**Submission for the International Researchers Consortium Workshop**

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*Institutional description*

This study took place in an R1 university in the U.S. Pacific Northwest, involving a group of Indonesian Master’s and PhD students from a variety of disciplines across the humanities, social sciences, and STEM. The case study presented in this submission involves an Indonesian international Ph.D. candidate in a STEM field. All of the research participants are student-writers who are working on a research project about Indonesia, thus forming transnational connections between their research context (Indonesia) and the U.S. university sponsoring their research.

*Key Theorists*

My work lies at the intersections of decolonial theories and transnational studies in rhetoric and composition. As such, my work engages with the following 3 clusters of scholarship. *First*, I align myself with scholarship on decoloniality (e.g., Mignolo and Walsh), which draws a distinction between colonization and coloniality. “Colonization” refers to a political project that has to do with gaining freedom from conquest and establishing independent nation-states. “Coloniality,” however, includes more than these material political issues. Its violence is both material and abstract — it includes the *logic* that undergirds the material violence of colonization. My project deals primarily with coloniality and its entanglement with knowledge production—how colonial logics are reproduced or challenged through research and writing. *Second*, I situate myself within the global or transnational turn in rhetoric and composition. I take up Dingo et al.’s call for “a more comprehensive understanding of the transnational as a complex, networked understanding of power” (518) that transcend nation-state borders. Bringing this approach in conversation with decolonial theories, I imagine a transnational and decolonial rhetoric and composition studies that works primarily toward the tracing and unveiling of global coloniality. *Third*, I attend to scholarly works that highlight the multiplicity and entanglementof different colonial structures (Da Costa and Da Costa; Lionnet and Shih; Lowe) as well as the necessity of defining the specificity of different colonial formations (e.g. Veracini).

*Glossary*

* Papua: the easternmost region of Indonesia. The island of Papua is divided into two: the eastern half is Papua New Guinea, which is its own independent country, while West Papua is currently a territory occupied by Indonesia. In this submission, because both myself and my participant are Indonesians, I refer to “West Papua” simply as “Papua,” that is, the Indonesian side of Papua.
* Java-centrism: an approach or ideology in Indonesia that puts the island of Java—and the worldview and ways of beings of people in Java—as the standard and default approach for all regions of Indonesia, ignoring the cultural and social diversity of the thousands of ethnic groups in the vast archipelago. In my view, factors that uphold Java-centrism include the fact that Java is the most populous island in the archipelago; it is where the central government and capital are; it was where Batavia, the heart of the Dutch colony, was; and the leaders (presidents) of the country have all been historically Javanese.

**Chapter 4**

**On the Costs of Decoloniality in Transcolonial Knowledge-Making**

Before Rio’s mock job talk, before our discussions on the epistemic translation strategies in his revised job talk, my ethnography actually began somewhere else, four months prior, at the dining room table of another Indonesian Ph.D. candidate whom I will refer to as Esther. At that time, we had known each other for 5 years, and she was one of the first Indonesians I knew in the U.S. Because of this, of course she was the first person who came to my mind when I started my research.

Esther spoke Indonesian in an idiosyncratic way, different from the Indonesian I’m used to hearing in Jakarta, where I grew up. It was only later, after several gatherings of Indonesian students in the Pacific Northwest, that I understood she was from Papua. Based on her looks, I hadn’t guessed that she was from Papua, Indonesia’s easternmost region. Papuans were racially Melanesian, with darker skin colors than people from other parts of Indonesia. But Esther didn’t look Melanesian, which made me think at first that she was Javanese, or at least from Java, or somewhere in western Indonesia.

In our literacy history interview, I finally learned that she was, indeed, ethnically Javanese. But her Javanese family moved to Papua when she was little, and so she spent her childhood in Papua, and came to see herself as Papuan. When I asked if she identified herself as Javanese, Indonesian, or Papuan first and foremost, she answered Papuan—which, to be honest, surprised me a little, not only because I felt it was more common for people to highlight their national identity (especially when abroad) or ethnic identity, but also because of the fraughtness of the region she chose to tie herself to.

Like the rest of the land currently known as Indonesia, Papua was formerly a Dutch occupied territory. It remained the Dutch’s foothold in Southeast Asia until they surrendered their claim in 1963. A referendum known as the “Act of Free Choice” was then held in 1969 for Papuans to decide if they would prefer self-determination or become a part of Indonesia. But rather than giving all 800,000 indigenous Papuans a vote, the Indonesian government—which had ambitions for the territory—selected only around 1,000 Papuan leaders to make their vote in the presence of Indonesian soldiers. The result was a unanimous vote in favor of accession to Indonesia, despite the separatist insurgencies happening throughout the 1960s until today.

In light of this, many have characterized the relationship between Papua and Indonesia as settler colonialism (Hanrahan; McNamee). There would be little dispute that Papua is an underdeveloped region—a paradox, since it is also home to the Grasberg mine, the world’s largest copper and gold deposit—but the Indonesian government would be far less likely to acknowledge that Papuans deserve their own independence. In fact, the state actively suppresses journalism and scholarship aimed to shed light on the government’s mistreatments of Papua (Nugroho). Anti-Papuan sentiments are also widespread among the Indonesian everyman, be it in the form of racism or opposition to the prospect of a Papuan independence. In 2019, when the Papuan independence movement once again gained spotlight in national news, the slogan *“NKRI harga mati”* (“the United Republic of Indonesia at all costs”) became the rallying cry of nationalists who were unsympathetic to the Papuan cause. For a country whose biggest achievement was kicking out its colonizers and forming a government that could rule over 13,000-odd islands, this fierce guarding of national unity was perhaps understandable, despite its constitution clearly spelling out that *“kemerdekaan itu adalah hak segala bangsa”* (“freedom is the right of all people on earth”).

Like it or not, this political dynamic serves as the backdrop for Esther’s research and identity. Several times in our conversations, she confessed in a heartfelt way that she pursued graduate studies in the U.S. because she wanted to help improve Papua. Her dissertation project, too, was designed to center Papuans and their issues, working for their benefit and in their own terms, because she was aware that very few research and development projects truly incorporated Papuan voices. Most were done using frameworks, methods, standards, and goals fit for western Indonesia, without asking if Papuans would like the same things the central government offered to Java, without using data or ideas sourced from Papuans themselves. Java-centrism is an often-unacknowledged problem in Indonesia. Esther wanted to work against that.

