

# **The End of the Dream: Postmodernism and Qualitative Research**

Georgina Tuari Stewart<sup>1</sup> (ORCID: 0000-0001-8832-2415)

Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre (ORCID: 0000-0002-5585-8173)

Nesta Devine (ORCID: 0000-0003-2535-8570)

Monika Kirloskar-Steinbach (ORCID: 0000-0002-4524-5189)

## **Abstract**

This article revisits the use of postmodernist theory in qualitative research in education and related fields, where such ideas remain consigned to the ‘fringe’ – or worse. What are the grounds for this ongoing refusal of ‘postmodernism’? How is postmodernism useful in our research and teaching? In this article, four senior women academics of various backgrounds, one or more of us identifying as Indigenous, Immigrant, White, Coloured, monolingual, bilingual, trilingual, and so forth, join forces to unpick what postmodernism offers us, and why it is still denied in mainstream academic circles. We focus on this question in the context of teaching research methods in the doctoral curriculum.

## **Keywords**

Doctoral curriculum, Postmodernism, Post-qualitative, Poststructuralism, Research methods

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<sup>1</sup> Georgina Tuari Stewart, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand.  
Email: georgina.stewart@aut.ac.nz

## **Introduction: Who's afraid of postmodernism?**

Why this article? Who's afraid of postmodernism, and why for so long, given that it's been around since the 1960s? The refusal and suspicion of postmodernism feels like a bad habit perpetuated by those who haven't sufficiently engaged with it, or any other 'system of thought' whose ontology is *not* based on essentialist humanism. Postmodernism (used here to also include related traditions such as post-structuralism) exists in a different ethico-onto-epistemological arrangement from the conventional interpretive and emancipatory humanist arrangements familiar to social scientists (St. Pierre, 2018a). In particular, postmodernism critiques assumptions of an essentialist subject, a 'person' with an 'identity'. Those identity labels, including ethnicity, 'race', gender, indigeneity, etc, are all categories of the Enlightenment's description of the human used to call out postmodernism as a problem. Perhaps the appeal of a stable, supposed scientific description of human being that relies on 'identity' is at the centre of the on-going refusal of postmodernism.

Postmodernism critiques a particular kind of emancipatory politics based on the essentialist subject with innate agency—the alienated voice at the core of human being. Judith Butler's (1992) political work offers an argument outside that kind of identity politics. It is assumed that an essentialist ethnic, indigenous or gendered identity has to centre liberatory movements: it works within the prevailing social frameworks. By disrupting the conventional understanding of the subject, postmodernism invites us to think about the subject and its agency differently. This description would indicate another way of resisting injustice. Being unfamiliar, this description is suspect. There are other, associated problems: for example, postmodernism critiques the representationalist assumptions about the nature of language on which interpretive

work relies, with its thick descriptions of lived experience. But the key difficulty seems to be postmodernism's stance on the standard description of the human being

In Western thought traditions the idea of the human being as an 'individual' was cemented by the Enlightenment and the emergence of science, with its concomitant concept of the 'knower' as the truth-seeking scientist: an individual, propertied, White European man, standing up against the prior orthodox power of the Christian Church (MacPherson, 1962; Morris, 1972). These developments powered the modernist flourishing of Euro-American capitalist democracies seen in the last several centuries of world history. Moreover, in the era of imperialism and colonialism, Europe used its geopolitical status to make theory for the world from a position of what can be called methodological Whiteness (cf. Mills, 1998). Driven by this Whiteness, its intellectuals deployed a relatively uniform notion of the individualist knower to unveil the 'truth' about other cultures in the world. In these undertakings, the European knower mapped the world around him as one which was inhabited by selves wholly different and oftentimes inferior to his own. While his own self was shorn of its socio-political context in these studies, other selves were tacked onto neatly separated and different cultures—cultures that were generally considered to be outright underdeveloped, or at best still 'developing'.

