised notions of the citizenry which is leading in many cases to exclusion, discrimination, occupation, forced assimilation, denial of actually existing ethnic (sic!) language, sexual, ability and other diversities, and the imposition of unitary identity on complex social systems.” (Sharma, 2005, pp. 7, 8)

The inter-movement dialogues sponsored by feminists and the World Dignity Forum are both examples of “subaltern cosmopolitanism” (Santos & Rodriguez-Garavito, 2005). They are among numerous instantiations of cosmopolitan contact zones facilitated by the open space of the WSF and, in these cases, initiated by movements of the global South who have felt intellectually and politically marginalized within the Forum. What is interesting to note, additionally, is the delimited character of each of these practices, and the role played by the convening movements in suggesting the terms for the encounter.

### **Indigenizing the Forum: towards a praxis of decolonization?**

On the question of difference, recognition, and the possibility of communicability, the challenges are far greater than the discourses of open space admit. Mutual intelligibility among movements, including those who share opposition to neoliberal globalization, is not a given. Ever-expanding diversity is arising from sheer multiplicity of forms of domination/resistance to which the movements of the Social Forum attest and the array of places and scales from which they arise. Some movements are more experienced with working across (some kinds of) difference than others. For all the movements, the sheer array of diversity in the WSF is confronting them with a historical challenge and invitation to unprecedented degrees of reflexivity, solidarity and transformation.

Moreover, movements have to recognize their own histories of colonialism and exclusion, male supremacy and racial hierarchy *in producing difference* order to engage in non-dominating ways with one another, in and beyond the Social Forum. Although this is a task for all, it is not equally so. It seems inescapable therefore, that subaltern perspectives must be privileged or, at least, met with thoughtful silence and practical solidarity while movements contemplate their historical and current positionality in creating colonial difference. This recognition is controversial but I believe foundational to advancing movement dialogues in and beyond the WSF.

There are some very important initiatives within the Social Forum process that reflect this recognition. One of the most pre-figurative was the 1st Social Forum of the America held in 2004 in Quito, Ecuador. Ecuador has recently been home to one of the strongest, most dynamic and politically potent indigenous movements in the world, where Aymara and Quechua peoples make up more than 40% of the national population.. The key national indigenous networks, CONAIE and ECUARNARI, were prominent members of the organizing committee of the ASF which declared gender and diversity as transversal axes.

In Latin America and beyond, this event issued a major challenge to prevailing Social Forum practices. In Brazil, the Social Forum has been the purview of more traditional constituencies of the Latin American left – in Brazil, notably the PT (Workers Party), the CUT (central labour federation) , and peasant (Via Campesina) and landless movements (Movimiento

Sem Terra--MST). While a plethora of other movements and political orientations have been present, these entities with their predominantly socialist and statist discourses have cast long shadows. The choice of Porto Alegre as the site of the WSF has also been significant. While it is a city that has had a PT administration since the late 1980s and is the home of globally-acclaimed experimentations in participatory budgeting, it is also in the south of Brazil. With a population of predominantly European origin, many small and medium sized agricultural operations, and a healthy economic base, it is a light-skinned and relatively prosperous part of Brazil, far from the favelas of Recife, the Black Brazil of the North East, or the indigenous presence in the Amazon. The experiences and political discourses of the Afro descendants and indigenous peoples have been barely audible in the World Social Forum in Brazil.

The Americas Social Forum in Quito issued a strong challenge to Porto Alegre from within the Latin American orbit in the 1000 strong indigenous people present, in their prominent presence on panels not narrowly about indigenous issues, in the visibility of their art forms, music and dance throughout the event, in their distinct political discourses, visions, projects and processes, and in their twin insistence that they need the World Social Forum, and the world-wide movement against neoliberal globalization needs them.

