

September 2021

**Key words:** inter-epistemic dialogue,  
neighbourhood, place of speech,  
decoloniality, interculturality

## Inter-epistemic dialogue for a broad neighbourhood participation model

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The article examines some epistemic practices of the south and how they can provide a frame of reference for re-evaluating the field of social participation as a space where the new communities of residents of Barcelona are included in the various power relations. This reflection is made in the context of applying a set of intercultural policies with an inter-epistemic approach that develop equality, recognition and interaction. We will also think about the use of language as a place for construction and legitimation, and we will conclude by discussing the challenges faced by CONFAVC in fostering the intercultural model in Catalonia's neighbourhoods.

### 1. The management of diverse participation as an exercise in legitimation

One of the first practices arriving from the south to include in our society and ensure a vision of broad participation is 'place of speech' (originally, in Portuguese, *lugar de fala*), a theory proposed by Brazilian philosopher Djamila Ribeiro (2017). According to Ribeiro herself:

'It is worth noting that, when we talk about *place of speech*, we are referring to the *social locus*; i.e. the social place from which groups are formed. Therefore, according to our point of view, arguments aimed at silencing certain debates or claiming that white people are not allowed to theorise about racism or that men may not theorise about male chauvinism are wrong.' (Ribeiro, 2018: 17, emphasis in the original).

The place of speech thus removes the limitations that have in many cases caused spaces for reflection – which are so necessary for sharing and putting in common opposing views – to be divided. This place of speech also enables us to highlight privileges that have led to spaces of power, as explained by the author herself.

'We need white cisgender men, for example, to increasingly analyse whiteness (or *whiteness*), *cisgenderism* or masculinity; to understand from a critical point of view the social place they come from in order to think and exist in the world, to the point of ensuring multiple voices and perspectives from other groups that have been ignored. Furthermore, it is an ethical position as, in our opinion, the burden of responsibility cannot be removed from *subjects with power*. Throughout history, various black intellectuals have mentioned the need to break with the discursive authorisation system under which different knowledge is silenced and/or suppressed to fight against structurally imposed violence against oppressed groups.

The 'place of speech' therefore tells us about the need to perceive the hierarchy of knowledge as a product of the racial classification of people. Those who have social privilege have epistemic privilege '(Ribeiro, 2018: 17, emphasis in the original).

This theory, when looked at in the context of our own reality, is very applicable, as white people can take part in the anti-racist initiatives that have taken place in recent years and those that continue to take place from their place of speech, acknowledging and using their privileges. These fights arise in response to discrimination, which is itself the result of institutional racism fuelled directly by dehumanised laws, such as the Spanish Immigration Law.

But the well-known fact that new organisations and platforms joining the ranks of social movements and fighting racism are constantly emerging is no longer enough. Puerto Rican sociologist Ramón Grosfoguel (2021), for his part, talks about the need to decolonise knowledge and power, although not without first decolonising being. To explain this, he quotes the philosopher Frantz Fanon, whose book *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) establishes a 'zone of being' to draw attention to what is formally referred to as *racism*. The 'zone of being' is a place containing both hyperhumanised people and completely dehumanised people. The latter account for 90% of the population, as the former are those who set the standards of normality on political, social, economic, aesthetic, spiritual and other levels. And, when we talk about racism, as well as talking about discrimination in labour, social, economic and other rights, we are also talking about a phenomenon that runs even deeper, one that has been established by these hyperhumanised people who define the 'official normality' of a society's cultural practices and that in turn build a discourse of superiority above the people that they consider to be dehumanised.

This is therefore the epistemic exercise that we must work on, at both individual and collective levels, if we want to get to the source of the concepts that feed stereotypes, i.e. the place where spaces of knowledge and power are built. And this epistemic exercise would be very appropriate in Barcelona's neighbourhoods. Similarly, if we engage in an inter-epistemic exercise, i.e. if we put the epistemic contributions arriving from various parts of the planet on the same level, we may be able to build a new way of managing neighbourhood conflicts that is more appropriate and effective while encouraging a truly diverse participation. Furthermore, it will enable us to use our place of speech or '*lugar de fala*' to reflect critically from a reality which, in spite of possibly not affecting each of us individually, does affect us as a community.

