



ANTI-COLONIAL RESEARCH PRAXIS

METHODS FOR
KNOWLEDGE
JUSTICE

Edited by
Caroline Lenette

Anti-colonial research praxis



Manchester University Press

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Methods for knowledge justice

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*To Lucie, you are wonderful and you are right to expect more from
the world.*

*To all who continue to bear the brunt of colonial violence,
dispossession, occupation, exploitation, and humiliation, while the
world watches.*

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Contributors

Mai Abu Moghli is an assistant professor at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies. She holds a PhD in human rights education from University College London (UCL) Institute of Education and an MA in human rights from the University of Essex. Mai's work focuses on critical approaches to human rights education, teacher professional development in crisis and emergencies, refugee education, and decolonising research and higher education. She has published on topics related to the legal status of Syrian Palestinian refugees, Palestinian teachers' activism, teacher professional development in contexts of mass displacement, decolonising the curriculum, decolonising research in the field of education in emergencies, and academic solidarity with Palestine.

Kaira Zoe Albuero-Cañete is a Filipino feminist scholar with training in anthropology and critical development studies. She is currently senior researcher at The Hague Humanitarian Studies Centre, International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), Erasmus University Rotterdam. She is also adjunct lecturer at the University of New South Wales. Kaira's research interests include understanding the everyday politics and ethics of living with, responding to, and recovering from disasters and other forms of crisis.

Crystal Arnold is a Gundungurra woman, living in Dharawal and Yuin Country. She is a lecturer in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Wollongong. Through the courses she teaches, Crystal aims to re-centre Country and give voice to entities such as plants, animals, wind, water, and

spirit. Crystal's PhD research focused on learning from weeds through observation and exploring how they respond to and might be considered a part of Country. She seeks to centre Indigenous ways of knowing and learning within her research.

Autumn Asher BlackDeer is a queer anti-colonial scholar-activist from the Southern Cheyenne Nation and serves as an assistant professor in the Graduate School of Social Work at the University of Denver. Her scholarship illuminates the impact of structural violence on American Indian and Alaska Native communities. Autumn centres Indigenous voices throughout her research by using quantitative approaches and big data as tools for responsible storytelling. Autumn is a racial equity scholar with an emphasis on Indigenous tribal sovereignty and is deeply committed to furthering anti-colonial abolitionist work.

Aviwe Baartman joined the Eastern Cape Teen Advisory Group (TAG) in 2018. She is from the Mdantsane Township in South Africa. Her hobbies are cooking, cleaning, and listening to music. Aviwe's dream is to own a restaurant selling township-style food.

Sesona Baskiti joined the Eastern Cape TAG in 2017. She is from the Port Alfred Township in South Africa. Her hobbies are cleaning and reading. Sesona's dream is to be financially independent and self-sufficient. She wants to complete Grade 12 and study hospitality because she enjoys decorating living spaces and keeping them clean with style.

Chelsea Coakley is a Research Officer, Adolescent Engagement and Participation, at the Adolescent Accelerators Research Hub, Centre for Social Science Research at the University of Cape Town (UCT). She oversees the Teen Advisory Groups study and is also a PhD candidate in Medicine at UCT.

Sibulele Dyobiso joined the Eastern Cape TAG in 2018. He is from the Mdantsane Township in South Africa. His hobbies are fixing electronics and watching movies. Sibulele's dream is to be a mechanical engineer. He is currently saving up to finish his studies.

Yamkela Hlekani joined the Eastern Cape TAG in 2018. He is from the Mdantsane Township in South Africa. His hobbies are drawing, listening to music, cycling, and swimming. Yamkela's dream is to be a builder and build beautiful houses. He wants to save money to start his own business.

Chumisa Jack (also known as CJ) joined the Eastern Cape TAG in 2015. He is from the Duncan Village Township in South Africa. His hobbies are singing, dancing, fashion, hosting events, and drawing. Chumisa's dream is to be a business owner, famous rapper, or fashion model or designer, or to start an NGO for young people because he enjoys working with people and hosting events.

Luyolo Jack joined the Eastern Cape TAG in 2018. He is from the Mdantsane Township in South Africa. His hobbies are listening to music, drawing, and doing woodwork. Luyolo's dream is to own a workshop with crafted furnishings to sell.

Laila Kadiwal is an associate professor in Education and International Development at the University College London (UCL) Institute of Education. Her research is focused on examining the issues of racism, the weaponisation of identities by far-right authoritarian actors, and the politics of knowledge production. She uses a decolonial lens to explore how these issues apply to various fields and topics, including education, refugees, climate-change injustice, minorities, emergencies, and conflict. Laila's research has taken her to India, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and the United Kingdom. She is a co-director of Best Foot Music, an intercultural music and arts organisation that collaborates with displaced and refugee artists in the United Kingdom.

Sinesipho Kwetha joined the Eastern Cape TAG in 2018. She is from the Mdantsane Township in South Africa. Her hobbies are singing, doing nails, and doing hair. Sinesipho's dream is to be a business owner or a lawyer. She is currently studying computer studies at a college. She is planning to study law in 2024.

Caroline Lenette is a professor of anti-colonial research in the School of Social Sciences and Deputy Director of the Big Anxiety Research Centre at the University of New South Wales. She is an uninvited migrant settler living and working on colonised Bedigal Land. Caroline is known for her contributions to refugee studies and her scholarship on participatory arts-based methodologies in collaboration with refugee-background co-researchers. Her current research explores intergenerational trauma and sociocultural notions of suicidality. Caroline is the author of *Arts-Based Methods in Refugee Research: Creating Sanctuary* (Springer, 2019) and *Participatory Action Research: Ethics and Decolonization* (Oxford University Press, 2022). She is co-editor of *Disrupting the Academy with Lived Experience-Led Knowledge* (Policy Press, 2024). In 2023, she created the *Anti-Colonial Research Library*, an online repository that hosts a wide selection of resources on First Nations and majority-world research methodologies from around the world.

Sandisiwe Mafuya joined the Eastern Cape TAG in 2018. She is from the Mdantsane Township in South Africa. Her hobbies are watching TV, cleaning (because she likes a clean place), reading stories, having fun, going out eating, and playing games. Sandisiwe's dream is to complete Grade 12 and study nursing or become a teacher.

Tebogo Samuel Malahlela joined the Eastern Cape TAG in 2015. He is from Post Dam in South Africa. His hobbies are reading, writing, and listening to or watching motivational podcasts and documentaries. Tebogo's dream is to build his grandmother a big house and own his own business.

He is currently enrolled in a college where he is studying a diploma in business management and accounting. Once he completes his diploma, he hopes to get an internship to gain experience and have a good chance of being employed.

Hlokoma Mangqalaza is a qualitative postdoctoral fellow from the Centre for Social Science Research at the University of Cape Town (UCT). Her research is on the socioeconomic trajectory of adolescent and young mothers with a particular interest in their educational attainment and mental health. She contributes to the qualitative components of the Hey Baby project, especially in participatory research and data collection, analysis, and writing up on the resilience of adolescent mothers and healthcare workers in the Eastern Cape. Hlokoma's research experience spans across the various fields of health, education, and community development, particularly in rural and informal settlements.

Yolanda Mapukane joined the Eastern Cape TAG in 2021. She is from the Duncan Village Township in South Africa. Her hobbies are cooking and cleaning. Yolanda's dream is to be a businessperson.

Maria de Lourdes (Marilu) Melo Zurita is a human geographer paying attention to processes of invisibilisation imposed on bodies, lands, and territories. In particular, Marilu explores methodological possibilities to engage in ethical and fruitful ways with what has been described as the under, the sub, the unseen. Her research and teaching practice is influenced by feminist and anti-colonial thinkers and activists. Marilu is an associate professor at the University of New South Wales.

Mpho Mendu joined the Eastern Cape TAG in 2017. She is from the Mdantsane Township in South Africa. Her hobbies are home decorating, painting, traveling, arts, and crafts. Mpho's dream is to be a business owner or interior designer. She is planning to obtain her Grade 12 certificate and start up a Spaza shop.

Gubela Mji is an emeritus professor in the Division of Disability and Rehabilitation Studies within the Global Health Department in the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences at Stellenbosch University. A physiotherapist by profession, she has translated this into disability and rehabilitation studies. As a National Research Foundation rated researcher, Gubela has published a book, chapters, and articles in prestigious accredited journals. Her work focuses on disability, Indigenous knowledge systems, and rural health. In June 2015, she produced a TED Talk called ‘How can we make disability research accessible in Africa?’ She has recently edited the book *The Walk without Limbs: Searching for Indigenous Health Knowledge in Rural South Africa* (AOSIS, 2019).

Lieketseng Ned is an associate professor and head of the Division of Disability and Rehabilitation Studies within the Department of Global Health at Stellenbosch University and editor-in-chief of the *African Journal of Disability*. She is lead editor of a Routledge international handbook on disability and global health. Her research interests include community-based rehabilitation, critical disability studies, decolonial health and education, and Indigenous methodologies.

Adreanne Ormond, with ancestral connections to the Māori nations of Rongomaiwāhine, Ngāti Kahungunu, and Ngāti Tuwharetoā, focuses her research on Māori wellbeing using a social and restorative justice framework. She actively engages with Māori communities and young people, emphasising collaboration and empowerment for positive outcomes. Adreanne is director of Te Ngāpara, Centre of Restorative Practice at Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University of Wellington.

Siphokuhle Ponoyi joined the Eastern Cape TAG in 2018. She is from the Mdantsane Township in South Africa. Her hobbies are singing, dancing, cooking, and looking after kids. Siphokuhle’s dream is to be a lawyer. She is currently saving to cover the costs of her university applications.

Yusra Price is an independent anthropologist, researcher, and facilitator in South Africa. She holds a Master's in social anthropology and has just started her PhD journey. She specialises in storytelling facilitation, arts-based and participatory research approaches, and education. She is currently a junior research fellow at the Centre for Social Science Research at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and a core member of the iBali network hosted by Open University. She is passionate about ethical research methodologies and access to education in South Africa.

Judy Pryor-Ramirez (she/her/ella) is a clinical associate professor of Public Service at New York University Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. Her teaching and research examine the leadership of non-profits, social justice movement-building, and public leaders using race, gender, and class analyses. She engages in qualitative methodologies and specialises in community-based participatory action research. Dedicated to enabling transformative possibilities, Judy centres justice and equity in her teaching, practice, and research because of her social identity as a Black-Latina first-generation college graduate. Judy has co-authored digital curriculum projects on race/ethnicity, Black women's contributions to the arts and media, and community-based participatory action research. Originally from Richmond, Virginia, the ancestral homeland of the Powhatan nation, Judy has proudly called New York City home for the past twenty years, where she resides with her life partner and son on the ancestral homeland of the Lenape people.

Elelwani Ramugondo is the deputy vice-chancellor responsible for Transformation, Student Affairs and Social Responsiveness at the University of Cape Town (UCT). She is a founding member of the UCT Black Academic Caucus, has been its vice-chairperson, and is a member of its Executive Committee. She was appointed Special Advisor on Transformation to the Vice Chancellor in 2015 in response to the student-led Rhodes Must Fall movement's call for decolonisation. She later became

a member of the Strategic Executive Task Team during one of the most tumultuous times in the university's history. Elelwani was instrumental in crafting the UCT Curriculum Change Framework (2018), which is centred on decoloniality. She has served on the UCT Council over three terms (1999–2000; 2016–2020; 2022–2023).

Charishma Ratnam is a human geographer whose research spans a number of areas including migration, refugee resettlement, and experiences of (re)creating home in Australia. Charishma's research is inspired by critical feminist and anti-colonial scholars and activists. She is particularly interested in developing methodologies with participants that include digital, walking, and visual approaches. She is an Alfred Deakin Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Deakin University. Charishma received an Australian Research Council Discovery Early Career Researcher Award (DECRA) in 2024 to explore how refugees use digital technologies to navigate resettlement in Australia.

Paula Satizábal is a human geographer and political ecologist studying how regional political economic processes produce governance institutions, power/knowledge dynamics, and territorial struggles in fluid and marine geographies. She draws inspiration from anti-colonial, anti-racist, and feminist thinkers to challenge ahistorical spatial configurations and open space for relational understandings of justice at sea and beyond. Paula is a postdoctoral researcher at the Helmholtz Institute for Functional Marine Biodiversity (HIFMB), a research institute at the University of Oldenburg.

Mildred Thabeng is from Pretoria and is currently based in the Eastern Cape as a senior research assistant on the Mzantsi Wakho and Hey Baby study. She has ten years of experience in planning, coordinating, and implementing qualitative components of public health research projects in addition to her practical experience as a community healthcare worker and as a young mother. Between 2012 and 2013, Mildred collaborated with

Beth Vale on qualitative and quantitative research exploring medicine-taking among adolescents. She has collaborated with Rebecca Hodes since 2014, focusing on sexual and reproductive health among adolescents and more broadly on the lived experiences of teenagers, their caregivers, and their healthcare workers, spanning the decades of South Africa's democratic transition. Mildred has published several peer-reviewed articles on these topics. She has copious experience conducting ethnographic research, including focus groups, participatory exercises, and observations. She was a senior researcher-facilitator-peer mentor for the Eastern Cape TAG.

Marie Aubrey Villaceran is the director of the University of the Philippines (UP) Center for Women's and Gender Studies. She is a faculty member of the UP Department of English and Comparative Literature and the convenor of the Decolonial Studies Program under the UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies. She has a Master's degree in creative writing from UP and a PhD in Sociology from La Trobe University in Australia, where she is also an honorary research fellow. She is currently involved in projects using arts-based social research methods.

Gabriela Villacis Izquierdo is an Ecuadorian feminist. She is a PhD researcher at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), Erasmus University Rotterdam, where she is part of the 'Humanitarian Governance, Accountability, Advocacy, Alternatives' project. Her current work focuses on the contributions of feminism(s) to humanitarian governance, with an emphasis on the potential of collective action and humanitarian advocacy.

Lisanda Zanempi joined the Eastern Cape TAG in 2018. She is from the Mdantsane Township in South Africa. Her hobbies are singing, dancing, and listening to music. Lisanda's dream is to be a mechanical engineer. She is currently completing pre-vocational learning to further her studies.

About the cover artwork

The artwork used in the book cover design is titled *The Redemption/Blossom*. It was created by photography-based artist Tawny Chatmon (www.tawnychatmon.com) for her series *The Redemption* (2018–2019). Her work celebrates and honours the beauty of Black childhood and familial bonds while at times addressing the absence and exclusion of the Black body in western art.

In *The Redemption* series, Tawny's photography portraits are embellished with layers of acrylic paint, 24-karat gold leaf, and semi-precious stones. The artist's statement reads:

With this series, it is my intention to celebrate and reinforce the beauty of Black hair, features, life, and culture. These portraits are meant to act as a counter-narrative and redemptive measure to uplift and elevate Black hair, tradition, and culture freeing us from negative stereotypes. An intent, not to be confused with seeking validation, but rather an unyielding affirmation of Black beauty.

The painted dresses and clothing are directly inspired by the beautiful and vastly beloved works of Austrian painter Gustav Klimt, during his Golden Phase. This is intentional and I wanted the connection to be made immediately. Visually, Klimt's use of gold and decorative elements brought about strong feelings of grace, magnificence, and beauty within me upon my first discovery of his work and have remained in my subconscious mind ever since.

Likewise, these are the emotions I am looking to evoke within the viewer of *The Redemption*.

Cover description for accessibility

The main title, subtitle, and editor's name appear in the top right corner of the cover. At the centre, against a pale background, a young Black girl stands sideways in a field of colourful circles and vertical lines representing flowers and stems. Her gaze is turned towards the viewer. The young girl's beaded braids fall across her shoulder. Her sleeveless dress glitters in circular gold patterns. She wears gold bracelets of different sizes from her wrist to the upper arm.

Preface

If there's a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it.

– *Toni Morrison*

Whenever I feel frustrated by the lack of scholarship on a crucial topic, I find myself returning to Toni Morrison's advice. I don't always know if I am the best person to respond to this call, or whether a book is the best format to share this knowledge. But I did not feel ambivalent about this edited collection. After many years thinking about and teaching research methods from a western-centric perspective – content I inherited and was hesitant to reframe – leading this initiative and working alongside a stellar group of First Nations and majority-world (i.e., migrant- and refugee-background) researchers was one of the best experiences of my life.

I draw inspiration from marcela polanco and colleagues (2020) to share my positionality. As a faculty member of an Australian university, and as an uninvited migrant settler living and working on stolen and colonised lands, I am complicit with the operations of academia as a privileged centre of Eurocentric power. This book is a response to the structures I have benefited from and that have impoverished society, research, methodologies, and knowledge production. Writing about anti-colonial research praxis from a position of relative privilege in academia is an alternative response to 'my ongoing faithfulness toward this system and its impoverishing practices of which I have been an accomplice in replicating'

(polanco *et al.*, 2020, p. 148). My choice to actively address this contradiction is a process of reimagining what is possible within and beyond current institutions and represents ‘a humble attempt at repairing academia’s historical sustainability of the coloniality of knowledge’ (polanco *et al.*, 2020, p. 148).

A book on anti-colonial praxis from the perspectives of First Nations and majority-world scholars brings together vastly different ideas and practices with a similar purpose: to destabilise the way western-based methods occupy a central and unquestioned place in research and the academy and to work towards knowledge justice. As a collective, we aim to transform and reimagine the possibilities of research methodologies.

Working with these contributors has been a real honour and an extraordinary learning journey. They responded enthusiastically to my invitation to share scholarship that is not always welcome elsewhere. The surge of energy and creativity I felt while reading their abstracts in 2022 was amplified as we worked together on drafts in 2023. I had the privilege of collaborating with ten of the authors to co-write the conclusion. I cannot express how incredibly rich, powerful, and regenerative this process was.

The international socio-political landscape worsened as we finalised our chapters. We could not ignore the genocide of Palestinians in the occupied Gaza Strip from October 2023. This devastating event, along with several examples of ongoing colonial domination in the respective countries where we live, led us, as academic authors and researchers engaged in anti-colonial work, to (re)consider the meaningfulness of our scholarship and praxis. We channelled our outrage to write in solidarity with others around the globe who feel the same way. We hope that this book can bring similar minded people together through supportive and purposeful conversations on how we must continue to use our privileges to progress from mere conceptual debates on ‘decolonisation’ to concrete actions towards change.

The writing took place alongside the development of the *Anti-Colonial Research Library* (www.anticolonialresearchlibrary.org), an online repository with similar aims to this book. I developed this tool in 2023 to

synthesise the excellent resources I found on decolonising research and anti-colonial models, so that others would have a starting point in their own search for this scholarship. At the time of writing, the *Anti-Colonial Research Library* held approximately 450 resources (open access peer-reviewed articles, websites, and videos). The site had attracted tens of thousands of visitors and several suggestions for new contributions to the repository. The positive reaction (especially on social media) to the announcement of this library signalled how much the international academic and broader community seeks resources on anti-colonial praxis, because there is now a deeper understanding of the problematic aspects of western-centric and colonial research practices – and of our collective responsibility to actively address those.

I am not sure if I will keep following Toni Morrison's advice! Any book project is a major undertaking that requires significant time and headspace. There are many others whose scholarship should take up more space in the academy, and I hope that this book prompts the creation of new publication (and other) opportunities with an anti-colonial focus for those with fewer privileges. For me, learning from the expertise and generosity of First Nations and diverse majority-world scholars represents research and academia at its best.

I end with the words of South African writer, activist, and political analyst Sisonke Msimang from her memoir *Always Another Country* (2017, pp. 298–299):

What else can I do but write when I know life is not just breath, it is also voice? I write because I cannot paint and I cannot sing. Words are my brush and my warbled song. I have written in the margins of every book I have ever loved, so I write because I read. I write because I am Black – that peculiar word that is more than the brown of my skin ... I write for myself because women seldom have spaces for themselves and writing is space; it takes up space, it creates space, it gives me space. I write because writing is solitary and women are seldom alone with just their thoughts – their

responsibilities intrude. There is this to be done and that to be paid for and those moments when it is just you and your words are rare and all the more beautiful ... I write because I have been let down, and sometimes I write because I do not know the answer and I am hoping someone might search with me.

Caroline Lenette
Stolen and colonised Bedigal land
May 2024

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Acknowledgements

I am an uninvited migrant settler who has lived and worked on stolen and colonised Bedjal land since 2015. I thank the Bedjal people and other First Nations people connected to this place for the care and custodianship of this land for thousands of generations. I acknowledge the continued connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to the land and waters of this beautiful place, and that they never ceded sovereignty.

It is an immense privilege to grow as a researcher on the lands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. First Nations peoples are the world's first researchers, knowledge holders, knowledge creators, and creative thinkers. Deep knowledge has been present here, including on the university campus where I work, long before it was bricks and mortar, and this knowledge will remain long after we are gone. Whenever I walk around campus, I enjoy the sight of century-old fig trees. I remember the 150-year-old Moreton Bay fig tree, known locally as the 'Tree of Knowledge', felled in 2016 in the middle of the night to make way for a light rail track – for progress. I remember never to take this deep knowledge for granted. Seeing the flowering jacaranda tree from my office window reminds me how privileged I am to live and work on this land. I recognise the benefits that accrue to me because I am part of institutions that maintain the dispossession of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

My deepest thanks to all chapter contributors – this book would not exist without you! I am especially grateful for the consistent efforts of authors who experienced very difficult circumstances during the writing process.

Thank you to Shannon Kneis at Manchester University Press for her patience and willingness to listen to new ideas.

Introduction: anti-colonial research praxis and knowledge justice in the academy

Caroline Lenette

Key points

- Anti-colonial praxis means pushing back against the politics of knowledge *subversion* and refusing to accept current norms, by prioritising alternative paradigms grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems and majority-world perspectives.
- Knowledge justice involves centring First Nations¹ and majority-world expertise to address the harms of epistemic injustice.
- The concept of decolonisation has been diluted to fit neoliberal university agendas, which reduces its potential to disrupt deeply entrenched colonial and unjust structures.
- Social science research continues to rely on colonialist-infused methodologies that reinforce rather than challenge white, settler colonial, and elitist ways of knowing; continue to hurt participants; and erase rich and diverse knowledge frameworks.
- The uncritical application of methods as ‘neutral’ tools across contexts, without recognising their ethical and political implications, perpetuates colonialism and racism.

Introduction

This edited collection aims to counter epistemic injustice. This form of injustice ‘wrongs someone in their capacity as a subject of knowledge’ (Fricker, 2007, p. 5) through attempts to ‘disqualify a person from the status of knower’ (Thomas, 2018, p. 211). Discrediting the credibility of a person’s testimony whereby they are wronged as a knower can have profound impacts, because ‘[t]he capacity to reason and to give knowledge to others is fundamental to being human and so to be insulted or ignored in this capacity is deeply wounding’ (Johnstone, 2021, p. 635). Striving for epistemic *justice* requires concerted efforts at multiple levels. In academic contexts, universities have perfected the art of silencing diverse ways of knowing – a key marker of colonisation and its enduring legacy, coloniality – by prioritising and embedding preoccupations grounded in western²-centric thought (Lenette, 2022; see Dei and Lordan, 2016, on the coloniality of education). When epistemic injustice is structural, as is the case in institutions of knowledge production, it must be addressed through systemic action (Anderson, 2012).

A key strategy to disrupt faithfulness to western-based, colonial thinking in the academy is to prioritise scholarship describing First Nations and majority-world knowledges. Here, the majority-world includes many former colonies (or ‘colonised bodies’) and refers to African, Latin American, Middle Eastern, Pasifika, and most Asian nations. The chapters in this edited collection outline research models, principles, and practices that the academy has long excluded, silenced, manipulated, and ‘epistemically demeaned as intellectually inferior and lacking credibility’ (Johnstone, 2021, p. 637). The transformative scholarship presented here aims to directly counter the academy’s over-reliance on colonialist-infused methodologies (i.e., sets of ideas that guide research approaches). The chapter authors draw from culturally grounded knowledge, that is, knowledge that makes sense in specific cultural contexts, to reclaim

scholarly spaces that dominant western- or Euro- or North American-centric knowledges have long occupied without being questioned. Together, contributors demonstrate how anti-colonial praxes redefine the possibilities in social research.

The first section of this introductory chapter defines key concepts of knowledge justice, colonialism, colonality, and decolonisation to contextualise the rationale for situating this book's contributions as anti-colonial praxis. The second section discusses the colonial origins of academia, social research, and methodologies to highlight the entrenched nature of this major obstruction to democratising knowledge production and addressing epistemic injustice. The third section outlines whose perspectives are valued in this book and its structure.

Key concepts

What is knowledge justice?

The meaning of justice is context specific, and so the concept of knowledge justice offers a useful framing for this book. According to Leung (2020), knowledge justice is ‘a *demand* for the voices of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color to be centered, because they are necessary for any justice to truly occur’ (my emphasis). Knowledge justice is a valuable sociocultural and political concept in academia, given that ‘a systematic lack of opportunity to acquire knowledge one needs as an individual and a citizen because of the way the epistemic basic structure of a society is organized is an injustice’ (Kurtulmus and Irzik, 2017, p. 129). This injustice should be of major concern to institutions that distribute (i.e., produce and disseminate) knowledge such as universities, as they play a crucial role in delivering educational, intellectual, and practical skills across several generations. Another definition of knowledge justice that speaks to diverse ways of making sense of the world is ‘a justice-based conceptual framework for examining knowledge production in an environment of competing claims’ (Egert and Allen, 2019, p. 352). Although knowledge justice is an underutilised concept in the social sciences, it is discussed in health science (Egert and Allen, 2019) and library and information studies (Leung and López McKnight, 2021).

Knowledge justice is linked to anti-colonial discourses in the collective efforts to address epistemicide – the killing of knowledge systems (Hall and Tandon, 2017), which is an ongoing feature of colonialism to this day. Epistemicide sets criteria of worthiness and renders some ways of knowing as non-existent, invisible, or discardable (Alonso Bejarano *et al.*, 2019; polanco *et al.*, 2020). Prioritising First Nations and majority-world methodological expertise over western-centric epistemologies in the academic literature contributes to knowledge justice because this approach

redresses imbalances in knowledge production, and, importantly, citational practices. While the impetus to rectify epistemic erasures is crucial, a deep understanding of First Nations and majority-world knowledges and perspectives cannot occur without proper *recognition* that dominant processes of knowledge production are problematic and need disrupting. Recognition leads to *unlearning* harmful practices to *reconfigure* disciplinary knowledge and methodologies (Guerzoni and Walter, 2023).

When scholars reject western-imposed criteria for what knowledge is considered superior in the academy and in society more broadly, they contest power structures that threaten knowledge justice, within and beyond institutions and (artificial) nation-state borders (Egert and Allen, 2019). First Nations and majority-world scholarship can reclaim processes of knowledge production that unquestioned western-, Euro- and North American-centric views have monopolised for far too long. Egert and Allen (2019, p. 353) contend that ‘if knowledge can be used to produce social injustice, knowledge can also be used to produce social justice’.

However, for many people around the world, any form of justice remains unattainable. A book on anti-colonial praxis cannot ignore the incredibly destructive impacts of ongoing colonisation around the world. For some contributors, writing their chapters was made more difficult because of explicit and more insidious forms of colonial violence. Two examples (among many) were the impact of an unsuccessful ‘Australian Indigenous Voice’ constitutional referendum on 14 October 2023, where 60 per cent of voters nationally chose ‘No’ to recognising First Nations peoples in the Constitution of Australia through a body called the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice; and the intense and rapid escalation of colonial violence against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip (and other occupied territories such as the West Bank) from October 2023 with clear genocidal intents and relentless bombings, where tens of thousands of civilians were massacred. These incredibly distressing events strengthened the authors’ resolve to write, especially when other avenues for seeking justice were non-existent or intentionally shut down.

Colonialism, coloniality, and decolonisation

Colonial projects have been part of history for centuries. Tuck and Yang (2012) contend that the current colonial era goes as far back as 1492, when the colonial agenda went global. Colonialism refers to ‘a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation, which makes such nation an empire’ (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243). It involves dispossession and oppression by invading and taking over land to impose colonisers’ norms, usually through violence and genocide. Despite many colonised nations gaining independence from colonial administration through resistance and sometimes violence, colonial relations continue to permeate present-day relationships. Colonialism is still a day-to-day reality, for example, in the occupied Palestinian territories (see Tatour, 2021) and Kashmir (Shah, 2022). The impacts vary across contexts, based on socio-historical and cultural differences (Guerzoni and Walter, 2023).

Tuck and Yang (2012) describe two forms of colonialism: external and internal. External colonialism refers to the extraction and exploitation of humans, animals, and plants to establish dominance and privilege and build wealth as a capitalist motivation. Internal colonialism denotes the imperial nation’s measures to control, imprison, segregate, dislocate, and criminalise those considered inferior. *Settler* colonialism operates through both external and internal forms but is a distinct form of colonialism because settlers take over land with the intention of establishing their new home and asserting sovereignty. Violence is not just used at the point of arrival, but reasserted everyday – settler colonialism is not an event in the distant past but a structure (see Tuck and Yang, 2012). Thus, the term ‘postcolonial’ is problematic, as it suggests ‘finished business’ despite clear evidence to the contrary (Mahuika, 2008). As Dei and Lordan (2016, p. vii) note, ‘this era is still perpetuating colonial vestiges’.

Coloniality is not merely the ‘aftermath’ of colonialism or colonial administration. It refers to entrenched patterns of power based on

colonialism, where notions of domination and inferiority are reproduced over time. Dominance is central to the ‘logic’ of coloniality (Dei and Lordan, 2016). According to Maldonado-Torres (2007, p. 243):

coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and everyday.

Coloniality is ‘intertwined with whiteness’ (Dei and Lordan, 2016, p. x); that is, it is perpetuated through the myth of white superiority and dominance. Further, coloniality is built on the normalisation of the non-ethics of war through practices such as slavery, genocide, and rape (Maldonado-Torres, 2007).

Decolonisation

The term ‘decolonisation’ was used in the 1830s to refer to former colonies achieving self-governance through ‘transfers of power’ or by challenging colonial rule (for example, the French military’s retreat from Algeria; see Gopal, 2021), although it is not always clear *to whom* the power has been transferred. In white settler colonial nations such as Australia, Canada, Aotearoa New Zealand, and the United States, the definition of decolonisation as First Nations’ struggle for sovereignty and ‘repatriation of Indigenous land and life’ (Tuck and Yang, 2012, p. 1) is perhaps most significant. However, Agozino (2023, p. 437) argues that decolonisation ‘has been incorrectly defined as the transfer of power by colonizers to the colonized’ and that a better definition would be ‘the continuing struggle to restore independence under conditions dominated by racist-imperialist-sexist world systems of power’.