Although individual colonies did not adopt one single educational policy, across the colonies these policies shored up, in different ways, the belief that knowledge was, and could be, made solely in the European metropolises. Many an intellectual and activist in the colonies strove to redeem the Marxian promise of a revolution that would tear asunder capitalism's individualist culture, and with it the notion of the bourgeois European knower. Today, we see more clearly how these intellectuals and activists ran up against a promise that too was undergirded by the supposed uniqueness of European experiences (Shilliam, 2015; also, Anderson, 2010). This

methodological Whiteness is still with us. Not only does it manifest itself in the academy's demographics where White males continue to carry with them the social capital of being projected as adequate knowers who can adjudicate over all kinds of knowledge claims, including those made in this paper. It is also visible in the ubiquity of the European and Euro-American canon in capitalistic economies in most parts of the world.

Under neoliberal regimes, the idea of the individual evolved into 'homo economicus' - a notion of the person as a 'rational chooser' who can be relied on to make selfish choices in the marketplace of life's opportunities, including education (Devine, 2004; Devine & Irwin, 2005). In today's capitalistic economies, individual performances whether in teaching, funded research, or even learning are considered to be measurable according to uniform, objective criteria. Individuals, and their performances, become ever-optimizable goods. Even diversification attempts are subjected to these criteria! Homo economicus expands the notion of individualism from epistemology to also include ethics and 'right' behaviour: it represents an ultimate homogeneity. Over time and through these various iterations, the notion of the 'stable subject' was found to be greatly useful in research and policy. Postmodernism, however, rejects the teleology and rigidity of such a model of the human being. The relevance for researchers in education is this: Do we want to work with and write about people as we find them, in all their remarkable complexity, or are we willing to pretend that 'people' in education can be adequately represented by numbers, or in terms as crude as the standard descriptions of homo economicus?

Postmodernism, then, exists in a particular ethico-onto-epistemological arrangement that doesn't enable the use of conventional humanist pre-existing social science research methodologies like quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods – or at least, not in the

dominant ways these methodologies are enacted in research and teaching research (Koro, 2020). If being and human being are essentialist and stable, then the methodologies can tell us ‘what to do.’ But if we’re working with an immanentist ontology—a world that’s becoming—and relatively unstable conceptions of human being that match that ontology, then we can’t know ‘what to do’ in advance. There is no ready-made toolkit we can brandish from our university’s branded daypacks. There can be no pre-existing methodology we can ‘apply’ in advance of inquiry.

This lack of certainty often makes researchers really nervous: it seems like ‘anything goes’! From that perspective, the firm ground of scientific ‘hard and fast truths’ threatens to cave in and give way to the yawning abyss of relativism. Yet anything always goes until someone draws a line, until someone for some reason stops creating, inventing, experimenting. One could argue that the social science research methodologies we’ve invented are designed to control inquiry, to stop thought, to keep us moving down the straight and narrow path methodology lays out, the path we teach our students. The industry that sustains methodology relies on us to reproduce it and abhors the counterclaim that methodology might consist mainly of masses of detail that amount to very little actual learning about becoming a researcher.

Depending on one’s location, one notable objection raised against postmodernism is that it is a ‘French theory’ whose proponents were privileged, well-educated white men. How, then, could female, Queer, Indigenous, and/or Black researchers (remember these identity categories are only thinkable with the humanist subject who has an ‘identity’) justify using poststructural approaches to inquiry such as deconstruction (Derrida), archaeology (Foucault), paralogy (Lyotard), and so on. The complication is that the French poststructuralists did not accept that humanist subject with an identity. An argument can be made, therefore, that the traditional

social science research methodologies that rely on that description of human being are incommensurable with poststructuralism. The suspicion that something's amiss—that poststructuralism is just 'too way out there'—may well prevent some researchers from giving up the certainty and security methodology promises.

There does seem to be some antipathy toward French continental theory among social science researchers simply because it is French, or European. Yet (at least) three other social science approaches, namely, positivism, phenomenology, and critical theory, also hail from Europe. The positivist approach stems from the Vienna Circle logical positivists. Husserl's phenomenological tradition is German, as is the critical tradition of Marx and the Frankfurt School critical theorists.