At present, most of us assume that a lot of what we refer to as *social conflict* is caused by new groups coming to live in our neighbourhoods, groups that we initially don't know and therefore don't yet understand. And, once we get to this point, if we don't make the effort to interact with them – and this is one of the main principles of interculturality – we are unlikely to ever understand this new reality that is changing community dynamics. This is where we must leave behind and question all previous stereotypes, both negative or positive, about a given group of people. We must honestly review all the prejudices on which the stereotyped view of the group of people we are now living with are based and prioritise our direct, first-hand experience of them.

Most of these considerations are dogmas that have been fuelled by literary, informational, historical and political discourse, as explained by Palestinian literary theorist and critic Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* (1978). And these are very hard to change, because they are the main factors that give rise to stereotypes and prejudice. These preconceived ideas eventually result in epistemological discrimination that skews and divides participation settings, preventing us from talking about 'we' or 'us', i.e. from forming a true community formed by everyone together. Said explains how, a century before colonising Egypt, English rulers used their historians and narrators to create a discourse about the East that led to an image of Arabs as a terrorist, totalitarian and sexist people, although not without first asserting that, although they had formerly made great advances in sciences such as mathematics, they were now people with whom 'it was difficult to reason'.

But let us now leave the theoretical arena aside and look at present-day Barcelona to examine a specific case: that of schools, where a participatory culture and neighbourhood community are not optional, in spaces such as, for example, the AFA (Students' Families Association) – until recently known as 'AMPA' (Parent-Teacher Associations). This specific arena contains clearly defined spaces of power, where access to participation is often dependent on language and, therefore, on the ability to express one's thoughts in a clear way that is easy to understand. In addition, even if a basic language for communication that can be understood by most parents can be agreed upon, there can be other cultural barriers that hinder fluid communication while giving rise to chronic power dynamics that will eventually affect how we perceive others.

A mother, for example, who is not yet familiar with the local language and who needs her daughter to translate communications for her will often end up not fully understanding the cultural reality under discussion. Furthermore, this mother may not know about the existence of associations where she can express her difficulties and receive advice to improve her children's school learning. And, even if this mother is lucky enough to know about the spaces for participation that are available to her, it is also possible that her participation is limited to the festive events that are held during the year, where she is asked to dance her country's traditional dances or bring in some of its typical food. In other words, these social spaces are often only really open to these people when diversity is appreciated as an expression of folklore and, in spite of people's good intentions, a deep and effective relationship with the other person's reality is never established. Basically, efforts end at superficial initiatives at which the wish to be 'intercultural' and respectful of diversity is expressed but no useful and effective interactions with these people and communities take place.

Let us now look at this example in the context of neighbourhood life. How could the Bolivian community, for example, in a neighbourhood with many people of this nationality participate in neighbourhood matters? In most cases, their participation is likely to be limited to showcasing their traditional dances at neighbourhood festivals and carnival groups. In view of what was said above, the question we should be asking is: 'Are we only interested in their folklore?' Popular culture is a great, valuable and very interesting excuse to make initial contact and get closer to the community. It is an essential exchange of ancestral traditions and knowledge. However, what other forms of participation can we promote from our organisations, be they neighbourhood or educational ones, in order to interact with these people? To what extent are we willing to share our organisations' decision-making power with new communities? Are we willing to open up and learn other knowledge that will enable us to interact with each other?

It is well known that there is always a certain resistance to change, but it is only with a new approach that we will be able to resolve dynamics with the potential to lead to the intergenerational renewal of our organisations. And this is a recurring theme in the internal meetings of neighbourhood associations and federations. Inevitably, there is concern about the generational handover of Catalonia's organisations, and the solution to the problem is often to put interculturality into practice with an inter-epistemic approach.

On the other hand, we have observed repeated patterns in the various practices in which we have had the opportunity to revitalise communities that interact with Barcelona City Council. Let us look at another example: there are organisations that have been making festive clothing for 20 or 30 years but are unable to continue because there has been no generational handover, so they leave their premises, full of sewing machines, which could easily be used by new organisations with people of diverse backgrounds who have more than enough people to work but no premises or machinery. This is where we must make these synergies come together: by sharing resources, sharing knowledge, sharing effort. Full participation always requires us to share.