It is significant that Esther chooses to do this by doing graduate studies at an American institution. As such, her knowledge-making is one located in two peripheries: Papua, which is the periphery of Indonesia’s central government, and the Global South, which is the periphery of the Euroamerican-centered academic institution sponsoring her research. In turn, this means there are two undercurrents of global coloniality flowing below the surface of her knowledge-making. One is the (officially unrecognized by the Indonesian government) colonial relationship between Indonesia and Papua. The other is the epistemic coloniality and uneven distribution of knowledge structuring the Eurocentric academia, as we’ve previously seen in the previous chapter with Rio’s case study. Studying Esther’s knowledge-making then requires an understanding of not only transnational relations, but also *transcolonial* relations. Hers is a movement of knowledge across nation-state borders *and* across colonial structures.

Françoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih offer one articulation of the relationship between transnationalism and transcolonialism. In *Minor Transnationalism,* they critique the way that transnational relations are often viewed in terms of vertical relationships between majority and minority, colonizer and colonized, global and local. In contrast, they argue for more attention to “transversal movements of culture,” which includes “minor cultural articulations in productive relationship with the major … *as well as minor-to-minor networks that circumvent the major altogether*” (8, emphasis mine). In emphasizing minor-to-minor networks, they acknowledge that “not all minorities are minoritized by the same mechanisms in different places,” and that “looking at the way minority issues have been formulated in other national and regional contexts” will enable us to see that “all expressive discourses … are inflected by transnational and transcolonial processes” (10-11). They conceptualize transcolonialism as “the shared, though differentiated, experience of colonialism and neocolonialism (by the same colonizer or by different colonizers), a site of trauma, constituting the shadowy side of the transnational” (11).

Lionnet and Shih’s transcolonialism is valuable in its articulation of differently contextualized forms of colonialism, and of the movements and solidarities between colonized populations at different sites around the world. However, their framework does not seem to adequately describe Esther’s case for two reasons. First, in highlighting minor-to-minor networks, Lionnet and Shih speak of at least two different populations and sites that have experiences of colonialism or neocolonialism. While Esther’s graduate studies do involve travel between sites—the U.S. and Indonesia—she herself *embodies* these two sites. A study of her knowledge-making process is not simply a study of two geopolitical locations or two colonized populations; it is a study of two (or more) *epistemic locations* embodied in the same person. Second, while Lionnet and Shih are interested in echoes of colonialism across different sites and the solidarity[[1]](#footnote-0) that can emerge between minoritized groups if they listen to those echoes, I am more interested in the way that Esther navigate different-but-juxtaposed colonial structures at the same time. This is less about “minor-to-minor networks” or “transversal movements or culture” across locations around the globe; this is about the convergence of overlapping forms of coloniality on the same site.

Da Costa and da Costa’s concept of “multiple colonialisms” does better in capturing this dynamic. Multiple colonialisms, they say, are evident when Indigenous activists yell out the protest chant ‘No ban on stolen land’ in solidarity with Muslim people against the U.S. travel ban. This is effectively a protest against multiple colonialisms, specifically the convergence between “the colonization of Turtle Island and the histories of racialized coloniality upon which contemporary Islamophobia is founded” (344). As cultural studies scholars, da Costa and da Costa then argue for the necessity to “situate cultural production in the context of multiple colonialisms in order to examine the complex relationalities of multiple and converging colonial relations in historical and contemporary contexts within which cultural production does its work” (344). Such an approach begins with the assumption that coloniality is “unexceptional and pervasive” as well as “multiply-articulated in form and condition” (345). However, this pervasiveness and multiple articulations do not mean that all structures of oppression are equivalent. Instead, a multiple colonialisms framework allows us to examine “the relationality, contradictions, and incommensurabilities generated within converging structures and multiple articulations of colonial and racialized violence across spaces” (344).

It is important to highlight that the multiple colonial structures that Esther must confront came to converge *because of* her transnational scholarship. Her studies brought into collision those disparate colonial structures, even though one is rooted in the U.S. and the other in Papua, Indonesia. In other words, transnational scholarship may create an epistemic space where different colonial structures converge, even though these structures would not have converged so intimately without the connection the scholar makes in her transnational knowledge making. The scholar’s transnational scholarship, then, becomes a site of multiple colonialisms. Importantly, this is a site created only through epistemic *movements*, like when a scholar investigates two different locations in a multi-sited or global ethnography, or when an immigrant scholar brings to bear knowledge from two different loci of enunciations, their homeland and the country they immigrated to. The role that movements play in creating such a site of convergence for multiple colonialisms makes transnational scholarship essentially also *transcolonial* scholarship, with the prefix *trans-* highlighting the movements and navigation between multiple articulations of colonial violence.

Treating transnational scholarship as a site of multiple colonialisms—a site created through transnational and transcolonial epistemic movements—calls for the intervention of rhetoric and composition studies, a field whose primary interest lies in writing and writing processes. In light of this framework, we might ask: How does writing bring together multiple articulations of colonial violence rooted in sites that may not have been connected before? How does studying the writing process of transnational scholars enable us to trace the relationality, contraditions, and incommensurabilities of the multiple colonial structures brought together in their scholarship? How does transnational writing also become a process of transcolonial navigation, the negotiation between multiple converging colonial structures? How can writing instructors, mentors, and audiences of Global South scholarship support transnational scholars from the Global South in their knowledge-making?

These are also the questions I am asking about Esther’s case. To study her transcolonial navigation and how her scholarship becomes a site of convergence between the Eurocentric academia’s epistemic coloniality and the Indonesian government’s colonization of Papua, I examine the introduction and conclusion chapters of her dissertation, using *cyclical talk around text* (Lillis; Lillis and Curry), in which we discussed the original and revised drafts of her chapters, and *stereoscopic reading* (Price), in which I treat her revised drafts as translation and interpretation of the originals, and read them side by side to trace how considerations of multiple converging colonial structures affected her writing and revision/translation strategies. From analyses of the original and revised drafts, the feedback given by Esther’s dissertation supervisor on the drafts, and our conversations around her writing and writing process, we will see how the Eurocentric academia’s epistemic coloniality and Indonesia’s colonization on Papua both work together to silence Esther in her knowledge-making, thus invisibilizing the presence of those colonial structures. Her transnational and transcolonial scholarship, as such, plays a part in the production of ignorance around colonial dynamics.