Maldonado-Torres (2007) explains that decolonisation is likely to have as long a history as colonisation, but only received attention in the early twentieth century in what is known as the ‘decolonial turn’ (see the work of

W. E. B. Du Bois). This ‘turn’, which I critique below, marked a shift in knowledge production with a focus on the impacts of colonisation on contemporary life. There is now an abundance of literature on decolonisation (e.g., [Ahmed, 2020](#); [Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019](#); [Tamale, 2020](#)), with growing scepticism about whether decolonisation and restitution are in fact possible (e.g., [Crichlow, 2023](#), [Moosavi, 2020](#)).

A decolonial approach seeks to address and (where possible) reverse the impacts and persistent harms of colonisation, which are political, social, cultural, environmental, historical, mental, spiritual, and emotional ([Wane, 2006](#)). But decolonisation has become a fraught concept used to designate anything and everything that needs to change – this is especially so in academia (see my critique in the second section). This universalising approach ‘turns decolonization into a metaphor’ ([Tuck and Yang, 2012](#), p. 1). Its misuse to replace debates that are in fact about human rights, social justice, critical methodologies, or approaches that de-centre settler perspectives is deeply problematic. Tuck and Yang ([2012](#), p. 3) argue that

When metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future. Decolonize (a verb) and decolonization (a noun) cannot easily be grafted onto pre-existing discourses/frameworks, even if they are critical, even if they are anti-racist, even if they are justice frameworks. The easy absorption, adoption, and transposing of decolonization is yet another form of settler appropriation.

This is one of the reasons why *anti-colonial* praxis might be more precise when discussing research methodologies.

Anti-colonial praxis

Anti-colonialism refers to ‘a continuous process of challenging colonial and neo-colonial legacies, relations and power dynamics’ ([Dei and Lordan, 2016](#), p. vii), which is at the core of meaningful engagement with the idea

of decolonisation (Gopal, 2021; see the works of Afro-Caribbean scholar Frantz Fanon). Anti-colonialism as *resistance* to imperial rule towards a radically transformed future can involve activities such as strikes, labour unrest, demonstrations, civil disobedience, guerrilla warfare, and insurrections. An anti-colonial theoretical perspective interrogates ‘the power configurations embedded in ideas, cultures, and histories of knowledge production, validation, and use’ (Dei and Asgharzadeh, 2001, p. 300). When it comes to knowledge production, anti-colonialism is ‘the *practice* of thought and action towards the goals of decolonisation’ (Gopal, 2021, p. 889, original emphasis). Anti-colonial thinking means ‘pushing back against the politics of knowledge subversion’, by ‘refusing to accept the current norms’ (Dei and Lordan, 2016, p. xiii).

Smith (2005, p. 29) argues that ‘we need to move beyond merely engaging in conscientization, decolonization, and political literacy initiatives to focus on transformative action and outcomes’, hence the centrality of anti-colonial *praxis* (see Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021) to this book. Praxis, as a form of reflexivity, refers to the ongoing critical (self and dialogic) reflections that take place in practice for a deeper understanding of the potential for change (Smith, 2005). For Smith (2021, p. xiv), meaningful research practices must go beyond ‘theory’ and ‘action’, and ‘are all about praxis and the reflexivity that is necessary for the integrity of the research and of the researcher themselves’. Ultimately, an anti-colonial approach ‘brings an action-oriented stance, one that is beyond theorizing’ (Dei and Lordan, 2016, p. x) and focusses on ‘resistance and rupturing of established colonial and colonizing practices’ (p. ix). For Adefarakan (2011, pp. 42–43), an ‘anti-colonial discursive framework appreciates, and therefore takes the position that Indigenous knowledges and identities carry crucial elements of empowerment, resistance, and the basic human right to simply be who one is. In this sense, justice and social change are attendant imperatives when working with/in this framework’.

Ideas about justice and change are also found in First Nations research principles such as the Kaupapa Māori worldview (see Ormond, Chapter 4),

where an anti-colonial approach broadly refers to ‘the active and proactive resistance to both old and new forms of colonization’ ([Mahuika, 2008](#), p. 10). Another insightful First Nations perspective is that of Red River Métis and environmental scientist Max Liboiron, who adopts a feminist, anti-colonial approach to science, and favours ‘anti-colonial’ over ‘decolonial’ when describing their work ([Raman, 2023](#)):

I can’t return land in a lab. In academia, everything and the kitchen sink is counted as decolonization ... [it] is a very promiscuous term. I’ve stopped using it because it’s been so heavily co-opted and become meaningless. I’ll instead say anti-colonization, which means, we are not assuming entitlement to Indigenous land and life for resource use or research access. For example, asking permission before working on Indigenous land is minding your manners in a way that doesn’t reproduce colonization. The use of the term anti-colonization is just being more specific about what we’re doing.

This points to an understanding that, as Barnes ([2018](#), p. 385) argues, research can only play a limited role in ‘decolonisation’, and that ‘research in and of itself is neither sufficient nor necessary for decolonisation’, which is why the term ‘anti-colonial’ is more specific in this context.

The distinctive meanings of ‘decolonisation’ and ‘anti-colonialism’ imply that these terms should not be conflated or used interchangeably (see, for example, Zainub’s ([2019](#)) edited collection on decolonisation and anti-colonial praxis). Despite the expansion of scholarly discussions on contextual uses of these terms, ‘decolonisation’ is still used more extensively, especially in academia, when discussing research, scholarship, and methodologies. In the chapters that follow, readers will note that contributors use the terminology differently, depending on what is most relevant to their research environment or discipline (indeed, the proposal for this edited collection was about ‘decolonising social science research’ and did not clearly distinguish between ‘decolonial’ and ‘anti-colonial’ as distinct concepts). The points outlined in this section reflect changes in my

own understanding of key concepts over time, hence the decision to prioritise ‘anti-colonial praxis’ in the title of this book. However, I did not impose this terminology on my colleagues’ scholarship if it did not make sense to them at the time of writing.

‘Decolonising’ universities and research methodologies

The exercise of decolonizing methodologies has to do more than critique colonialism. It has to open up possibilities for understanding and knowing the world differently and offering different solutions to problems caused by colonialism and the failure of power structures to address these historic conditions. (Smith, 2021, p. xiii)

It is difficult to disentangle the colonality of university systems from the colonality of research methodologies, which requires an explanation of academic contexts. The term ‘decolonisation’ entered the academic lexicon to disrupt the function of universities as tools for colonial expansion. Universities, especially anglophone institutions in western countries, have become powerful sites of colonial knowledge production (see polanco *et al.*, 2020; Stein, 2022). Colonisation turned pre-colonial scholarly thinking (e.g., in Greek philosophy) into a European tradition to shape the dominant curricula and research methodologies of the contemporary academy, making education and knowledge production contested areas (Wane, 2006). ‘Decolonisation’ has become a buzzword in academia and is at times perceived as a ‘hype’, a ‘craze’, or ‘in vogue’ (Moosavi, 2020), or ‘a passing fad, a recycled set of ideas that have very little critical bearing on the critical work that needs to be done’ (Barnes, 2018, p. 382). Its overuse in university contexts (see Asher BlackDeer, Chapter 3) has diluted the concept’s emancipatory potential while ignoring struggles for sovereignty. Universities have usurped its initial intent – about justice, reparations, and radical change – and weakened the meaning to tame commitments that lead to small or no improvements. The term ‘decolonisation’ has quickly become acceptable institutional jargon as an action point on managerial agendas paired with mild, all-encompassing strategies (see Gopal, 2021).

Recent critiques of ‘decolonisation’ as a co-opted term in academia compare it to malaria ([Agozino, 2023](#)) to signify its uncritical spread across disciplines. Universities use the term as a form of virtue signalling to convey that they are doing ‘something’ to do right by First Nations peoples (see [Pierce, 2022](#)) to ‘attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity’ ([Tuck and Yang, 2012](#), p. 1). Performative academic exercises, such as standard land acknowledgements, are seldom about returning land and dismantling colonial structures and practices but serve to exonerate those in power from addressing problems such as white privilege, racism, whitewashing of knowledge, and discrimination. Institutions have at times responded by including brown and black bodies in the academy, without, however, disrupting dominant ways of knowing (see [Maldonado-Torres, 2021](#), for a discussion on the ‘white immune system’). Such situations have resulted in ‘decolonisation without decolonising’ ([Moosavi, 2020](#), p. 334), while colonial agendas remain intact.

Moosavi ([2020](#), p. 334) critiques western-based, settler colonial, and white scholars who are quick to jump on the ‘decolonial bandwagon’ without thinking deeply about the limitations of such discourses or being reflexive about their positionalities and privileges. Such scholars celebrate a decolonial ‘turn’ despite long histories of majority-world scholarly thinking on this topic, suggesting that ideas only matter when western-based and white scholars ‘discover’ them. They tend to completely ignore or else consider majority-world scholars’ viewpoints as *inferior*, despite their long-established presence and original, insightful, and sophisticated arguments ([Moosavi, 2020](#); [polanco et al., 2020](#)). Decolonial feminist scholars such as María Lugones, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Gayatri Spivak have criticised this silencing of majority-world perspectives for decades, but decolonial thought and methodological debates remain Eurocentric and elitist. This norm has resulted in ‘the formation of a cadre of experts’ who produce ‘an entire industry of publication about – a largely detached and purely academic conceptualization of – decoloniality’ ([Maldonado-Torres, 2021](#), p. 12). In this context, acknowledging one First Nations or majority-

world scholar (often under the problematic banner of ‘People of Colour’) equates to acknowledging all First Nations or majority-world scholars, known as ‘colonial generalisation’ (see [Moosavi, 2020](#)). Such attitudes have created a context where ‘social movements and their intellectual creations are taken as zones for intellectual excavation and as springboards for theoretical and philosophical reflection that remains caught within the liberal order of knowledge production in academia’ ([Maldonado-Torres, 2021](#), p. 11).

Many academics and researchers who benefit from the status quo actively resist and resent commitments to decolonisation ([Moosavi, 2020](#)) or do not think that it applies to them, their disciplines, courses, or research. Others believe that decolonisation applies to teaching but not research ([Loyola-Hernández and Gosal, 2022](#)) or methodologies ([Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019](#)). Others still might claim to engage in ‘intellectual decolonisation’ but never cite scholarship from majority-world authors, thus perpetuating citational injustice – arguably another form of epistemicide.

As Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s quote above states, disrupting colonialist influences in the academy requires more than acknowledging or exposing their origins. It involves recognising and actively dismantling institutional power dynamics such as white privilege and the colonial underpinnings of knowledge production and research methodologies ([Ahmed, 2020](#); [Lenette, 2022](#)), and undoing the pervasive racial and gendered power and social inequalities on which the academy is built ([Alonso Bejarano et al., 2019](#); [Smith, 2021](#)). It is, by definition, hard, risky, and unsettling work ([Maldonado-Torres, 2021](#); [Tuck and Yang, 2012](#)), where ‘one must be prepared for a daunting struggle given that coloniality is unapologetically entrenched’ ([Moosavi, 2020](#), p. 341; see Conclusion).

Guerzoni and Walter ([2023](#)) describe a three-stage process to address the colonial roots of academia, through cognition, commitment, and conduct. Cognition means critical self-reflection and reflexivity, responding to the call to ‘decolonize our minds’ ([Smith, 2021](#), p. xii) – which does not apply solely to white, settler colonial scholars and researchers but also to those

educated in former colonies, where coloniality still deeply affects institutions that distribute knowledge such as universities. Scholars and researchers cannot simply ‘embrace critique without actually destabilizing their own privilege’ (Alonso Bejarano *et al.*, 2019, p. 30; see also Loyola-Hernández and Gosal, 2022). Commitment involves centring Indigenous knowledge systems and ethical research practices grounded in the majority world to challenge rather than reinforce normative lenses. Revalourising distinct bodies of knowledge that *displace* western-centric and settler colonial thought as the only framework or possibility for knowledge production (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019; Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021) sets the foundation for changes in conduct to prioritise anti-colonial praxis. Still, many consider academia ‘unsuitable for such a task, precisely by being one of the sites for colonial production’ (polanco *et al.*, 2020, p. 148).

More recently, student bodies have signalled their commitment to disrupting the academy’s colonial origins. Student-led protest movements, starting with the Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall campaigns at the University of Cape Town in South Africa in 2015, have garnered international momentum (see Ahmed, 2020; Gopal, 2021; Kadiwal and Abu Moghli, Chapter 8; Maldonado-Torres, 2021). Such movements (and subsequent debates such as ‘Why isn’t My Professor Black?’ and ‘Why is My Curriculum White?’ in the United Kingdom) push for more radical systemic changes ‘by confronting questions of institutional racism, increasing access to education, and reforming the Eurocentric university curriculum’ (Ahmed, 2020, p. 282). These protests spurred contentious debates on the need to overhaul racist and ethnocentric academic structures and curricula to centre majority-world perspectives such as Black radical feminism, to rectify the enduring legacy of epistemicide, and to better reflect the contemporary realities of students and staff. But it is an uphill battle, since ‘[p]ossibilities of decolonized education are not discussed or openly welcomed in many of our educational institutions’ (Dei and Lordan, 2016, p. xii).

The 'colonial mode' of social science research

Social science research has long been an elitist platform for western-based, settler colonial, and white researchers, with roots in colonisation and the global spread of western imperialism (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019). Such colonialist norms remained unchallenged for decades, which is why the social science literature is largely built on Euro- and North American-centric standpoints (Lenette, 2022; Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021). Hall and Tandon (2017, p. 11) questioned 'how the ideas of white men from just a few countries (Italy, France, England, Germany and the USA) came to dominate the world of knowledge'. Such ideologies have set research norms imbued with power imbalances as the standard. The process of delegitimising First Nations and majority-world views continues to be a key characteristic of social science research, which still operates 'in the colonial mode' (Alonso Bejarano *et al.*, 2019, p. 28). The ease with which scholars continue to extract and misappropriate contextual knowledges by 'just running those realities through the interpretive machinery of elite European social theory' (Alonso Bejarano *et al.*, 2019, p. 8) is troubling.

Debates on the need to 'decolonise' the social sciences (and other disciplines) have intensified over the past decades (Maldonado-Torres, 2021). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2019, p. 481) describes this process as undoing a 'dirty history'. Scholars such as African philosopher Claude Ake (1939–1996) extensively critiqued the application of western-centric social science lenses to knowledge production in vastly different contexts such as countries on the African continent and exposed Eurocentric assumptions underpinning the discipline (see Arowosegbe, 2008). Ake (1979) described this uncritical structure as an expression of imperialism. He argued that '[w]estern social science continues to play a major role in keeping us [Africans] subordinate and underdeveloped; it continues to inhibit our understanding of the problems of our world, to feed us noxious values and false hopes' (Ake, 1979, p. ii). His explanation that 'we have continued to peddle [social science] for a variety of reasons which include laziness, self-

interest or fascination with esoteric irrelevancies’ (p. i) still holds relevance. Alonso Bejarano *et al.* (2019, p. 136) agree that ‘social science as a set of ideas and practices – despite decades of introspection, deconstruction, and auto-critique – remain deeply colonial, embodying, benefiting from, and contributing to the maintenance of [w]estern imperial power’.

Western-based lenses continue to inform research methodologies and practices across white-majority and majority-world contexts as an enduring legacy of colonialism. Due to the ‘naturalisation’ of western-centric concepts and worldviews, viewed as the ‘gold standard’, academia only benefits from a very small proportion of the extensive and diverse knowledge systems in the world (Hall and Tandon, 2017). This means that the social sciences are *impoverished* due to limited appreciation of the value of First Nations and majority-world perspectives. Scholars such as Smith (2021, p. xii) have pointed out that ‘[n]o real progress has been made to decolonize the major knowledge and political institutions of academia’, especially in settler colonial settings.

‘Decolonising’ methodologies

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2019) argues that the idea of a research methodology itself is an instrument of Eurocentric knowledge that blocks and delegitimises other ways of knowing. The impetus to ‘decolonise’ methodologies stems from anti-colonial, activist, and grassroots methodological work in Latin America in the 1970s, and since then in countries such as Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, Canada (especially in First Nations research), Malaysia, Nigeria, and South Africa (Moosavi, 2020). Majority-world decolonial scholars who lead anti-colonial methodological debates include Chela Sandoval and Bagile Chilisa (see Ned *et al.*, Chapter 1; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019) and Carolina Alonso Bejarano and colleagues (2019). For Smith (2021, p. xii), ‘decolonising’ methodologies ‘forc[es] us to confront the [w]estern academic canon in its entirety, in its philosophy, pedagogy, ethics, organizational practices,

paradigms, methodologies and discourses, and importantly, its self-generating arrogance, its origin mythologies and the stories that it tells to reinforce its hegemony’.

Destabilising the colonial origin of methodologies through praxis is seen as a *moral* and *ethical* imperative (Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021). However, Barnes (2018) cautions against simplifying the relationship between ‘decolonisation’ and ‘research methodologies’ (as is often represented in the literature), arguing that if this relationship is ‘not properly interrogated, the decolonising methodologies movement may inadvertently reinforce the systems that it critiques’ (p. 380). To avoid this, Alonso Bejarano *et al.* (2019, p. 8) propose that a ‘decolonial methodology takes a different point of departure to arrive at a different set of endpoints’, and is unapologetically anti-objectivist. Importantly, Moosavi (2020, pp. 341–342) states that ‘there are many calls for intellectual decolonisation but much less guidance about how it can be practically realised’, which is one of the problems this book addresses.

Research *methods* are not neutral data collection tools. They are social practices with ethical and political implications and consequences (West and Schill, 2022). The choice of methods in social science research aligns with specific ideological and political standpoints (Lenette, 2022; Smith, 2021). Methods convey different assumptions about the nature of reality (ontology), knowledge (epistemology), and ethical values (axiology), but they are often assumed to be apolitical tools rather than imbued with specific ethical and socio-political values. Key methods commonly used in social science research such as interviews, focus groups, surveys, photovoice, and narrative inquiry reflect dominant western-centric models and values, which methodological debates often fail to recognise and disrupt (Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021; Smith, 2021). Barnes (2018, p. 380) suggests that

we should not assume that certain methodologies are *de facto* more likely to contribute to decolonisation than others. For example, it is

often suggested that participatory action research can contribute more to decolonisation research than quantitative cross-sectional surveys, or that quantitative methodologies are conservative and that qualitative methodologies are politically woke.

In fact, the majority of qualitative and mixed-methods studies *do not* contribute to a decolonial agenda (Barnes, 2018). This suggests that research methods may not be problematic in and of themselves, but coloniality is often perpetuated in *how* they are used.

For instance, the long-established approach of ethnography *relies* on the existence of power imbalances, restricted access to resources, and positions of dominance. Due to its deeply entrenched roots in colonial anthropology, ethnography was – and can still be – extractive and non-reciprocal:

The colonial strain of ethnographic research is extractive. It cracks open the oysters of other people's lives and harvests the rich goo within. It brings this material back to the university, the factory wherein it deploys further tools – what it calls 'theory', sets of ideas that are nearly always the products of [w]estern thought – to process raw materials from aboard and render them suitable for [w]estern consumption. (Alonso Bejarano *et al.*, 2019, p. 7)

These authors' model of 'decolonising' ethnography in research with undocumented immigrants in the United States involved a team of academic researchers and immigrant workers from Latin America, whose roles shifted from research assistants to project leaders. The team composition, which is a crucial research component, demonstrated 'the true potential of decolonized methodology for both scholarly learning and political praxis' (Alonso Bejarano *et al.*, 2019, p. 13). An uncritical approach to ethnography leads to harmful erasures, whitewashing, and weakened understandings of social phenomena, experiences, and

relationships, producing a partial rather than full grasp of social issues and practices (Fricas, 2022).

This problem extends to methods grounded in positivist traditions, such as story completion, originally developed in psychology for psychotherapy, but now used in qualitative social research on sexualities, disability, and health and well-being (see Lenette *et al.*, 2022 for a full discussion). In relation to participatory and arts-based methods, Fricas (2022) cautioned against the ‘ahistorical’ application of tools such as photovoice to avoid perpetuating their colonial and racist underpinnings. Based on her research in Ecuador in 2017–2018, she argued that such creative methods often hide stereotypical, romanticised, or pathologised representations using settler colonial lenses. Researchers’ tendency to ‘celebrate’ such methods without questioning their origins and implications limits opportunities to apply an anti-colonial lens to reframe how these methods are used and what harm is potentially caused in the process (see also Lenette, 2022, and Omodan and Dastile, 2023, on Participatory Action Research).

Scholarship on anti-colonial praxis in quantitative research is relatively limited. Recent publications such as Nakhid *et al.*’s (2023) edited collection on affirming methodologies in qualitative and quantitative research in the Caribbean aim to address this gap. Other key examples include Ryder *et al.* (2020) on incorporating Indigenous methodologies in quantitative research describing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, and Chapter 3 author Asher BlackDeer’s (2021) work on a quantitative Native approach to Indigenous mental health research and the centrality of Native data (i.e., data sovereignty). In relation to statistics, examples are Zwiener-Collins *et al.*’s (2023) anti-racist critique of how statistics amplify existing micro and macro power and colonial relations, and Walter and Andersen’s (2013) outline of *nayri kati* (‘Good Numbers’) as an Indigenous quantitative methodology (please consult the Anti-Colonial Research Library (2023) at www.anticolonialresearchlibrary.org for further examples). There is much scope to expand the body of knowledge on anti-colonial models in quantitative and mixed-method research.

Whose perspectives are valued in this book?

Returning to Leung's (2020) definition of knowledge justice as a demand for First Nations and majority-world voices, the chapters in this book reflect the perspectives of:

1. Indigenous and First Nations scholars from South Africa (Lieketseng Ned, Elelwani Ramugondo, and Gubela Mji), Australia (Crystal Arnold), the United States (Autumn Asher BlackDeer), and Aotearoa New Zealand (Adreanne Ormond).
2. Majority-world scholars living and working in white-majority settings, in Australia (Charishma Ratnam, Maria de Lourdes Melo Zurita, and myself), Germany (Paula Satizábal), the Netherlands (Kaira Zoe Albuero-Cañete and Gabriela Villacis Izquierdo), and the United Kingdom (Laila Kadiwal and Mai Abu Moghli).
3. Scholars and co-researchers (i.e., thirteen young advisers) who live and work in their own countries, in the Philippines (Marie Aubrey Villaceran), United States (Judy Pryor-Ramirez), and South Africa (Aviwe Baartman, Sesona Baskiti, Chelsea Coakley, Sibulele Dyobiso, Yamkela Hlekani, Chumisa Jack, Luyolo Jack, Sinesipho Kwetha, Sandisiwe Mafuya, Tebogo Malahlela, Hlokoma Mangqalaza, Yolanda Mapukane, Mpho Mendu, Siphokuhle Ponoyi, Yusra Price, Mildred Thabeng, and Lisanda Zanempi).

Authors are at different career stages and represent several social science disciplines such as development studies, education, social work, sexual and reproductive health, humanitarian studies, and geography. The co-authors of [Chapter 10](#) are four researchers and thirteen isiXhosa-speaking young people who were advisors on a Teen Advisory Group (TAG) and have

collaborated on research projects using this model over several years. Except for five young men from the TAG, contributors to this book are women, a deliberate strategy to redress gender imbalances in academic authorship towards citational justice (see [Kwon, 2022](#)).

Together, we practise epistemic disobedience ([Mignolo, 2009](#)) by prioritising anti-colonial praxes in contexts where colonial values still reverberate. We do not seek *white validation* ([Leung and López McKnight, 2021](#), my emphasis) and continue to produce this scholarship in a white space that was never meant to acknowledge, value, or indeed learn from First Nations and majority-world knowledge. We are deliberately unfaithful to the Eurocentric canon and have ‘intentionally and naughtily skipped the mandated flip and fix line of production of Eurocentric scientific technologies or methodological frameworks toward which researchers dedicate monogamous fidelity’ ([polanco et al., 2020](#), p. 159) to democratise knowledge production.

While the combined expertise in this book yields rich and valuable perspectives, contributors’ ability to write about this work also reflects privileges that many scholars, activists, and community-based practitioners situated outside the academy, especially those in majority-world countries or who write in their first language, do not have. Maldonado-Torres ([2021](#), p. 14) reminds us that ‘many crucial lessons for decolonial thinking are much better formulated by community and activist organizations than by academics’. Zavala ([2013](#)) also points out that the role of grassroots research collectives, for instance, is largely ignored despite the rich knowledges that such initiatives can generate. The contributors to this book worked well together because we are acutely aware of this imbalance in academic publishing.

I acknowledge the potential for the content to reflect privileged views given our positionalities, professional roles, and access to this publication opportunity. As Fricas ([2022](#)) has pointed out, the risk of providing ‘romanticised’ perspectives on methodologies is ever present, and this is a pitfall that all the authors have endeavoured to avoid. Much broader

perspectives grounded in diverse sources of knowledge are needed to achieve the aspirations of knowledge justice and to create social and scholarly spaces together with those who have fewer privileges.

Further, despite the wealth of anti-colonial thought originally published in French or Spanish, anglophone scholarship is the currency in contemporary debates (see [Dei and Lordan, 2016](#)). Anti-colonial scholarship published in English can easily undermine the notion of writing about anti-colonial praxis. A small step towards rectifying this imbalance involved some authors translating their abstracts in a language other than English (i.e., Spanish, Hindi, Arabic, and Filipino). Abu Moghli's Arabic translation and Kadiwal's Hindi translation ([Chapter 8](#)) are included as an image in the chapter. Arnold ([Chapter 3](#)) presents original artwork instead of a translated abstract, explaining that her language lives not in written words but within the text of Country itself – including spirit, land, sky, water, elements, plants, trees, and animals. This is a modest response to Phipps' (2019, p. 11) call to decolonise multilingualism and succeed 'in cracking open a space where we might begin to make a way for our work, multilingually, deliberately shirking the pull to a single language for ease of administration'.

Structure

The chapters are organised in three parts. In Part I, 'Indigenous knowledge systems', Ned, Ramugondo, and Mji ([Chapter 1](#)) reflect on their use of Chilisa's Indigenous research paradigms with AmaBomvane in South Africa to illustrate how emancipatory research involves transcending the 'inclusion struggle' into dominant paradigms. They explain the crucial importance of articulating Indigenous research paradigms and approaches as legitimate tools for social change. Arnold ([Chapter 2](#)), a Gundungurra woman, explores the concept of Country as a living methodology. The transformative journey she outlines extends beyond individual research, representing a holistic shift towards Indigenous methodologies that respect

the interconnectedness of all life forms and care for Mother Earth. Asher BlackDeer ([Chapter 3](#)) delineates a decolonial framework to design and teach an introductory social work research methods course that counters dominant research paradigms. She describes the centrality of perspective, process, and praxis as the framework's main ideas. Ormond ([Chapter 4](#)) argues that Kaupapa Māori is a transformative influence to disrupt the historical complicity of universities in perpetuating colonial dehumanisation. She draws on the experiences of young Māori students to show how Kaupapa Māori empowers them to critique western scholarship's dehumanising aspects, to validate their Māori knowledge, and to assert their humanity. The four chapters in Part I illustrate how re-centring and re-valuing Indigenous knowledge systems in research contexts that maintain colonialist norms can expand frameworks that align with a knowledge justice agenda. In doing so, these authors contribute to redressing the legacy of epistemic injustice.

In Part II, 'Feminist frameworks', Albuero-Cañete and Villacis Izquierdo ([Chapter 5](#)) draw on their feminist research in the Philippines and Colombia to discuss co-construction of knowledge and designing methods that address imbalances of power inherent to humanitarian practice and research. They draw attention to the potentials of feminist methodologies to facilitate localised, anti-colonial, and co-constructive research. Ratnam, Satizábal, and Melo Zurita ([Chapter 6](#)) reimagine qualitative interviews from an anti-colonial, feminist perspective. The critical feminist geographers explain their approach to research as listening with attention and intention to lived experiences, and as reflecting on positionalities to guide political and academic practice. Villaceran ([Chapter 7](#)) details the transformative potential of arts-based research using a decolonial feminist framework in a project on sexual and reproductive health and rights in the Philippines. She points to methodological flexibility and cultural appropriateness as ethical practices for working with diverse identities. Together, these three chapters highlight the vast potential of participatory, intersectional research. The authors demonstrate how non-exclusionary

feminist principles can counter narrow frameworks that reinforce the colonial origins of social science research approaches.

In Part III, ‘Creative methodologies’, Kadiwal and Abu Moghli ([Chapter 8](#)) discuss the ‘Theater of the Privileged’ Decolonial Café as an effective approach to interrogate the field of international education and development. Researchers can use this model to engage in anti-racist research and practice to prevent a tick-box approach to decolonisation. Pryor-Ramirez ([Chapter 9](#)) shares how she created the story circle interview method, drawing on Latina feminist and translanguaging scholarship to advance participatory research. She illustrates the method’s strengths using case studies from the Rio Grande Valley and New York City. Researchers and TAG members Baartman, Baskiti, Coakley, Dyobiso, Hlekani, Jack C., Jack L., Kwetha, Mafuya, Malahlela, Mangqalaza, Mapukane, Mendu, Ponoyi, Price, Thabeng, and Zanempi ([Chapter 10](#)) outline their collaborative experiences of decolonial, participatory, and creative research in South Africa using ‘slow work’. They used a facilitated reflexive writing process to discuss the TAG model, their decision-making processes throughout their long collaboration, and the impacts of their choices as decolonial praxis. These three final chapters describe practical examples in context and offer unique insights on how to realise the promise of anti-colonial research.

The concluding chapter is unique in two ways. First, it morphed from a planned sole-authored conclusion to a co-authored piece. The content was drawn from collective online discussions in November 2023 with ten contributors to identify the book’s key purpose in the context of ongoing colonial violence and colonial solidarity (thanks to Laila Kadiwal for the suggestion; see Preface). Co-authoring this work with several contributors across time zones was an incredibly powerful and enriching participatory process. We aimed to use our book writing privileges – an essentially neoliberal academic activity – to contribute meaningful dialogue on anti-colonial praxis amid troubling local and international socio-political contexts. The nine provocations for praxis that summarise these

collaborative discussions aim to counter the trend whereby ‘recent publications [on decolonisation] are mainly academic in a narrow sense and ... too many of the scholars who pursue these topics have little connection with the movements that are mainly responsible for keeping the discourse of decolonization *urgent and relevant*’ ([Maldonado-Torres, 2021](#), p. 11, my emphasis). Second, the chapter’s unique content means that readers can decide to engage with the conclusion either before or after reading other chapters. This is because the concluding chapter clearly sets out the book’s overarching values and brings the key threads of the chapters together as a summary for readers while also including suggestions for moving forward.