In conclusion to this first part, we can assert that, although we are making progress towards interculturality, the three key pillars that make it possible still need to be consolidated. We must thus go beyond equality, recognition and interaction and carry out an additional exercise, which could be inter-epistemic dialogue. Interculturality needs to be more than simply a requirement in

the list of politically correct actions that have to be carried out by social organisations. In order to achieve this, we need to understand the Eurocentric dynamics on which a power that is currently preventing us from exercising interculturality has been established.

## **2. Language as a tool for awareness and legitimization of intercultural management**

It is important to reflect on the words we use and change them if we notice that they entail inherent prejudice. Behind each signifier there is a signified, which lies in our collective unconscious. We often unconsciously use words with derogatory connotations towards groups of gender, race, culture or social position.

We tend to think that, as a society, we no longer need to re-analyse language as we did in the early 20th century and realise the explicit content hidden in commonly used words, but this is unfortunately not the case. We are all familiar with Swiss linguist and father of structuralism Ferdinand de Saussure's (1916) views on linguistic signs, and we must point out that they are fully applicable now. Linguistic signs are composed of a 'signified' (*'signifié'*) and a 'signifier' (*'signifiant'*), which are two sides of the same coin: the signified is what characterises the object or idea in question, the qualities that make it unique and distinguishable from others; while the signifier is the 'sound-image', which leaves a psychological imprint on the brain (Saussure, 1945: 91-93). One might say that the signifier refers to the word itself which, whenever we hear or read it, evokes the object or idea in question. Saussure's structuralist idea of signs is key to understanding linguistic and signification systems. However, American semiologist Charles Sanders Peirce's theory on the operation of signs through the *sign-object-interpretant* triad is also important. Peirce takes into account the relevance of the 'interpretant'; i.e. the sign as interpreted in the recipient's mind as part of the process of signification, as it is ultimately the recipient who keeps the act of signification in their mind, the act of turning reality into signs: the recipient is the mediator between the sign and the object.

Let us look at the definition given by Peirce himself, for whom a 'sign' or representation is: 'something that stands for something to someone in some form or capacity. It is addressed to someone; in other words, it creates an equivalent or possibly more developed sign in that person's mind. (...) The sign stands for something, its object' (Peirce, 1991: 239-240).

If 'a sign is something that means something to someone', we can assume that the people who construct language and who structure reality are the users of a language. Our configuration of the world and the way we relate to it therefore affects the production and communication of signifieds. In other words, in addition to structuring realities, language also structures the way we communicate with others.

All this means that discourse is subject to the intrinsic ideologies of the signifieds it contains. The construction of the signified is thus determined by the person with power in acts of communication; in other words, by the minds that order the discourse. And these minds can construct arbitrary meanings in the social sphere and give rise to communication problems that will find expression in the various social players.

But what happens when the people who construct this meaning are also the people in charge of deciding what the 'normality' of knowledge is? Or when it is this standardised knowledge that lays down the laws discriminating against some people based on origin, race or religion? The film *Malcolm X* contains a scene in which two black men in prison are looking up words in a dictionary and read the definitions of 'black' and 'white'. On seeing that 'black' is defined as 'dirty,' 'devoid of virtue,' 'possessed by the devil,' etc. and 'white' means the opposite, one of the characters wonders who wrote the dictionary. And they eventually find out that it was written by a white man who had reproduced meanings and definitions of the word 'black' in a semiotic framework that also included discriminatory practices and slavery. This is the case to such an extent that you can still find the word 'black' laden with racism, male chauvinism, classism and much more in the main official dictionaries. All this provides a modern-day example of what was so precisely defined by

Saussure. These are words and meanings that are therefore still being used to build a hate discourse in political campaigns, such as the one carried out in Madrid only a few weeks ago by the far-right party VOX<sup>1</sup>.

Educating people about change in these signifieds is the best way to change narratives. Perhaps this way, instead of reacting to hate discourses, we can be proactive and create new narratives against such hate discourses. And we can indeed say that Barcelona is already working on these paradigms. Social movements carry out an analytical and critical task and are the focus of the construction of a Barcelona that can one day consider itself fully intercultural. An example of this can be found in the work being carried out by the local government to make changes to administrative language.