No doubt, the French studied German theory, and vice versa. Qualitative research, for example, was invented, in the USA, at least, as an interpretive critique of positivism, and quickly adopted the critical European traditions as well. So, it's interesting *which* European theories social science researchers find acceptable, and which they refuse. We return here to the particular question that prompted this paper: why do some qualitative researchers refuse postmodernism? Surely, it can't be just because it's French. Perhaps it's because postmodernism, with its ontology of immanence, refuses the methodological project of the social sciences that relies on a realist ontology. And, as we stated earlier, if one gives up the pre-existing methodologies we teach and teach, how would one inquire? And what would we teach? The desire for a recipe which will yield a 'true' or 'real' answer depends on a methodology which insists on the (known) existence of the true and real, even while many researchers acknowledge the difficulties of such an insistence.

But every thought has been thought before, including different ontological arrangements, and European thinkers also borrowed from the rest of the world, even though the standard notion of the knower presumes that all worthwhile ideas can be traced back to Europe only, as the crucible of human knowledge as we know it today. Standard knowledge-making narratives, however, omit how European thinkers borrowed from their non-European counterparts. One way to track such borrowings would be etymological studies in the world context.

A judiciously conducted etymological study can illustrate how ideas travel: by studying the history of words we learn about the history of relationships between various speakers of those words, and thinkers of those ideas. Etymology is a window into the workings of discourse through processes of what Foucault (1984) labelled ‘genealogy’ in referring to the antecedents of ideas and beliefs. The objection to postmodernism on the grounds of being ‘French’ is a case study of discourse working through genealogy. Genealogy is a fundamental postmodernist concept, related to the debate about the importance of ‘context’ in philosophy, but often completely overlooked in qualitative research, where the rush to ‘final’ truth claims overshadows more ‘realistic’ genealogically situated concepts.

Let us add in this context that in our reading of postmodernism, Foucault’s methodological Whiteness itself (see Lazreg, 2017) will need a recontextualization (for one such attempt at recontextualizing a canonical figure see Kirloskar-Steinbach and Mika, 2020). The following section homes in on the problem of how to teach research methods once we accept that ‘the methodology’ cannot tell us what to do.

## The theory-method nexus in educational research

In our 2020 workplaces there is a binary division of opinion between those academics who believe it is possible to separate the teaching of research methods for educational research into ‘theory’ and ‘research design’ and those who don’t. Since courses in research methodologies are invariably requisites for postgraduate and doctoral research students, this question becomes a powerbase in our departments. Details vary, of course, in different contexts, but common threads run across the international Anglophone academy. Examples include when only the approved ‘research methods’ course is deemed to be at the highest academic level; or pressure within a department for multiple research methods courses, which then compete for students. Such courses often mimic a standard research methods textbook: a whistle-stop tour of ‘paradigms’ and ‘methods’ that leaves many students bamboozled, and may offer them little in the way of preparation for undertaking doctoral research. ‘[M]ethod’s visibility has been captured and institutionalized by qualitative textbooks, coursework, publication standards, and so on’ (Jackson, 2017, p. 666). The debate over teaching research methods in the doctoral curriculum points to the divide in the community between adherents of the traditional ‘qualitative’ research methodologies that cling to the coattails of science, and ‘post-qualitative’ research – which we define as what happens to qualitative methodology when we take account of new directions in disciplinary philosophy, including postmodernism and poststructuralism.

We join a growing consensus that qualitative methodology has an identity crisis it can no longer ignore (MacLure, 2015). Scholars are finding multiple creative ways to respond to the difficulties created by the resistance to theory and philosophy in qualitative methodology. Aaron Kuntz (2020) identifies the ‘indeterminacy’ inherent in the notion of ‘new approaches to inquiry’ and uses *parrhesia*, the ancient Greek practice of truth-telling, which requires a fundamental, philosophical shift in orientation to inquiry, rather than ‘superficial alterations



(or attentions) to method’ (Kuntz, 2020, p. 1). To adopt parrhesia ‘requires that the inquirer remain on the threshold, the blurry intersection where the present becomes future—residing in an indeterminate space to generate potential difference’ (p. 1).