# Esther’s dissertation: on multiple colonialisms, transcolonial navigation, and the reproduction of colonial unknowing

Like the case with Rio’s job talk, I also hadn’t planned to analyze any one of Esther’s writings for my own dissertation project, until I stumbled upon something too interesting to miss. It was a day in early February 2024 when Esther texted me to ask for an urgent help with her dissertation. Being a writing instructor and part of the Indonesian graduate student community, I had often received various requests for writing assistance from my fellow Indonesian students, and at that point I had helped Esther with several other pieces of academic writing. That time, she needed someone to edit the third chapter of her dissertation and help her with drafting the introductory and concluding chapters. She needed to do all this quickly because her supervisor was going to review her drafts the day after. They were less than three weeks away from her scheduled dissertation defense.

I was aware that Esther had faced a lot of difficulties in her dissertation project. Her goal was to build an app that responded to a problem identified by the Papuan population she studied[[2]](#footnote-1). Her insistence on a human-centered design that incorporated Papuan users in the design process meant that she needed to do an ethnographic study in Papua, an endeavor that was both time-consuming and expensive, involving many transpacific flights over at least three years. The COVID pandemic slowed her research down significantly; she had to pause her visits to Papua because of the lockdowns, and when she was finally allowed to go, several incidents with the university’s funding-related bureaucratic processes contributed to the wearing down of her morale. She had won a prestigious external research funding to the tune of 20,000 U.S. dollars, but despite this achievement, the university administrator that supervised her funds usage treated her in patronizing ways, often questioning her knowledge of Indonesian payment systems and her ability to understand the guidelines on international use of funds. She had read the guidelines carefully, she said, and followed all that was written there. But still the administrator treated her as if she didn’t understand English and couldn’t follow instructions. In the end, when it was proven she hadn’t done anything wrong—it was the administrator who’d belabored the matter with their needless suspicions—she didn’t even receive any apology. This was one of several incidents that made her question her own English language skills, all of which accumulated into a severe case of burnout that made it hard for her to write. This was why at that time in February when she reached out to me for help, she was already a year past her supposed graduation date and funding expiry, a costly delay that pushed her to take out a significant amount of loan to cover her tuition and living expenses in the U.S.

The day after I received her text, I set aside an entire evening to go to her house and see what I could do to help. She looked visibly distressed; she hadn’t finished drafting the introduction and conclusion chapters that were already due. We both sat down in front of her computer, and she started telling me about how difficult it was for her to explain Papua’s context in a way that her supervisor would understand. Whenever she tried to do so in the drafts of her other chapters, something always went wrong: her supervisor would question her explanation, demand more explanation that she didn’t know how to give, or flat out not understand her attempts at explaining. A particularly difficult case was that her supervisor wanted a justification for Esther’s choice to research Papua—why Papua, what was different and significant about it? Esther didn’t know how to answer this question in a satisfying way without also calling attention to Indonesia’s colonization of Papua.

Her anxiety around pointing out the fraught dynamics between Papua and the Indonesian central government stemmed from Indonesia’s tendency to suppress and even criminalize critical reporting and scholarship on the central government’s treatment of Papua (Nugroho). Because Esther herself was a civil servant and faculty member at a state university in Papua, the threat of the government’s policing around Papuan issue felt especially palpable to her. She worried, for example, what if one day when she had to go through a performance review for a promotion, she was found to be “pro-Papua”? This would be a bad thing, of course, because being pro-Papua was synonymous with supporting the separatist movement threatening the unity and integrity of the Indonesian nation-state. She said it was impossible for her to say anything in her dissertation about Papua’s history and politics in a way that suggested any conflict with the Indonesian government, even though what drew her research to Papua was the inequality experienced by Papuans as a product of its conflict-ridden relationship with the central government—a relationship that was in fact settler colonial.

Here we can begin to see how Indonesia’s colonialism obstructed Esther’s transnational knowledge-making by forcing her—even if indirectly—to reproduce the silence and invisibility surrounding the colonial violence in Papua. Esther did try to get around this enforced silence a few times, hinting at Indonesia’s coloniality in ways that didn’t name it head on. Esther attempted to hint at the coloniality surrounding Papua by writing about how Papuans are racially Melanesian, with darker skin colors than people from other parts of Indonesia—especially compared to western Indonesia, where the central government is. She mentioned this racial difference to hint at—without blatantly naming it—the racism that inflected the marginalization, deprivation, and violence that Papuans endure, which then made research that benefitted Papuans even more urgent. But instead of picking up on the hints, her supervisor only questioned why skin color mattered in the making of an app. This reaction understandably frustrated Esther. While she acknowledged that maybe she could have been more direct and clearer in explaining the role of racism in the plight of Papuans, she stressed that she couldn’t afford to spell out this critique for fear of negative repercussions from the Indonesian government. She felt that bringing up race should have been enough to give a hint at the dynamics at hand, especially since critique on anti-Blackness is already more mainstream in the U.S. than it is in Indonesia. The supervisor’s lack of uptake made her wonder if it was the supervisor’s white privilege that had stopped them from making the connection between skin color, racism, and the urgency to do research that benefits a racially marginalized population.

I contend that the negotiation that Esther did across Indonesian and Western academia’s colonialities was uniquely difficult. Articulating the nature of her difficulties also requires describing the colonial structures she worked in. To do this, I take inspiration from the logical steps through which Lorenzo Veracini formulates an analytical distinction between colonialism and settler colonialism. Veracini argues that distinguishing settler colonialism from colonialism is important because their “distinct stances create different conditions of possibility for different patterns of relationships” (3), and their “structurally different demands prompt structurally different reactions, however intertwined” (4). In short, there are four things to look at when considering the differences between colonial structure and another: stances, patterns of relationships, demands, and reactions.