Readers will encounter common themes across the three parts on Indigenous knowledge systems, feminist frameworks, and creative methodologies, as these concepts and practices converge and overlap in many contexts, even when considered through distinct disciplinary lenses. The structure of this edited collection should not create artificial boundaries that can detract from the anti-colonial focus, but serves to demonstrate the interconnectedness of anti-colonial thinking across contexts and time while highlighting the need to make these connections more explicit in anti-colonial research and scholarship.

Conclusion

I encourage readers to approach the book's content with a self-reflexive intent and willingness to unlearn practices rather than merely 'consume' praxis, which is more akin to intellectual laziness. Think deeply about how your discipline and methodologies can contribute to knowledge (in)justice; how more people, especially those with lived experience of your topic, should benefit meaningfully from research; and how you can address the contradictions of your complicity with harmful structures ([Dei and Lordan, 2016](#)) by being unfaithful to dominant paradigms (see [polanco *et al.*, 2020](#)). Find ways to be disobedient.

Questions for further discussion

1. How do you nurture solidarities among similar minded scholars, researchers, including early-career academics, activists, and community-based partners from around the world?
2. What do you see as the most pressing priorities to expand research and scholarship on anti-colonial praxis?
3. What strategies can support collaborations with community-based organisations and other research partners engaged in anti-colonial work who do not have the same privileges as university-based scholars?
4. What opportunities and limitations might independent researchers (i.e., who are not employed at academic institutions) face when implementing anti-colonial research practices?

Notes

- 1 The terms used to designate the people who are indigenous to a place and who have been colonised (e.g., 'First Peoples', 'Indigenous', 'Aboriginal', or 'First Nations') are sometimes contested (see [Adefarakan, 2011](#); [Barnes, 2018](#); [Guerzoni and Walter, 2023](#); Ned *et al.*, Chapter 1). Here, I prioritise the term 'First Nations', and I refer to Indigenous knowledge systems. In specific contexts, it is best to engage with individuals and communities to find out what terminology they prefer to use.
- 2 My use of lower-case 'w' in 'western' is intentional to de-centre western-centric lenses and colonialist linguistic dominance.

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Part I

Indigenous knowledge systems

Reflecting on the use of Chilisa's Indigenous knowledge postcolonial paradigm as a decolonial praxis

Lieketseng Ned, Elelwani Ramugondo, and Gubela Mji

Key points

- The colonial legacy of research is a growing global concern in the academy and across disciplines.
- Indigenous research contributes to decolonising methodologies and, for marginalised populations, is key to realising epistemic freedom.
- Researchers need to transcend the ‘inclusion’ discourse when working with Indigenous communities.
- To advance Indigenous research as emancipatory, we need to rightfully and unapologetically articulate Indigenous paradigms and approaches to research and Indigenous data collection methods as legitimate and appropriate for social change.
- Methodological flexibility can offer opportunities for privileging the voices of Indigenous people in research and positioning them as co-researchers.

Introduction

Worldwide, researchers are addressing the colonial legacy of research on Indigenous people. For instance, the decolonisation discourse pertaining to research is well documented in the Americas, Australia, New Zealand (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008), and recently in Africa (Chilisa, 2012; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018a; Seehawer, 2018), where methodologies are said to remain dominantly based on so-called western epistemology (Keane *et al.*, 2017; Seehawer, 2018). Those who critique the dominating hegemonic order of research raise the following concerns:

- With its inextricable links to European imperialism and colonialism, research continues to be deeply steeped in Euro-North America-centric worldviews (Smith, 1999; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018a).
- Research continues to embed the researcher with a locus of power to define (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018a).
- Research contributes to the marginalisation of African epistemologies and ontologies as well as the holders of such knowledges (Chilisa, 2012; Ned, 2019).
- Co-researchers become specimens rather than people born within valid knowledge systems (Smith, 1999).
- Dominant research methodologies imposed upon those who are often re-researched are, at times, stigmatising and insensitive to co-researchers. Such methodologies cause harm and distress; lack responsiveness to community concerns; and risk drawing incorrect, decontextualised conclusions (Smith, 1999; Chilisa, 2012).

The above concerns have mobilised researchers to constantly reflect critically on how they conduct research to avoid harmful practices and inappropriate methodologies. More specifically, these concerns are increasingly facilitating a shift to the use of methodologies and paradigms

that question power dynamics between researchers and co-researchers. Our stance in this chapter is that community members who are the focus of research are active participants, contributors, and co-researchers in research, contrary to views that situate them as mere subjects being studied. Decolonising methodologies is crucial because it challenges problematic ways of doing research and calls for respectful and beneficial research. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018a) puts it, this decolonial process ought to be an ethical, ontological, and political exercise instead of being merely one of the approaches and ways of knowledge production.

Drawing on methodological processes from the first author's doctoral research with AmaBomvane titled *Reconnecting with Indigenous Knowledge in Education: Exploring Possibilities for Health and Well-being in Xhosa, South Africa* (Ned, 2019), we reflect on the lessons of doing Indigenous research. Using a case of narratives as a merged methodological design, this doctoral research was located within the postcolonial Indigenous paradigm developed by Chilisa (2012), referred to here as the Indigenous research paradigm. We first clarify the concepts used in this chapter and provide a brief background to situate the significance of decolonising research. Second, we outline the main overlaps and major points of difference between western and Indigenous research. Third, we introduce ourselves as well as the project that informs this chapter as a point of reference to critically reflect on the methodological lessons of doing Indigenous research as a decolonial praxis while also advocating for Chilisa's Indigenous research paradigm. By doing so, we reflect on issues of building relations and framing the research in collaboration with communities and share thoughts about making choices on paradigms and navigating methodological flexibility, as well as what this means for higher education institutions.

The term 'Indigenous' remains highly contested. These contestations suggest that there are significant differences in the circumstances that First Nations and Indigenous peoples are subjected to in different parts of the world, as shaped by varying degrees of dispossession, different health and

education experiences, and diverse political relationships (Ned, 2019). It is worth noting that this term was not initiated by those who are actually referred to as being Indigenous. Rather, it is a term which stemmed from the modernity-colonial logic of the imperial paradigm of difference to imply existing outside the modern time. For the purpose of this chapter, we draw on the work of Indigenous scholars such as Semali and Kincheloe (1999) and Smith (1999), who speak about Indigenous people ‘within the context of people’s colonial relations with European conquerors and modern attempts at economic, political and cultural restructuring’ (Smith, 1999, p. 7). Thus, the term ‘Indigenous people’ becomes a dynamic construct that includes networks of people who have been subjected to colonisation of their lands and cultures (Smith, 1999), leading to a reshaping of their cultural identities by colonisation (Semali and Kincheloe, 1999). This colonisation of lands and cultures continues to hinder Indigenous people from living according to their own practices. Work by Ohajunwa (2019) and Ned (2019) are exemplary studies that clearly provide evidence of the continuity of such dominant hegemony. However, Smith (1999) also notes that colonisation and socioeconomic disadvantage are not the most defining elements of indigeneity. Rather, a strong sense of unity with the environment, as Durie (2004) writes, seems to be the most significant and defining characteristic of Indigeneity.

Decolonising research methodologies

Decoloniality scholar Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018a) argues that ‘rethinking thinking’ cannot be realised without decolonising research methodologies. The impressive works of leading decolonial scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research, and Indigenous Peoples*; Chela Sandoval (2000), *Methodology of the Oppressed*; and Bagele Chilisa (2012), *Indigenous Research Methodologies* become indispensable and pave the way to responding to this call. Smith, a leading Māori anthropologist, redefines research and unearths the dirty colonial history and power dynamics embedded in research activities from the experiences of Māori people in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Chilisa centred African people in her framing of Indigenous people in the African context. This is an important intervention because, up to that point, Africans were overlooked in the discourse and research around indigeneity. Chilisa thus exposes how Euro-western thought is embedded in the world of research, leading to the invisibilisation of Africans as Indigenous people in their continent of birth.

Drawing from the experiences of Latin and African Americans, and specifically women of colour, Sandoval critically engages with methodological issues facing researchers who are committed to alternative approaches and social change in research. She argues for a need to develop a decolonial mindset, which enables radical transformation, and suggests skills that support emancipative methodologies.

These three women, Bagele, Chela, and Linda – a decolonial act in itself, given the biographic history of knowledge producers – profoundly engage with the case of decolonising research methodologies. While they all depart from different questions and vantage points, their meeting point, as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018a) puts it, is the call for decolonising methodologies as a process through which epistemic freedom could be realised by those whose knowledges remain marginalised. Here, epistemic freedom refers to ‘the

right to think, theorise, interpret the world, develop own methodologies and write from where one is located and unencumbered by Eurocentrism' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018b, p. 17).

Chilisa provides a poignant definition of decolonisation from the perspective of research, as 'a process of conducting research in ways that the worldviews of those who have suffered a long history of oppression and marginalisation are given space to communicate from their frames of reference' (2012, p. 14). The implications of such a process, as Smith (1999) rightly argues, speak to transformative research. Smith states that when Indigenous people become co-researchers and not merely the researched, the research process is transformed because questions are framed differently, priorities are ranked differently, problems are defined differently, and people participate on different terms (Smith, 1999).

At this point, one may be asking what the link between decolonising methodologies and Indigenous research is. Given the social inequities that Indigenous people experience, Nicoll (2004) notes that decolonising methodologies is important within Indigenous research because of the focus on unequal Indigenous-settler relationships and the aims to disrupt social relationships that relegate Indigenous peoples. This disruption enables a form of praxis that brings forth Indigenous voices and representation in research that has historically marginalised and silenced Indigenous peoples (Smith, 1999).

However, it is worth noting that the decolonising alternative and Indigenous epistemologies emerge from different paradigms. For example, decolonising research is born out of critical theory within the transformative paradigm (Mertens, 2005) and centres the settler discourse, whereas an Indigenous paradigm centres Indigenous knowledges (Chilisa, 2012). Indigenous methodologies are said to be a paradigmatic approach to research and paradigms generally provide direction to theory and influence how this theory is developed, where held assumptions about knowledge form the basis for common practice. In paradigmatic research such as the Indigenous paradigm, this paradigm influences methodological choices

made and how these methods are used to gather data, as well as how analysis and interpreting such data takes place ([Kovach, 2010](#)). When working with Indigenous research, all chosen methods must make sense from the lens of Indigenous knowledges. This link enables and ensures alignment and consistency between methods and the chosen theoretical standpoint.

Relationality in western and Indigenous research

There remain major irreconcilable differences between Indigenous and western approaches to research, the most striking being the absence of relationality in many western paradigms. For example, interpretivism is about understanding and describing human nature, whereas the Indigenous research paradigm as per Chilisa's outline challenges the deficit thinking and pathological descriptions of the ex-colonised. Interrogating imperial and colonial power in research invokes Indigenous knowledge systems to envision other ways of doing research as informed by the world senses of the ex-colonised and historically marginalised groups ([Chilisa, 2012](#)). Interpretivism is informed by hermeneutics and phenomenology, while Indigenous research paradigms are informed by Indigenous knowledge systems, feminist theories, and other critical theories ([Chilisa, 2012](#)).

It therefore becomes difficult to integrate Indigenous perspectives in the dominant interpretivism framework and not engage with the related tacit assumptions of each. For instance, the nature of knowledge is subjective and context dependent in interpretivism, while it is relational in an Indigenous paradigm, and so what counts as truth is informed by these multiple relations. In an Indigenous context, relationality includes recognising or valuing the communities as knowers and that their knowledge is stored in their languages, traditions, practices, and rituals. It also means that this knowledge is co-constructed socially by people who have relationships and connections with each other, the living and non-living, and the environment. In other words, knowledge has a connection with knowers. This relationality implies that the 'researched' are not mere participants but co-researchers in the process. As an important Indigenous research tool, relationality emphasises that researchers build respectful relationships that consider the existing web of relationships so that research can happen, as collective action, in a nurturing harmonious environment.

Generally, a distinguishable factor between Indigenous and western constructs is that relationality is viewed as a key aspect of methodology in an Indigenous research perspective, whereas western constructs view relationality as bias and therefore situated 'outside' methodology (Kovach, 2010). Even when we advocate for co-existence, the western academy constantly asks us to separate our scholarship and ourselves from our political activism. These questions illustrate the distinguishable paradigmatic positions. This is to say, while certain western research paradigms frown upon the relational because of its potential for bias, Indigenous methodologies embrace relational assumptions as central to their core epistemologies (Kovach, 2010). Hence, Wilson (2008) maintains that this relationality is a major difference between conventional western research and Indigenous research. As such, western research is so profoundly compromised by its entanglements with colonialism that it is fundamentally incompatible with Indigenous communities and their priorities.

Positioning the authors

We refer to ourselves as Indigenous scholars. In this context, this refers to rootedness in our place of birth and ancestral lineage, which is also intertwined with multiple layers of oppression predicated on systemic racism at both geopolitical and local levels.

Lieketseng

I am a Black woman, born and bred in the Eastern Cape province of the post-apartheid South Africa but currently living in the Western Cape province for migrant work purposes. I have grown up in a country that does not see people like me as human. I am a product of a schooling system that teaches people like me that our knowledges are nothing but folk knowledge, barbaric, and superstitions that we must forget. While I have done well in my career so far by western standards, I am a product of a system which alienates people like me from who they are and socialises us into hating environments that produced us while liking the west that rejects us.

My passion for disability work started while working as an occupational therapist and this led me to interdisciplinary postgraduate studies, that is, disability and rehabilitation studies. I became interested in issues of knowledge politics, especially the interface of diverse ways of knowing. My PhD explored Indigenous knowledges in formal education and links to health and wellbeing. It was significantly influenced by Mji's (2012) project with AmaBomvane on health knowledges utilised by older rural Xhosa women to manage health problems within the home. This research concluded that three components undermine the health status of AmaBomvane, namely education, biomedicine, and religion. I could relate to these assertions and was more interested in education because of my own experiences of alienation, disconnect, and disavowal within the formal schooling system. Primarily based and informed by western ways of knowing, knowledges of the home within formal schooling in South Africa

remain at the margins. Thus, a divide exists between what is taught at home and what is taught in formal schools.

Similarly, in the disability sector where I work, there remain debates about the erasure and silencing of knowledges built from people with disabilities outside the metropole. The sense of disconnect still exists in disability work, with persons with disabilities often having to deny themselves in a dominantly able-bodied world (Bezzina, 2018). My interests have thus led me to engage with how ways of knowing in research and practice have been fraught with settler colonial tensions. This has enabled me to be vigilant about not reproducing and reinforcing other expressions of colonial prejudice and unequal biased power relations.

Elelwani

I am a Black woman born of the African continent, and a product of westernised education – successful in my career and lifestyle by western standards. Since 1994, when Apartheid ceased to be state policy, I have been part of a South Africa that, on the one hand, sees people like me rise through the ranks to lead key institutions such as universities, and on the other, denies Black people, especially Black women, the chance to set the agenda for meaningful change away from oppressive practices that reinscribe coloniality and perpetuate racial inequality. South Africa, like many postcolonial African states, continues to advance dominant global agendas, with leaders who often resist being removed and replaced by pliable actors. Settler colonialism aggravates this for South Africa.

As an academic and researcher who straddles the health sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities, and who is acutely aware of the role of geopolitics in sustaining the colonial university, I refuse to confine myself within strict academic disciplines or a single profession. I am, however, inspired by the idea of occupational therapy, anchored in the belief that health is advanced or thwarted in context and through what people do every day. I am constantly aware that dominant global agendas result ultimately in

poor health indicators and overall debility for racially oppressed communities, who are increasingly stripped of their agency for self-determination and self-reliance. It has been an honour to supervise Lieketseng Ned's PhD with Gubela Mji, through which I encountered the story of the AmaBomvane, and was reminded of the power that lies in Indigenous voices speaking back to oppression through Indigenous methodologies led by Indigenous researchers, even those who may have had to endure westernised education, which often strips one of ways to see that fall outside western knowledge paradigms.

Gubela

I was born and raised by Xhosa feminists in a rural area in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa (ECPSA). These feminists had a lineage with Indigenous Xhosa leaders. I was close to my grandmother, who was a retired teacher. My grandmother instilled in me respect for all knowledge systems. As a young person, I observed how she interacted with people with no formal education on matters related to Indigenous approaches to treatment of illnesses and with people of different religious groups. I believe that this is where I gained my interest in interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary studies.

As a young person, there were also times I spent in the households of my relatives who were Indigenous Xhosa leaders. I could observe Indigenous leadership at play during imbizos (Chiefs meetings). From these early observations, I saw the African collective approach to leadership at play, as no decisions were made without a collective agreement. Hours were spent convincing the opposing voice until an agreement was reached. It appeared that these leaders were aware of the strength and importance of unity. I also learnt from observing these meetings that you do not have to be at the front to lead.

I trained as physiotherapist and did my PhD in Family Medicine, exploring the health knowledge carried by older Xhosa women in their

home situation, with special focus on Indigenous knowledge systems. I chose AmaBomvane Indigenous women from the ECPSA as participants. Being exposed to these women assisted me to understand that I had to let go of the misguided power I held due to my formal education and allow the women to co-create and, in some areas, to lead the understanding of key concepts. Among the lessons I learnt from these women is that it would be impossible to address challenges facing people of African descent without reconnecting with Indigenous knowledges systems to understand who they were before they were colonised.

Background to the research

Setting

We explored the potential relevance of Indigenous knowledges in transforming the formal education system for better health and well-being. The setting was Xhora (also known as Elliotdale), situated within Mbashe municipality in the Eastern Cape province, South Africa. The town lies approximately fifty kilometres south of Umtata and twenty-two kilometres south-east of Mqanduli. It consists of eight clusters of villages (Xhora, Soga, Melithafa, Bomvana, Madwaleni, Mqhele, Hobeni, and Nkanya), with clinics under each cluster. These surround the Madwaleni Hospital. The majority of people who reside in and are Indigenous to this area are known as AmaBomvane. There have been, to date, ten generations in this land (see [Ned, 2019](#) for further information).

Generally, AmaBomvane is loosely translated as ‘the red people’ (*abantu ababomvu*) because of the red and orange ochre they use to smear (*ukuqaba*) on and cover their faces with. The practice *ukuqaba* also gave birth to the label Amaqaba, a term commonly used to refer to people who have resisted missionary beliefs and western schooling and are thus condemned as not civilised. Much like the term ‘Indigenous’ (see above), this label pointed to the aspect of existing outside modern times. Those who went through the formal schooling system have always been referred to as Amagqobhoka, a term with roots in the gradual conversion of Black people to Christianity and western formal education. The religious converts were called Amagqobhoka as they started to despise their African values, traditions, and norms (see [Ned, 2023](#) for further reading). Our conversations with AmaBomvane highlighted that, while AmaBomvane is a widely used term, it is likely that it did not originate from the people. Rather, it is possible that the name originates from the above-mentioned connotations and can be referred to as colonial.

Co-researchers

Purposive and snowballing sampling approaches were used in four communities in Xhora to include Indigenous elders (nineteen) and teachers from selected schools (thirteen), as well as young people who were still in high school (ten) and the middle generation, who were young brides aged twenty-five to thirty-five (thirteen). These two approaches of selecting and accessing co-researchers is well aligned with the Indigenous process of being guided by the villages' leadership structures (that is, Chiefs) upon entry, as they were well positioned to identify which key elders could contribute to this research. In one of the villages, Chief Phathisile Fudumele was a particularly key asset because of his passion and value for research (and generally education) within the community. Chief was also key in identifying an assistant researcher, Noluthando Pazi, to collaborate with, who was very knowledgeable about all the villages and key stakeholders.

It is worth noting that real names were used with permission in this project. Ethics committees in the academy are particularly consistent with the request to de-identify data and hide real names. These committees often question allowing participants to choose to have their real names presented in research findings. In our view, the decision of Indigenous people to be identified by name is indicative of a move towards securing and retaining ownership of their knowledges and a desire for their voices and perspectives to be heard.

Methodology

Located within Chilisa's postcolonial Indigenous framework as a research paradigm, we used the case study design supported by narrative inquiry as methodological frameworks. This case of narratives provided contextual boundedness and situatedness to the research, while narrative inquiry uncovered the stories that formed the basis for exploring and describing the case in question (Ned, 2019). Indigenous methods such as talking circles and storytelling were used to collect narrative data. These methods align

with an Indigenous worldview because they uphold the relational dynamic of an Indigenous paradigm. Reflexivity, reciprocity, and continuous relationship-building grounded these methods. Ethical research practices were guided by four unwavering principles: relational accountability, respectful (re)presentation, reciprocal appropriation, and rights and regulations ([Chilisa, 2012](#)).

Brief findings

Findings were presented as village narratives that provided context and privileged co-researchers' voices. The narratives were followed by Lieketseng's reflective narrative indicating key lessons received from the conversations and stories. A case of seven co-constructed narratives highlighted three typologies (Amaqaba, Amagqobhoka, and Agonizers: the uncomfortable in-betweeners) related to the complex interactions and dynamics between formal schooling and the communities and homes. These typologies reveal the intersecting operations of coloniality of power, being, knowledge, and doing. The findings (see [Ned, 2019](#)) also reflect literacies of AmaBomvane, which challenge the academy by bringing considerable insights into understandings of knowledge itself, learning, and the purpose of education and curriculum. The inseparable link between everyday doing, knowing, and being was highlighted as central to knowledge production. AmaBomvane's conceptualisation of knowledge also highlighted an inextricable link between health and education, thus advocating for an education that enhances living well.

Methodological reflections and lessons: embodying and advocating for Indigenous paradigms

Informed by a relational worldsense, the principles of relationality and relational accountability hold true in Indigenous research paradigms (Wilson, 2008; Kovach, 2009; Chilisa, 2012). Wilson (2001) argues that Indigenous research can be perceived as information sharing between people in a network of relationships. The following section describes Lieketseng's experiences and reflections from researching with AmaBomvane.

Building relations and framing the study together

Lieketseng had the privilege of witnessing how the process of fieldwork is based on managing and maintaining relationships between researchers and community members as co-researchers throughout (and beyond) the research process (Brayboy and Deyhle, 2000; Maiter *et al.*, 2008; Smith, 1999). This includes topic selection and research questions, which are based on community needs to enable the basis for giving back and reciprocity. One way in which we enacted this was through prolonged immersion of self (Lieketseng) in the context to assist with understanding relations that inform Indigenous research and unpacking roles and responsibilities towards maintaining these relations.

This research started off as a follow-up on Mji's (2012) work with AmaBomvane. Having been intrigued by these findings, Lieketseng started visiting and building relations with AmaBomvane – a process called 'community entry'. Lieketseng would take walks with villagers and participate in some of the communal activities such as fetching water and peeling dried corn (it was the season for these activities then), and informal discussions would take place with youth and elders. It is through these visits and conversations that we were able to agree on the focus and research questions together with community leadership and key informants. This

process further informed what would comfortably fit as appropriate methods to centre Indigenous voices, understandings, and practices. It was clear to Lieketseng that using informal, spontaneous, and observational methods as well as immersing herself in the villages on a daily basis were integral to getting a deeper understanding of the context as well as key to this community entry stage of relationship building. Informal and non-formal (i.e., methods not recognised in the mainstream research space) endeavours of intergenerational knowledge making have been an effective methodology since the time of social movements against the Apartheid government. These activities can ensure that one understands and knows the different features of Indigenous research, that is, the people (AmaBomvane and how they operate), the place (context of the community), and expectations (Ned, 2019). They also offer intergenerational spaces of knowledge production, which recognise diverse perspectives that converge in collaborative interpretation of their experiences. This commits a researcher in some duty to rethink methods based on Indigenous knowledge systems to allow the community to communicate their experiences from their worldview.

Methodological flexibility

We believe that a paradigm shift is crucial in Indigenous research settings. While this may be enacted through applying methods such as storytelling, life history, and unstructured interviews (Kovach, 2009), we also support being guided by methodological flexibility. Snow *et al.* (2016) define methodological flexibility as the usage of several alternative data collection, analysis, and presentation techniques that are congruent with Indigenous ways of being, doing, and knowing. Paksi and Kivinen (2021) take this further beyond the need to use alternative methods, to encompass the complex relationship between researchers and the community as co-researchers. Depending strongly on the methods used, this includes the multifaceted roles the researcher navigates, such as being a participant,

facilitator, or activist. This multi-layered role is integral to the Indigenous research principle of reciprocity. Reciprocal relationships in research could in fact be weakened or strengthened by the choice of research methods, influenced by assumptions about what constitutes evidence, truth, and facts. This is understood to be epistemology and it not only re-shapes the methodology, but also profoundly influences the relationship between researchers and community members as well as conceptualisations of community members in data collection and analysis.

Deciding on paradigms and engaging assumptions

Our stance on applying Chilisa's postcolonial Indigenous research paradigm is informed by the rationale that, historically, Indigenous voices in knowledge production have been excluded while western voices have continued to dominate. Indigenous people are often denied opportunities to develop the skills and access the necessary resources to produce and disseminate knowledge as a result of the material consequences of exclusion and marginalisation in unequal historically oppressed societies. Though adaptations can be made to dominant western paradigms (as many studies have done before), the problem lies with the underlying beliefs of the paradigm, which cannot be removed. Paradigms are all guided by certain philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality; how knowledge is produced, shared, and valued; and the theoretical frameworks that converge to make up a particular methodology ([Mertens, 2005](#)). In this research, integrating Indigenous perspectives in dominant paradigms would not have been the most effective strategy to legitimise the worldsense, histories, ways of knowing, and experiences of Indigenous people. We intentionally resisted participating in what Ndlovu-Gatsheni ([2018a](#)) terms 'the inclusion struggle', because inserting Indigenous perspectives into one of the major paradigms is not always effective as it is hard to remove the underlying epistemology and ontology on which paradigms are built ([Wilson, 2008](#)). Part of our work includes promoting the need to rightfully

articulate Indigenous research paradigms and related approaches to research and data collection as part of decolonising methodologies. We had the responsibility to critically assess the research process and see to it that it would allow AmaBomvane to communicate their experiences from their own frame of reference.

Chilisa's postcolonial Indigenous research paradigm was an ethical alternative to indigenising and decolonising western research paradigms. This position may be difficult politically because it can so easily slip into an incorrect assumption that decolonising methodologies is about a mere rejection of dominant methods. Others may perhaps interpret it as taking on a separationist political stance. On the contrary, it is based on the attributions of the Indigenous paradigm, which appreciates and considers how Indigenous ways of knowing could be used to transform conventional ways of knowledge production to re-centre multiple ways of knowing (Chilisa, 2012). We imagine that just including Indigenous methods into dominant paradigms would require some form of compromise in principles and would seem to result in superficial and unethical decolonisation work.

The famous aphorism by Audre Lorde (1983, p. 16) states that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'. It may thus be rather difficult to challenge problematic narratives using the very tools that are informed by these dominating narratives. Additionally, we are of the view that both the history of colonisation and continued coloniality still make any form of alliance between the different paradigmatic agendas an uneasy solidarity (Mertens and Cram, 2016). As Indigenous scholars, it is critical to transcend this form of 'inclusion struggle' to position Indigenous research as emancipatory as well as challenge the single narratives often written about Indigenous people. However, a reflexive researcher actively, rather than implicitly, adopts a way of knowing. If we just 'do' Indigenous research without engaging with relevant assumptions about knowledge, then we would be non-reflexive researchers. In such a context, reflexivity can become a useless research tool if it does not deal with power issues.

Conclusion: implications for higher education institutions

This work contributes to advancing methodological knowledge in the context of higher education by presenting alternative ways of doing research. It calls for attention to Indigenous paradigms as a legitimate way of thinking about the research process. The overreliance on western philosophical frameworks in theorising experiences of Indigenous people had led to what Curry (2011, p. 152) terms a ‘methodological crisis’ in Indigenous thought. For Curry, this happens when attempts are made to integrate Black experiences into western philosophy categories. As we argued earlier, the same rings true when we attempt to fit Indigenous ways of knowing, imagining, and seeing the world within western ways of knowing, without particularly engaging with embedded philosophical assumptions.

We argue that advancing an Indigenous paradigm in research can significantly contribute to advancing critical ideation spaces in higher education where an understanding of the world far exceeds that of the ‘west’. Higher education plays a central role in the decolonisation process, for it has, for many years, excluded Indigenous scholarship through institutionalising, legitimising, and disseminating only dominant Euro- and western-centric ideologies. This structure cannot be challenged without decolonising research. Therefore, higher education as a site for knowledge production needs to transform research to enable different ecologies of knowledges. This work enhances efforts towards decolonising research in that it encourages a process of critically questioning the existing systems and structures of power that inform daily research practices.

Questions for further discussion

1. How do you practice reflexivity in your teaching and research?
2. Who benefits from your research?
3. How do you resist participating in research that harms those at the margins?
4. How do you ensure that your teaching and research enables the subaltern to speak and be heard? (See Antonio Gramsci's definition of 'subaltern' and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay 'Can the subaltern speak?')

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Respecting Country as a living methodology: the Kookaburra Song

Crystal Arnold

Key points

- Indigenous methodologies offer guidance for understanding the world through reciprocal relationships between humans, nonhuman entities, and the environment. Decolonising academia and research requires an essential journey whereby Indigenous methodologies are embraced to see that nature speaks and knows and is a living methodology.
- There is an ethical imperative to engage with Indigenous communities to interpret the messages of nature. This paradigm shift involves departing from the dominance of western knowledge paradigms, replacing them with diverse modes of understanding, and creating enduring partnerships with Indigenous communities, knowledge holders, and protocols.
- Non-Indigenous researchers can gain insights from Indigenous methodologies by respecting and collaborating with Indigenous knowledge holders and communities.

Introduction

This artwork (Figure 2.1) weaves together elements from Country: rocks, crystals, bark, and weeds, forming the image of Kookaburra sitting on a branch by River. In this representation, Kookaburra embodies the entities comprising Country. His white eye signifies Spirit, while weed petals flowing from his mouth symbolise the communication that Kookaburra shares. Much like Kookaburra exists in connection with Country, the artwork reflects the reciprocal relationships inherent in the methodology. Kookaburra engages with various elements and the rocks lining River in the artwork signify each entity Kookaburra yarns with.



Figure 2.1 Artwork representing key messages of the chapter.

Artist: Crystal Arnold, 2023.

I start this chapter with a poem I wrote, to help you, reader, understand my deep spiritual, mental, and physical connection to Country and my Ancestors. It conveys my personal identity and cultural and academic journey. It demonstrates Country as a living methodology, culturally, through the Kookaburra song (see video clip of song at [Tidal Australia, 2013](#)).

‘Kookaburra Song’

by Crystal Arnold (2023)

Kooooo-kakakaka –

I hear the kookaburra call,

Kooo-kakaka

He awakens with me a remembering of my soul.

Kooo-kakaka

I feel the Old Ones talking to me in spirit,

Kooo-kakaka

It is time to welcome Grandfather this minute.