Maggie MacLure (2013) finds in new forms of materialist research the possibility to move beyond the ‘hierarchical logic of representation’ towards ‘post-representational’ thought and method (MacLure, 2013, p. 658), with scope to explore what Deleuze called *sense*—a ‘non-representing, unrepresentable, “wild element” in language’ (MacLure, 2013, p. 658). Indeterminacy and flux are echoed in the idea of qualitative inquiry ‘in the making’ proposed by Lisa Mazzei and Laura Smithers, who are also inspired by Deleuze to write in collaboration as a recording or performance of their relationship of ‘thinking through each other’ (Mazzei & Smithers, 2020, p. 99). Deleuze also helps Alecia Youngblood Jackson (2017) avoid the ‘trap’ of the dichotomy between ‘staunch procedure versus anything goes’ by starting with ‘*the outside of method*’ (Jackson, 2017, p. 666, original emphasis).

If qualitative researchers think the ‘methodology’ can tell them what to do, they don’t seem to have appreciated the full concept of ‘qualitative methodology’ with its emphasis on how language is used to produce and convey meanings. This ‘linguistic turn’ invokes both the older concept of literacy and the newer concept of discourse, as delineated by Foucault. In today’s educational thinking, the original complex concept of literacy has been largely overtaken by reductionist visions of measurable milestones in the acquisition of reading and writing skills. The strong link to economic forces, whereby basic literacy is seen as a foundational employment skill, conceals the fact that literacy effectively has no ‘upper limit’. Genius or mastery-level performances of literacy lead to best-selling works of literature, or prize-winning achievements in science.

Academic writing is of central importance in qualitative research methodology, and to apply the necessary diligence to writing in qualitative research is an exercise in (world) literacy as well as thinking (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2018). Yet the kind of work required to learn how to produce good academic writing is rarely mentioned in the textbooks and courses that purport to address qualitative research methodology. More often, students are exposed to detailed studies of ‘sampling techniques’ or ‘research instruments’ in the name of teaching and learning about interview research methodology. Qualitative inquiry is currently subject to ‘repositivization’ (Lather, 2006, p. 783) under neoliberal conditions, in which qualitative researchers refuse to ‘concede science to scientism’ (p. 784). The ontological resistance to postmodernism connects to an epistemological insecurity about the ‘discipline’ of academic theory and associated literacies, whether in mathematics or science, or in the rigorous thinking required for critical readings of textual sources.

Proliferation of the ‘posts’ includes the idea of the post-disciplinary academy (Devine, 2018), in which disciplines have lost their dominance to the rise of ‘studies’ (Peters, 1999) including cultural studies, women’s studies, gender & sexuality studies, film studies, etc. Fear of loss of certainty looks both inwards to the unchanging self, and outwards to the unchanging world mapped by this self. Anthropology becomes almost ‘about’ methodology, in thrall to the question: can we know reality? And if so, how? As it turns inward, methodology shades into philosophy. The boundaries between disciplines begin to blur, as does the boundary between data collection and analysis, when data begins from the researcher’s own experience.

As noted above, the refusal of postmodernism is obvious in current standard practice for teaching research methods in education, in postgraduate and doctoral programmes within our

universities. It is often assumed that the student will ‘collect data’ by conducting interviews, sometimes as well as a survey. Sometimes students are taught that doing both makes the study a mixed methods research project! The hangover of scientific influence, *or in Lather’s words, refusing to concede science to scientism*, is rife in qualitative research, as is shown by use of pseudo-scientific jargon such as ‘collecting data’ for interviews and ‘research instruments’ for the interview questions or survey form. Students (and many lecturers) usually talk about ‘doing their research’ when they mean ‘conducting their interviews’ – a sign of privileging the busy work involved in interviewing over than the reading and thinking work that good scholarship requires.