In 2019, Barcelona City Council created the *Guia del llenguatge inclusiu* [Guide to Inclusive Language], which explains terms such as *racialised*. What is a *racialised* person? Although from a biological point of view<sup>2</sup> race does not exist, we are forced to keep talking about it when addressing oppression as a social category. As to the use of the term *racialisation*, for example, historian Antumi Toasijé (2018) explains that:

'In the late 1800s and early 1900s A.D., a use – which I believe to be correct – of the term *racialise* started to emerge in social science. People started talking about social phenomena such as the *racialisation of poverty* or the *racialisation of illiteracy*, and so on. In this case, they were saying that these disempowerment phenomena focused on specific groups, which they referred to as *racial* groups, but this did not mean that other groups were not racialised but simply that, statistically, the phenomenon did not affect them to the same extent. The term *racialisation* was taken superficially from these analyses by decolonialism and then distorted in its use'.

Toasijé concludes in the same article that, 'In short,

every human being is racialised: some positively and others negatively. It therefore makes no sense to say 'I, as a racialised person' or 'We, as a racialised group', unless you are referring to the whole of humanity. In fact, this verb has become a vague and reductionist expression like so many others based on phenotype, and I therefore discourage its use for the purpose of denouncing *white* supremacism or that of any other human group based on the idea of *race*'.

This is just one of many examples where a particular meaning has been used for a term that was designed to explain a different reality and has then been interpreted by another group to express itself, causing it to take on a different connotation. Although some guides recommend its use and some articles discourage it, the word has simply already acquired a new meaning and a new life and can be used in the right context. Its use is appropriate, for example, to describe a reality of oppression, but it must not be used in a general context unless it has connotations of exoticism or folklore, as it can distort its meaning. This guide also advises that people should not be referred to as 'black'. It is thus better to ask a black person how they would like to be referred to: as black, Afro-descendant, African American, Afro-Catalan or something else. And this is when the difficulty in writing a regulatory guide such as this from a place of power becomes clear, as we can fall into the trap explained in the first part of this article: the trap of using power to 'normalise' an

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1. On 21 April 2021, in the context of the political campaign for the Madrid local elections, the far-right party VOX put up an election campaign poster at Puerta del Sol underground station stating that a '*mena*' (an unaccompanied foreign minor) received €4,700 a month, while a grandmother received a monthly pension of only €470.

2. Science journalist Angela Saini (2021) explained that race must be studied as a social phenomenon rather than a biological one, as the biological concept of race doesn't work and never provides reliable data: The idea of splitting humans into different groups is a political one: it is not something that happens in biology. Biology does not place humans in different groups; in fact, it shows that we are all very similar. In fact, according to her, we are one of the least varied species on the planet.

interpretation that we have not built together. In any case, and despite the difficulties, we must acknowledge the courage of the project, and any – always constructive – criticism we may make in relation to the work carried out to produce the guide must relate to its excessively institutional discourse, which could have been better agreed and has lacked the point of view of social movements in certain matters.

On the other hand, an appropriate idea that is also highly advisable for the neighbourhood and/or community world is to simply refer to people from diverse backgrounds as ‘neighbours’ or ‘residents’. Nothing could be easier or more natural. As for the word ‘newcomers’, however, we recommend that this should only be used in school settings or when talking about someone who has really only just arrived. It is not advisable to use this term for people from diverse backgrounds, as they have often been living in Catalonia for many years. In the more administrative and political sphere, we usually use the word ‘citizens’, but this term is just an ideal, for example when discussing interculturality, because many people that we refer to in this way are in fact prevented from exercising that citizenship.

A good idea for finding more words whose use has been reflected upon is to consult the *AfroDiccionario*. This has been created by African political scientist and activist Ngoy Ngoma Ramadhani, together with other people, as an educational tool to fulfil the ‘Afro’ community’s need to generate material content that highlights the constant racism suffered by this group. Ngoy explained in an interview that his project:

‘is the launch of a political strategy whose aim is to provide an alternative to the dictionary of the Real Academia Española (RAE) [the official Spanish dictionary] aimed at anyone wishing to know society from a different and more real point of view. Members of the ‘Afro’ community experience many realities for which there are no specific words in Spanish. The definition of language by a few has systematically and with premeditation omitted the reality of many’ (Ramadhani, 2019).

This is one of the various examples of exercising identity through language that is being carried out by some communities, in this case the ‘Afro’ people living in Spain.