Kooo-kakaka

As Grandfather Sun arises,

Kooo-kakaka

He shields me from crises.

Kooo-kakaka

The Ancients Ones had called me home,

Kooo-kakaka

To heal my Country, my home.

Kooo-kakaka

My Ancestors are here,

Kooo-kakaka

Grandmother tree is near
Kooo-kakaka
All that is living within Country,
Kooo-kakaka
Is living within animals and trees,
Kooo-kakaka
Everything living, including me.

Reader, I invite you to see and know Country. Country transcends the conventional understanding of a geographical homeland. It embodies a dynamic, living entity that encompasses the tangible and intangible aspects of the land, water, and all that inhabits place ([Arnold *et al.*, 2023](#)). Country communicates knowledge. Learning how Country communicates knowledge through sensory experiences, lessons, and stories can help people make sense of the world.

I would like to welcome you into my story, which is presented through the Kookaburra poem. By cultivating respect for all the entities residing within Country, we not only respect Indigenous people but also care for the wellbeing of diverse Countries and nurture the Mother (Mother Earth). This chapter threads ideas, research, and stories to form a methodological narrative.

It is important that I welcome you into this chapter, each paragraph, and each word, to immerse yourself in Kookaburra's song of knowledge that unfolds within these pages. This chapter is not a compilation of facts and theories; it is a living, breathing story that invites you to engage, question, and learn alongside me. Reader, I welcome you to my story – a story that begins with Kookaburra.

I want to highlight upfront that this story will not follow in a straight line but will bend and flow, like Kookaburra's call. This chapter is a story that purposefully moves with the sound waves in scholarly writing. Here, I create a safe space for Indigenous and western knowledges to build a narrative that flows with the spontaneity of Country. Reader, this is an

exploration that transcends the boundaries of academic thinking. It is an invitation to drift along Kookaburra's sound waves and venture into the in-betweenness of Indigenous and western knowledges ([Arnold *et al.*, 2023](#)).

First, I explore what Country is for Australian Aboriginal people. I acknowledge nonhumans as participants and co-contributors in any research endeavour. As you travel through this section, like riding the waves of Kookaburra's call, I demonstrate the depth and diversity of Indigenous perspectives.

Next, I share my positionality with you, reader, to share my story of living in-between. I share my personal story where my cultural reconnection inspired my academic journey. It begins with my reflections on my identity as a Gundungurra woman and my disconnection due to the historical traumas of colonisation. I share the deeply spiritual and Ancestral connection that ultimately drew me back to Country. My reconnection was for my personal healing and to help heal the Mother through sharing the teachings I receive in academia. As Kookaburra sings, he has many messages about my identity and position, but he is much more than that, as you will learn throughout this chapter. Kookaburra is part of Country, a living story of the interconnectedness of all life. In academia, where the boundaries between disciplines often separate our understanding of the self from all existence, Indigenous perspectives stand as a testament to the intrinsic interconnectedness of all life forms and entities on Mother Earth.

Country speaks: a living methodology invites us to embrace nonhuman contributors and the multifaceted nature of the concept of Country. In the context of decolonising academia and research, Country speaks: a living methodology offers valuable insights into ways of knowing, understanding, and engaging with nature, the seen, unseen, and the universe at large. These methodologies challenge dominant western approaches that prioritise human-centred perspectives and objective knowledge production. Through Country, I share messages and meanings that are nonhuman-centred and emanate from the land, guiding research and deepening my connection to Country. I shed light on the holistic and multidimensional nature of Yuin

methodologies, where looking, listening, and seeing ([Harrison and McConchie, 2013](#)) extend beyond the tangible world, encompassing the internal responses and emotions that shape perception and interaction with the environment.

As I reconnected with Country, Travels (Dreams) became a pivotal part of my experience, guiding me in profound ways just like Kookaburra guides me. Therefore, I explore the transformative abilities of Travels as messengers from Country, offering a paradigm shift that transcends the boundaries of the mind and embraces the unity of all beings within Country as a whole.

Finally, I explore the limitations and challenges encountered along the way and the transformative lessons that emerge from interactions with Country and its inhabitants, such as Grandmother Tree, Grandfather Sun, Elders, Ancient Ones and Ancestors. I highlight the importance of ethical engagement, collaboration, and respectful sharing of knowledge with Indigenous communities, ensuring that Country is acknowledged, protected, and healed.

Country

Country is an Aboriginal English word that includes not just the territorial, land-based notion of a homeland but includes humans as well as waters, seas, and all that is tangible and non-tangible, and which come together in a mutually caring and multidirectional manner to create and nurture a homeland ([Bawaka et al., 2016](#)). For Aboriginal people, Country is not just an area of land or the natural environment. Dr Anthony McKnight (Uncle Macka) ([2017](#), p. 6) describes Country as ‘an entity that moves and shifts like any living entity, such as wind, trees, people, water and sand’. Uncle Macka’s definition emphasises a holistic view of the world around us, highlighting the many beings that are part of Country, including nonhumans and humans, such as trees, animals, and me.

The physical, ecological environment is a vital element of what Country is to Aboriginal people. However, it is much more than this alone. Country is not only a place, area of land, or vegetation. Country is all beings, from a blade of grass to the wind and Ancestors. Country has agency and can speak clearly to provide rich knowledge by communicating through all the senses, including visual messages, sounds, and feelings ([Rose, 1996](#)). The assertion that Country possesses agency and communicates effectively may initially seem unconventional within western frameworks of understanding. However, Indigenous epistemologies offer perspectives that acknowledge the land as a living entity with its own consciousness and voice. Furthermore, contemporary research in fields such as more-than-human geography provides empirical evidence supporting the notion of nature’s agency and capacity for communication ([Jones and Cloke, 2008](#)).

Country has a personality, will, temper and ancient reciprocal relationships with people ([Gleeson-White, 2019](#)). I remember one time, during my cultural teaching, when I was disrespectful while walking down Gulaga Mountain, a sacred Mother Mountain in Yuin Country. I asked questions that were not for my learning at that time, and at that moment, I

sprained both my ankles and had to be carried down the mountain. Country can give you the bundi (Aboriginal tool and weapon) metaphorically if you are not respectful. These lessons can seem harsh, but they teach us how to behave respectfully on a deeper level.

There are also lessons within stories from Country that help people to make sense of the world ([Milroy and Revell, 2013](#)). On Country, everything is alive, and Country is a principal source of knowledge ([Bawaka et al., 2015](#)). As Yuin Elder Uncle Max Dulumumun Harrison said, ‘I don’t use a computer, but I receive emails from the land; they’re spiritual ones’ ([Harrison and McConchie, 2013](#), p. 77). Country is sending messages with knowledge to humans that have personal or external meanings. For example, Kookaburra shared with you a personal song about my identity, but he also shared knowledge that was external to me, being that Kookaburra is a teacher and part of Country – a living methodology.

Significantly, the concept of Country is not the same for all Indigenous people. Because we all interpret experiences and relationships differently, it can be enlightening to look at the ways that people express their relationships with Country. The literature on Country as a concept commonly acknowledges Country as a living being and shows how storytelling demonstrates personal meaning that comes from Country encounters ([Bawaka et al., 2015](#); [Rose, 1996](#)). These experiences, memories, or histories can move the teller and receiver to a range of feelings and encourage deep thought and learning.

Positionality

The reawakening of my soul, my connection to culture, and my academic journey began when I was thirty years old. At this point, I could no longer ignore Country's guidance, which was helping me to connect to the people and nonhumans that could help me on my journey. Sometimes, that guidance was not easy as I had to break away from people and places that were not on my connecting pathway home. Just as in Kookaburra's Song, I needed to connect to Country so it could shield me, so that, in return, I could heal and protect Country.

I am a Gundungurra woman, and my home is in the Illawarra on the east coast of New South Wales (NSW). My Ancestors are from Goulburn, not far from the Illawarra. Gundungurra Country runs through Goulburn to the Blue Mountains. Yuin Country is connected to Gundungurra People and extends along the South Coast to the Victorian border.

As a child, I was always told I had Aboriginal heritage, but my father was afraid of owning his culture, and I sensed the fear deep within him. My grandmother was also fearful and did not embrace her culture until she was very sick. She passed away when I was about nine years old. Due to fears such as racism, discrimination, and the risk of having her children taken away ([Dodson, 1994](#)), my grandmother taught her children not to connect culturally.

However, through my healing and connection to Country, I feel that my grandmother and other family members also benefit. I feel that they are receiving healing when I am connected, and that my grandmother is connecting to Country through me. As Kookaburra shared in the poem, I feel her sometimes in spirit and my other Ancestors talking to me and guiding me through life. I feel them in the trees, like in [Figure 2.2](#), in the Kookaburra song, in my Travels and sometimes see their spirit.



Figure 2.2 Kookaburra in the tree. Image: Crystal Arnold, 2023.

While I identify as a Gundungurra woman, I also use the term ‘Aboriginal’ throughout this chapter. Using the word ‘Aboriginal’ is to help you, reader, see that I am from the Australian continent. My Ancestors are from and return to this country, and I am connected to Country. However, this is an English word and not a term all First Nations people use. Here, I use it not to separate but to connect myself to Country, showing you, reader, that I am Country. I acknowledge that this challenges conventional western notions of ownership and separation from the natural world to offer a holistic understanding of human–nonhuman relationships that transcend individuality and underscore the oneness of all life.

I am from mixed heritage and my Ancestors on my mother's side come from Yorkshire, United Kingdom. I was born in Australia, and I feel a deep connection to this place. My mother could see this when I was growing up, and she was the one who encouraged me to connect to community and own my identity as a Gundungurra woman. Despite my strong connection, in my twenties I followed my friends who were travelling and spent eight years in the United Kingdom. However, a spiritual calling and longing to come back to Country was so deep. I felt like my Ancestors needed me back, and they sang me home, like Kookaburra's song.

In the Kookaburra poem I shared with you, reader, the Sun is Grandfather. For Yuin people, Grandmother is the Moon, Grandfather is the Sun, Earth is the Mother, and Father is the Sky ([Harrison and McConchie, 2013](#)). There is a ceremony to welcome Grandfather Sun as it rises to thank him for all the gifts he offers: for the light and fire, for keeping us alive, for warmth, for helping plants grow, and for the food he gives us. It is not about worshipping the sun, but paying respect and acknowledging that Grandfather Sun is part of Country that is living and helps all life on the Mother.

All my life, I have always felt such a deep connection to Country, yet I could not fully understand it without the cultural guidance from Elders, cultural knowledge holders, and Country itself. I started to receive that guidance when I went to university at thirty years old, where I met Yuin man and academic Dr Anthony McKnight (Uncle Macka), and my connection to the Yuin community began. Uncle Macka then introduced me to Uncle Max Dulumun Harrison, a widely respected senior Lore man, and Uncle Greg, a Yuin cultural knowledge holder. These Elders, other community members, and Country itself finally taught me the cultural knowledge that should have been taught to me as a small child.

While I was on my own personal journey of connection to culture, I finished my undergraduate degree in human geography and began an honours degree. While working with trees, I learnt that my Grandmothers are not just humans but trees too. Over countless generations, trees have

evolved to thrive in specific environments, each deeply rooted in its own soil and under its unique sky. Every plant is intricately connected to its surroundings and to one another, growing in its own distinct manner. Just as a grandmother nurtures her family, these trees form a community, each playing a vital role in Country (Cavanagh, 2020). There are Grandmothers, Grandfathers, Mums, Dads, and Bubs (babies). In the oneness of existence, some trees embody the wisdom and nurturing qualities associated with Grandmothers, fostering growth and harmony within their families.

I learnt that Country is a living methodology that teaches us about how the world works externally and also within (Arnold *et al.*, 2021). I began to wonder why people do not have the same appreciation for all plants, which led me to a PhD on ways to manage weeds and invasive plants by learning from Country.

I would not have been able to do so without the strong Indigenous scholars who helped pave a pathway for me. Positioning myself within the broader community of Indigenous scholars, I acknowledge with deep respect and gratitude those who have come before me (McKnight, 2017; Kwaymullina and Kwaymullina, 2010; Grieves, 2008; Kwaymullina, 2005; Smith, 1999). I stand on the shoulders of those who, through their strength and determination, share Indigenous knowledge systems, creating a safe space between cultural knowledge and academia (McKnight, 2017). Their resilience in the face of historical injustices and their commitment to justice have paved the way for my own journey of reconnection and learning. My contribution is small, but it is part of a larger tapestry of Indigenous voices, each weaving their unique experiences and insights into the narrative of decolonisation. My work is a continuation of a legacy, and I aim to create space for other Indigenous scholars to feel safe to share their knowledge.

In this collaborative spirit, I hope to create a community of learning where we can all continue to grow and care for Country. At the heart of my research and all that I do is to continue to learn how Country needs me to care for her. Therefore, I knew that learning from weeds would teach me

more ways to look after Country, and, in doing so, this enables her to look after me.

Country speaks: a living methodology

Country speaks: a living methodology extends beyond academic pursuits. It represents a method of learning that holds meaning across all aspects of existence. This approach to learning is not confined to scholarly endeavours but exists within various spheres of life. For example, Bawaka *et al.* consist of Country itself, at Bawaka in northeast Arnhem Land; Indigenous authors; three academic geographers; and a research assistant. Bawaka includes the human researchers, the more-than-humans, and all that is tangible and non-tangible, which come together in an active, sentient, mutually caring, and multidirectional manner in, with, and as place (Bawaka *et al.*, 2016). They refer to this methodology of Country as co-becoming, where everything exists in relation. For example, the yam (root vegetable) exists in relation to Banumbir, the morning star; to wangany rulu, the number five; to a ceremony for a loved one who has passed away; to a direction; to knowledge or concepts of life and death (Bawaka *et al.*, 2016). Within Country, humans and nonhumans are equally part of its wholeness. When Bawaka decided to list the names of the human contributors, it was purely separated for the academic process. Acknowledging Bawaka Country as the author is part of a responsibility humans have as Country; it is part of caring for Country and ourselves (Bawaka *et al.*, 2016). In caring for Country, humans care for themselves; in caring for humans, Country cares for itself.

In Bawaka *et al.*'s (2016) paper, nonhumans such as the rain, beach, bay, seats, tracks, red kangaroo, yams, fish, song, dance, and tears contributed to the shape and intent of the project. The acknowledgement that Country gives to research is vital as it not only decentres the privileging of human authors as the only beings able to control and create, but it also opens opportunities for re-imagining the environment and individual nonhumans that hold so much knowledge. In my teaching, I also aim to include all human and nonhuman contributors. I let Kookaburra come in on the acknowledgement of Country, and I aim to teach outside as much as

possible to incorporate nonhuman voices. As they speak, such as Kookaburra, I acknowledge their contribution and thank them for their help.

On Yuin Country, Yuin methodologies follow Yuin protocols. Country speaks: a living methodology aims to take care of all the entities involved in research. Showing respect to the Mother and her children involves what Uncle Max Harrison refers to as looking, listening, and seeing ([Harrison and McConchie, 2013](#)). By looking and listening, a researcher might identify and locate messages. These actions are intentional, directing the self towards Country. When I work with nonhuman entities, such as Kookaburra, I respect him as a participant and co-researcher. He actively participated through his song, and I could ‘see’ his messages.

Observation is a key aspect of Country speaks: a living methodology. Yuin, Jerrinja, Gundungurra, and other First Nation Peoples are connected to each other by the Shoalhaven River on the South Coast, NSW. It was here that I chose my fieldwork site for my PhD research to reciprocate the care Country offers me and as an intuitive call that resonated deeply. I respected and followed academic considerations whereby the Shoalhaven River has seen limited research regarding weeds from Indigenous perspectives. It is a significant place for ecologists and other scientists who identify it as a significant place to study that is full of life ([Carvalho and Woodroffe, 2020](#)). River (Shoalhaven River) is constantly evolving and becoming anew as it responds to the rain, the ocean tides, the plants that grow along its banks, and the humans and animals that live alongside and within it, such as Kookaburra. Yuin people pay close attention to River and how it changes. The presence and activity of plants and other entities are observed in relation to the seasons and how people sense and feel in the moments they are on Country. Observations identify feelings and meanings for connecting stories that may be needed for interpreting the messages that Country offers as knowledge.

During my fieldwork on River, I ventured into a patch of vegetation that had grown on the riverbank. The overgrowth caught my attention, and I engaged in the act of looking, listening, and seeing, making careful

observations of the flourishing weeds in that area. However, what initially drew my gaze was the presence of a python nearby, up within the weedy bush (see [Arnold et al., 2023](#)). The weed revealed a Kookaburra-like ability to protect. Kookaburra's presence can help maintain the ecological balance by controlling populations of small animals, such as rodents. In this way, Kookaburras play a role in protecting the health of Country. Contemplating this balancing pattern, I recognised how this weed offered a haven for animals seeking refuge. This act of observation became a conduit for Country to share knowledge, a silent message that these plants have the capacity to provide shelter and protection for vulnerable animals. My attention shifted from the snake underneath to the weeds' role, deepening my understanding of how these entities contribute to the intricate patterns of life.

The unexpected sources of care, such as weedy plants offering shelter, remind us that considering their capacity for nurturing is crucial when addressing the challenges posed by invasive species. As we seek solutions to weed-related issues, we must be mindful of potential impacts on existing relationships within Country. This observation prompted contemplation of the spiritual and mental wellbeing of Indigenous researchers. Beyond the tangible sights and sounds, observation encompasses an intimate connection with my internal responses. This includes emotions, thoughts, and questions that arise during the act of observation, shaping how the observer perceives and interacts with the world ([Arnold et al., 2023](#)). For Yuin people, these sensations hold significance, serving as conduits for Country's messages that guide actions. Acknowledging and interpreting these feelings become vital, as they contribute to my sense of self and identity, ultimately enriching the connection between myself and Country.

More-than-human geography supports Country as a living methodology, allowing locally lived experience, knowledge, and theory to challenge culturally bound concepts ([Paul et al., 2021](#); [Bell, 2018](#); [Dowling and Suchet-Pearson, 2017](#); [Lorimer, 2013](#)). Recent developments in human geography, including shifts towards relational, non-representational,

material, and performative perspectives, are prompting geographers to re-evaluate their understanding of complex human–nature relationships. These shifts view the world as ongoing and intricate interactions between humans and the environment, challenging researchers to adapt their thinking and methods (Bell et al., 2018). Therefore, human geographers foster collaborative research relationships between humans and the more-than-human world (Dowling and Suchet-Pearson, 2017; Bawaka et al., 2016). These collaborations actively engage with power dynamics, reconsidering the authority of researchers.

However, it is important to acknowledge that I do not use more-than-human geography to justify Country’s teachings but to show that academia is finally catching up. Uncle Max would often say, when scientists would tell him something the Old People knew for millennia, ‘Ah they are finally catching up’ (Uncle Max, personal conversations). More-than-human geography has finally caught up and demonstrates that it is essential to pay attention to the relational world in which many Indigenous Peoples live (Paul et al., 2021). This helps support academic practice that is attentive to the interdependence of all life in ways that care for Country and upholds Indigenous Peoples’ rights to self-determination and cultural identity.

In my research, I encountered challenges that ignited a strong sense of resistance within me, such as the reluctance to continually explain every aspect of my findings. This contrasts with how I have been taught by Uncle Max and Uncle Macka. Within the Yuin knowledge system, the path to learning is guided, but you are not directly given the answer. This is because constant explanation may lead to a loss of inherent meaning and hinder others from engaging with the knowledge in their own unique ways.

In many western academic settings, there is a strong emphasis on explicit, detailed explanations and a demand for researchers to make their work accessible to a broad audience, often through extensive written documentation and standardised presentations. This approach aligns with a worldview that values objectivity, detachment, and the transmission of knowledge in a linear and systematic manner (Kidman, 2019). In this

context, there is a tendency to prioritise clarity and comprehensibility above all else, which can sometimes take spirit or Country out of the process and can only harm researchers, producing incomplete conceptualisations.

To address my resistance towards academic norms, the Elders advised me to return to Country and seek guidance from nature. I was encouraged to sit by River, connect with Country and ask for help removing blockages to effectively communicate my stories while meeting the requirements of academic discourse. I sat quietly at River and asked for help to overcome these challenges to effectively convey the teachings through poetry, writing, or art.

During one such experience on Country, a group of playful Fairy Wrens (small bird) emerged from the bushes and approached me closely, hopping along a pathway. As I observed them, I noticed that there were dogs and people up ahead, which raised my concerns about their safety. However, I was struck by the cautious yet joyful manner in which they proceeded. This observation had a deep impact on me and became a meaningful message from Country.

In an academic context, this experience can be interpreted as a message to overcome challenges and resistance in research. The Fairy Wrens symbolised playfulness and joy, suggesting that researchers should approach obstacles with positivity and energy rather than fear or resentment. The lesson to build relationships with those we might initially fear can be seen as a reminder of the potential benefits of collaboration and networking in academia.

The experience with the Fairy Wrens highlights the significance of adopting a joyful and cautious mindset when faced with uncomfortable situations in the research process. It underscores the value of staying open to diverse perspectives and embracing the support of others, as these interactions may eventually lead to safety and success, just as the people and dogs on the Fairy Wrens' path scared off potential threats such as cats and foxes.

Dreams as part of Country

Integrating Travels (dreams) into the research process and maintaining a dream diary may indeed appear radical within mainstream academic discourse. However, it is precisely this departure from western research methodologies that offers an opportunity for deeper reflection and engagement with Indigenous ways of knowing. By acknowledging and valuing Travels as a source of knowledge and insight, we challenge ethnocentric biases that prioritise western scientific paradigms over other ways of understanding the world. While the concept of incorporating dreams into research may initially seem perplexing, it is essential to recognise that Indigenous knowledge systems offer perspectives that have been marginalised or dismissed within dominant academic frameworks. Therefore, by embracing the idea of a dream diary and considering Travels as part of the research process, we open ourselves to a richer and more inclusive approach to knowledge production – one that honours diverse ways of knowing and being.

Travels are not separate from Country, as Country consists of elements, spirit, and the seen and unseen, and it can speak to you when you are awake or asleep. For many Indigenous people, understanding our sleeping Travels is vital for understanding the world ([Shawanda and Manitowabi, 2023](#); [Absolon, 2022](#); [Hirt, 2012](#)). Dreams act as a catalyst for accessing inner spaces and are considered so invaluable that the external environment is often manipulated so that dreams might happen ([Ermine, 1995](#)). Uncle Max and Uncle Macka taught me that I need to go within when connecting to Country, and I have learnt how to incorporate spirit and my inner knowings ([Rowe, 2014](#)) into all areas of my life. Travels have always been a big part of my life, and I have vivid memories of Travels from when I was little. However, incorporating and understanding Travels as a research process has not been straightforward. Although they have directed and guided me, I have often been confused about what my Travels meant.

My Travels were a part of the spiritual call to reconnect with Country. While reconnecting with Country, I began to talk about these Travels to Yuin cultural people, and I received guidance from them, which helped me understand the meanings. In turn, I began to understand the value of listening to my Travels for guidance in my life. One Travel about weeds was instructive:

I encountered a giant weed that had long tentacles and a big opening in the middle. It was scaring me the way it was moving its tentacles, similar to an octopus. Then its opening started to shrink, and I got a feeling that something was about to come out of it. Then it was like it spat, and before it hit me, I woke up. (Dream Diary, 2021)

It was quite a scary Travel, but it guided me to pay attention to the fears that people have of weeds, as opposed to other nonhumans such as Kookaburra. The giant weed with long tentacles and a big opening drew my attention to the overwhelming and invasive nature of weeds. But as I reflected on their nature, I saw that they were mirroring the behaviour of human colonisers. It showed me the importance of recognising the scope and potential impact of weed infestations. Just as I felt fear and apprehension, acknowledging the challenges posed by weeds is crucial in effective weed management.

The movement of the weed's tentacles, akin to an octopus, suggests the need for attentive and continuous observation. Weeds can quickly spread and entangle, and managing weeds requires consistent observation to detect their growth and prevent them from becoming unmanageable. The 'spitting' action in the dream demonstrates the weed's defence mechanism in response to threats. This teaches us that proactive measures, such as caring for Country to prevent weeds from establishing and spreading, are essential and that thoughtful decision-making ensures that attempts to manage weeds do not inadvertently cause harm.

On a deeper level, this Travel initiated a transformative shift in my perspective, redirecting my focus from viewing plants as distinct entities

separate from humans to perceiving them as active defenders akin to humans. This altered viewpoint, which considers weeds as integral components of Country and even interconnected with the self, introduces profound complexities when contemplating their management, alteration, or removal.

Contrary to western understandings that often underscore disparities and disconnections among people, places, and plants within the realm of weed knowledge and management, the Yuin ontology of interconnectedness underscores the unity of all living entities, weeds included, within the larger pattern of Country. Recognising this interconnectedness necessitates a paradigm shift – from combating weeds to caring for Country – that advocates for a balance between weed removal and their potential persistence.

Therefore, Travels as messengers from Country have illuminated a path of understanding that transcends the mind. Guided by the insights gained from our Travels, we are called to embrace the interconnected patterns of life, from spirit and feelings, and the creeping vines of weeds, to the flight of Kookaburra. The living beings within Country have co-created this research work.

Limitations for research

Country as a source of knowledge and wisdom operates on its own terms, and its messages are not always easily knowable or definable. It requires discipline, training, and a respectful, reciprocal relationship with Country and Elders to be able to look, listen, and see. This process is ongoing and ever evolving, necessitating mutual exchange and openness to diverse forms through which Country communicates. However, it is not always easy, as in the story I told you of how Country taught me a harsh lesson when I sprained my ankles. The lessons are not always harsh; sometimes, I can be simply blocked, meaning that I am unable to receive, see or interpret messages from Country.

Messages come through all the senses and can take diverse forms. To see the messages, you must learn to interpret them. To see and understand them, I use my body and I embody their messages. However, to share these messages with others in conversation or in academia, I have had to develop respectful reciprocal relationships with Country, learning through discipline and spending long periods quietly observing plants and their kin, watching their behaviours and actions.

As a researcher, I must acknowledge my own limitations in understanding Country and the broader world. There are instances when my research does not progress or when the data collected prove challenging to interpret. Some messages from Country may not be expressible in words or may be intended for specific individuals, reflecting the unique positions and relationships that I have within the community.

What can researchers learn from Country?

Country speaks: a living methodology challenges the notion that knowledge can only be obtained through detached and objective means, instead emphasising the embodied and subjective nature of understanding. This approach invites researchers to engage with their senses, emotions, and intuitions as valid sources of knowledge for spiritual, mental, and physical connection.

To decolonise academia and research involves moving away from the dominance of western knowledge paradigms and ways of working to embrace diverse ways of knowing and understanding the world. Collaborating with Indigenous people globally to utilise Indigenous methodologies, such as Country speaks: a living methodology, can help foster a more inclusive, ethical, and sustainable approach to research, one that respects and honours the interconnectedness of all beings. It requires ongoing collaboration, dialogue, and engagement with Indigenous communities, knowledge holders, and protocols (Claw *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, these relationships do not begin and end within the time frame of research projects but are a continual reciprocal relationship (Arnold *et al.*, 2021).

While anyone can learn from and engage with Country, it is essential to recognise that the depth of understanding and connection may vary based on one's cultural background, experiences, and willingness to learn from Indigenous perspectives. Indigenous peoples often have ancestral knowledge and cultural protocols that guide their interactions with Country, which may not be readily accessible or understood by non-Indigenous individuals.

Everyone can strive to interpret or co-research with Country, but it is crucial to approach such endeavours with cultural humility, respect, and a commitment to ethical and equitable collaborations with Indigenous peoples and communities. This includes recognising Indigenous voices,

perspectives, and leadership in research and decision-making processes related to Country. Interpreting messages from Country requires collaboration, time, respect, and reciprocal relationships with Indigenous communities. Country's knowledge is not to be appropriated or taken without proper consideration and respect for the people and the place. It is also not for non-Indigenous people to take and use on their own. Collaboration is always welcome, but this needs to be done with reciprocity and respect with Indigenous community members. Non-Indigenous people can respect and care for Country within these protocols. By learning from Indigenous cultures and respecting Country, researchers can navigate challenges more effectively and communicate their findings in a meaningful way within the academic domain (Claw *et al.*, 2018; [Smith, 1999](#)).

Historically, Indigenous voices and perspectives have been marginalised within academia, often overshadowed by western knowledge systems. By centring personal experiences, ways of knowing and relationships with Indigenous ways of knowing, researchers can assert the validity and importance of Country within the academic sphere, thereby challenging colonial epistemologies and fostering epistemic diversity. Moreover, by sharing personal insights and reflections of Country, I invite researchers to embark on their own journeys of self-discovery and decolonisation. This relational approach to knowledge production emphasises reciprocity, solidarity, and collective empowerment, inviting readers to critically engage with their own positionalities, privileges, and responsibilities within processes of decolonisation.

Finally, the methods suggested in the chapter can be adapted and applied in collaboration with Indigenous scholars or colleagues to numerous research areas beyond the study of weeds in the following ways:

1. Having a holistic and Country-centred perspective can benefit research in diverse fields by considering the oneness and interdependencies among different elements. Interdisciplinary

- collaboration allows researchers to address complex issues from multiple angles and generate comprehensive solutions.
2. Researchers in environmental science, conservation biology, and ecology can incorporate a living methodology to enhance their understanding of ecosystems, biodiversity, and natural resource management.
 3. Researchers can adopt culturally responsive and sensitive approaches in their studies, considering the cultural, social, and historical contexts of their research topics and engaging with diverse perspectives with respect and empathy.
 4. Anthropology and cultural studies can incorporate experiential learning and direct engagement with the environment into their methodologies, allowing for embodied knowledge and deeper connections to research subjects.

In any project, researchers can prioritise ethical considerations and reciprocity in their interactions with participants and communities, ensuring that research benefits those involved and contributes to positive social and ecological change.

Conclusion

Country speaks: a living methodology emphasises the importance of recognising the agency and contributions of nonhuman entities in research. By acknowledging the active participation of the more-than-human world, we can develop a more inclusive and holistic understanding of the environment. Country speaks: a living methodology invites you, reader, to reconsider our roles as researchers and caretakers, emphasising the reciprocal relationship between humans and nature.

Travels, as a part of Country, highlight the significance of incorporating spirituality, intuition, and inner knowing into the research process. By embracing Travels and incorporating them into research, we can tap into deeper layers of knowledge and engage with the unseen aspects of reality. This emphasises the importance of observation, listening, and sensory experiences as integral parts of the research process.

Embracing Country-centred methodologies, along with a commitment to challenging power dynamics and centring Indigenous knowledge, can contribute to a more inclusive, equitable, and respectful approach to knowledge production and engagement with the environment. Here, I extend an invitation to you, reader, to join me with a spirit of respect and reciprocity with Country. Kookaburra's call is your invitation, reader, to see him as a vital being in Country. His deep belly laugh is a call to all of us, a reminder of the oneness in Country.