Anxiety over academic thinking, associated with the refusal of postmodernism, and other philosophical approaches to inquiry, is usually exacerbated by ideas based on racism, sexism or classism, which work together to produce distorted dominant versions of social histories, in which White experiences are centred. These experiences become the touchstone of scientificity (Lather, 2006) at the border with scientism (Sorell, 1991). To be a ‘pukka’ academic anywhere in the world, one is expected to place oneself in the academic family tree of links to the White male knowing subject. Racism, sexism and classism form a triad of biases operating at many levels, both structural or systemic levels and personal or psychological levels, which include unconscious levels. In liberal ‘Western’ social contexts today, the way sexism, racism and classism work can be so subtle as to be largely invisible, except to those who are cognizant of the academy’s methodological Whiteness. These unseen and unconscious biases create ethical issues in research, adding to the ontological and epistemological burden of fear and resistance to postmodernism and related ideas. It is very difficult to separate out ethical issues from ontological or epistemological ones, making it necessary to pay close attention to the

philosophy of knowledge that underpins theory and methods in educational research and related fields, including philosophy itself.

If doctoral and postgraduate research students are not taught the importance of theory and the skills required to undertake good scholarship (St. Pierre, 2018b), over and above running around interviewing people and going to conferences, they may not make the connections independently. If not carefully guided and taught to write a critical literature review, researchers may never advance past annotated bibliographies. In the weakest kinds of qualitative research, interview data are ‘analysed’ as if they constituted a form of scientific data. These symptoms and more are outcomes of this fear and resistance to postmodernist and poststructuralist ideas, and their implications for qualitative research.

Which brings us back to the doctoral curriculum and the theories we learn and then teach. These new ‘turns’ – to language, to the self (as in the ‘auto-turn’), to ontology, to affect – ask us to reconsider onto-epistemology, but reluctance to do this is clear in our working contexts, especially as it plays out in the teaching of research methods. We are trapped by those 19th and 20th century research methodologies developed by the White, male knower that almost always trump onto-epistemology (St. Pierre, 2018c). That knowledge continues to be made in our world today by a hermetically sealed community whose members project themselves as being the sole possessors of the social capital needed to be knowers, is lost from sight. Methodological Whiteness is reproduced in, and for, our postcolonial world. The point is that this trap prevents researchers from acknowledging and engaging with the full humanity of those whom they study, in all their living complexity, instead reducing them to some kind of caricature, presented in unreadable prose or unenlightening info-graphics, for the sake of ‘informing policy’ or some such instrumental objective. Non-Whites continue to be, in general,

assigned the role of passive objects or ‘native informants’ whose cultures can be mined for self-proclaimed global dialogues (see Tully 2016). and for non-White academics, speaking truth to power is a risky endeavour. (cf. Kirloskar-Steinbach 2019).

Doctoral supervision and the doctoral curriculum operate as a pressure point for the theory-method nexus in qualitative research. Learning theory involves wide and deep reading of dense textual sources; the reading and thinking on which good scholarship depends is a time-consuming process, but time is invariably in short supply for doctoral scholars. Exacerbating the time problem, in today’s university environment, there is intense pressure on doctoral students and their supervisors to finish within three or four years. Moreover, in the streamlined neoliberal university, the committees that approve doctoral research proposals – or not – are often assembled across divergent disciplines, which further exacerbates the problem of lack of understanding of qualitative research methodology, and the reluctance to relinquish outdated research models. Doctoral research is by definition intended to push at the edges of the known in the field of study, but disregarding the importance of theory and philosophy in education renders the field and its boundaries impenetrable to the comprehension of the researcher.

This section has argued for a return to the full range of potential meanings of the concept of the ‘qualitative’ in research methodology. The embedding of restricted meanings of ‘qualitative inquiry’ engendered by de-politicizing forces and simplistic presentations have necessitated the invention of ‘post-qualitative inquiry’ (St. Pierre, 2014) but this new descriptor still fits under the larger umbrella of ‘qualitative inquiry’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Gerrard, Rudolph, & Sriprakash, 2016). In the next section we relate the adoption of the ‘post’ in ‘post-qualitative’ to a strategy, rather than a category.