Under Western epistemic coloniality, academic knowledge production centers (white male Anglophone) Western Europe and North America, and in turn, marginalizes knowledge coming from places and identities outside of those (Cupples and Grosfoguel), which means that the U.S. academia where Esther studied knows comparatively little about Indonesia. But the academia—because their job is knowledge—does not like not knowing. So when they enter into a conversation with a non-Western scholar like Esther, their first reaction is often to ask—or demand—the non-Western scholar to explain to them the non-Western context their scholarship is coming from (Cadena). In short, it demands *visibility* from the non-Western person, for the scholarly consumption of the Western academia*.*

But Indonesia and its settler colonialism operates under a “logic of elimination” (Wolfe) and “non-encounter,” which is “a recurring need to disavow the presence of indigenous ‘others’” (Veracini 2). It demands silence around its violence, to minimize resistance and critique on the land dispossession and genocide it commits. In short, it demands *invisibility*. Esther, who is subject to both colonial structures, is then expected to react in two diametrically opposed ways. To fulfill Western epistemic coloniality’s demand for visibility, in her dissertation she was trying to explain Papua’s context, including the inequities they suffer under Indonesian settler colonialism. But at the same time, to fulfill Indonesia’s settler colonialism’s demand for invisibility, she was *also* trying to *not* explain Papua’s context and how most of it is shaped by Indonesian settler colonialism.

Table 1: One analysis of the differential operations of Western epistemic coloniality and Indonesian settler colonialism

|  | **Western epistemic coloniality** | **Indonesian settler colonialism** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Stances** | Knowledge centered on (white male Anglophone) Western Europe and North America (Cupples and Grosfoguel) | Logic of elimination(Wolfe)  |
| **Relationships** | Entitlement to knowledge (Cadena); scholarly consumption | Settler colonial “non-encounter” (Veracini) |
| **Demands** | Explain the non-Western context (Veracini) 🡪 ***visibility*** | Silence on its settler colonialism (Veracini; Mignolo and Walsh) 🡪 ***invisibility*** |
| **Reactions** | Trying to explain the inequities in Papua, caused by Indonesian settler colonialism. | Trying NOT to explain the inequities in Papua and how they’re caused by Indonesian settler colonialism. |

This is just one way that Indonesia’s colonialism—and Esther’s strategies to get around its silencing mechanism—are met with another colonial structure, that of the Wester epistemic coloniality. This entanglement even throws into doubt the utility of a project that attempts to uplift marginalized voice. Esther was determined to use human-centered design principles to adapt the app for the Papuan population by involving Papuans in the app’s design process and user testing, but when she reported the results of this process in her dissertation, her supervisor kept asking her what exactly she had done to adapt the app for Papuans. This is one comment the supervisor wrote on the draft of Esther’s concluding chapter: “I did not see clear ways the voices and traditions were incorporated. Be very explicit about what was uniquely added to tailor to this population. This is an important component to your work and you need to really highlight and state clearly what you added.” Esther had mentioned the app’s name (taken from Papuan words) and logo (which incorporated patterns echoing traditional Papuan textiles) as some Papua-specific adaptations she had done, but the supervisor wasn’t satisfied. Esther and I then discussed the possibility of adding more explanation of how she’d added motivational messages to the app in order to make Papuans feel more supported. I pointed out that everyone—not only Papuans—needed to feel supported, and so it likely wouldn’t satisfy the supervisor’s request for more Papua-specific adaptations. In frustration, Esther said, “I don’t know, there’s nothing tradition [sic] anymore.”

At a glance, this may be read as a failure in achieving Esther’s original goal of adapting the app in a way that incorporated Papuan voices and traditions. However, more discussions on Esther’s process of adapting the app revealed that this wasn’t simply her individual failure; it was instead a product of Indonesian and Western colonialities. Esther did incorporate Papuans in her app adaptation and refinement process. Before her study even began, she’d asked the targeted Papuan end users if an app could be helpful to them. She then recruited Papuan graphic designers and experts on technology to help with the app design, and interviewed Papuan targeted end users to seek input on their user experience. But when she asked whether they wanted the app to be in the Papuan dialect, for example, her participants declined the offer. They said that the apps they used had always been in standard Indonesian, so they felt like that was how things were supposed to be, and they didn’t want to be set apart from the rest of Indonesia. Esther mused that maybe if there had always been apps that used the Papuan dialect, they wouldn’t have felt this way. This is a symptom of how Indonesia enforces—whether subtly or violently—ways of life and standards originating from its center (meaning the central government in Java), which is then internalized by the Papuan people to the point that they would at times opt to minimize their particularities in order to uphold the state integrity that the central government prioritized at the expense of diversity and self-determination. Esther had indeed tried to tailor the app to Papuans and incorporate Papuan voices; it was just that under coloniality, attempts to seek “authentic” voices and traditions are fraught because surfacing such particularities may as well be impossible after the flattening of difference that is symptomatic of governments that run on colonial logics—including, in this specific case, the monolingual language ideology.

Traces of Western coloniality is also apparent here, in how the Papuan end users interviewed at the beginning of the study accepted the offer of an app because they didn’t want to be seen as backward. Despite Esther’s own apprehensions on whether an app was the right solutions for Papuans, the end users told her she shouldn’t underestimate Papuans; Papuans were also technologically savvy and modern, so of course they could use apps to help them in their work. (As I have recounted above, it was later proven that the app was not exactly the best solution for their specific situation.) It is interesting how the Papuan end users’ enthusiasm for the app was driven by something that might resemble a desire for empowerment and a sense of self-confidence in their own abilities—which could be read as decolonial, except that “abilities” here is too much of an echo of the standards of advancement according to Western modernity, which is the ability to use technology in every facet of life. The end users’ eagerness for the app might have been an eagerness to push against the West’s colonial framing of “third world countries” like Indonesia as backward and traditional, as opposed to sophisticated and modern. The widespread use of modern technology—especially those originating from the West—becomes a shorthand for “progress” regardless of whether such technologies are fundamentally suitable to the local way of life. In Esther’s case, this was exacerbated by how there weren’t enough studies in the first place that could inform her of the nature of the Papuan problem and what kinds of solutions would take. Her first instinct had indeed been to try to better understand the particularities of the Papuan problem—through a qualitative study—but the trends in Western academia pushed her in another direction. Technological solutionism (and the pursuit of Western modernity) didn’t only sabotage Esther’s efforts to improve the lives of marginalized Papuans; it also distracted her from her initial goal of understanding the full nature of the problem that Papuans face, a problem that stemmed from Indonesia’s colonization.