I learnt in the process of writing this chapter about the ways I can give back to Kookaburra, such as making sure there are worms in the garden and the soil is healthy. Reader, what did you learn from Kookaburra?

Questions for further discussion

1. What are the key steps and considerations in the ongoing process of decolonising research, particularly in the context of Indigenous methodologies?
2. How can we recognise and weave in the agency and contributions of nonhuman entities, such as plants and animals, into research methodologies and our understanding of the environment?
3. How can Indigenous perspectives on dreams enhance our understanding of the interconnectedness of the world?
4. How can researchers and readers cultivate respectful and reciprocal relationships with the environment and Indigenous perspectives?

Further reading and resources

- Arnold, C. (2023). *What teachings are being shared by weeds? Lessons from the Shoalhaven River* [PhD thesis, University of Wollongong].
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**Decolonising social work research:
subverting the white, western colonial
paradigm through praxis**

Autumn Asher BlackDeer

Key points

- Social work is entrenched in social justice perspectives that situate marginalised communities within harmful systems, while decolonisation calls us to reckon with why these systems are the only option.
- This chapter delineates a decolonial framework used to design and teach an introductory research methods course to counter dominant social work research paradigms influenced by ‘evidence-based practice’.
- A central focus on perspectives, process, and praxis when teaching a research methods course can address common stereotypes and critiques of decolonisation as it applies to social work research.

Introduction

White, western research has been characterised as an extractive and colonial process; however, research in social work is meant to advance the very mission of the profession: social justice. As social work has sought to reckon with its complicity in its colonial past and white supremacist present, decolonisation has emerged as a movement for reclaiming Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Decolonisation in social work has mostly been limited to clinical interventions at the micro level, while emerging work has begun to apply decolonisation to the individual social worker themselves through innovative approaches such as neurodecolonisation, which combines mindfulness and undoing internalised colonisation. However, there remains a consistent lag in decolonial research methods and the pathways to apply these methods. Progressive courses may include a reading or two from Linda Tuhiwai Smith's ground-breaking work *Decolonizing Methodologies*. However, the uptake of the entire decolonial approach across social work has not yet been achieved.

At its most fundamental level, decolonisation is the undoing of colonialism in all forms (see Introduction). Decolonisation has spread across academic disciplines but is not limited to the Ivory Tower. There is inner work of decolonising our minds and unentangling from a colonial mindset as well as community and cultural work, such as reclaiming our traditional ways of knowing and being. Thus, decolonisation is not limited to an academic exercise or recitation of a land acknowledgement but is a social movement, theoretical framework, and ultimate praxis for how we can move through the world.

White supremacy is one of the most pressing manifestations of colonialism today. White supremacy is a mechanism of social control and oppression that originates from European imperialism ([Almeida et al., 2019](#); [Beck, 2019](#)). White supremacy can be seen throughout society in hegemony that establishes white as neutral, normal, and objective; at the

macro level in the racial contract upon which countries such as the United States were formed; and at the micro level in respectability politics that impose white, right, and polite as the only acceptable ways of being. Naming and addressing forms of colonialism are imperative first steps towards true decolonisation.

Social work as a discipline might struggle with accepting or understanding decolonial perspectives due to its purported commitment to social justice. Social justice has a distinct focus on efforts of reform, diversity, inclusion, and recognition. In contrast, decolonisation is a movement, framework, and praxis that refers to anti-capitalist and anti-colonial means of achieving overarching goals of sovereignty and liberation. While social justice perspectives would have marginalised communities be *included* in harmful systems, decolonisation calls us to reckon with *why* these systems are the only option. Similarly, *diversifying* a colonial institution does nothing to reckon with the inherently harmful nature of the organisation. Decolonisation calls us to create a new organisation built on community care where we can all thrive. Social work is entrenched in social justice mindsets that privilege white saviour approaches and reformist endeavours that barely provide even a band-aid of coverage for harm. The majority of social work research centres interventionism and clinical colonisation ([Asher BlackDeer, 2023](#)), which privileges an outside social worker imposing colonial practices on a marginalised community. Decolonial social work seeks to upend the system causing harm in the first place, rather than merely helping folx adapt to being harmed.

In this context, decolonial research methods go beyond theoretical conceptualisations or merely adding more marginalised authors to the syllabus, such as those racialised as Black, Indigenous, or other people of colour. True decolonial research methods tear down the entire colonial research framework, destabilise notions of what counts as evidence and who decides, and ultimately invite critical discussion and propel action to disrupt systems of oppression. However, those who make the calls to

decolonise social work have been predominantly white. Previous works have incorrectly identified decolonisation as a repositioning of Indigenous peoples and how non-Native communities relate to our work, which have further tokenised Indigenous scholars and only served to perpetuate the white gaze. Decolonisation is not Indigenous people doing diversity work. Rather, it is an embodiment of our commitment to liberation. In response, this chapter delineates a framework of action for instating decolonial research methods in social work from an Indigenous perspective, to realign the profession towards social justice from the very beginning of the research process all the way through to dissemination and implementation.

A major component of decolonial work from an Indigenous perspective is the centring of relationality through a relational worldview. Essentially, everything we seek to do should be guided by the goal of being a good relative to one another. One key practice of this throughout social sciences has come to be known as a positionality statement. By situating ourselves in relation to the present work, we establish both our subjectivity and how we approach the work. This practice is in direct response to white, western colonial ideas of research that are built upon the notion of distance through objectivity. Positionality as a practice recognises that, far too often, objectivity has been used as a defence for whiteness. It involves pushing back on this norm by uplifting the power of our personal identities in framing how we interact with the work, one another, and the world around us.

In alignment with this tradition, I introduce myself in a good way. I am a queer Indigenous woman, preferring the term *Indigiqueer* to denote that both my Indigeneity and queerness are vital to understanding my individual experience and collective worldview perspective. *Tsistsistas* is a Cheyenne phrase meaning ‘the people’; it is our way of saying, *I am Cheyenne* or *We are Cheyenne people*. I am a sovereign member of the mighty Cheyenne Nation. I was raised by my mother and grandmother, proud full-blooded Cheyenne women from the Little Calf bloodline. My Grandfather Sam B. Deer was our tribe’s medicine man, camp crier, and sacred arrow keeper,

and we are proud to descend from Chief LittleFace, who fought in the Battle of Little Big Horn. It is an honour to be raised in community and hold traditional knowledge and generational wisdom from my ancestors. It is a privilege denied to many as they were removed from their communities through colonisation. I also hold immense privilege as one with advanced degrees from western higher education institutions, knowing that these initials attached to my name hold more weight in opening doors than are typically available for a queer Native person of my age. I navigate the academy from a decolonial perspective, positing that the cultural knowledge of my people is just as valuable as any degree or 'formal' education. It is from this decolonial Indigiqueer perspective that I share my experiences of developing a critical and decolonial research methods course for social work. While the process of developing this course to meet accreditation criteria and pass the faculty vote battle is discussed elsewhere, the lessons learned and key tenets of this research framework are presented below.

Dominant social work research paradigm

Social work is a practice-based profession meant to centre social change through the empowerment of people and communities. The American social work profession was formally established in the late nineteenth century. However, Black, Indigenous, and other communities of colour have been practising models of community care since time immemorial, regardless of recognition from the professionalised field of social work.

Social work as a discipline is defined by an ecological perspective, providing service at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of practice. Micro social work is predominately at the individual level, focusing on one-on-one dynamics, family support, and small group settings. Mezzo social work refers to centring groups of people in contexts such as schools, hospitals, or neighbourhoods. Macro social work encapsulates society-level issues such as policymaking, research, and community-based initiatives. In the United States, social work is guided by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and the Code of Ethics for the profession. The six broad ethical principles delineated within the Code of Ethics based on the profession's core values are service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, emphasising the importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence.

Despite these idyllic values and ethical principles painting the profession through a rose-coloured lens, the actuality of social work has left much to be desired. Social work has a longstanding history of complicity with harmful institutions such as the federal government, in carrying out agendas enforcing social control ([Asher BlackDeer and Gandarilla Ocampo, 2022](#)). Social workers played integral roles in removing, relocating, and contributing to the overall genocide of Indigenous communities in the United States. Social workers were also active in the incarceration of Japanese Americans in internment camps and proudly served in segregated settlement houses – see the true legacy of activist Jane Addams ([Jeyapal,](#)

2017; Fortier and Hon-Sing Wong, 2019). Early social work practice was defined by deficit-based approaches, seeing individuals as problems in need of treatment or entire communities in need of help integrating and assimilating into white society (Fortier and Hon-Sing Wong, 2019; Asher BlackDeer and Gandarilla Ocampo, 2022; Brady *et al.*, 2019). This line of thinking reflects the broader deference to the medical model throughout the profession, often duplicated in social work research.

Problems with evidence-based practice

Social work research continues this legacy of harm and a deficit-based medical model approach through the cornerstones of evidence-based practice (EBP). While typically mistaken for the interventions or treatments themselves, EBP is actually a six-step process for conducting research to inform clinical practice. In 2005, the American Psychological Association (APA) published guidelines on evidence-based practice in psychology, defined as the ‘integration of the best available research with clinical expertise in the context of patient characteristics, culture, and preferences’. While not entirely synonymous, empirically supported treatments are often the target goal sought out through the EBP process. However, it is a more comprehensive concept than one focusing solely on empirically supported treatments (ESTs). EBP and ESTs operate from fundamentally different perspectives altogether. ESTs start with the intervention itself and ask whether it works for a specific problem, while EBP starts with the client and asks what evidence will help the clinician reach the best outcome. Social work has emulated the medical field and thus followed APA guidelines by adopting EBP as the primary means of conducting research. This has led to further ingratiation in harmful hierarchical thinking and privileging of practices that are not as translatable into social sciences.

Evidence-based practice is inherently built upon the hierarchical ranking of types of knowledge, with the most ‘empirical’ at the top, and the most subjective at lower levels. This strict criteria for treatment evaluation contributes to the hierarchical ranking of knowledge and the related value of these interventions; however, these categories and ranks do not directly translate into social sciences such as social work. This hierarchical separation and subsequent devaluation of knowledge is a prime example of western colonial logic. Rather than seeking the type of knowledge to best answer the question, rankings are held in order to simulate prestige.

Further issues arise in the implementation of EBP in social work. The majority of interventions identified through the EBP process are built on assumptions of a western medical model, which emphasises distress and dysfunction. Again, the counting of symptoms or problems and then designing programs to 'fix' these problems is an extremely deficit-based approach. The western medical model has been critiqued as both incompatible and hypocritical to use with Indigenous populations as the majority of distress and dysfunction began in the United States through colonisation. Scholars have said, 'You cannot be the doctor if you are the disease' (Daes, 2000, p. 4). Applying interventions with no known efficacy among a marginalised community is essentially replicating the colonial project at the micro level. In other words, EBP is an imposition of white, western colonial ways of knowing, forcing Native populations to receive an intervention for problems caused by colonisers in the first place. This clinical colonisation is rewarded and perpetuated in EBP. The need for a decolonised research method emerges.

Decolonial critique

Statements on decolonisation in social work exploded during the United States' great racial justice awakening of 2020. As social workers strove to #DecolonizeYourSyllabus or #DecolonizeTheClassroom, these movements were, just as the hashtags imply, mere virtue signals. An abundance of cosmetic changes was recommended, everything from counting the number of people of colour cited in the syllabus to inviting a random Indigenous person to guest lecture on an area completely outside of their expertise. I was on the receiving end of several of these tokenising requests, and the buzzword effect of this movement is still being felt today.

Decolonisation in social work is not a new concept. Previous generations of scholars referred to this work as Indigenising social work, which refers to efforts that preserve cultural heritage and identity despite ongoing oppression and colonialism ([Weaver *et al.*, 2021](#)). However, the term appears to be somewhat outdated. Some refer to Indigenisation as another process of 'othering' Indigenous peoples and our ways of knowing and being ([Gray *et al.*, 2013](#); [Asher BlackDeer, 2023](#)). Reclaiming traditional ways of knowing and being that were interrupted by colonialism is considered decolonial work, but it is not just limited to Indigenous peoples. As the entirety of our society has been impacted by settler colonialism, it is the responsibility of all of us to decolonise.

The larger movement of decolonisation in social work includes calls to truly reckon with the inherently colonial nature of the profession, undoing the intertwined legacies of settler colonialism and white supremacy. Decolonisation is the undoing of colonialism, fundamentally aimed at dismantling structures of oppression, including undoing the internalised colonialism within our minds ([Yellow Bird, 2016](#)). Whether it is the result of previous Indigenous scholars' work in social work being narrowly considered or the influence of the buzzwordification from its most recent movement, social work has failed to truly understand what decolonisation

means. Some may even ask if the decolonisation discourse in social work is too far gone. But for the purposes of this chapter, ‘decolonisation’ will be the agreed-upon term for work that fundamentally seeks to undo colonialism.

Research methods course

The impetus for creating a new class on *Critical and Decolonial Research Methods* was a result of two years of course evaluations from my teaching a typical EBP course. Students encouraged administration to let me redesign the course and teach it in the way I wanted to, not tethered to the colonial basis of EBP – another way social work asks educators to try to reform harmful ways of knowing rather than truly transformative work. At long last, I was invited to create an entirely new course. However, this was by no means a streamlined course of action. Numerous conversations and meetings were held, with folx throwing down the gauntlet as to what they considered social work to be. Apparently, the entirety of decolonisation does not even count as social work to some. After an immense amount of lobbying behind the scenes and a lot of support from upper administration, our course was finally approved. The culmination of my lived experience as a queer Indigenous femme, years of quantitative scholarship training, and commitment to decolonial praxis all lead to this: my decolonial research framework for social work.

Decolonial research framework for social work

My decolonial research framework can be synthesised into three main ideas, or the three Ps, as I refer to them: perspective, process, and praxis. Perspective encompasses teaching worldviews, adopting a critical perspective, and the practice of positionality. Process centres on the valuing of questions over outcomes, practising unlearning and reflexivity through adopting an iterative approach. Finally, praxis is the overall embodiment of the goals of sovereignty, liberation, and self-determination, ultimately seeing reciprocity as a way of being.

Perspective

The first step of the EBP process is to identify an answerable or researchable practice question such as *What is the most effective treatment? How well does this symptom indicate a particular diagnosis? What is the likely course of the problem?* – the most common templates for emerging social work scholars. This begins a process from an inherent deficit-based lens. Essentially, posing a question based on a problem is a launching point disaster. Before students are even ready to pose a question, we must develop an awareness of perspective.

Colonial western frameworks assume that by avoiding all discussions of positionality or subjectivity, the researcher is inherently objective. Scholars have described this as the problem of positivism, essentially reducing ways of understanding the world to measurements that shift the focus to procedures (Smith, 2012). These white ways of knowing centre distance and measurement as means of professional conduct. It is important to consider who the person posing the question is, how they conceptualise the world around them, and how their intersecting identities come to bear in the clinical setting. My decolonial research framework first begins with key attention to one's perspective, particularly one's worldview in terms of how one sees the world, valuing a critical perspective in questioning and

evaluating the status quo, and the aforementioned practice of positionality to situate oneself in relation to the work, all before even thinking of posing a research question.

Worldviews

The first portion of perspective is introducing worldviews to students. While typically taught (and lost) as epistemology and ontology, I have found ‘worldviews’ to be a much more accessible concept for students to grasp and grapple with. Professor Leroy Little Bear (Blackfoot) defines a worldview as a set of beliefs and values that are honoured and withheld by several people (Little Bear, 2000). This includes how an individual, group, or society interacts with the world around them, including land, animals, and people. Worldviews are typically passed on to our children or the next generation to ensure continuity over time. As we are in the world, as we interact and learn from one another, we acquire the beliefs of other worldviews. These worldviews are not stagnant either but evolve as people and societies evolve over time.

I begin the course by introducing students to the concept of worldviews and doing a ‘compare and contrast’ exercise with Indigenous worldviews and to de-centre white western lenses (Mead, 2016). These include side-by-side comparisons of general concepts such as beliefs, truth, relationality, and land. A colonial worldview takes a scientific or sceptical view of belief; proof is a basis of belief, hence the overreliance on evidence and measurement (Smith, 2012). This is similar to the common saying ‘seeing is believing’. Conversely, an Indigenous view of belief is typically grounded in spirituality. Indigenous belief systems are based on cosmologies and traditional teachings of the spiritual world; we do not need to see things in order to believe in them.

White, western worldviews on truth hold that there is only one truth, one that can be found using scientific methods, while Indigenous worldviews consider that there can be many truths dependent upon how folx experience the world. Relationality is a cornerstone of an Indigenous worldview,

focusing on the interconnectedness between us and the land. These western worldviews are increasingly hyperindependence focused. The American mantra of ‘pulling oneself up by one’s bootstraps’ comes to mind: succeed or fail, as long as you do it on your own. In terms of comparing conceptualisations of land, western worldviews posit that land is a resource available for exploitation and ownership to drive a profit, while Indigenous worldviews hold that land is sacred, our relative, and it is our responsibility to be stewards of the land that Creator has entrusted us with.

This opening exercise provides a platform to the process of unlearning. Without having the opportunity to examine our worldviews or having been exposed to the concept, the majority of students have been steeped in white, western colonial higher education systems and replicate these modes of thinking inherently. For many, this is this first time they engage in the process of questioning why we do things this way, why this has been presented to us as the only way of doing things, and what our practice would look like from a different worldview. I encourage students to begin to critically evaluate how they view the world, what messages they receive and from where, and what the utility of these messages is. This is of course a lifelong process, as our worldviews can change and expand without limit throughout our lives. Some students and professors alike may be intimidated by the idea of a critical perspective, fostering the environment where we can question everything. I try to give students a grounding in a particular example where they can grasp the boundaries of what that critical questioning would look like, and then encourage them to stretch and grow from there. Rather than beginning the course by entirely flipping everything they have ever known to be true, I take smaller steps at first to say, ‘Let’s think about this and what that means for us.’

Once introduced to the concept of worldviews, students are encouraged to further examine what their own worldview is. As an Indigiqueer professor, I teach from a relational worldview, which is common across many Indigenous worldviews and encourages us to focus on the collective in everything we do. The Seventh Generations Principle is an excellent

example of the relational worldview in action. The Seventh Generations Principle is a traditional teaching from the Haudenosaunee Nation, which holds that everything we do today is guided by the seven generations that came before us, and that everything we do today will impact the next seven generations. It is from this worldview that I came to consider myself an ancestor-in-training. Everything that I am able to do today is a direct result of all my ancestors and relatives creating that path for me, and I am doing work today to help future generations go farther than I ever will be able to.

Critical perspective

I teach the course from a critical perspective, encouraging students to ask underlying questions and really open themselves up to other ways of thinking about research and the processes of knowing. Some misunderstand critical perspective to mean critique. The class is not simply an exercise in critiquing colonialism, white supremacy, and structures of oppression, although these certainly occur throughout. A critical perspective to research is always asking the next question. *Whose voices are not represented here? Whose voice is telling the story of those represented in the data? How applicable is this research to our population of practice? What decisions are we making that are unseen by those who will interact with this research?*

In the development of the course, I wanted to centre each week around a particular question, such as *How can we be better consumers of research?* My supervisor of Indigenous descent from Tkaranto pushed back on this and challenged me to think more relationally. He reframed this question as *How can we be in right relation with research knowledge?* Even as an Indigenous scholar in a western higher education institution, I am not exempt from the ways of the west seeping into my thinking! I am so grateful that my colleague was able to point this out to me as it fundamentally shifted our conversations. While EBP research courses would spend one day on quantitative evaluations and the other on qualitative approaches, drilling concepts of rigor, validity, and reliability,

we chose instead to think about these concepts *relationally*. This led us to a series of questions to guide students' thinking, subverting the typical research discourse (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1 Subverting western research paradigms through decolonial questions

<i>Western paradigm</i>	<i>Decolonial framework</i>
What effective interventions exist for our population of practice?	What information do we need to know how applicable this work might be to our population of practice?
How generalisable are study findings to our present population?	Are there certain pieces of this scholarship that can help us develop our thinking around this issue?
What gaps in research exist?	What is missing from available research evidence?
What were the inclusion and exclusion criteria for which search engines accessed?	Have we included forms of knowledge that are usually excluded from western ways of knowing? (i.e., grey literature, grassroots organising, social media sources from folx with lived experience.)

We organised the new course around these central questions, embedding this critical perspective throughout the semester. Instead of following specific steps for each research method, we chose instead to consider questions and core tenets. This was a summer course taught over five weeks, meeting twice a week (full syllabus available in 'Further reading and resources'), so we posed five overarching questions each week that we grappled with over the course of two class sessions per week (Figure 3.1).

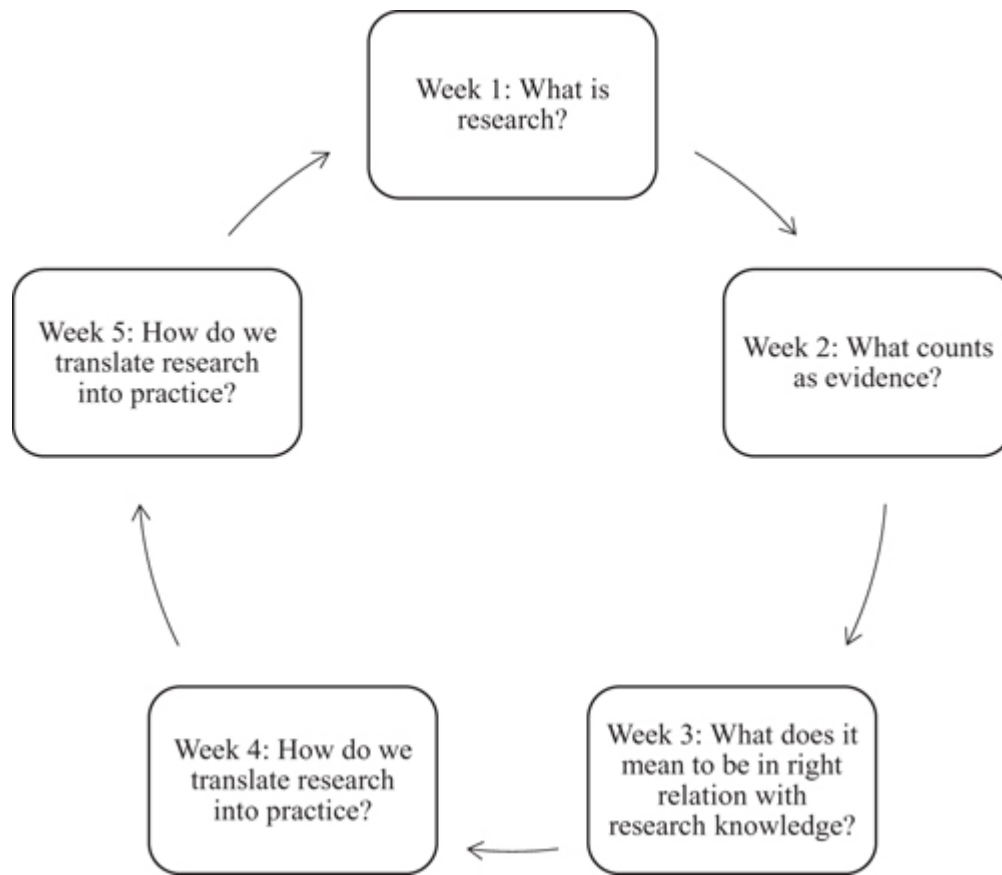


Figure 3.1 Five questions for weekly discussions.

In Week 5, we returned to the same questions as in Week 1 and gauged whether students responded differently. This is not only a nice way to wrap up the course and reflect on the process, but it is also an invitation for them to voice how their views may have shifted or been challenged throughout the course. Additional questions that week include the following: *What do they still want to learn more about? Where will they go next on their journey? Where do we go from here?*

Positionality

In the same way as this chapter began, the course models the practice of reflecting on positionality. This happens in Week 2 and is carried throughout the remainder of the entire course. Positionality is part of the larger process of building critical consciousness. The framework of critical

consciousness encourages continually reflecting on our own biases and assumptions, particularly on how we perceive difference and power dynamics. Positionality is the first step in the critical consciousness framework: examining our various identities, locations, and standpoints. By taking time to critically evaluate who we are and how we come to the work, we directly intervene against western colonial logic's notions of distance and objectivity. Positionality, in contrast, means explicitly stating the relevant intersecting identities that we hold and how they come to bear on the research project. Positionality situates us in relation to our values and our views, where we are located in space and time, and how each of these influences our worldview and what we hope to achieve in research.

There are a couple of pitfalls around teaching positionality that I would like to caution against. Positionality statements are not meant to be a laundry list of identities that we hold and then never engage with again. I blame the abundance of 'positionality wheels' and visualisations of privilege and oppression that create a two-dimensional perspective of who is right and who is wrong. Some students have been drilled to 'check their privilege' so much, to the point that they begin every sentence with, 'As a [insert race here] [insert gender identity here] with substantial privilege, I recognise x, y, and z BUT ... [insert excuse here]' Positionality statements are not a disclaimer to excuse harmful behaviours and practices, nor a list to rattle off before speaking. Awareness of privilege is a start, but that is by no means the end goal.

Similarly, positionality as a practice is not meant to be what I call a 'parking lot' approach. Imagine you are going shopping and pack your jacket, head to the shops, and as you arrive, you decide to leave your jacket in the car, never to be thought of again. It is left in the parking lot. This is what I caution students not to do. We will not be listing our positionalities and then leave them in the parking lot. We need to bring it with us, throughout the work we are seeking to undertake, and continuously refer to how these identities are influencing the way we move and the decisions we make. This is why, throughout this chapter, I have referred to my

Indigeneity and cultural values influencing the ways I approach the work. At the same time, I am also wrestling with being in a position of power while simultaneously trying to break down the hierarchy between student and professor.

Process

The class is a model of decolonial praxis in itself. We value the process of unlearning and learning new ways together, which is much more than a list of readings and exercises – it is about the process. The space we hold for students, the ‘container’ we set in the classroom, creates the space and invites students in to fill it with their lived experiences and hold the potential for what they want to become. The process of the course values questions over outcomes, as described above. While there are certainly touchpoints for assessment, the goal is not just to write an outstanding paper that meets externally imposed requirements. I continuously remind students that they are the product of the course. They are the product of their degree. I ask them, What kind of practitioner do they want to be? What kind of social worker do they want to be?

Reflexivity is the skill of constantly turning critical thinking back on ourselves. The majority of social work education centres instantaneous critical thinking on a situational basis, but decolonisation is more aligned with anti-oppressive practice in social work, a critical framework that seeks to challenge and ultimately dismantle oppressive structures and practices. This decolonial approach to research is an ongoing self-reflexive practice that turns the process inwards. While it makes sense to critically examine overarching oppressive, mainstream, or dominant systems at play, we must also reflect on our own ideas and practices. The assessment points throughout the course are designed to build and strengthen reflexivity in research. Students complete pieces of one large research project; these are ungraded but students are given feedback throughout, so they have several opportunities to reflect, edit, and revise their research. Students are able to

change their research question, broaden or narrow their topic focus, and engage in conversations about what types of knowledge they are including, such as lived experiences, grassroots organisers, and public scholarship, as opposed to those typically represented in research courses (i.e., peer-reviewed empirical studies). These multiple touchpoints allow me as an instructor to give students personalised feedback and pose questions in their feedback that can challenge where they are at and give hope for where they want to end up. This also embeds an iterative approach to research, in which students are continually paying attention to the questions they are asking, the assumptions they are making, and how they are situated in relation to the work. Rather than having students perform the scientific method through colonial research processes or simply regurgitate white frameworks in APA format, I support them to focus on the process, practice reflexivity, and begin to embody the skills and values they learn in the classroom into action.

Praxis

A major critique of decolonisation is that it is ultimately only a nice idea, or that it is just a theory or framework, but really lacks action overall. I counter this notion throughout our course, constantly reminding students that knowing is not the same as doing, and we must put these theories into practice in order to create a praxis. While we call attention to colonialism throughout, I scaffold steps for students to move from critique to community engagement. Through praxis, students are able to develop a practice of resistance, resurgence, and revitalisation. Beyond these short-term solutions for our clients, we encourage students to visualise empowerment-driven futures for their chosen populations of practice. What would a decolonial future of social work look like? We plant these seeds of liberation ([Aikau et al., 2015](#)) and remind our students – *Mni Wiconi* – water is life.

The social work research methods course was designed in such a way that students have several opportunities to learn, practice, and begin to embody the very skills and perspectives they learn about in the classroom. The ultimate goal of decolonial research is to further the causes of sovereignty and liberation. As we begin the course by problematising deficit-based approaches and resisting white saviour research, we then move to other ways of knowing and being. From there, we begin to grow into discussions of applicability of research and how we can be in right relation with research knowledge. Resisting the urge to consume research methods ‘steps’ ad nauseum, we impart values of decolonial research as a crucial point of departure in such a course. We build skills for students to begin the embodiment process, that is, to move ideas of decoloniality into practice – to embody a decolonial praxis. By focusing on decolonial perspectives and processes, the method itself is decentred. Rather than a prescriptive plan of action, students are invited along a decolonial journey, from whatever starting point they join the class with. We journey together and create the community space we want to see.

Typically, research methods pedagogy are described as either empirical, theoretical, or comparative-historical ([Ponomarenko *et al.*, 2016](#)). Empirical pedagogies centre practice and classification while theoretical pedagogies focus more on idealisation and hypothesis formulation. Comparative-historical methods focus on trends of development and various manifestations under certain circumstances. The present decolonial research methods pedagogy transcends these categories by combining all three approaches seen through the ways in which the historical informs the present, and how this comes to bear on the theoretical formation to ultimately translate as empirical.

The framework itself is intentionally non-specific, allowing for instructors to tailor and adapt to their individual classes and instructor style. It requires instructors to do their own inner decolonial work to truly interrogate who they are and how they show up in the space. The vulnerability and authenticity required to embody this praxis can be seen as

a limitation to some, but I prefer to invite folx to see it as a challenge to be embraced, learning to sit with the discomfort of becoming and grapple with how they can see the world to guide their students through their own processes of unlearning.

Where do we go from here?

As an embodiment of my own decolonial praxis, I apply reflexivity in every version of this course that I teach. Previous students have shared that they would have appreciated more time to develop their positionality statements and explore which identities were most salient to them. In prior iterations of the course, this was an activity completed asynchronously and briefly discussed in class. Upon receiving this feedback, I modified the course to have more in-class time to discuss the instructions of the assignment, with additional time in the following week to process and debrief together. This change allowed future students to have greater integration of their positionalities throughout the course.