### **Thinking strategic essentialisms**

Can feminist scholars use postmodernism? The obvious answer is ‘yes, of course!’ But it might be useful to think for a moment about what is implied by the question. What do feminists have to lose by using postmodernism? Historically speaking, initial feminist responses to Foucault – generalisable to most of the ‘canonical’ postmodernism writers – was that they paid little or no attention to women or feminism (from Heidegger through to Foucault and Deleuze), or if they did, got it wrong to a greater or lesser degree (Derrida). But many saw the possibilities: the concepts of genealogy, deconstruction, discourse analysis, of governmentality, power, biopower, have infinite potential for feminist research. The sticking point was onto-epistemological: most evident in Deleuze and Guattari with their concept of nomadism (St. Pierre, 1997), of the subject as being other than integrated, consistent, self-knowing, always identical to itself.

This postmodern concept of the subject is a direct challenge to any theoretical position that depends on an immovable concept of a subjectivity, whether feminist, national, class-based or ethnic. A subject conceived as becoming simply cannot rest on the standard notion of a distinctly gendered and raced knowing subject. But to regard the subject as inherently infinitely variable is to challenge a concept of feminism founded upon a concrete, inflexible foundation of what it is to be female. In this sense, feminism—or any other ‘ism’—is only ever a ‘reply to’ patriarchy, a ‘speaking back to’ and, hence, is never in the direction where our full female creativity and human potential lies.

Similar considerations hold for indigenous scholars or those of colour: subjectivities that emerge in response to Western/White hegemonies (G. Stewart, 2018a, 2018b). Formed under oppressive conditions, Indigenous, Black or other ‘Other’ identities function as critiques of,

rather than replacements for, the dominant subject positions. Such identities are never pure: purity is anathema to emancipation (Hopwood, 2016). Such identity positions are fluid in the sense of impermanent, intersectional, and possibly doubled, such as in recognising the post-colonial Indigenous as **both** radically different **and** never completely different from the coloniser (G. T. Stewart, 2018).

Post-colonial scholar Gayatri Spivak is credited with inventing the term ‘strategic essentialism’ in 1984 (Chakraborty, 2010) to describe how the adoption of essentialist subject positions is a useful strategy in the political projects of oppressed or subjugated groups in society. Years later, Spivak complained about the way in which her term had been distorted and misunderstood in being taken up and reified into a theory, rather than as the critique she originally intended (1989). Together with feminism and indigenous critiques (and others e.g. ableist), postmodernism and post-qualitative methodology share an explicit political commitment to the dismantling of oppressive hegemonic power structures based on racism, sexism and classism in our fields of practice and research. On this basis, postmodernism and post-qualitative inquiry can be likened to ‘strategic essentialisms’ in their overlapping domains; postmodernism in philosophy and post-qualitative inquiry in research methodology. This also explains why ‘post-qualitative’ is still ‘qualitative.’

These clarifications answer the critiques of post-qualitative inquiry offered by Gerrard and colleagues (2016), who queried why post-qualitative inquiry (a) privileges the ‘new’ over what is, and in so doing risks apolitical presentism; (b) presents a linear teleology of qualitative methodology leading to itself; and (c) centres the researcher and side-lines the interests of the researched. These are useful prompts for advancing the discussions of post-qualitative inquiry. No book-length works on post-qualitative inquiry have yet appeared (at the time of writing, i.e.

October, 2000), so, given the small and recent literature, the gaps identified by Gerrard and colleagues may result, at least in part, from simple matters of the corpus and its emergent nature.