In short, a society can be perceived to be changing when it reacts to changes in words, but not without first challenging itself and feeling uncomfortable in the process. As explained at the beginning of this article, language enables us to interpret reality; and, by changing the words we use, we reinterpret this reality. In summary, the exercise to be promoted involves leaving automation behind and invites us to reconsider the current dynamics to make proposals for change and question our relationship with other cultures, which are often as close to us as they are unknown, and which have always been, and always will be, subject to new interpretations that will almost certainly require essential linguistic improvements.

### **3. Intercultural action by CONFAVC**

Neighbourhoods are the first place of contact for anyone arriving in a town or city. This is the ecosystem that establishes the nature of a community that can sometimes seem asleep but wakes up to create projects in response to neighbourhood needs. Or a community that comes together to claim often-infringed rights or to recognise the efforts of hundreds of anonymous volunteers who work hard to preserve the memory of the neighbourhood, the place where a people’s history is written.

The Confederation of Neighbourhood Associations of Catalonia (CONFAVC) was created in 1988. It is a neighbourhood movement organisation that coordinates 452 neighbourhood associations and 22 federations and that aims to improve the quality of life of the residents of Catalonia’s neighbourhoods by means of projects, campaigns and services.

CONFAVC has been working on the management of people from diverse backgrounds with a transformative approach for almost 10 years. Its Board has included people from diverse backgrounds without interruption for six years, enabling it to launch and continue with projects that work on interculturality as a cross-cutting line at the organisation. In other words, this vision that is to enable all projects to respond to the needs of the demographic reality of neighbourhoods is being imposed from the various areas worked on by the organisation.

Projects have been carried out through Cultural Interaction Groups (GIM) over the years, based on the various approaches applied to the management of diversity. These initiatives became known under the motto 'Building Intercultural Neighbourhoods, Neighbourhoods for Everyone', where the neighbourhood movement, with the collaboration of local administrations, promoted what at the time was called 'intercultural coexistence in neighbourhoods'. The project, which ran from 2004 to 2013, thus had the following aims: to ascertain the intercultural realities of each neighbourhood, to learn more about the various migration policies and models, to transform the 'fear of the unknown' into potential for local residents, to create actions to foster intercultural knowledge of local residents, and to boost ties of solidarity and good neighbourly behaviour.

'Building Intercultural Neighbourhoods, Neighbourhoods for Everyone' consisted of two phases. A social diagnosis of the neighbourhood was initially carried out, including the various public policies that have addressed this new reality, in coordination with other organisations and government bodies. Groups of voluntary workers were then created to promote community actions with the aim of fostering intercultural coexistence.

The second phase was characterised by the creation of interaction groups, which were formed by the people taking part in the course and other voluntary workers who decided to join in, and who carried out actions based on the needs identified by residents themselves with the purpose of achieving intercultural coexistence.

Over nine years, the project was launched in 19 neighbourhoods in Catalonia: in Hospitalet de Llobregat, Santa Coloma de Gramenet, Reus, Rubí, Manresa, Viladecans, Igualada and, more recently in February, in the AV de Badalona Federation and the Sant Just Desvern and Sagrada Família, Badia del Vallès and Terrassa associations. The project benefited over 7,500 people indirectly, and around 500 directly.

Other projects carried out by the neighbourhood associations linked to the CONFAVC are those of the Neighbours' Associations of the neighbourhoods of Rocafonda, l'Esperança, Ciutat Jardí and Valldeix, in the city of Mataró, which has been a great example of working for the community with a full intercultural and inter-epistemic approach. This was explained by a member of the association, retired teacher Maria Major, in an interview conducted by the Intercultural Communication Agency Itacat on 20 November 2020. According to Maria, now a retired teacher and an activist for the rights of women from all over the world who now form part of these neighbourhoods, these women and their families are now the future of this neighbourhood community that has carried out projects over the past 20 years. One of these is the 'Espai matern' ['Mothers' Space'] project, an alternative to nurseries from which many children mostly from families of diverse backgrounds without a care network are excluded, which looks after these women's children so they can go to work. Maria and other retired teachers launched this project, which has also helped women improve their literacy skills, sharing spaces of knowledge because, as she explained in the interview, knowledge is not exclusively academic: 'I've learned a lot from these women, more than I've been able to teach them' (Majó, 2020). They have also carried out other projects along the same lines that have been awarded prestigious awards in this field, such as the Carulla Foundation's Francesc Candel Award 2011 for La Vocalia de Dones' project 'Totes plegades' ['All Women Together'], the 2019 neighbourhood recognition granted by the CONFAVC, and most recently the Fem Mataró Award 2022.