Similarly, student feedback noted a tension in group work and the time allotments in class. Students shared that their groups were a great space to process and discuss but wished they had more hands-on experience with the assignments themselves. There is also a greater desire for more time in class to process and grapple with applications to practice in the large group and not just within their small groups. As a result, I changed group work to discussion groups only rather than assignment groups. This allowed me to have more in class time for entire discussions instead of trying to provide time for students to meet and work with their groups. Feedback on this shift has been mixed as there is never consensus on group work, but overall, the in-class discussions are reported as one of the highlights of the course.

Students have been immensely receptive to this course and learning about decolonial praxis. I end all my courses with a talking circle, inviting students to share how the course went for them, where they are at on their journey, and where they would like to head. Many share their initial discomfort or even dread of a research methods class, and how they ultimately enjoyed the possibilities invited throughout the course. They also express their desire to have more courses taught from this lens. It is my

hope that this work can become more widely known and practised, both in social work and beyond.

Questions for further discussion

1. What are key insights you have gathered regarding yourself and the world we live in via learning about the approach used to design and teach this class and your other experiences and journeys?
2. How would you describe your worldview? How does that relate to your positionality?
3. How can you embody a decolonial praxis within the classroom and beyond?

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Kaupapa Māori: asserting Māori humanity within a university

Adreanne Ormond

Key points

- Kaupapa Māori embodies a worldview deeply embedded in foundational beliefs and intrinsic ways of knowing and being.
- A Kaupapa Māori worldview promotes the recognition of diverse human perspectives to counter the undervaluing of non-European and Indigenous cultures and knowledge.
- Kaupapa Māori has societal and academic relevance, as it represents a transformative influence that is gradually reshaping the academic landscape by disrupting the complicity of universities in perpetuating colonial dehumanisation.
- Kaupapa Māori is a powerful tool for reclaiming Māori humanity and challenging the dehumanising elements of the university system.
- As Māori students experience challenges in academia, Kaupapa Māori fosters inclusive education and enables young Māori students to assert and express their humanity to achieve excellent outcomes.

Introduction: a Kaupapa Māori framing

This chapter offers a framework for understanding the experiences of Māori students in universities in Aotearoa New Zealand, particularly through the narrative of Everest, a Māori student. This account was collected as part of a broader research initiative, *Telling it like it is: Māori Student Voice in Tertiary Education*, aimed at amplifying the perspectives of Māori students from various faculties, including the social sciences. Everest's experiences are reflective of the intricate interplay between Māori individuals, philosophical principles outlined in a Kaupapa Māori worldview, and academia – an institution with a history of colonialism and ongoing colonising practices. Her story invites consideration of the broader discourse of humanity from a Māori worldview, Kaupapa Māori, in response to the dehumanisation of Indigenous Māori people within the academic sphere.

Kaupapa Māori research is an assertion of Indigenous Māori philosophies, practices, priorities, and intents. The intent of the Kaupapa Māori space, and, by extension, research that is aligned to Kaupapa Māori principles, is to provide a place for the many expressions of what it is to be Māori without requiring those involved to be positioned in ontologies from other places. That said, because of the colonial history of Aotearoa New Zealand, one effect of Kaupapa Māori thought and activities is to challenge colonial structures and assumptions in contested philosophical, political, and educational environments. Thus, the research enterprise at the centre of this chapter can be read as anti-colonial. However, it is also an anti-colonial posture to take one's direction of naming ([Sanga and Reynolds, 2017](#)) not from the colonial, even as opposition (anti), but from a root and by a route that is Indigenous. In academic research in Aotearoa New Zealand, this is represented by Kaupapa Māori.

The chapter begins by exploring Kaupapa Māori as a deeply ingrained worldview that fosters growth and has decolonising impact. It then

examines Kaupapa Māori within academic settings, critically addressing the reality of colonisation in this context. I share my personal insights on how Kaupapa Māori affirms humanity, contrasting this with my dehumanising experiences at university. This leads to a discussion on how Kaupapa Māori enables young Māori students to assert and express their humanity at university. The resistance to colonial, and specifically dehumanising, discourses is also framed as decolonial or anti-colonial action. The chapter includes a glossary of key terms relevant to the exploration of Kaupapa Māori.

Kaupapa Māori as a worldview

Māori, the Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa New Zealand, have heritages deeply rooted in the land itself. Our enduring connection to the natural world runs through every aspect of our existence. Once, Māori lived in co-existence, being the land's sole human guardians, and today, our identities remain intertwined with the very essence of Aotearoa New Zealand. Surviving the waves of colonialism, we, as Māori peoples, can stand strong today, constituting approximately 17% of the Aotearoa New Zealand population ([Statistics New Zealand, 2021](#)). Although tribal in organisation, we have come to be collectively referred to as Māori, and this cultural amalgamation, although in some ways problematic, has created a cultural solidarity.

Māori are composed of individually distinct nations, each with its own territory, leadership, social structure, genealogy, language, and knowledge systems. Ancestral territory encompasses not just physical land but an intricate web of relationships with the natural world, including mountains, rivers, forests, coastal areas, and all living creation – from the smallest insects to the largest marine creatures – that are integral to their identity and ways of being. This diversity is well accommodated within the Kaupapa Māori space, which, far from essentialising, invites and values relationships of similarity and difference that exist within and between Māori communities. Within this chapter, I primarily refer to Māori as a collective while acknowledging diversity, but I briefly mention one of the Māori nations to which I belong, Rongomaiwāhine. I first explore the traditions, values, and beliefs that have come to constitute the Kaupapa Māori worldview.

The flourishing intent of Kaupapa Māori

Kaupapa Māori, an approach to life and research, embodies a worldview deeply embedded in foundational beliefs and intrinsic ways of knowing and being. Emerging from Te ao Māori, the Māori world, and significantly influenced by the Māori body of knowledge, mātauranga Māori, Kaupapa Māori offers a philosophy of life that guides how Māori communities and people can perceive, comprehend, and navigate their journeys through this world.

As a worldview, Kaupapa Māori is deeply embedded in a spiritually oriented society, where the spiritual entails a profound belief in, and connection to, the metaphysical aspects of existence, including spiritual forces, ancestors, and the interconnectedness of all life (Mika, 2011). The worldview emphasises the profound connections between all entities, whether tangible or intangible. As a result, the relationships between the Māori people and the natural world are not purely transactional or utilitarian but profoundly symbiotic.

The landscape is sacred, known as Papatūānuku, our earth mother, as are the sky and heavens, as our father, Ranginui. Both are understood as having the power of creation and being capable of supporting and curtailing life. Every aspect of life, from daily routines to significant life events, is influenced by deep bonds with the land and the cosmos. The health of the land, water, and sky directly correlates with the health and wellbeing of the Māori people. The wellbeing of Māori is therefore understood through the lens of spiritual–environmental synergy, where spiritual and environmental connections are deeply intertwined and inseparable.

Interconnectedness means that any harm to, or imbalance of, Papatūānuku or Ranganui is not just an environmental concern but a direct affront to Māori identity and wellbeing. For Māori, understanding and maintaining balance is paramount. Rituals, ceremonies, and daily practices work towards preserving harmony in a spiritual nexus. Respecting the

Whenua or land, conserving resources, and understanding one's place in this vast web of relationships is essential to life.

Kaupapa Māori as decolonial

Taki (1996) argues that ‘Kaupapa’ encapsulates ground rules, customs, and a right way of doing things. In the context of Kaupapa Māori, these ground rules, or the right way of doing things, would be understood as Tikanga. Tikanga encompasses customs, traditions, practices, protocols, and principles that guide behaviour and interactions within Māori culture. It represents the customary ways of doing things, ethics, and cultural norms that have been passed down through generations and are integral to Māori ways of life. Although practised differently according to Māori nation and ancestral territory, Tikanga plays a fundamental role in shaping and preserving Māori identity, values, and cultural practices. Kaupapa Māori, as underpinned by Tikanga, supports and contributes to the cultural wellbeing of Māori, *serving as a decolonial force that challenges and resists the imposition of colonial systems and ideologies.*

Alongside wellbeing is the understanding that Māori best understand their needs and the ways to minister to them so that they thrive. In this regard, Kaupapa Māori asserts Māori autonomy and sovereignty, and the right to self-determine wellbeing within Aotearoa New Zealand. This perspective refines Kaupapa Māori’s worldview on unique Māori ways of life, thought, and engagement with the world. Consequently, while the spiritual and cultural dimensions of Kaupapa Māori are foundational, so too is a decolonial dimension. As a worldview that is intrinsically decolonial, Kaupapa Māori has a primary objective: to empower Māori individuals to achieve self-determination and to be leaders in nurturing all aspects of cultural wellbeing.

Māori humanity and cultural wellbeing

Māori humanity is associated with Māori self-determination, uncontested in the presumed pre-colonial era. However, in the contemporary context of Aotearoa New Zealand society, which was established through colonialism, the status and meaning of self-determination are highly contested. Māori scholar Graham Smith (1997) asserted that the political intent of Kaupapa Māori for self-determination was embodied by the principle Tino Rangatiratanga, which encompasses self-determination and sovereignty. By identifying Māori as the Tangata Whenua, the first people in a maternal–paternal relationship with the landscape, this principle recognises that to flourish, Māori must have sovereignty over the ways we practise this relationship since it is formative to our Indigenous heritage and cultural wellbeing.

In this context, flourishing can be understood by drawing on the work of notable Māori scholar Mason Durie (2005), who characterised the cultural wellbeing and Indigenous heritage of Indigenous peoples, including Māori, as encompassing the following: an enduring relationship across time among people, land, and nature; the celebration of this relationship in customs and group interactions; the shaping of cultural identity; the generation of unique knowledge, methodologies, and environmental ethics; the facilitation of economic growth and sustainability in balance with the surrounding world and creation; and, finally, the evolution of a language exclusive to this land of Aotearoa New Zealand and Māori peoples. Kaupapa Māori, when energised through Tino Rangatiratanga, advocates for the flourishing of Māori cultural identity and heritage in these fundamental aspects and the ways they are embodied and lived out in various contexts by Māori individuals and groups. In general, to be Māori is a matter of whakapapa: relationships to people, natural world, and unseen forces which co-exist with the seen. The history of Aotearoa New Zealand has resulted in many Māori struggling to place themselves in such relationships. Nonetheless,

whakapapa is multi-dimensional and relationships endure despite apparent rupture.

Kaupapa Māori in the university academy

The term Kaupapa Māori was formally coined by Graham Smith in 1997 during a period of decolonial and cultural resurgence. This movement was an historically located response to the colonial marginalisation of Māori and aimed at promoting our cultural wellbeing. However, it is important to note that Kaupapa Māori is not a new concept but draws from an ancient and enduring essence that has always been integral to the cultural existence of Māori ([Pihama, 2010](#)). As a force emerging from history, Kaupapa Māori can be viewed as an approach that navigates from Māori Indigenous standpoints rather than a single, tightly defined and inflexible set of rules established at any given time.

For Māori, Kaupapa Māori plays a pivotal role in academic settings, where it serves as a repository of Māori knowledge, a basis for life philosophy, and a guiding framework for ethical research ([Hudson *et al.*, 2010](#)) and pedagogy. It has a central role in the discourse surrounding Māori and Indigenous studies, recurring significantly in scholarly works within this area ([Pihama, 2010](#)). In essence, Kaupapa Māori epitomises a decolonial approach ([Smith, 1999](#)) as it not only diverges from western-origin methods but actively challenges the pervasive influence of colonialism, upholding the relationships and meaning making of Indigenous people. As a result, Kaupapa Māori paves the way for inclusive, culturally grounded, and transformative practice.

The richness of application that has taken place in diverse fields has spurred a considerable body of research and literature, documented in academic repositories. For instance, a search in 2023 in the Victoria University of Wellington library database for publications featuring ‘Kaupapa Māori’ in the title yielded 4,323 articles, 683 book chapters, 547 books, and 340 postgraduate theses. This data offers a partial representation of Kaupapa Māori’s presence in academia, showing the extensive academic activity generated through this lens.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the academy, much like all other aspects of public life, is subject to Te Tiriti o Waitangi, the fundamental basis of the relationship between Māori and the British Crown. A number of versions of what some call New Zealand's founding document were signed from 1840, including a sheet signed by chiefs at Waitangi in the north of New Zealand, on land cared for by one of the Māori nations, Ngāpuhi. Under this arrangement, Māori might expect to have their humanity acknowledged and to be at home in all academic spaces, and to find Kaupapa Māori and university conduct, academic and organisational, to be in alignment. However, as the narrative of this chapter shows, this is not the case.

The rise of Kura Kaupapa Māori, educational institutions based on Māori philosophies and practices, signifies the growing impact of the Kaupapa Māori framework. For example, the approach of Māori language immersion schools reflects Māori cultural values, and aims to revitalise Māori language. These institutions are instrumental in nurturing a new generation that is deeply rooted in Māori perspectives and worldviews, ensuring the continuity and evolution of Māori knowledge and culture in contemporary society and educational landscapes. Through Kaupapa Māori, a path is paved for Māori to not only participate in academia but also to thrive, with their humanity acknowledged and celebrated.

In the next section, I articulate my personal and professional experiences as a Māori and explain my sense of being human in these contexts, and the ways my humanity has or has not been affirmed.

Exploring Māori humanity: insights through a Kaupapa Māori worldview

I was raised within my Indigenous community on the ancestral land of my Māori nation, Rongomaiwāhine, located on Māhia peninsula. Growing up amongst other Māori, understanding the world through a Kaupapa Māori worldview was an inherent part of my existence. As a Māori and an academic, I navigate two distinct realms: my Māori Rongomaiwāhine community of Māhia peninsula and the university environment.

Here, I draw from my personal experiences as both a Māori and a Māori academic to address two fundamental matters: my understanding and experience of a Māori perspective on humanity, based on my Rongomaiwāhine community, and how this understanding translates into my professional life within the university.

From a Kaupapa Māori worldview, my humanity is perceived through the lens of being Tangata Whenua. This framework positions me as an integral component of a complex web of relationships within a holistic cycle that encompasses Tangata Whenua and all aspects of the natural world. This philosophy situates me within a larger family of all creation, recognising me as one among many interconnected forms of intelligence, energy, and agency.

As Tangata Whenua, I am in relation with the natural world, Papatūānuku, my natural earth mother, and Ranganui, my natural sky father, by whom I am created. While this understanding of Whakapapa is unique to Te ao Māori, the concept of relationality ([Moreton-Robinson, 2017](#)) resonates with many Indigenous perspectives. Relationality forms the foundation of Indigenous ontology, epistemology, and meaning-making processes.

I recall experiences from my childhood where our parents would take my siblings and me out onto our ancestral landscape and teach us our place in the world, so that we could make sense of who we were in relation to the

landscape that is our ancestor. One memory I have is of a warm summer afternoon, being on a particular headland where we could observe the vast ocean below us. From this vantage point, my father unravelled the ocean's role in our Whakapapa. He described the ocean as a living, breathing entity with a personality, intelligence, and agency that contributed to our lives. He consistently emphasised our bonds with specific people, lands, rivers, trees, and creatures, explaining that their significance to our ancestry provided us with a deep understanding of how our identities were intertwined with others. From this perspective, as Tangata Whenua of my ancestral homeland, I do not perceive myself as a separate and abstract individual detached from the world I inhabit. Rather, I recognise my humanity as part human, part ancestral spirit, part tree, part sky, part ocean, part crawling creature, and part earth dust. This relationship extends beyond the philosophical realm; it is a palpable reality that shapes our interactions, responsibilities, and interconnectedness with the world. I am aware that my ancestral landscape recognises me, as I am part of it and it is part of me.

Integrating a Kaupapa Māori worldview: navigating Māori humanity within the realm of university and academia

The university I work at, established in 1897 – the year of Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee celebrations in the era of colonialism – acknowledges the Indigenous Māori and the Treaty of Waitangi, yet operates predominantly within a western cultural framework. Historically, a colonial worldview categorised me as less-than-human due to my non-European heritage. Colonialism brings perceptions of ‘others’ lacking in civilisation, knowledge, and geographic relevance. A colonial perspective suggests that the recognition of Māori humanity is contingent upon Māori conforming to the norms of the colonial worldview, ironically risking the loss of ‘Māoriness’ in the process. The university hosts a number of Māori students and Māori academic staff and has made significant steps to meet the Treaty of Waitangi obligations. However, being a large institution, the availability of Māori staff skilled to manage Māori cultural aspects is limited. Within the halls of this white colonial university, my sense of humanity, as seen through the lens of Kaupapa Māori, often feels obscured and unacknowledged. The institution’s rigid structures and Eurocentric paradigms stand in stark contrast to the fluid, interconnected world of my ancestral homeland.

What most astounds me is the normalised lack of care. It is commonplace not to know the people sitting next to you, to be on Māori land and remain unaware of it, and to be oblivious to the ancestors upon whose land these buildings exist. In Te ao Māori, we greet the material world, including a building as an intelligent living entity. In the university, we occupy it as four walls. This lack of awareness and connection starkly contrasts with the rich tapestry of relationships and knowledge that form the essence of my being as a Māori. Whakapapa is replaced by bureaucracy, and ancestral connections by networking.

In stark contrast to the symbiotic relationship I share with the environment, the university operates on a transactional basis. It is an institution providing a service, not a nurturing ancestral homeland. The reciprocity and responsibility I feel towards the land are replaced by contracts and fees. In this transactional exchange, I question whether my humanity, intrinsically tied to nurturing and care, holds any significance.

The university, with its adherence to traditions and resistance to change, feels like a static environment, far removed from the dynamic continuity and renewal I experience in my homeland. This dissonance highlights a stark realisation: within these unyielding walls, there seems to be little comprehension of how my humanity is intricately constituted and reconstituted by the wider natural world and all creation, which is in a state of continual flux. The familial ties and communal bonds that uphold my humanity struggle to find a place in an environment that values independence over collectivism.

Thriving in the academy: Kaupapa Māori as a vital source of strength and insight

Despite the university's tendency to obscure my Māoriness, it is through this very worldview that I maintain and reclaim it. Kaupapa Māori serves as a light, illuminating alternative ways of being human that transcend the dominant non-Māori norms pervasive within the university. This broader understanding of humanity enables me to navigate the institution with a sense of self that is not confined to the restrictive paradigms the university offers.

In this journey, there are emotional lows and highs. To help navigate these, I actively cultivate relationships with other Māori. By seeking out colleagues and students who share my worldview, I foster a community that becomes my mini-Māori solidarity within the university's walls. This intentional creation of relational spaces serves as a sanctuary, where our Māoriness is not just recognised but celebrated. In this space, when I feel dehumanised by various conversations, lack of institutional understanding, and frustration, or lost and lonely for my Māhia homeland and the company of the land-sea-sky scape ([Ormond *et al.*, 2020](#)), I can drop by someone's office and say, 'What are you doing?' and touch base with that essence of Māoriness that I need. This act of recalibration, by being with another Māori who understands humanity as I do and recognises the challenges and triumphs, is invaluable.

Within the constraints of the university, I actively engage in the decolonisation of academic spaces. I carve out areas where Kaupapa Māori is not only preserved but also allowed to flourish. Whether it is in my teaching methods, through my writing, within research projects, or when supervising Māori students, I am dedicated to creating enclaves of our world that challenge the established colonial norms. By engaging in respectful discussions with students and peers, I endeavour to ensure that our perspectives and knowledge are not merely recognised but are fully

integrated into the fabric of academic discourse, thereby enriching it with the diversity and strength of our traditions and viewpoints.

Through a Kaupapa Māori standpoint, I can navigate the university not as a place of disconnection but as a space where I assert and uphold my humanity, drawing strength from the knowledge and practices of those who have walked before me. This approach becomes my act of decolonial resistance and affirmation, a signature to the enduring power of my humanity in a landscape that often fails to recognise its depth and richness. As my generation's journey progresses, our focus inevitably shifts towards the experiences of the rangatahi, the young, the new net going fishing in the academic sea. It is essential that we pave a path for these emerging minds to traverse their academic journeys with dignity and pride in their Māoriness. Research has a part to play here.

Research project: *Telling it like it is: Māori student voice in tertiary education*

The qualitative research project *Telling it like it is* explored the lived experiences of Māori within a specific university setting in Wellington from 2019 to 2021. The study was designed to encapsulate the complex and varied experiences of young Māori individuals at university. Guided by a Kaupapa Māori approach, the research was deeply anchored in values derived from Te ao Māori. It was characterised by an assertion of a space in which what it is to be Māori is central and requires no outside reference, and a consequent decolonial impetus. The research aimed for transformative outcomes that challenge colonial legacies and empower Māori perspectives and realities. As a distinctive approach, the project opted to record oral stories via Zoom. The work was undertaken largely by Māori researchers, although not exclusively. It can be possible to embrace the skills of non-Māori in Kaupapa Māori research provided that the aims, understandings, behaviours, values, and so on that structure, develop, and interpret the research remain true to the assertion of Indigeneity in Aotearoa New Zealand as collectively understood by Māori involved in the work.

The research participants, six young Māori who had completed at least one degree and were progressing through further undergraduate, honours, or master's programmes, shared their journeys and reflections, which formed the core experiences this research sought to voice and understand. Storytelling by academically successful Māori students provided a means of uncovering Māori stories of success sitting behind academically focussed accounts. The project uncovered how these individuals had experienced being Māori and therefore their Māori humanity. As this work aimed to enable the Kaupapa Māori principle of self-determination, the research was deliberately structured to enable the individual to speak to, and within, a Māori collective. The work provided a lens for self-empowerment, cultural

resilience, and identity affirmation, while also challenging and redefining conventional academic paradigms.

Everest's pathway: navigating university life with Kaupapa Māori as a guide to Māori humanity

One participant, Everest, grew up in a picturesque small coastal town in the North Island. Raised in a Māori household, she excelled academically and developed a passion for media, starting with photography. For Everest, being Māori was as inherent as breathing. Her worldview, influenced by the principle of Tangata Whenua, reflected a deep connection with the land where her ancestors' presence was palpable. Her decisions, impacting both her cultural welfare and personal wellbeing, were rooted in her Māori identity and resonated with the ethos of Tino Rangatiratanga – the principle of absolute sovereignty and self-determination. Surrounded by the support of whānau, her sense of humanity was effortless and unspoken; to be Māori was to be fully human.

During her engagement with our project, Everest revealed a facet of her university experience – how her Māori identity, an intrinsic part of her being, was perceived and interpreted within the academic environment. Here, I present three episodes from her research contributions which chart her development as a student following a decolonising agenda.

Episode #1 Stepping into a new world: The weight and wonder of being Māori at university

Coming to uni was a big step, you know? It was just me stepping into this whole new world, and honestly, it felt like only my parents really got it, really believed in me. It was scary exciting. But it is hard, you know, when it feels like you're carrying the weight of your whānau on your shoulders, trying to make them proud, trying to make a space for us in this world. It is a lot, but that belief, you know, that aroha from my parents. Sorry, I'm gonna cry ... it keeps me going, keeps me fighting to be heard in this place.

Everest's narrative poignantly reflects the tension between her deep-seated connection to Kaupapa Māori and the challenges she faces in a university environment that may not always embrace or understand this worldview. Her decision to step into higher education, described as 'a big step' into a 'whole new world' signifies not just a physical transition but a cultural and emotional one, where she carries the 'weight of your whānau on your shoulders'. This weight represents not only her family's hopes but also the larger responsibility to her community and culture. Her reliance on the 'aroaha from my parents' underscores the vital support system rooted in her whānau, yet this same support highlights the contrast she experiences in an academic setting that lacks the collective ethos and understanding of Māori values.

Everest's journey is marked by an ongoing struggle to assert her identity and perspectives within an environment where her cultural background and the inherent knowledge it carries are not always recognised or valued. Her determination to 'keep fighting to be heard in this place' is an affirmation of her resilience but also underscores the inherent tension in navigating a space where her worldview is not the norm, reflecting the broader challenge of affirming Indigenous identity in contexts shaped by different values and histories. In this journey, Everest does not just pursue academic success; she also engages in a profound act of rehumanisation, asserting the validity and vitality of her Kaupapa Māori perspective within a space that is still learning to embrace its transformative power. The challenge is both exhilarating and exhausting for her.

Episode #2 Seeking inclusion: A quest for Māori representation in academic content

I wanted to learn as a Māori to see our stuff in the courses, but it was like talking to a wall. It just wasn't there. And I'm sitting here thinking ... what the *@* ... we've got so much good stuff in our communities why isn't that showing up. Why's it always Pākehā stories? We've got stuff that can hit you in the feels, that can teach,

light a fire under you it will. It's about time that stuff was front and centre stage in our learning, on screens everywhere, on media, you know.

Everest's vivid portrayal of her frustration reveals her deep desire for uplifting Māori representation within the university curriculum. She poignantly describes the absence of her culture as 'talking to a wall', emphasising how Māori perspectives are glaringly absent. This lack reflects a profound issue of dehumanisation, where the courses she enrolled in draw a line between what is considered valid knowledge and what is not, effectively disregarding the depth and humanity inherent in Māori knowledge and experiences.

Her experience leads her to question, 'What the *@* ... we've got so much good stuff in our communities, why isn't that showing up?' Everest's words reflect her profound disbelief and exasperation at the erasure of her culture's potential contributions. She challenges the prevailing narrative that predominantly favours Pākehā and other non-Māori stories, asserting the power and relevance of Māori knowledge: 'We've got stuff that can hit you in the feels, that can teach, light a fire under you; it will.' Her insistence on the educational and emotional value of Māori stories is a poignant call for inclusivity and recognition. Everest's plea for the inclusion of Māori perspectives stems from the understanding that the omission of Māori content within her courses also implies an implicit denial of her very existence. This dissonance leaves her grappling with the harsh reality that, although she lives and breathes as a Māori, the education she pursues seems to negate her presence and that of people like her, creating a stark contradiction between her lived reality and the academic environment.

Everest's frustration culminates in an emotionally charged demand for change: 'It is about time that stuff was front and centre stage in our learning, on screens everywhere, in media, you know.' Her words are not just a plea but a statement of resilience and determination, pushing against the dehumanisation and marginalisation of her culture. Through her

decolonial advocacy, Everest seeks to restore the humanity and dignity of Māori knowledge, demanding its rightful place in the educational landscape.

Episode #3 Empowering self-representation: Bringing Māori content to the forefront

I got to a point, you know, where I was over asking, ‘Where’s the Māori content?’ So, I just started bringing it myself. I told myself, ‘I know this stuff and so I did it, I brought it myself. I knew what I wanted, what was missing, and I wasn’t gonna wait around for someone else to bring it in. It is like, if they won’t provide it, then I will. It is our knowledge, our stories, and we have every right to bring that into these spaces. And look, some people might think I’m the angry Māori, but I’m not angry, I’m hungry for Māori stuff because we have been starved of it, so I’m serving it up myself now.

Everest’s powerful declaration captures her transition from questioning to action. She exemplifies agency and determination in her words: ‘So, I just started bringing it myself. I knew what I wanted, what was missing, and I wasn’t gonna wait around for someone else to bring it in.’ Her confidence in her cultural knowledge is tangible as she affirms, ‘I know this stuff’, highlighting her proactive approach in filling the educational void she experienced.

Everest’s resolute assertion, ‘It is our knowledge, our stories, and we have every right to bring that into these spaces’, emphasises the inherent human right of Māori to contribute their perspectives and knowledge in academic settings. This stance underscores her deep-seated conviction in reclaiming and asserting mātauranga and the associated Māori identity within the university. However, this proactive approach entails a significant emotional toll. The loneliness and alienation Everest faces are profound,

exacerbated by the real cost of marginalisation – a burden heavily borne by many Māori students.

The battle against marginalisation, often requiring Māori students like Everest to constantly justify and defend their worldview, can drain energy and resources. It adds layers of complexity to Everest's educational journey and raises questions in her mind about the worth of her struggles. These are difficult discussions that someone in their youth and away from whānau and community can easily feel are heavy to deal with. This leaves students like Everest to bear an additional burden that their non-Māori peers rarely, if ever, have to consider or confront. Ironically, her plea for Māori humanity to be recognised costs her her humanity, as she endures the weight of these struggles and the ongoing effort to validate and amplify Māori voices in academic spaces where they have been marginalised or silenced.

Everest's critique of the educational pathway in media studies underscores the need for a curriculum that is decolonised so that it is culturally relevant and responsive, 'The pathway into producing and influencing media content is culturally undeveloped ... the connection to New Zealand and to Māori identity is often a stretch at best.' Everest's words resonate with a deep desire for systemic change, advocating for an educational and media landscape where Māori can authentically express, explore, and affirm their identity. Her stance reiterates the need for transformation, highlighting the urgency and importance of integrating Māori perspectives and knowledge into these crucial societal domains.

Reclaiming humanity: the empowering legacy of Kaupapa Māori

Everest's journey within the university shows that Kaupapa Māori is not just a philosophical framework but a living, breathing guide that offers a transformative perspective on our existence. It is a worldview that urges us to re-evaluate what it means to be human, calling for a deeper understanding that transcends the westernised (Grosfoguel, 2013) humancentric individualistic views often fostered in academic environments. At its core, Kaupapa Māori emphasises our responsibility to live in harmony with all of creation. This harmonious approach fosters a sense of balance and respect for the natural world.

Furthermore, Kaupapa Māori, though steeped in decolonisation, presents an opportunity for healing – not only for Māori but also for the coloniser. As francophone Martinican poet and scholar Aimée Césaire (2000) eloquently points out, colonisation has brutalised and degraded the coloniser as much as the colonised. Embracing Kaupapa Māori is an opportunity to heal these wounds and step away from the dehumanisation that has become normalised within the society of Aotearoa New Zealand. This shift can help both Māori and non-Māori within the university to move beyond the types of violence that have been historically perpetuated, fostering an environment of moral integrity and mutual respect.

For Everest, navigating the corridors of the university while embracing the principles of Kaupapa Māori has brought clarity and hope. This perspective has enabled her to discern and eloquently express the tensions that arise between her Māori understanding of humanity and the demands of a westernised academic institution, which, despite its efforts, is still in the nascent stages of understanding and integrating Te ao Māori. Embracing a Kaupapa Māori worldview has provided her with a Māori standpoint, a robust framework that allows her to articulate her perspectives, even when they diverge from the predominant narratives of the spaces she inhabits.

This alignment with her cultural roots has offered her emotional and psychological solidarity with her whānau, community, and the broader Māori world, thereby cushioning the sense of isolation she often endures when expressing her unique experiences in an environment that may find them unfamiliar or unconventional.