In sum, the accounts above show how the multiple colonialisms converging on Esther’s scholarship worked together to occlude the presence of coloniality—or, more accurately, multiple forms of coloniality—thus allowing colonial mindsets and violence to remain unchallenged. Each of Esther’s attempts to visibilize, critique, and seek redress for Papua’s colonization was then blocked by the Western academia’s knowledge-making conventions, which are inflected by Eurocentrism and epistemic coloniality. This invisibilization of coloniality has been theorized through concepts such as “epistemologies of ignorance” (Sullivan and Tuana), “agnotology” (Proctor and Schiebinger), and “colonial aphasia” (Stoler), and “colonial unknowing” (Vimalassery et al.), all of which speak of how colonial histories and their processes of racialization are made illegible in the present, stressing that this illegibility, ignorance, and disremembering are something that is produced, not at all natural or innocent. Vimalassery et al.’s conceptualization of colonial unknowing, in particular, sheds light on how ignorance of coloniality can be produced through an “epistemological orientation that works to pre-empt relational modes of analysis” (para. 3) that results in an “incomprehensibility between different forms of colonialism” (para. 6).

Hence, it is important important to hold specificity and entanglement together: “emphasising analytical distinction does not imply a denial of their simultaneous operation” (Veracini 4). When different forms of oppression and violence are viewed as the same thing, we risk overlooking specific processes that are incommensurable with each other. When different forms of oppression and violence are viewed as unrelated events—instead of overlapping structures that work together—we risk not anticipating what other obstructions lie in our path, leading to ineffective strategies against said oppression. In Esther’s case, this means that someone who focuses only on the Eurocentric academia’s lack of knowledge about the Global South may advise Esther to include more explanation on Papua, to help her supervisor understand her research problem. However, in focusing only on the university’s Eurocentric blindness, this advice ignores how Indonesia’s settler colonialism makes such explanation a threat and an impossibility. Conversely, someone who focuses only on producing scholarship that challenges Indonesia’s settler colonialism may overlook the difficulties in communicating such a critical stance in writing, both because Indonesia makes communicating this profoundly risky, and because the Western academia doesn’t know enough about the local context to see the value of such scholarship without the risky explaining. Esther’s focus on the marginalization of Papua-centric research in Indonesia resulted in a research design that aimed to center the preferences of Papuans, not considering that their preferences may have been flattened by Indonesia’s Java-centrism and monolingual language ideology on the one hand, and the West’s colonial standards of modernity and progress on the other hand.

 Viewing transnational composition practices through the lens of multiple colonialisms and transcolonial navigation is necessary not only to acknowledge the differently contextualized structures of oppression that the transnational scholar must deal with, but also because these overlapping structures work together to reproduce colonial unknowing that occludes the presence of coloniality itself *and* hinders efforts to undo the negative effects of coloniality. By accounting for the specificity and entanglement of multiple converging colonial structures, a transcolonial approach to composition and rhetoric forefronts the relationality between different colonial structures—and, in accounting for the specificity of each structure, anticipates the unique challenges they co-create in knowledge-making across borders. Furthermore, Esther’s case show how multiple converging colonial structures do not only pose obstacles to a writer in their writing process; they also co-produce colonial unknowing. The next section will discuss the writing, knowledge-making, and argumentation strategies that facilitated this co-production of colonial unknowing, as well as strategies that could help disrupt it.

# Strategies of transcolonial navigation: upholding and disrupting colonial unknowing

One moment stood out in the conversation that Esther and I had as we were revising he draft of her introductory chapter based on the feedback she’d gotten from her supervisor. We were trying to find a way to respond to the supervisor’s request for more explanation on why Papua’s uniqueness and why it was chosen as a study site.

Me: [reading the supervisor’s comment] ‘You want to highlight about the unique population or why Papua again here.’

Esther: In my opinion, it’s already clear. [Reading a sentence that she’d written on the draft] ‘Present a unique population that has historical … [unclear]’

Me: Maybe she wanted it to be explained further?

Esther: Yes…. Unique…. I’ve said their race is different, but that was called racist.

Me: You were called racist?

Esther: No. She didn’t say racist, actually. She was like, “What’s the point?” It’s that thing about Melanesia.

Anselma: Well, maybe you can try explaining that?

Esther: No, no.

Here I got the impression that because the supervisor hadn’t responded well to Esther’s previous attempt to try to explain that Papuans, as Melanesians, were racially different than the majority Malay population of Indonesia, Esther was now hesitant to try the same strategy again (of explaining Papua’s uniqueness by mentioning their different race, subtly pointing at racism) . Instead, she then started trying to phrase other forms of uniqueness.

Esther: ‘Present a unique population… present a population with a distinct culture!’

Me: But your supervisor could just ask again what this distinct culture is like.

Esther: Maybe if… indigenous? No? ‘With the mingle of indigenous and…’ Indonesian colonizers! [Laughs]

Me: You’re being serious?

Esther: [Chidingly] No, that’s too…

With her tone, here she seemed to imply that her use of “Indonesian colonizers” was too harsh; of course she wasn’t being serious.

Me: I don’t think she’ll understand if you don’t mention that.

Esther: Which is me, including colonizers. It’s true, we are. I don’t want to…

Me: You don’t want to admit it, or you don’t want to not admit it?

Esther: I don’t want to no admit that yes, we did something wrong in Papua.

Me: But you don’t want to mention that in your dissertation?