The same organisation has also driven the creation of three female *capgrosses* [big-headed papier-mâché carnival figures] for the neighbourhood: a North African one, a sub-Saharan one and a local one. In other words, a set of *capgrosses* representing the vast majority of female residents in these neighbourhoods. When Maria Majó was asked what the key to participation was, she told us that word of mouth was very important, because posters were often in languages that these groups couldn't understand. She also highlighted the importance of trust and of treating people as equals. She also explained that this neighbourhood association took all these approaches and that, in addition to carrying out the projects, she hired women who understood the language of the children being looked after in the crèche and the specific cultural needs of the local residents taking part in the project. Maria Majó also highlighted the importance of respecting one's own language and guaranteeing the teaching of Catalan to give these women more opportunities both socially and in terms of employment (Majó, 2020).

In addition to projects such as those mentioned above, CONFACV has been carrying out the initiative 'A-porta' since 2016. This is a social neighbourhood empowerment experience in which local residents, who are referred to as 'door knockers' and who are familiar with the cultures and languages spoken in neighbourhoods, visit residents and inform them about practical issues. These are neighbourhoods with significant social needs, such as Ciutat Meridiana, Torre Baró and Vallbona, Montserratina de Viladecans, Can Puiggener in Sabadell, and Rocafonda in Mataró. 'Door knockers' are hired, trained and coordinated to visit all local residents and provide support, advice and resources to improve their quality of life in important aspects such as, among others, access to social rights, energy vulnerability, looking for work, the resources available in the neighbourhood, waste management, coexistence and civic behaviour, and supporting the elderly.

The initiative has recently received the Civic Behaviour Award in the Innovation category awarded by the General Office of Civic and Community Action of the Generalitat de Catalunya's Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Families. The awards in this category recognise actions and productions that have stood out for their innovative nature in the field of civic behaviour and human values. This is the third award received by the 'A-porta' project, as in 2018 it received the La Caixa award for Social Transformation and Innovation as the best social project in Spain, and in 2019 it received the 'Desafío RECI 2018-19 Diversity Advantage' award granted by the European Intercultural Cities Network (RECI) promoted by the Council of Europe.

CONFAVC president Jordi Giró explained that the success of this project lies in the 'door knockers' who are at the heart of it. What they do is as important as visiting every resident in the neighbourhood, exchanging information with them, and helping them with matters such as energy vulnerability and loneliness. Other collaborators in the 'A-porta' project include lesMed, SCEL (Innovació i Economia Social en la Mediterrània, Societat Cooperativa Europea Limitada), which has provided advice on the viability of the project in Catalonia since 2016. The Board of CONFAVC is currently carrying out participatory strategies that work on interculturality in a cross-cutting way and promote good practices, such as ensuring that the boards of organisations represent the diversity of neighbourhoods, that communication is inclusive and that participation involves strategies making it possible to invite and involve as many people as possible from those living together in our neighbourhoods.

#### **4. Conclusions**

By way of conclusion, we would like to make the observation that the change of approach to new neighbourhood life needs to be a constant and thoughtful exercise carried out in all meeting and participation spaces, from AFAs to neighbourhood organisations and in the parallel social movements that are gradually being created in response to the needs of each community.

We must also be careful not to resort to folklore when we want to hold community interaction activities. Furthermore, we can use the 'place of speech' (*lugar de fala*) as a tool for recognition and legitimation to talk about conflicts that we believe to be distant issues but actually affect us as



a community. In addition, we can change how we use language and be open to new interpretations that will in turn make us consider making profound changes to our relationship with our neighbours.

In short, a change of approach that entails a clear awareness of the privileges that some of us have compared to others based on the oppressions affecting each community. This way, we will be able to recognise the established order that has ended up shaping the hierarchy of powers in the community. And, from here, to deploy a deeper intercultural communication in which the exchange of knowledge with equal rights takes the inter-epistemic task beyond a mere category of science and places it at the centre of diverse societies if the aim is to create spaces with a sense of belonging.

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