To describe the move to post-qualitative as more of a strategy within qualitative inquiry, rather than a ‘new’ category, deflects the suggestion that post-qualitative inquiry sees itself as ‘replacing’ previous iterations of qualitative inquiry (see ‘killing the father’ in St. Pierre, 2018b). That post-qualitative inquiry ‘centres the interests of the researchers’ is inferred by Gerrard and colleagues from the use by St. Pierre (2014) of ‘we’ in describing the large aims of post-qualitative inquiry. But this inference seems unwarranted, given that the article (St. Pierre, 2014) began as a keynote address to an academic conference, and the whole article is speaking to and on behalf of the humanities and social sciences.

What then, does postmodernism offer to those who are (still) interested in education for social justice and socially engaged research, and not in current economic policy ideas such as ‘social investment’ etc? The challenge of education is in the ‘beautiful risk’ of learning and un-learning, which obliges research to approach the abyss of the radical unknown (Biesta, 2014). Postmodernism does not ignore the philosophical ‘edge of the abyss’ or liminal space between the dominant categories of identity: that risky, creative, educational ‘third space’ we encounter in the intercultural ‘hyphen’—however we understand ‘culture’ each in our own contexts, in all their diversity and specificity. What postmodernism offers is not ‘the solution’ but the acceptance that we cannot know in advance what to do by following the research method.

Instead of being content with simply replacing one research method with another, postmodernism underscores the ethical stance of intellectual humility in our knowing



endeavours, coupled with the willingness to unlearn our dearly cherished academic habits. In order to be on the move creatively in the liminal third space, we will have to refrain from foregrounding ourselves as knowers who always have the right methodology regardless of the context to be studied. We have to learn to break the habit of presuming that we have always been able to master the known. Arguably, practices of self-cultivation may be useful in this regard, practices which equip us to estimate our abilities as knowers more realistically.

Postmodernism encourages researchers to pay attention to characteristics of science that are downplayed or obscured in the current milieu of qualitative inquiry, and its ongoing efforts to be officially recognised as 'science.' When all is said and done, postmodernism means the end of the dream of modernism: the underlying belief in science and technology as able to solve all human problems in order to deliver infinite economic growth, which lies at the heart of the Western or Euro-American capitalist democratic project that has dominated Anglophone countries during the last few centuries of world history, supported by masculinist White supremacist frameworks operating at all levels.

The dominance of the USA in world politics since the mid-19th century is based on the most successful manifestation of the dream of modernism. But the end of economic growth means the end of the American Dream, and there is an understandable reluctance to admit to the implications of this. Who stands to lose power and privilege in the academy by this admission, under the current conditions? The culture of the academy is overwhelmingly White, the inescapable result being that Whiteness will continue to exert influence over all areas of the academy, including the teaching and practice of research, for as long as possible.

## **Conclusion**

Our interdependent world comprises numerous highly complex, diverse societies. Remarkably, educational institutions across these societies seem to operate with variations on one canon, which has been distilled out of European and Euro-American experiences. It is presumed that only this canon can adequately capture the plurality of the world. The current neoliberal policies adopted by educational institutions in several capitalist economies seem to operate in lockstep with this view. These policies claim to be able to objectively rank individual performances; maximizing output becomes the mantra of life at the university, be it that of an academic, student or administrator.

In this paper, we have attempted to resist this view by making a case for postmodernism. Educational institutions and their practices valorize commodity extraction today. In the name of knowledge, they train students that the world around them is nothing but a commodity which can be captured, yoked and tamed by the academy's in-house conceptual frameworks. We do not share this view of being in the world. In fact, we believe that this view should be actively resisted. Neither the academy's methodological Whiteness nor its concomitant manner of commodity extraction, deliver an ethically meaningful input to make sense of our being in an interdependent, interconnected world.

Even though hegemonic discourses in the academy currently caricature postmodernism as an unequivocal departure from the achievements of modern civilization, we claim that postmodernism's ethico-onto-epistemological arrangement is more adequate for engaging with the diversity, complexity and interdependence of today's life. In our reading, postmodernism is not a laissez-faire act of resignation. As illustrated in this article, it offers us a perspective from which we can critique the status quo (the neoliberal university's lockstep with

methodological Whiteness) and also an invitation to deliberate upon the way forward (the knower as a becoming self).

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