Esther: But we can’t mention that in the dissertation. Because… well. Besides me being a civil servant, it will also leave a digital footprint that will follow me whatever I do. And then in the future when there’s a leadership qualification test, they’ll say, “Oh, this one is pro-Papua.” [Laughs]

This is the moment where Esther decided not to explicitly call out Indonesian colonization in Papua, by removing the words “Indonesian colonizers” even before she wrote them. Here we could see the thought process by which she came to this decision. Her supervisor asked her to explain more about Papua’s uniqueness and the importance of researching Papua. She recalled a strategy she’d used to address the same request, by mentioning racial difference, which was as close as she could get to the actual problem of colonization, without mentioning the colonization itself (or racism). But she decided not to try this strategy again because it hadn’t been very successful in the past. Instead, she used words that had nothing to do with race or colonization, that were more neutral and not suggestive of conflict: “distinct culture.”

I see there were two strategies of transcolonial navigation here, both of which capitulated to the multiple colonialisms that Esther was facing. The first strategy was essentially *self-censorship*: Esther decided not to use the words “Indonesian colonizers” even though she felt they would accurately describe the dynamics at hand. This strategy was chosen after considering the negative repercussions that this word choice would bring, and Esther then chose self-censorship as a means of self-preservation. But self-censorship only solves one side of the multi-faceted colonial problem she was facing; it might have protected her from the threat of Indonesian colonial violence, but it didn’t help her solve the Western academia’s lack of knowledge on Global South political dynamics, which her supervisor was demanding her to solve by explaining more about Papua. Her self-censorship only left a blank that might have been good enough for Indonesia, but not good enough for the Western academia.

This prompted her to turn to another strategy of transcolonial navigation, which I’m calling *diluted words*, a form of euphemism. Because talking about colonization or racism was considered too risky, Esther chose to talk about cultural diversity instead. Culture is, in fact, a word often used to mask colonial dynamics—this is why Walter Mignolo uses the term “colonial difference” instead of “cultural difference,” to highlight how these differences are nothing neutral; they have been used to organize systems of oppression (Walsh and Mignolo 179). Thus, just like her self-censorship on naming “Indonesian colonizers,” Esther’s references to “distinct culture,” “ethnic diversity,” and “tradition” to explain the urgency for research that centers Papua also work to reproduce colonial unknowing: these are all rhetorical choices that invisibilize the coloniality that Papua face, and leaving this coloniality unnamed and unchallenged is the same as preserving it—though this was a choice that Esther made for her own self-preservation.

 Later on, though, Esther and I did discuss another way to modify this part of the text to hint at Indonesia’s coloniality more. Before this discussion, her sentence read, “Papua is culturally unique from the rest of the country with significant ethnic diversity among the indigenous Papuan groups as well as migrant groups from Java and other islands who came and settled in Papua.” I then suggested using the word “settler” instead of “migrant”:

Me: What if we say “settlers”? You used “migrant” earlier.

Esther: Or Javanese? [laughs] Why are the Javanese always to blame?

Me: We used “migrant” yesterday. What if we change that to “settler”?

Esther: Yes.

Me: Because that’s how they understand things here in the U.S., right? Indigenous and settlers.

Esther: Uh-huh.

Me: So maybe if we use that, even without us explaining, your supervisor will understand. And Indonesia isn’t as familiar with the words indigenous and settlers, so maybe that will leave you safe.

Esther: [Nodding, sounding excited] Oooh! ’Made worse by settlers from other regions in Indonesia?’

Me: ‘From Java and other Indonesian islands.’

Our revised text reads, “Papua is culturally unique from the rest of the country with significant ethnic diversity among the indigenous Papuan groups, most of whom still preserve and practice their traditions. This indigenous diversity is then compounded by settlers from Java and other islands.” While the revisions are small and only at the level of word choice, this is an example of transcolonial navigation of multiple colonialism. What I was suggesting here was to borrow a critical term from the domain of one colonial structure (the word “settlers” from U.S. settler colonialism) and use it in the context of another colonial structure (Indonesian colonization of Papua) to subtly call out the invisibilized colonial dynamics in the second context. This was also done by exploiting the colonial unknowings in each context: the average Indonesians aren’t very familiar with the significance of the word “settler” in the U.S., but Esther’s American supervisor might be more sensitive to its connotation. Conversely, referencing U.S. settler colonialism in a discussion about Papua might help correct the American supervisor’s ignorance of the colonization of Papua. Using a term that is more closely associated with coloniality—albeit in another context, from a different colonial structure—might work better to challenge colonial unknowing than using a more neutral word (“migrant”), if the audience addressed are people who have some familiarity with the colonial structure from which the term is borrowed. In addition, “Java” is highlighted here (“from Java and other islands”) to draw attention to Indonesia’s Java-centrism, part of its colonial structure. These are all strategies that are very subtle, and may not have been strong enough to counter the self-censorship and dilution of meaning already happening through Esther’s excision of “Indonesian colonizers” and invocation of cultural difference as opposed to colonial difference. Maybe only the most discerning of readers would see the use of “settlers” here as an anticolonial critique, but it is still one way to exploit understanding of one form of coloniality to challenge the colonial unknowing around another form of coloniality.

Other forms of transcolonial navigation that Esther did in her chapter were less textual or lower-order in nature. At least two times in our conversations, she mentioned how she could just explain more about Papua in her oral presentations at the general exam, prospectus, or dissertation defense, instead of writing everything in the dissertation manuscript. This was because oral presentations, due to their more ephemeral and less public nature (they would happen just once each, to an audience that Esther could hand-select), would not leave a paper trail or footprint that the Indonesian government could trace and lead to an accusation of being “pro-Papua,” thus jeopardizing her career. Genre and multimodality here became one strategy for her to eschew censorship under Indonesian colonialism while also addressing the Western academia’s ignorance on Papuan matters.