The Americas Social Forum was organized by a coalition of indigenous, feminist and queer organizations. The Forum was also the occasion for the 1st Forum on Sexual Diversity. The tensions among the discourses of these movements were not resolved in Quito but they were on the table, being named and explored, even as these movement actively collaborated in conceiving and mounting the event. Their various constituencies co-occupied the space, shared platforms, organized their own discussions, facilitated cross-movement dialogues, ate, assembled and marched together. This Social Forum is an example of how an ensemble of place-based movements seized a Social Forum in its entirety, in this case, at the regional scale, to enact and advance the possibility of dialogue across colonial difference. In so doing, out of Pratt's contact zone across colonial difference, organizers forged a temporary and pre-figurative cosmopolitan contact zone closer to Santos' hopes for the World Social Forum.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have analyzed the Social Forum is a 'contact zone' that, although situated in a context of global coloniality, is enabling the emergence of communicative practices across previously unbridged, indeed largely unrecognized, differences. The methodology of 'open space' is central to the dynamics of recognition and dialogue. However, I have distinguished between the accomplishments of the praxis of open space, its expanding globality and impressive incorporation of subaltern movements AND the creation of conditions for inter-movement and inter-cultural communicability beyond simply sharing presence in the space. This putatively horizontal and utopian space is also marked by unequal power relations and, in particular, largely unacknowledged legacies of colonialism that impede communicability and solidarity across "cultural and cosmological divides" (Mohanty, 2005) in movement politics. The praxis of open space is contested, conflictual, and permanently incomplete, marked by inequalities and incommensurabilities.

For all the achievements of the open space of the WSF, it is extraordinary to note the similarities in the accounts of feminist, dalit and indigenous movements in their struggles for inclusion and the persistence of their sense of marginality. These observation raise very profound

questions about the character of the WSF's putatively 'open space,' its limitations, inequalities, and exclusions and, in particular, the need for a praxis of *decolonization*.<sup>15</sup> In profound ways, this demands a decolonization of knowledge, including the emancipatory knowledges of modernity which have been so central to the politics of many progressive movements worldwide

In thinking this through, I have been informed by the work of the Latin American Research Group, particularly their notions of coloniality and colonial difference, their strategies for the decolonization of knowledge, and the possibility of "'a new conceptualization of post colonial politics' that is able to imagine 'joining the radical political tradition of Bandung ... to an ethos of agonistic respect for pluralizations of subaltern difference'." (Escobar, 2004, p. 208; Scott, 1999) In terms of the possibility of communicating across difference in movement politics while also recognizing that different identities are differentially located in various fields of power, their notion of subaltern or "colonial difference" is an important theoretical resource.

In this paper, I have explored the utility of understanding the World Social Forum as a "contact zone" in order to analyze the dynamics of encounter and exchange across difference among the movements. Reflecting on specific movement practices in the context of the WSF, I have concluded that some movements have successfully crafted cosmopolitan contact zones, establishing dialogues across difference with prospective allies in terms important to their movement. Santos' version of the cosmopolitan contact zone is an apt one for some of these inter-movement dialogues facilitated by the WSF, but it is more problematic when applied to the open space as a whole. Here its application can too easily obscure inequalities among movements and the ongoing production of centres and margins in the WSF itself. Santos' concept of the contact zone is insufficiently attentive to the asymmetries that persist among progressive movements, despite their shared opposition to neoliberalism. In particular, Santos does not sufficiently recognize or problematize the coloniality of power operative in encounters (within and) between progressive movements, both across the North-South axis but also within and among movements of the South. His theorization of the WSF as the work of translation is not sufficiently troubled by the coloniality of power and knowledge, its imbrication with patriarchies, and the resulting inequalities and incommensurabilities that impede cross-movement and cross-cultural communication and collaboration in the present. In this, Pratt's alternative understanding of the contact zone is an important corrective.

There is still much work to be done to understand and promote communicability and collaboration across difference among the movements that agglomerate in the World Social Forum, including fuller analyses of the relations between different forms of hegemony and subordination in the WSF, of different kinds of difference operating at the WSF, of alterity and incommensurability in the WSF and their political meaning, and the meaning of all these for worlds beyond the WSF and the struggles for myriad forms of justice. This article points to both the need for and the emergence of new epistemologies to undergird reconstructed ethical practices of encounter, exchange and collaboration among progressive movements, especially across "colonial difference" toward "a practice of relational knowledge production that will allow people and knowledge systems to interact with each others in noncolonizing, nonhierarchical ways." (Waller & Marcos, 2005, p. xxi). Central to this undertaking is the critical acknowledgement of hegemonies, marginalities, and alterities *within* the putatively horizontal and egalitarian spaces of encounter among the global justice movements.

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<sup>15</sup> For the moment, I am leaving aside the question of patriarchy and its imbrication with coloniality. This work remains to be done.

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