Conclusion

The influence of Kaupapa Māori extends far beyond individual experiences, playing a pivotal role in enabling Māori to assert, express, and articulate their humanity within academic settings. Its presence is increasingly visible and influential across various academic domains, including research design, pedagogical approaches, and curriculum development. This marks a significant shift from just a few decades ago, when Māori knowledge was scarcely recognised in academia. In contemporary academic contexts, Kaupapa Māori provides a vital framework for Māori students and scholars to articulate their perspectives and experiences, rooted in their cultural identity. Research applications now frequently include sections that emphasise engagement with Māori communities, recognising them not only as collaborators but also as valuable knowledge holders and producers. This growing inclusion enriches the academic discourse and serves as a testament to the enduring strength and relevance of Māori knowledge systems, ensuring that these voices are not just included, but are integral to the narrative of research and scholarship.

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Glossary

Aotearoa New Zealand: The Indigenous Māori name for New Zealand.

Aotearoa is often translated as ‘land of the long white cloud’.

Aroha: Feelings of affection, empathy, compassion, and deep emotional connection. A guiding principle that shapes interactions and relationships, emphasising the importance of caring for and understanding one another within the community.

Kaupapa: An agenda, theme, or principle. It denotes a set of values, principles, and plans that people have agreed on as a foundation for their actions.

Kaupapa Māori as a worldview: A Māori approach or perspective that is embedded in Māori cultural values, beliefs, and knowledge. It is an Indigenous framework that guides thinking, research, and action in a Māori context.

Kura Kaupapa Māori: Primary and secondary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand that use Māori language and culture as the foundation of their curriculum. They provide an educational environment where Māori language, values, and customs are integral to the teaching and learning process, aiming to empower Māori students through a culturally relevant education.

Māori: The Indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Māoriness: The qualities, characteristics, and state of being Māori.

Mātauranga: Māori knowledge or wisdom. It encompasses Māori worldviews, philosophies, and epistemologies.

Pākehā: Typically refers to a person of European descent, particularly one who was born in Aotearoa New Zealand. The term is used in contrast to Māori and other ethnic identities.

Papatūānuku: Earth mother in Māori cosmology, the personification of the land.

Rangatahi: Young people or youth, typically in the context of Māori society. It is often used to describe the new generation or the emerging leaders and scholars within the community.

Ranginui: Sky father in Māori cosmology, the personification of the sky.

Rongomaiwāhine: A female ancestor recognised in Māori tradition, associated with the coastal regions of Te Māhia, which is in northern Hawke's Bay district.

Tangata Whenua: Literally 'people of the land'. It refers to Māori as the Indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Te ao Māori: This term translates to 'the Māori world' or 'the Māori worldview'. It encompasses the beliefs, values, customs, practices, and knowledge of the Māori people.

Te Māhia: A geographical location in Aotearoa New Zealand. The homeland of the author and the ancestral homeland of the Māori nation Rongomaiwāhine.

Tikanga: Correct procedure, custom, lore, practice, or convention; protocol – the customary system of values and practices that have developed over time and are deeply embedded in the social context.

Tino Rangatiratanga: Often translated as 'absolute sovereignty' or 'self-determination', it refers to the autonomy and authority Māori seek over their own affairs.

Treaty of Waitangi: The Treaty of Waitangi, signed in 1840, is a foundational document in Aotearoa New Zealand's history. It is an agreement between the British Crown and various Māori chiefs, marking the formal beginning of British colonisation in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Waka: In Māori culture, a *waka* is a traditional canoe. It holds significant cultural and historical importance, often used in the past for navigation and exploration across vast stretches of ocean. The term is

also metaphorically used to represent a group, community, or journey, signifying the collective effort and direction of a community.

Whakapapa: Genealogy, lineage, or ancestry. It is the layering of generations of genealogical history.

Whānau: Extended family or community. It plays a central role in Māori society and consists of multigenerational collectives bound by kinship.

Whenua: Land, country, or territory. It has significant cultural, spiritual, and ancestral importance to Māori.

Questions for further discussion

1. In what ways can a Kaupapa Māori worldview be supported to flourish within academic and societal contexts?
2. How can non-Māori educators and researchers respectfully and effectively incorporate Māori cultural perspectives and methodologies into their work?
3. What strategies can be implemented within universities to better support the educational journeys and wellbeing of young Māori students?

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Part II

Feminist frameworks

**Rethinking the (im)possibility of
participation in humanitarian
research: co-constructing knowledge
through feminist methodologies**

Kaira Zoe Alburo-Cañete and Gabriela Villacis Izquierdo

Key points

- From its inception, dominant forms of humanitarianism have been interlaced with colonial practices. Power and views from the minority world have shaped how knowledge about peoples affected by crises are represented and imagined.
- Despite the challenges posed by humanitarian contexts, feminist methodologies have the potential to centre the situated and lived experiences of crisis-affected people and their knowledges to contribute towards a humanitarian studies discipline that is inclusive and anti-colonial.
- Feminism is diverse. We draw from a varied range of feminist perspectives on knowledge-building to demonstrate how feminist methodologies can be a useful way to address epistemological inequalities and advance majority-world perspectives in humanitarian studies.
- Feminist and anti-colonial humanitarian research remains a work-in-process. Attention to positionality, reflexivity, and creating spaces for co-constructing knowledge helps to advance research that matters to communities affected by crisis.

Introduction

The coloniality of modern humanitarianism is most apparent when ‘aid flows between former colonial powers and former colonised regions often mirror their past colonial relationships, with decision-making power concentrated in the Global North’ and where the role of affected people is reduced to being recipients of ‘benevolence’ (Peace Direct *et al.*, [2021](#), p. 4). Consequently, critical scholars, practitioners, and community activists, especially in the majority world, have been calling for the transformation of the humanitarian system to be more inclusive, non-hierarchical, non-paternalistic, less asymmetrical, and respectful in its engagement with local actors – comprising a diversity of peoples such as first responders, civil society organisations, faith-based groups, communities, and government officials that are involved in humanitarian responses – and other forms of knowledges about how societies respond to crises.

In the field of humanitarian studies, authors such as Hilhorst ([2020](#)) have raised concerns regarding how humanitarian research remains largely extractive, externally driven, and mostly led by institutions in the so-called global north. This is underwritten by assumptions that crises are ‘exceptional’ events and thus require swooping in and collecting information in the name of saving lives and helping vulnerable peoples considered to have limited capacity to help themselves.

Participatory forms of research, which require sustained engagement, trust-building, and respectful co-construction of knowledge, are usually construed as a luxury, especially in highly volatile situations of armed conflict or in the context of social disruptions caused by disaster. Such methodological decisions are often rationalised as a matter of pragmatism (and in some cases, security) but rarely problematised in terms of how research methodologies contribute to reinforcing dominant, colonial forms of knowledge and practices. While much-needed conversations on the need to decolonise humanitarian action are growing ([Aloudat and Khan, 2022](#)),

there is still a lack of critical reflection on how *humanitarian research* and the *methods* employed contribute to (re)producing colonialist discourses.

Given this premise, we argue that we need to rethink instrumentalist views of humanitarian research, whereby affected communities are merely seen as beneficiaries and ‘sources of data’ to inform policy, programs, and knowledge about crises. We bring to focus the potentials of feminist methodologies in centring the situated and lived experiences of crisis-affected people, their contexts, and knowledges to contribute towards creating humanitarian studies that are inclusive and anti-colonial. While we are not dismissive of the very real and sometimes life-threatening challenges that are inherent in researching crisis settings, we argue that dismissing people’s participation in constructing knowledge about *their* experiences of crisis altogether is not only disempowering but also colonising.

As feminist researchers, we hope to engender conversations on research practices in humanitarian settings that support the meaningful involvement of affected people. While feminism is often equated to research by/with/on women – a category that we also problematise in the next section – we contend that there is much that other (humanitarian) scholars can learn from the ethical, political, and methodological approaches that characterise feminist research. To demonstrate this, we present two separate research projects from the Philippines (Kaira) and Colombia (Gabriela). Kaira is a Filipino scholar who has been actively involved in women’s organising and advocacy over the last fifteen years. Since 2010, she has worked in the field of disaster and has taken an active role in humanitarian response following typhoon Yolanda in the Philippines in 2013. Gabriela is an Ecuadorian PhD researcher who has lived in Colombia for five years. As a humanitarian worker, she came to recognise the challenges and problematic practices in the sector.

To begin, we provide an overview of feminist methodologies and situate their potential for anti-colonial humanitarian research. Then we present the two methods: *PhotoKwento*, a feminist photo-based method Kaira used in

disaster recovery in Tacloban City, Philippines, and the *feminist collective storytelling circles*, which Gabriela implemented in Putumayo, Colombia to work with displaced women affected by crises. We conclude the chapter with our reflections on how applying feminist principles in humanitarian research can contribute to produce anti-colonial knowledge about crises and the people, places, and environments affected by them.

Situating feminist methodologies in humanitarian studies

Collecting information about crisis-affected populations plays an increasingly important role in making decisions about aid provision. Such information also shapes how people affected by crisis are perceived and imagined. As Potts *et al.* (2022) note, knowledge production within these settings is starkly laden with power imbalances. The question of how and by whom knowledge about affected populations is produced is central to a critical reflection about such power imbalances, which are not given enough attention in humanitarian settings.

Discussions around participation and representation in humanitarian studies and practice have gained traction in recent years, although this is not necessarily a new idea. The 2016 World Humanitarian Summit gave way to a so-called ‘participation revolution’, which aimed to involve people affected by crisis in decision-making regarding aid as well as in knowledge-building. However, prevailing assumptions that prevent the practice of participatory humanitarian research include: (1) crisis situations are not ideal for enacting participatory methods because of the fragility of certain contexts and social tensions that may exist; and (2) crisis-affected people are not interested in investing time and energy in research (Hilhorst, 2020).

Although we acknowledge these concerns – and indeed in some cases conducting research might not be feasible or appropriate at all – we contend that such blanket rationality can be harmful. The implication is that one could produce knowledge about crisis-affected people ‘out there’ – count them, describe them, make conclusions about their needs and aspirations, and prescribe universal(ised) measures intended to make them ‘better’ – without providing people the opportunity to define who they are, what matters to them, and how they imagine their world and the forms of crises they experience. These practices are not only invalidating, but they also run the risk of perpetuating colonising forms of knowledges and relations.

We contend that feminist perspectives can contribute to addressing these issues. Here, we do not intend to provide a comprehensive account of feminist research and its history. Nor do we want to limit feminism to a specific definition, as each researcher who identifies as feminist is situated in specific histories, embodied contexts, and experiences and therefore approaches social inquiry differently (Dupuis *et al.*, 2022). Rather, we draw from a varied range of feminist perspectives on knowledge-building to demonstrate how feminist methodologies can be used to address epistemological inequalities and advance majority-world perspectives in humanitarian studies.

The agency and authority to speak (and write) about the experiences of others – that is, those who belong in social categories that are marginalised in relation to a dominant group – has been a central subject of feminist scholarship. As Borland (2007) suggests, the feminist researcher is confronted by a daunting and seemingly paradoxical task: to speak authoritatively as a feminist while simultaneously striving to preserve the authority of research participants to speak for themselves. While this is a tension that feminists should confront, the emphasis on challenging forms of knowledges that exclude is a hallmark of feminist scholarship and praxis. Although not decolonial in origin, feminism shares many of the concerns and commitments of decolonial scholars and offers tools and perspectives that could serve the project of decolonising knowledge. As Smith (1999) acknowledges, feminist methodologies and other critical theories lay the foundations for deprivileging colonial, racist, and patriarchal forms of knowledges and advancing research that leads to the recovery of lands, cultures, languages, histories, and identities.

Harding (1987) posits that there is no distinctive ‘feminist method’ to social inquiry. What characterises feminist research, then, is not the technique by which data are constructed but the approach, perspective, and ethical and political commitments embedded in the conduct of research – from the framing of research questions to the construction and interpretation of data and their application. While feminism is itself a

diverse movement grounded in varied epistemological orientations, central to its commitments is addressing the silencing of women's (and 'other') knowledges about the worlds they experience and inhabit. It is explanatory as well as prescriptive: it provides a vantage point to critically examine social processes and relations, with a clear intent of challenging and changing unjust structures and gendered hierarchies.

Importantly, within feminist thinking, the notion of 'women' is also contested. Much debate has ensued over who is included and excluded in this categorisation. As Mohanty (1988) argues, 'woman' is not a stable category, and its definitions reflect societal and cultural biases. Lugones (2010) has also critiqued how even the notion of gender is underpinned by coloniality, privileging constructions along hierarchies and binaries of gender, sexuality, and race. In consideration of these lively discussions around definitions of women and gender, we take a more intersectional and inclusive approach when we employ these terms here.

Feminist approaches view research as a relational process – viewing people as active participants and co-creators of knowledge rather than simply as informants. Importantly, co-construction of knowledge recognises the diverse expertise of participants and emphasises the collaborative aspect of research endeavours. Centring reciprocity and care and attending to power imbalances that reinforce divisions between knower/subject, white/Black, and coloniser/colonised are among the key ethical commitments of feminist studies (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Contributions of Black, postcolonial, and decolonial feminists have been more explicit than other strands of feminism in grappling with issues of gender, sexuality, race, and coloniality (hooks, 2004; Lugones, 2010).

Feminist research on humanitarianism and crisis contexts has increasingly carved its space (see Hyndman, 2008; Lokot, 2019). Such studies have shed light on gendered, intersectional, lived experiences and presented alternative views of what matters in these contexts. While feminist perspectives in humanitarianism offer opportunities to engage with and reflect on current practices, these ideas are rarely brought into direct

conversation with other strands of humanitarian action. By focusing on feminist methodologies, this chapter explains how such approaches offer tools to counter power imbalances and the harmful erasure of other forms of knowledges in contexts of crises. We also seek to contribute to reimagining a form of humanitarianism that is accountable, responsive, inclusive, and anti-colonial. Below, we present how we designed and implemented feminist research in disaster settings and contexts of fragility and reflect on how they contribute to anti-colonial research.

Philippines: disaster recovery through women's eyes – Kaira

On 8 November 2013, typhoon Yolanda (internationally known as Haiyan) struck the Philippines. It caused widespread destruction across the central islands, claiming the lives of over six thousand people, destroying a million homes, displacing approximately four million, and affecting sixteen million people.

Tacloban, a highly urbanised city and the centre of commerce, communications, education, technology, and trade in the Eastern Visayas region, bore the brunt of the typhoon, which destroyed entire settlements in coastal areas. To 'build back better' in the wake of the disaster, Tacloban City initiated the large-scale resettlement of some ninety thousand people from 'danger zones' on the coast to the northern peripheries of the city. My research began with this backdrop of destruction and, more importantly, of efforts to recover and (re)make post-disaster futures. Reflecting critically on the complexities of reconstruction, physical relocation, and the negotiations between continuity and change that underpinned efforts to 'build back better' and make people more 'resilient', I undertook a PhD project from 2016 to 2021 that examined disaster recovery from a feminist perspective.

Rebuilding for the 'better' or making communities more 'resilient' after a disaster are not benign concepts. They hold ideological baggage that prescribes specific ways of knowing and responding to risks, and how to live as resilient or modern subjects. In my research, I regarded women's narratives of rebuilding lives in the aftermath of disaster as a powerful starting point for an inquiry into the current organised practices of disaster recovery. I was interested not only in how women experienced displacement and how their subjectivities had been (re)shaped by processes of reconstruction, but also, starting from women's embodied knowledge and practices, in what one might learn (or need to unlearn) from the ways that communities are 'rebuilt' after a disaster.

Inspired by feminist standpoint theory and (decolonial) feminist political ecology ([Collins, 2000](#); [Harcourt and Nelson, 2015](#)), I privileged the perspectives of marginalised women from urban poor communities in Tacloban who were displaced when the typhoon destroyed their homes. I employ the term ‘marginalised’ in the spirit of Black feminist scholar bell hooks’ ([2004](#)) argument: that the margins are not merely a site of dispossession and deprivation. The margins most importantly are a site of radical openness, a space in which life can be imagined otherwise, and where alternatives to the status quo can be explored.

I designed a feminist photo-based method called *PhotoKwento*, derived from the combination of the English word ‘photo’ and the Filipino word ‘kwento’, which means story. This translates to ‘photo stories’ or storytelling with photographs. *PhotoKwento* utilises techniques of photo elicitation (i.e., using photographs in an interview) to facilitate collaborative constructions of women’s narratives of rebuilding their lives after a disaster. There are many variations of photo-based methods, some of which have been applied to disaster contexts. *PhotoKwento* shares some similarities with these other methods but is also distinctive. This point is elaborated in a separate article ([Alburo-Cañete, 2021](#)). The choice of naming the method as *PhotoKwento* was a result of conversations with local community organisers and research participants whom I worked with in Tacloban. ‘Photo’ is a widely used term in everyday conversations, but they expressed that using the word ‘kwento’ helped them relate better with the method as opposed to English terms such as ‘story’. Studies have shown how carefully designed photo elicitation methods can minimise power disparities between researchers and participants by shifting the frame of reference of the research encounter from the researcher to the dynamic perspectives of various participants.

PhotoKwento focuses on rethreading and interweaving small stories of a particular experience – in this case, a disaster – which shape the bigger story of carving out post-disaster futures. It stresses the interconnectedness of stories and the people who produce them to counter the persistent

silences that surround the political, economic, and ecological issues that form the basis of the gendered inequalities, disempowerment, and disadvantage aggravated by experiences of disaster. This specific characteristic of *PhotoKwento* resonates well with anti-colonial feminist politics, which promote knowledge production from the margins as a site of nurturing possibilities for transformation.

The method, inspired by an earlier study of Bunster and Chaney (1989) on working women in Peru, entailed working with a small group of women who took photographs of their everyday lives after Yolanda over several days, and collaboratively putting together a photo album that represented their experiences. The co-construction of the album took place during a whole-day workshop where women shared their photographs and stories, and collectively discussed what these stories meant for them, where they were similar, and where they were different. They identified thematic areas across their stories and selected photos that best represented each theme to be included in the album, which was then used as a tool to interview other women in selected resettlement sites in Tacloban. Hence, instead of employing conventional word-based instruments, photographs were used to prompt one-on-one conversations with women regarding their experiences of disaster recovery (see [Alburo-Cañete, 2021](#)).

What *PhotoKwento* enabled were conversations between myself and the women, as well as among themselves. During image generation, for instance, I would visit the women every few days to talk about their photos and check if they had any concerns or questions about the activity. Rather than saying ‘tell me about this photograph’, I would ask ‘what do you want to say with this photograph?’. This slight difference in framing the question allowed the women to reflect on their reasons and motivations for taking the photographs instead of just describing what one could see in images captured. This way of asking tended to provoke detailed and emotion-laden responses grounded in experiences. It also afforded an opportunity to let them tell their personal stories and talk about feelings regarding their new resettlement sites, anxieties, and hopes. These series of conversations

opened opportunities to build relationships that even enabled the women to provide me with critical feedback about the questions I was asking. For instance, some participants told me that they were not fully convinced about the guiding questions I gave them for taking photographs. I was so focused on what their practices were in recovery that I failed to ask about their experiences before and during the disaster. ‘It is part of our experience’, they said. They then asserted that they should include photographs that captured these aspects of their journey. By providing me with this valuable feedback, I saw them owning the process and taking a more active role in determining the questions the research should be asking. Moreover, through these interactions, I also saw friendships form among the women.

PhotoKwento provided an opportunity for an incisive look at how ‘build back better’ was assimilated in the local context of Tacloban City from women’s standpoints. Women’s intimate narratives of recovery through *PhotoKwento* revealed how attempts to rebuild and govern communities were highly dependent on the participation and care-based practices of women, while at the same time exacting costs relating to their bodies, energy, emotions, and time. *PhotoKwento* also demonstrated how women were qualifying, appropriating, or defying dominant constructs of ‘resilience-building’ and post-disaster ‘development’, which pervade much of current disaster risk management practices and scholarship. Housing reconstruction and resettlement in post-Yolanda Tacloban was based on a rationale of ‘safety’ and hazard avoidance, as supported by ‘expert’ and scientific knowledge, but women were telling a different story of what they needed and aspired for in recovery, based on how they imagined their worlds and their relations within it.

A distinct and unique element of using *PhotoKwento* is its ability to re-centre the everyday, embodied, and emotional dimensions of daily life (Harris, 2015), situate these dimensions in overlapping socio-spatial environments, and capture these multi-layered textures in a single image or set of images. *PhotoKwento* allows both the researcher and participants to (re)discover facets of daily experiences that often escape the gaze and

attention of conventional disaster research: the intimate spaces of a house provided after a disaster, women's invisible care work, and the emotions attached to and generated by place. These are all material and embodied manifestations of recovery expressed and articulated by disaster survivors themselves, which are largely missing from much of the work produced on disasters.

More importantly, *PhotoKwento* promoted collaborative knowledge construction. From image generation and developing research tools, to the production of narratives, participants were centrally positioned. Having them take photographs (independently) led them on an embodied journey through the research process: they became physically present in a place, they held the camera, they looked through the lens, they angled their body, they moved with the light and the terrain, and they saw things from their physical (and social) stature. Eyes, after all, are not inert instruments of seeing but actively take part in organising our world. Vision and visualising practices are linked with power ([Haraway, 1988](#)) and have traditionally been employed through a Eurocentric colonial male gaze. In this research, women used their 'eyes' to reimagine their world and futures. This process facilitated a sense of active involvement in and ownership of what gets generated by research, and solidarity with others. One woman commented, 'we are researchers now!'.

PhotoKwento is of course not impervious to power imbalances. I constantly faced challenges of letting go of my need to 'control' the research process. At times, I found myself asserting my own authority in interpreting what women saw in the photographs and struggling against these tendencies to maintain power as a Filipino researcher, but one who was based in the west. *PhotoKwento* emphasises not only the production of local narratives of disaster recovery, but also the journey one must undertake alongside participants to co-construct those narratives. The project of decolonising research, after all, also requires decolonising our own mindsets as researchers.

Colombia: interwoven collective stories of women in armed conflict and disasters – Gabriela

‘We have come together to take refuge among ourselves, to unburden ourselves, to share our burdens to make them more bearable’ (quote from a Collective circle in Mocoa, 13 May 2023). Participating women affected by disasters and armed and patriarchal violence were involved in three feminist collective storytelling circles that took place in the department of Putumayo,¹ Colombia as part of my doctoral field research between 2022 and 2023, and identified sharing, talking, and listening to other women as essential needs. First, I explain the motivations for choosing this method and how a feminist methodology enhanced a more situated and dialogic relation with participants.

My research took place in urban and rural areas of Putumayo, an Amazonic (from the Amazon region) department located in the southwest of Colombia and on the border with Ecuador and Peru. Unlike other humanitarian crises, where massive displacements or refugee camps are evident, what occurs in Putumayo is a different and often neglected crisis. Populations have experienced successive cycles of violence, massacres, protracted effects of armed conflict, and the dominance of illicit coca crops trade as a source of income for impoverished populations, including Indigenous, Afro-Colombians and *campesinas* and *campesinos*.² In addition, disasters derived from environmental deterioration and inadequate urban planning have caused double and triple affectations to populations already living under vulnerable conditions ([reliefweb, 2022](#)). This was the case, for instance, in Mocoa, the capital city of Putumayo, when the confluence of these factors resulted in a tragic landslide in March 2017, killing hundreds of people. Affected communities still have not recovered and many are missing to this day ([Rincón Flórez, 2023](#)). People in Putumayo have been displaced (sometimes more than once) and are dealing with the impacts of disasters and armed violence. Concurrently, women and

people from Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex (LGBTQI+) populations face the increase of patriarchal violences, which operate as an interconnected system of practices, institutions, and behaviours to harm, oppress, and exercise control over the bodies and lives of such populations. This is particularly acute in Putumayo as these violences (e.g., feminicides, child sexual abuse and exploitation) intersect with those derived from armed conflict ([Zulver, 2021](#)).

My motivation to work in Putumayo was not just based on these contextual dynamics. In fact, I was mostly inspired to learn from women's and feminist trajectories and struggles amid such violent and adverse contexts. My doctoral research explored the possibilities and contributions of feminisms to humanitarian action, a long overdue assignment in the sector. As a feminist, I soon recognised that feminism/s are not simply an outlook, but something one practises and embodies. While my philosophical approach to the methodology arose from feminist standpoint, which allowed me to question aspects such as objectivity and truth in research, I also identified the need to incorporate an ethical and practice-oriented approach, one inspired by a feminist ethics of care.

Drawing from Haraway's ([1988](#)) notion of situated knowledges, I view knowledge as specific and embodied, hence I regarded participants' knowledges, experiences, and trajectories as situated, local, positioned, partial, and non-homogeneous. I also reflected on a feminist ethical approach to research in a context of crises and humanitarian conditions, one that considers 'everyday ethics' ([Mena and Hilhorst, 2021](#)) and the particular and contextual aspects of the women who participated in the research process. If humanitarian action's *raison d'être* is caring and taking care of others, the use of a care ethics becomes relevant. Importantly, I do not conceptualise ethics of care as a normative moral theory, but subscribe to Joan Tronto's account of care as a practice rather than a set of principles, which 'implies that it involves both thought and action, that thought and action are interrelated, and that they are directed toward some end' ([Tronto, 1999](#), p. 108). Care, in this sense, becomes an act of (re)imagination – a

value and a practice that challenges western individualist notions of autonomy and independence.

A feminist approach to research, based on care and the recognition of knowledges as situated, was pertinent and relevant in a context such as Putumayo, where decades of armed conflict, disasters, and other humanitarian crises have overexposed affected communities to researchers and enquirers of different kinds, such as government representatives, and international non-governmental organisation (INGO) and NGO workers. Violence from armed actors and neglect from state authorities in Colombia have eroded trust in communities and generated particular challenges for researchers beyond safety and security concerns. Participants echoed this distrust during our conversations. They complained about how different unknown people arrive in their communities, organise workshops, interviews, and surveys, and request signatures from them, but rarely come back with feedback or suitable proposals (Collective circle in Mocoa, 11 March 2023).

With the valuable support of a local research collaborator from Putumayo – who herself was a feminist researcher and activist – the proposal for organising feminist collective storytelling circles was well-received by participants. The objective of the spaces was to develop a collective co-construction of meaning with women and feminist organisations and groups in Putumayo to contribute to the humanitarian advocacy agenda, as activities and initiatives carried out by affected populations to demand their rights, interests, and needs ([Hilhorst and van Wessel, 2022](#)).

Storytelling was selected as a method not only due to my interest in undertaking participatory research but also because it could become a powerful tool that participants could own. From a feminist perspective, ‘storytelling is a way to challenge dominant narratives which erase, oversimplify and universalize women’s voices and experiences. It is an unconventional way to explore women’s stories and to expand their

possibilities as women tell their own stories in their own words’ (de Nooijer and Sol Cueva, 2022, p. 234).

We convened three feminist collective circles of storytelling in two zones (rural area of Mocoa and Valle del Guamuez) where thirty-six women from urban and dispersed geographical zones participated and contributed their experiences and knowledges as displaced and crisis-affected women and as leaders of their own processes and organisations. Importantly, the feminist collective circles were designed and adapted to local practices. Attuned to the symbolic practices of Amazonic women – meaning Indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and *campesinas* and *campesinos* – the feminist circles took place in spaces of significance for the women. The atmosphere, in terms of comfort as well as symbolism (e.g., fire burning at the centre of the circles), was carefully considered. Rituals of prayers and gratitude at the beginning and end of each circle, inspired by the traditional practice of women and feminists known as Juntanza (roughly translated as ‘gathering’), helped the collective circles to develop naturally among women, not as a formal or training set-up but as a non-hierarchical space in which they could speak up.

During each feminist circle, individual and collective stories were shared and interlaced with participatory approaches, such as actor mapping, tree of processes, and pictures and meanings. Participant women did not necessarily know each other or the researchers at the beginning. Based on care ethics of mutuality and collective responsibility, the creation of confidence and trust was necessary before the storytelling process. Guided by the researchers but also by participants themselves, the group developed collective activities such as massages, sharing a meal, or informal chatting. Care became essential, as a practice to promote a safe and comfortable space to prepare for sharing and listening. The relations created lasted beyond the circles, as women became interested in getting in touch with each other to learn from their experiences or just to be in contact.

While storytelling was at the centre of the circles, active listening was a key element to enhance positive association and responses among

participants. In this case, exposure to decades of armed and patriarchal violence have affected women in Putumayo in diverse ways. For them, psychosocial support and processes of healing have been significant to address trauma and promote recovery. As participants expressed, getting together with other women in this kind of setting makes them feel connected and stronger. Collective strategies as the Juntanza enhance the possibilities to share, speak out, and recognise oneself in the traumatic experiences of others. Nonetheless, women still needed to be heard. Having a safe space with other women where they could share their experiences, struggles, and trajectories worked in a positive way.

In this research, I took distance from top-down or imposed approaches that tend to be dominant in humanitarian settings as derived from the colonial practices entrenched in modern or western humanitarianism ([Potts et al., 2022](#)). Feminist circles constituted a valuable process that enabled a close relationship between storytellers and listeners. Storytelling can help release tensions and elicit support and empathy from other members and reconstruct a more genuine discourse about experiences of crisis. In this case, participants were the ones who owned their narratives and stories, which can also be seen as a key cathartic tool for a society such as Colombia, to deal with a long history of violence and pain ([Hassellind, 2022](#)).

Out of the many stories and trajectories participant women shared, a first key realisation was the importance of the collective versus the individual. Often, humanitarian actions or responses tend to focus on individual needs and interests, consistent with western constructions of individualistic autonomy. However, participants said that they relied much more on the power of collective activities, as this was seen as a key medium to advance their rights and improve their situations. Acting as a collective also helped to reconstruct the social fabric of their communities. Second, women challenged the material provision of needs as the sole form of aid. For example, after one of the worst massacres carried out by the paramilitaries in Putumayo (El Tigre), affected women claimed that instead of material

goods or kits, they required psychosocial support and safe spaces (Juntanza) to speak about their traumatic experiences. This only became apparent when they gathered with other women facing the same situation. Finally, unlike dominant narratives of ‘passive victims’, I learned about women’s capacity to act after the crisis, to respond, and to support other women, even when they could face retribution or more violence.

This process had limitations. The use of feminist circles of storytelling demanded time and effort that researchers in the humanitarian field cannot always spare. In fact, storytelling as a method is also complicated when participants are not used to listening to others or are not ready to deal with other people’s stories of trauma and pain. Here, it would be ethical for researchers to use care as practice and to be familiar with strategies to avoid re-victimisation during collective sharing. Nonetheless, rather than being met with ‘exhaustion’, participants accepted the set-up and development of feminist collective circles in Putumayo and were able to share and hear other women’s stories, not only about trauma and pain but also about their achievements and successes derived from collective actions and organisations.

Without conclusion

Conducting studies in times of crisis undoubtedly holds specific challenges for researchers. However, precisely because of the nature of such circumstances, scholars need to be mindful and reflexive in their methodologies to avoid reproducing the same colonising practices that modern humanitarianism has been criticised for. We have argued that methodologies in humanitarian research need to enable a capacity for recognising diverse epistemologies, senses, and worldviews, especially from those affected by crises. This entails exploring, developing, and designing – with participants as much as possible – research methods that support the co-construction of knowledge.