In addition, Esther was also hoping that her immediate audience—i.e., her dissertation committee—would help her epistemic translation process. We spent quite some time talking about how the different people in her committee might help explain Papua to her primary supervisor who knew nothing about Papua. One of her committee members was a professor from a university in Indonesia, and one other was an American professor who did ethnographies in Indonesia. There was also a committee member who was a non-American BIPOC professor, whom Esther was hoping would at least easily sympathize with the plight of marginalized populations. The shared positionality and background knowledge that these committee members had may enable them to read between the lines when Esther dropped subtle hints at Indonesia’s coloniality. One time, Esther expressed regret that she couldn’t get one professor from her own department who—unlike her primary supervisor—had research experience in Papua New Guinea. She thought this person would have been able to help her grapple with discussions around the geopolitical and colonial context of her research, but she wasn’t able to add this person to her committee because while they had the necessary background knowledge on her research site, their expertise wasn’t on apps or the disease she was intervening in. This shows that the academia’s usual focus on subject matter expertise in determining mentorship assignment may not work well to support transnational student-scholars, because oftentimes, the greatest difficulty faced by these transnational student-scholars was their mentors’ lack of understanding of their faraway research site.

# On deep silence and transcolonial agency

Upon reading this account, it might be easy to think of Esther’s scholarship as not being resistant enough. The multiple colonialisms she was dealing with worked together to block her attempts to elucidate the full nature of the Papuan problem that her research was intervening in, thus effectively reproducing the colonial unknowing around Indonesia’s coloniality. Though Esther did try some strategies to get around the colonial silencing imposed on her, the strategies may feel incremental rather than radical. Overall, the dissertation is largely silent on the matter of the colonization of Papua; the problems it deals with are framed in the more neutral terms of cultural diversity and lack of research. *This is not critical enough,* one might think, *this is not decolonial enough.* I admit I myself had this thought, as Esther’s research unfolded before me, as I watched her again and again chose silence over speaking up, safety over challenging colonial unknowing.

But this is the time to pause and reconsider what silence and speaking up might mean under conditions of coloniality. In her theorization on the rhetorics of silence, the feminist rhetorician Cheryl Glenn argues that “silence is not, in itself, necessarily a sign of powerlessness or emptiness; it is not the same as absence; and silencing for that matter, is not the same as erasing. Like the zero in mathematics, silence is an absence with a function” (263). She raises the possibility of silence as not simply a capitulation to the powers that be, but instead something purposeful, or as Adrienne Rich puts it, “a plan / rigorously executed” (cited in Glenn 263). Aimee Carrillo Rowe and Sheena Malhotra further situate this valorization of voice in coloniality and Western-centrism: “the binary logic of speech versus silence and the almost commonsensical equation of silence with powerlessness and oppression in the Western tradition from Aristotle to Audre Lorde presumes a political imperative: for an individual or group to gain power and ‘to resist and transform the conditions of their oppression,’ they ‘must activate their voice’ “ (1). But this commonsensical understanding of silence is not that simple, just as “having a voice” is not that simple. As we’ve seen in our discussion on Rio’s mock job talk in the previous chapter, even when someone from a marginalized position has spoken—has provided copious explanation on the context from which they spoke—there is no guarantee their Western-centered interlocutors will understand them in good faith. Once again, here is Martina Ferrari on the coloniality of voice:

within a colonial context, “speech” requires conformity to Eurocentric standards that exclude subaltern communicative practices and being. As such, the demand to speak places the subaltern in an untenable position. Were the subaltern to speak in their native languages, their speech (and their demands for normative treatment) would lack uptake. But were they to speak in a way that was intelligible to the colonizer, they would, on the one hand, subscribe to and be rewritten by a conceptual and linguistic framework that inscribes their culture, language, and being as inferior, while also, on the other hand, sacrificing their cultural specificity. (126)

It is therefore not enough to judge Esther’s experience as a case of voicelessness and submissiveness, much less of “facilitating [her] own oppression” (Ferrari 131). On the one hand, speaking up puts her in an unsafe condition, and putting herself in such a threat is a decision only she could make—to force her is to further enact violence on her. On the other hand, even if she does speak up—to try and try again to explain the full nature of Papua’s uniqueness—there is no guarantee she would be listened to if she says what she needs to say in the way she needs to say it, instead of in the normative Western way.

The burden of decoding silence and challenging colonial unknowing should not be disproportionately laid on the victims of coloniality, especially when colonial structures hold as their priority the excision of the subaltern voice. After all, their voicelessness already does more than to reveal their weakness; it also reveals the “institutional structure that implicitly kept [them] disciplined and silenced” (Glenn 265), as long as those who witness this silence are able to read it as a form of rhetoric or discursive regime (Foucault) that encodes the workings of colonial power. When nothing else other than silence is offered as a viable choice for a transnational/transcolonial scholar, perhaps it is time to see transnational/transcolonial communication as a negotiation, for witnesses unburdened by the same colonial silencing mechanism to meet them halfway and share the burden of undoing colonial unknowing, in a way that doesn’t *only* rely on the colonized to speak up. This is especially important when—as Esther and Rio’s cases have shown us—sometimes it is precisely these demands to speak (e.g., to explain Papua or Indonesia again and again) that render their silence more deafening.

How, then, do we undo colonial unknowing in a way that doesn’t rely only on (colonial, Western-centered understanding of) voice? In response to the colonial normativity of voice, Martina Ferrari frames silence as *deep silence* to highlight its depth, complexity, and multiplicity, recovering it as “an inherent component of sense, thinking, and being” (125). This challenges how “the specific historical formation of coloniality relies upon and actively promotes the flattening of deep silence for its perpetration and legitimization—an operation of flattening that is actively concealed through the naturalization of epistemic and ontological inferiority” (125). Silence should no longer be seen as simply a sign of weakness and submission, rather, as Cheryl Glenn and Adrienne Rich have hinted at above, it can also be generative. Ferrari points out how “experiences of silences … can be negotiations of reality and fecund sources of radical meaning-making” (134). As an example, she cites how Ernesto J. Martínez’s silent response to an experience of sexual violence—which he recounted in an essay on “joto passivity”—was also a moment of reflective meaning making where he envisioned “radically different gendered practices of resistance like nonmisogynist and nonhomophobic ways of performing masculinity” (Ferrari 124-125), instead of doing what would normally be expected, which was to fight back and answer violence with violence.

Similarly, even if the textual manifestation of Esther’s scholarship is largely silent on matters of colonialism, her knowledge-making was already infused with reflections on Papuans’ lived experience, reading their less-than-ideal quality of life as a reflection of the central government’s colonialism and Java-centrism, and understanding how these in turn limit the production of knowledge around Papua’s problems and stop those problems from being resolved. Her scholarship—no matter how textually silent on paper—was already a moment of decolonization in the way that Kuan Hsing-Chen understands it, which is “the attempt of the … colonized to reflectively work out a historical relation with the … colonizer, culturally, politically, and economically. This can be a painful process involving the practice of self-critique, self-negation, and self-rediscovery, but the desire to form a less coerced and more reflexive and dignified subjectivity necessitates it” (3). Though in our first interview she described herself as “neutral” on the Papuan issue, in our later conversations she reflectively worked out an articulation of the relationship between Java and Papua as one of oppression—“we did something wrong in Papua.” Her methods and methodology also reflect the desire to form a less coerced and more dignified subjectivity, through her use of human-centered design framework that seeks out Papuan voices to inform the building of her app. Even if in the end the app didn’t manifestly exhibit Papuan uniqueness—to no fault of her own, because Indonesian and Western normativities were already so entrenched that her Papuan interlocutors felt it strange to center themselves—this should not erase the decolonial intentionality and reflexivity that undergirded her knowledge-making process. This is reminiscent of Lu and Horner’s *translingual agency,* which urges us to focus on a writer’s *negotiation* of language difference—even if it concludes in the use of standard English—rather than on exotic textual evidence of language difference. Esther’s case shows the necessity to think of *transcolonial agency* to honor the complexity of negotiating multiple colonial structures, an endeavor that is never without danger or risk of failure. Regardless of how her writing product turned out, Esther had performed a transcolonial negotiation informed by an awareness of the workings of Indonesian and Western academic colonial structures—a *decolonial rhetorical awareness,* if you will, which helped her decide the rhetorical strategies to communicate her knowledge, even if this strategy is silence on the topic of coloniality.

While silence might characterize Esther’s dissertation manuscript, this silence is in truth something surface-level. We should look instead toward deep silence, an examination of the colonial/decolonial dynamics that lie under the surface text. In short, in matters of transnational scholarship under multiple colonialisms, a focus on knowledge-making is not enough. This also requires a decolonial reading of transnational/transcolonial scholarship, the ability to read beyond surface silence and toward deep silence, to excavate colonial structures without only relying on silenced voices to speak up—something that the coloniality of voice already renders almost impossible. This is the exigence of a transnational and decolonial literacy: to build capacities on both sides of the aisle, for the marginalized scholar to be able to negotiate multiple colonial structures in their knowledge-making, and for their audience to be able to read between the lines when a full articulation of the colonial dynamics at hand is blocked by multiple overlapping colonial structures. The work of undoing colonial unknowing should be a cooperation: decolonial writing and decolonial reading—and also, perhaps, decolonial experiencing, to eschew reliance on voice whether written or spoken. In one of our conversations on how difficult it was for her to explain Papua to her supervisor, Esther said, “Maybe one day she [the supervisor] should go there and see.” This hints at the possibility of a way to challenge colonial unknowing without defaulting to the logocentrism of voice. Realizing the extent to which her own voice was rendered impossible, Esther turned to embodied experience to undo the colonial unknowing around Papua. *Maybe one day if this white American professor goes to Papua and experience the situation themself, they will know; they will understand.* No matter what way of knowing (other than Western-centered voice) is used to unsettle colonial unknowing, one thing is worth considering: when the subaltern communicate only in silence, or when they speak only in whispers, perhaps it is on their audience to lean closer and meet them halfway.

# Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that transnational knowledge-making is also transcolonial knowledge making because of how it may require a scholar to negotiate differently configured and contextualized colonial structures. Using da Costa and da Costa’s framework of *multiple colonialisms,* I show how Indonesian colonization of Papua and the U.S. university’s Eurocentric epistemic coloniality work together to hinder the knowledge-making and communication process surrounding a dissertation about Papua authored by Esther, a transnational Indonesian scholar. Because Indonesia’s censorship meant Esther wasn’t able to explicitly explain the colonial situation in Papua, and her American supervisor’s race blindness and ignorance of non-Western politics stopped her from reading between the lines of Esther’s toned down communication, these two colonial structures effectively reproduce the colonial unknowing—in other words, produced ignorance—surrounding Papua’s oppression. The end result is a dissertation manuscript characterized by silence around Indonesia’s colonization, with minimal critical or resistant stance.

However, another look at the coloniality of voice helps us see her silence in a way that is not simply a sign of submission. An emphasis on deep silence and transcolonial agency highlights how Esther’s decolonial rhetorical awareness of the multiple colonialisms she was navigating helped her to consider the means of communication available to her, while also (re)considering her relationship to the forms of coloniality impacting her. Even if the text she produced did not manifest explicit critique on coloniality, her *process* of knowledge-production and making did already show a critical stance. Her silence is a deep silence, and demanding her to speak up means forcing her to default to Western logocentrism and normativity of voice, contributing to “the naturalization of epistemic and ontological inferiority” (Ferrari 125) of subaltern silence that is the aim of Western coloniality. Instead of relying on the victim of a colonial structure to speak up—which is problematic because oftentimes only *Western* voice is considered as voice—I point out the necessity of a collaborative approach to transnational/transcolonial meaning-making, in which the audience meet the transnational/transcolonial scholar halfway and learn to read between the lines of their subaltern text, to learn about coloniality so they can go beyond surface silence to interpret deep silence.

In the next chapter, I will turn to an autoethnography on my own process of writing this dissertation, to further sketch out the transnational and decolonial literacy necessary for a mutual negotiation of multiple colonialisms. After all, I myself am a transnational scholar, and the multiple colonialisms that my research participants faced means that I need to also negotiate these multiple colonialisms when discussing their knowledge-making process. My autoethnography is an attempt to model the strong reflexivity, decolonial rhetorical awareness, and transcolonial agency necessary in transnational knowledge making, all of which are important for epistemic, ethical, and decolonial reasons.

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1. See also Lionnet “Transcolonial Translation”; Lionnet “Transnationalism”; Harrison; and Taylor-Garcia. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. To protect the identity of my participant, I have decided to include as few details as possible on her field of study and the specificity of her research, due to the sensitive political nature of her work. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)