We have outlined how feminist methodologies can contribute towards decolonising humanitarian research. While the methods we described were designed independently of each other, we found commonalities in terms of our epistemic approach and ethical-political orientations stemming from our commitment to feminist (and anti-colonial) principles. Our respective work in the Philippines and Colombia demonstrate how the development and application of feminist research methods facilitate spaces for co-creative practices of knowledge-building.

We have presented how we view the research process as relational and dialogical – and how such ethical standpoint is inscribed in the methods we each used. Our proposition contends that research participants in humanitarian settings need to be counted as co-producers of knowledge, moving away from dominant colonial frameworks in humanitarian action that tend to reduce their roles and agency as ‘beneficiaries’ or ‘aid recipients’. Instead, we have demonstrated that affected populations can authentically engage in research (and are interested in doing so) via participatory and creative methods that are designed and implemented with care.

Here, we choose not to have a conclusion. This is in recognition that, much like the projects of decoloniality and feminism, the work that we do is always work-in-process. Despite working hard on adhering to commitments to ethical principles of feminist research, there are still many things that make us uncomfortable, not least of all due to our positionalities as ‘feminist global south scholars’ who are situated in the global north. We continue to recognise how we slip and slide in our own research and thinking – that in many ways, we too need to continuously decolonise our perspectives and practices. We constantly grapple with questions such as: how do we continue to engage with our collaborators ‘after’ the research? Is there even an endpoint to this kind of research? How do we deal with the real limitations we have as researchers in terms of resources and institutional policies? In dealing with these discomforts, we find encouragement in the words of Borland (2007, p. 626) that ‘no method or representational model can avoid the ethical dilemmas involved in politically committed research. A reflexive awareness of our multiple roles and identities – as insiders and outsiders – can help us more successfully produce scholarship that matters to communities.’ And thus, despite the lack of conclusion, we choose to stay with the trouble.

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Questions for further discussion

1. How does traditional humanitarian research perpetuate power imbalances and colonial practices? What specific examples can illustrate this point?
2. How might incorporating local knowledge and perspectives enhance the purpose and relevance of humanitarian research?
3. How do feminist methodologies contribute to challenging dominant forms of humanitarianism and colonial practices?
4. Which other interdisciplinary approaches might also contribute to more inclusive and anti-colonial humanitarian research?

Notes

- 1 The political-administrative division of Colombia is in departments; total number of departments is thirty-two.
- 2 In English, peasants. People in Colombia – and in general in Latin America – call themselves *campesinas/campesinos*, meaning people who live in the rural areas and work the land in a variety of forms (crops, husbandry, etc.). This category is employed to differentiate themselves from Indigenous, African descendants or urban mixed-raced peoples. For example, in Colombia it is estimated that 15 per cent of the population self-identifies as *campesinas/campesinos*. This identity is subjectively chosen by *campesinas/campesinos* themselves.

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6

The excess of qualitative interviews and the feminist, anti-colonial reimaginings of research methods

Charishma Ratnam, Paula Satizábal, and Maria de Lourdes Melo Zurita

Key points

- Feminist, anti-colonial research requires an attentiveness to power relations and positionalities, which shape research and interview processes.
- This chapter critiques the coloniality of interviews and contributes to anti-colonial and methodological scholarship by advocating for researchers to reimagine the possibilities of approaching interviews as careful and liberating projects.
- Individual and collective reflexivity are critical to research and interviewing.

Introduction: anti-colonial critique of interviews

In this chapter, we seek to join the multiplicity of efforts that challenge coloniality in research practice within and outside of academia ([Archibald Q'um Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019](#); [Smith, 1999](#)). We draw from anti-colonial and feminist scholarship with an aim to contribute to critical debates on the colonial roots of the interview as a dominant qualitative research method. Indeed, qualitative interviews are widely criticised in anti-colonial and feminist research ([Anti-Colonial Research Library, 2023](#)). Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) has emphasised that the peoples and places subjected to colonial processes largely experience being researched, which leads then to the abstraction and appropriation of knowledge.

Relationality, reciprocity, and solidarity are at the heart of Indigenous communitarian feminist approaches in, for instance, *Abya Yala* (Latin America), which foregrounds an embodied, territorial, and political commitment to collectively challenge colonial violence ([Colectivo de Miradas Críticas del Territorio, 2017](#)). Challenging colonial violence includes refusing research practices and methodologies that reconfigure people as commodities and further contribute to the dispossession and appropriation of knowledges ([Simpson, 2014](#)). Qualitative interviewing is arguably the most established method used in qualitative research, though interviews can take multiple shapes and forms ([Denzin, 2001](#); [Miller, 2017](#)). In a review and critique of qualitative interviews, Miller (2017) discussed the historical relevance of interviewing, which has enabled it to surpass critical scrutiny. As a face-to-face method, interviews are social interactions and processes that tend to reinforce the 'Othering' of participants, which is rarely problematised or approached in terms of relations of power ([Miller, 2017](#)).

Anti-colonial research involves an emphasis on embodied, emotional experiences and a commitment to careful and ethical approaches and methodologies ([Ahmed, 2017](#); [Smith, 2019](#)). The layers of who we are,

where we come from, where we have worked, and our experiences make our research intersectional (Crenshaw, 2017). María Lugones (2016) has contended that power relations shape researchers' positions in relation to the places where we do research and the people engaged through that process, which makes them inseparable and constituted at the intersection of complex and historical language, class, gender, race, and ethnic social orderings enacted by the colonial matrix of power (Quijano, 2000). We come together to write this chapter as critical feminist geographers, positioned as cis, migrant researchers, and women working in academia in colonial, elitist, racist, and wealthy institutions and acknowledge that each of our positionalities and histories are different, including our career stages and experiences of precarity. We often do research in contexts of vulnerability, gender and racial discrimination, labour precarity, and migration. This chapter presents reflections from our experiences of negotiating and navigating interview processes. These reflections, we hope, will shed light on the importance of reflexive approaches that open space for collective storytelling and conversations on *how to challenge the coloniality of interviews*.

Our collective reflexivity was inspired by the work of Indigenous communitarian feminists including Lorena Cabnal (2010), Maya-xinka Indigenous activist and healer from Guatemala, who has highlighted the critical importance of reflecting and politically strategising to contribute to anti-colonial, anti-racist, anti-patriarchal movements. Rodriguez Castro (2021, p. 340) has argued that for communitarian feminists, 'colonial feminisms are not grounded in any specific body of work but rather operate through the coloniality of power'. Coloniality of power is embedded in practices that tend to privilege white, elitist, Eurocentric narratives, which extend to mainstream and colonial feminisms (Rodriguez Castro, 2021). As such, reflexivity through the lens of power relations created in research settings involves discussing and sharing the emotions of interviews and interviewing so that learnings beyond logistics take place. In this chapter, we engage with feminist, Indigenous, anti-colonial scholars (and their

scholarship) among others, who argue that many research efforts continue to reaffirm coloniality, including methodologies and methods, and advocate for research that is inclusive, intentional, collaborative, and caring (Thwaites, 2017; Archibald Q'um Q'um Xiiem *et al.*, 2019; Rodriguez Castro, 2021; Lenette, 2022). These scholars are attentive to emotions, storytelling, and the multiple directions qualitative interviews and methods can take to produce meaningful encounters that do justice to participants and their lived experiences. Such arguments have guided the directions of this chapter, and us (as researchers), which has been a collaborative writing endeavour across institutions, time zones, and continents.

We draw on critical reflexivity and call for more open discussions about the struggles and tensions of doing interviews. We ask: what would it mean to approach the interview as a method that could foster more reciprocal and liberating practices and processes? In scrutinising the interview method, and our experiences of conducting interviews, we first critique the coloniality of the interview. We then focus on how the interview exceeds the interview and reflect on the multiplicity of ways in which interviews are, and could be, reimagined. In this chapter, we thread reflections of conducting interviews in multiple contexts and about different topics. In a way, we fused autoethnography with critical, collective reflexivity. Before we started writing the paper, we had regular meetings online to share, in conversation, our fieldwork and research experiences. Sharing and reflecting on such experiences formed part of the autoethnography as we gave each other glimpses of personal experiences and how that shaped our research of various sociocultural phenomena (Chang, 2021). We then created a set of prompt questions in a shared document and wrote short reflections related to each prompt question in our own time. Our individual reflections and conversations helped to shape this chapter, and we have integrated them as quotes herein. Through our conversations and written notes, we could 'record more deeply processed perspectives' and critiques of the qualitative interview and, thus, contribute to critical methodological and anti-colonial discussions (Chang, 2021, p. 58).

This chapter contributes to methodological and anti-colonial scholarship by *reflecting* on the research process and the qualitative interview itself, and by integrating and sharing our own intimate and diverse fieldwork experiences. We see this chapter as an invitation for scholars, students, collective groups, and activists to reflect on their fieldwork practices and experiences and think about the colonality that such experiences can reaffirm. Thus, we proffer a discussion of how interviews can be reimagined through a critical feminist lens and in a way that refuses colonial legacies and tropes.

Struggling interviews

Qualitative interviews have been used to extract ‘data and narratives from the field’ for the benefit of research without much consideration for how that might impact participants (Lenette, 2022, p. 4). The extractive interview is inextricably linked to the fast-paced, colonial, capitalist, neoliberal, and patriarchal research and academic landscape we work and study in (Mountz *et al.*, 2015). For instance, the demand on researchers based at universities is growing exponentially, often positioned as experience that will ‘advance our careers’ with requirements to generate more grant income and publications, among a myriad of other expectations. Thus, a lot of the supposed ‘grunt work’ (i.e., data collection) is offered to contracted casual researchers who come to the research with subjectivities, intersectionalities, and positionalities, and may approach the research differently but may only have limited paid hours to fully grasp and understand the research context or participants (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2019).

The problematic cycle of neoliberal academic institutions limits the ability of researchers to build trust and develop care-full and meaningful relationships with research participants. The three of us have been subcontracted as research assistants and understand the difference between being involved in projects that we fully grasp and can meaningfully contribute to and those with time constraints and funding limitations. The stark difference is that the quality of the data – including what is shared by participants and how researchers experience the field – is impacted. It is evident that *we*, as researchers, need to create spaces of care and respect so that participants feel safe to share their stories, life histories, and lived experiences.

Indigenous peoples around the world have foregrounded the importance of storytelling as a practice of coming together to share stories, experiences, and understandings to make meaning and connect with each other

(Archibald Q'um Q'um Xiiem *et al.*, 2019). Inspired by this longstanding practice, we challenge dominant and colonial approaches by centring the interview as a method that seeks to create a dialogue and open space for storytelling to emerge and even flourish. The stories shared during an interview are not owned by researchers; they emerge in conversation and involve a process of listening and interpretation. Indeed, stories shape our writing while simultaneously shifting our research focus, practice, and the sense of belonging we might feel to the people, places, and relations from which such stories unfold (Smith, 2019, p. xi). How our research shifts and morphs has been essential to our research as geographers working in unseen spaces, including disaster areas, and spaces of extractivism and intense transformation (Marilu), territorial struggles in fluid and marine spaces and geographies (Paula), and in refugee homes (Charishma). Honouring complex feelings and relations is at the heart of our own practices of storytelling and listening as researchers.

Interviews are emotional. Emotions can mould and shape the research and therefore the interview. However, the intimate and emotional ways in which researchers and participants encounter one another and experience interviews remain largely obscured or in the background of research. The interview as a colonial method may prompt feelings of discomfort for the researcher *and* participant. Even though researchers try to curate a reciprocal, caring, and convivial interview setting and encounter, it is not always possible or even straightforward to remove the power dynamics that are intrinsic to the method. By sharing emotions and integrating the potential for emotional encounters into the research design, we pay attention to limitations. For instance, an attentiveness to emotions may shape who is able to conduct an interview and how an interview is experienced. Integrating and acknowledging the role of emotions is a critical part of the research process and underlies how stories are told, listened to, and interpreted as part of an interview. As such, emotions and reflexivity go hand-in-hand.

Preparing for interviews starts well before arriving at the place of encounter with participants. It involves an ethics centred on a reflexive way of thinking and doing research, which goes beyond institutional ethics applications. Critical to that preparation is the ongoing reflection on power relations, who might benefit or be affected by the research, the risks faced by participants and researchers, where and how to conduct interviews, and the possibilities of changing research directions and approaches. When conducting an interview, we first establish a space where participants can ease into the interview setting, which simultaneously becomes one of sharing and mutual respect. This is followed by multiple and ongoing processes of consent from the participants and from ourselves. These processes include consent to continue the interview, staying or leaving when uncomfortable, sharing stories, connecting with each other, on being identified, excluding particular stories either by request or by our political and ethical refusal to cause harm, and consent to ask whether participants can be contacted afterwards for follow up ([Chazan and Baldwin, 2021](#); [Simpson, 2014](#)). As Chazan and Baldwin (2021) have underscored, these processes of consent signal power relations as well as openings and closures that are inseparable from relationship-making and that are triggered by the interview process.

While we do as much preparation as possible and spend time building trust and rapport with participants, we often encounter tricky and messy situations that we learn to manage with minimal or no preparation. The ability to ‘successfully’ manage such situations comes with more time spent in place, in the field, and with participants. Tricky situations may also signal limitations in, and challenges with, method choice. As we shared stories about our experiences conducting interviews, we noticed how, as researchers, we are rarely taught the political, ethical, and emotional complexities of interviewing. When we read about the interview processes in textbooks, they are often descriptive and technical, overlooking discussions of power relations, the careful design of an interview, or its impact on participants and researchers. For example, asking closed

questions can leave little space for participants to share their life experiences (Hofisi *et al.*, 2014).

The three of us have mentors and colleagues who have guided us through the research process by providing insights and sharing their own experiences – a type of storytelling in a way – but we have mostly learned how to conduct interviews by doing them, facing discomfort, making mistakes, and then reflecting on the process. Indeed, we are still learning to respond to the unexpected behaviours, emotions, subjectivities, and the sensitive topics that may arise during interviews (Thwaites, 2017). However, we have often approached interviews in isolation, with limited opportunities to listen and learn from the interviews of colleagues or receive feedback from participants on how the process felt and could be improved upon. The collective need for storytelling on the struggles of decolonising interview processes brings us together in writing this chapter. For us, qualitative interviewing, despite its colonial legacies and complexities, is a method that generates possibilities for feminist and anti-colonial research and practice, which is why we pause to reflect on some of our own experiences and learnings in the following sections.

The interview exceeds the interview

The interview extends well beyond the moment an interview takes place. The interview not only transforms the research but transforms us as researchers. Relationality is central to critical research because we are our research, and the research process is moved by our bodies and labour as we go back and forth rethinking the research questions and our preconceived understandings. We pay attention to the overflow of thoughts, feelings, and ideas that we experience in relation to an interview. In this section, we reflect on this ‘excess’ as it relates to anti-colonial practices in research. We were drawn to thinking ‘in excess’ similarly to Kimberley Peters and Phil Steinberg (2019, p. 305), in the context of oceans, who have asserted that while the ocean has a material liquid property, there are diverse ways the ocean *exceeds* such materiality. Their argument is shaped by an appreciation of the ocean’s multiple changes of state (mist, ice, liquid), which require deeper consideration of how the ocean is not only connected, but also extends, in excess, ‘far landward of its shores’ (Peters and Steinberg, 2019, p. 305). We drew a similar ontological parallel with the qualitative interview as a method by thinking about the relationality and connections that take place before, during, and after the interview, and how these connections go beyond that prescribed moment of an interview. We concluded that ‘the interview is more than the method’ (Paula’s reflections). Our intention here is to share some of our experiences of using interviews as a research method while at the same time honouring the stories, learnings, experiences, and challenges we continue to experience regardless of how many interviews we have conducted.

From our perspective, excess comprises time and space. Everything happens in a historical context of how researchers and participants got there in addition to when the interview takes place. It involves learning from, and critically interrogating, what is being shared. This creates movement, which goes beyond the bounded time and space we share with participants and

movements that start before an interview, as Paula has noted: ‘Conversations related to interviews start before an interview takes place, as we decide on who to invite and why, bringing together what we think we know of the research topic and project, and our own curiosity surrounding what we would like to understand/discuss, where, as well as with whom.’ This process creates ripples that speak to the temporalities of interviews, noting that they are not linear, but instead interlace and bring together past, present, and future imaginaries and stories guided by our curiosity and interest. Even if interview notes, recordings, and transcripts are fixed in a specific moment and conversation, the interview process flows across time while also changing over time.

The questions asked during an interview are shaped in excess and according to the experiences and responses of participants. It is in conversation that what *matters* might appear as relevant, offering openings and awareness of partial understandings. As Charishma has elucidated: ‘These emotional stories and responses are openings because they give us insight into someone’s life, their history, their experiences. How they feel becomes clearer by the multiple ways their emotions become visible to me as they share.’ Emotions – interest, excitement, fatigue, rage, fear, joy, appreciation, among many others – and the emotional labour of interviews exceed the method itself, taking place and emerging before, during, and after an interview (Thwaites, 2017).

Interviews can transform researchers and, of course, research projects. As fieldwork and projects progress, our emotions can intensify when we imagine the interview, revise questions, and then listen back through interviews or read transcripts. The emotions and ideas that emerge might linger and shape conversations with other researchers and participants. Indeed, each interview is different and prompts particular memories and emotions for all involved. Interviews have the power to influence who we are, how we experience reality, and produce meanings (Lokot, 2021). These relational and onto-epistemological encounters are situated and shaped by our own positionalities and embodied experiences (Burns, 2003; Rodriguez

[Castro, 2021](#)). The excess of an interview is shaped by complex, situated, and historical power relations, which become entangled with our positionalities.

Acknowledging that it is not always possible to fully understand and connect with what a participant shares is, thus, critical. We are moved by some stories, but there are other stories that we neglect, sometimes in unintended ways. Behind the scenes of communicating academic research is a raft of decisions, including how we use quotes, focus on specific stories, and champion particular arguments, that form part of the excess. Reflexive, anti-colonial approaches should consider more meaningfully the excess of interviews, and researchers' responsibilities towards it.

Reimagining interviews

Audra Simpson (2014, p. 105), Kahnawà:ke Mohawk First Nations anthropologist, in *Mohawk Interruptus* has reminded us of the need to learn from Indigenous practices of refusal – that is, refusing to reveal everything and to appropriate ‘for the express purpose of protecting the concerns of the community. It acknowledges the asymmetrical power relations that inform the research and writing about native lives and politics, and it does not presume that they are on equal footing with anyone.’ In positioning our research within these asymmetries of power, we also think with Gloria Anzaldúa’s work on the ‘tolerance for ambiguity’ (1999) – that is, attentiveness to the ambiguities and contradictions of interview processes and feminist research, focusing on the possibilities of ‘turn[ing] the ambivalence into something else’ (Anzaldúa, 1999, p. 10). A tolerance for ambiguity does not mean compliance; rather, it signals a need to question, pay attention, and refuse to engage, disclose, and approach participants and their stories as property or commodity. In doing so, we question and reimagine the possibilities of turning interviews into careful and liberating projects.

Combining interviews with other methods can offer openings and shift power dynamics, allowing participants to lead the discussion, as Charishma explained:

I often struggle with integrating ‘just’ interviews into research projects ... I want to get to the heart of my participants’ stories, their emotions, and their feelings, not just the rehearsed stories they tell migration agents, lawyers, and officers. That is why I often employ the interview in conjunction with other activities, like walking. Walking interviews create more of a relaxed environment that is led by the participant. It creates an opening instead of a closure. It incorporates movement and brings embodiment to the interview that helps to shape the narrative that participants share.

Enabling participants and their stories to lead the way is not only about movements of bodies in space, but also opens our focus to the themes and stories that matter to them. Some qualitative methods move beyond extraction, favouring ‘an explicitly political, socially engaged, and democratic practice’ (Brydon-Miller *et al.*, 2003, p. 13). Integrating methods that are centred on ‘the active involvement of people with lived experiences of the topic’ sometimes involves refusing institutional rigidity that perpetuates injustices by not paying attention to what participants have shared with us (Lenette, 2022, p. 1).

In refusing the extractive interview, and to reimagine interviews, we reflect on the need to pay attention to the emotions that are triggered when we think a participant’s story ‘is great for my research’ (Marilu’s reflections). By conceptualising rapport, Thwaites (2017, p. 3) has argued that researchers should not subsume ‘their full self to the performance of rapport to “get the data”’. Sometimes participants’ experiences and stories can prompt feelings of excitement because the data neatly connect to research themes or project objectives. But it is important to remember that interviews can be sites of struggle and, as such, managing, navigating, and even sometimes (un)learning practices, feelings, tensions, and discomfort form part of a process of refusing extractive research processes. It is these types of situations that sit uncomfortably with feminist and anti-colonial principles of interviewing. In line with Marilu’s reflection, Paula articulated that:

the outcomes of analysing interviews will likely benefit our own careers, the substance that gives us degrees, publications, jobs, and pays our salaries – being linked to our accumulation of power and capital. Importantly, however, how is this work benefiting the participants?

In the context of power imbalances as inherent to interview processes, and research more broadly, one question becomes central to practice: how is our

work benefitting participants? This question can be viewed as an invitation to build reciprocal relations and collaborations with participants and colleagues to discuss how we can give back in meaningful ways. Unsettling and refusing the extractive interview involves working to shift research processes and outcomes from the individual (the researcher) to the collective (within and beyond academia). The collective encompasses participants, colleagues, groups and organisations, activists and advocates, and students. Thus, this diverse group – the collective – requires an effort to connect and contribute to it by building relations that exceed the interview. The collective is about caring and wanting to work for what matters to a particular group. There may even be circumstances where interviews do not happen with collectives that are politically or ethically aligned with our own positions as researchers. Yet we may find ways to connect and learn by having important, and sometimes uncomfortable, conversations that can reshape our understandings of a problem or particular context. As feminist scholars, our politics are worn on the outside, yet we also acknowledge that we are not at the centre and, indeed, the collective exceeds the interview and the researcher.

Instead of thinking about interviews as something we possess, we reformulate our relation to them and value their exceeding nature. Thus, we consider approaching interviews as conversations, snapshots of particular moments, ideas, and experiences that we are invited to listen to and care for. As Marilu noted:

It is an opening to someone's life, an invitation to care about what the other knows and has experienced. This is by no means a romantic idealisation of what an interview is. These are emotionally challenging moments, but compared to other methods (e.g., survey), they allow for connection to emerge, despite the topic or the story. I enjoy doing interviews as they place me in/within the research. Being within the research, instead of doing research, is an extension of those stories shared and learnt, but it is also about the

opening to be active towards the learning – to ask the question, what am I doing about what has been shared?

Reimagining interviews faces the challenges of academic systems where time and funds are limited and where the system privileges the sharing of research in mediums (e.g., peer-reviewed academic journals) and formats (e.g., written academic English) that, most of the time, are not only distant from the collective in terms of language and paywalls, but also in terms of abstraction and reduction of complex stories. In breaking down the complexities of a participant's stories, an interview becomes multiple, even if presented as a unit and abstracted into files, codes, and fragments.

Essential to how we read, revise, and engage with research that uses interviews is the collective. This relation is what produces outcomes. As such, we join the multiplicity of voices within and beyond academia demanding care-full research that is reflexive of our positionalities and centred on listening, building relations, and slowing down ([Ahmed, 2017](#); [Mountz *et al.*, 2015](#); [Rodriguez Castro, 2021](#); [Smith, 2019](#)). This care-full approach to research also involves a political commitment to reimagining interviews, which requires unpacking their coloniality and re-shifting focus towards practices and meanings that exceed the interview and the research and that are committed to building long-term solidarity and reciprocity. This work is never complete and remains a struggle. These reimaginings are collective processes that are situated, politically active, and emotionally driven.

Lessons and learnings

We have traced, challenged, and sought to reimagine the qualitative research interview from a feminist, anti-colonial perspective. Interviews are dynamic and comprise emotions, power relations, and other complexities that exceed the method itself. We acknowledge that the interview process is not straightforward, especially for researchers who want to more carefully integrate anti-colonial, feminist, Indigenous, and intersectional approaches into their research design and methodologies. As such, we close this chapter by sharing and collectively reflecting on three experiences that have complicated and enriched our critical engagement with interview processes. We share these experiences as an opening and an invitation to encourage scholars, activists, and research participants to join, and contribute to, reflexive conversations on the struggles and emancipatory possibilities of doing, and taking part in, anti-colonial interviews.

By reflecting on excess, our research evidences the many ways in which disasters exacerbate existing injustices, exclusions, and violences that racialised and precarious women experience around the globe. As Marilu reflected, having conversations with women in disaster contexts certainly involves a responsibility towards them, the stories they share, and the emotions that those stories carry:

Weeks after the 2019 earthquake in Mexico City, I was trying to contact some of the members of the Feminist Brigade to conduct interviews about their response to the collapse of one of the buildings in downtown Mexico, and their work to rescue the bodies of undocumented women trapped under the rubble. After months of trying to create contact with the Brigade, I received communication from one of them who was willing to have a conversation with me. Many protocols and safety procedures were implemented to ensure that the feminist activists were not at risk. Even now writing this, I remember the fear of travelling with the dictaphone back to my

house and saving the recording in a password protected computer. The responsibility of having that conversation certainly exceeded in many ways the two-hour conversation. It is a feeling that I experience even today while writing this. The impacts of listening and living through those conversations make us responsible for what has been shared. As Lucía told me from minute one of our conversation, ‘When someone asks me “what happened to you?”, when you ask me, “how are you?”, well, our home crumbled and fell, that’s what happened to us. What happened to me? that I am sad, and what happened to you? that it seems like nothing has happened, what happened to you before the earthquake that desensitised you in every way?’ Some interviews will shake us to the core, and when that happens, it is good to be surrounded by people who can help you navigate not only the emotion but also the responsibility.

Marilu’s emphasis on ‘navigating’ is interwoven in the interview process, the responsibility that researchers have towards the stories participants share, and the ways emotions are part of the research process. In this vein, research is not a solo exercise. The reflexive process of understanding and unpacking research experiences may result in conversations with mentors, supervisors, colleagues, and communities of practice. Indeed, these conversations can be generative and create a safe and inclusive space to share fieldwork challenges and experiences, ethical dilemmas, future project directions, and seek guidance on aspects that are hard to grasp. From an anti-colonial, feminist perspective, a generative space in research can be where interviews are reimagined and approached as part of the researcher’s commitment to challenge indifference and politically activate researchers and bodies of research.

In line with these discussions, Charishma shared some challenges she faced with inviting, building trust, and interviewing participants who have experienced traumatic events that have forced them to seek refuge in a different country:

My research with Sri Lankan refugees has been an insightful, intimate, and emotional journey. I have had the privilege of listening to stories of fleeing war, travelling across rough seas, spending protracted periods in detention centres, and making new homes in new places. But the research process has not been straightforward. The key lesson I have learned by doing this research is that it is not a linear path – unexpected challenges are part of the process. One specific challenge that I still navigate is that of recruiting participants to engage in research. Although I have an insider/outsider connection to the Sri Lankan refugee community, it has taken, and continues to take, a long time for them to trust me enough to participate in research. Indeed, it is by no means a criticism of participants; participants can, and should, be sceptical of research and what their stories will be used for, rather my intention here is to share that developing meaningful rapport with people who have experienced trauma can take time. While not necessarily directly related to the interview itself, for me, the way we traverse rapport building and recruitment can form a critical part of how an interview ensues. Without participants, we cannot do research, but even with participants, the ways in which we find them, explain research to them, and invite them to join the journey can inform the interview. I am still navigating research challenges, but I have learned to allow a lot of time to work through this part of the research process, to share these challenges with mentors and colleagues, and document these experiences in field notes.

The time it takes to engage with participants often exceeds project timelines. For Charishma, time in this sense is not a matter of quantity, but of reflexivity, attentiveness, listening to participants and our own responses, and carefully engaging and integrating these practices into research. How can we build meaningful connections and rapport with research participants while being constrained by institutional and project deadlines and demands? This question is central to thinking about reciprocity and the possibilities of refusing to do research, for instance, when there is not enough time. Sharing

these struggles with participants and support networks can help to navigate ambiguities while also being mindful of the limitations of our positionalities and projects. Openness about time constraints, lack of funding, and precarity, in our experience as researchers, is important to building relations with participants while also asking and thinking about how our research can support their struggles.

Openness about a researcher's presence in a particular context is not only essential to building rapport but it also brings forward ideas of how stories and experiences shared with us are presented. At times, during our discussions, the 'beginnings' of research in a community can be described as 'parachuting' into a space – that is, landing into a dimension where, even if we are part of that community, we become someone else (i.e., a researcher). Paula shared one example to elucidate this point:

In preparing for fieldwork a few years ago, I found a piece of investigative journalism that discussed the labour relations in what was seemingly an egalitarian grassroots cooperative. In the field, I recognised one of the persons that was interviewed by the journalist and whose photo was published in this piece. I invited them to participate in an interview, which took place the following day. When we started chatting, this person apologised for what I had read in that article, sharing that when the journalist was conducting the interview the president of the cooperative was sitting right next to them. The fear of retaliation had prevented them from sharing the truth surrounding the labour abuse and exploitation that they were experiencing while working for what was an elite-co-opted cooperative. They wanted me to reach out to the journalist to share their truth. I did this and added a photo of the participant holding the photo that the journalist had published. In reflecting on the importance of critically engaging with interviews, this experience revealed the complex relations that shape the stories we read, listen, and share, all of which emerge in context, shifting in meaning and shaped by relations of power. The distress that keeping the truth had caused the participant was evident, which highlights the importance

of reflecting and nourishing an awareness of the impacts of interviews as they move across time and space, reaching different audiences while immortalising snapshots of power relations.

The power dynamics in an interview setting must be navigated carefully. Researchers have a responsibility to participants and with their stories. Paula's experience highlights a level of responsibility to share the participant's truth at their request while at the same time reflecting on the importance of context, interpretations of what is said (or not), and how all of these facets of an interview are wrapped up in power relations between the researcher and participant. It also relates back to the excess of an interview and how its impact can ripple. Thus, the interview is never stagnant and can always shape and impact researchers, and the research itself, at different times and spaces.

Conclusion

We conclude this chapter with an invitation to integrate critical feminist approaches to interviews and research processes in service of anti-colonial and anti-racist movements and struggles. These approaches are centred on listening and reflexivity. Our lessons relate to our responsibility as researchers, acts of refusal and the commitment to create meaningful relations, and paying attention to power relations while designing research. Interview processes are a struggle within the colonial matrix of power, which require positioning ourselves and our research in relation to the people and places we engage with to resist exploitation and appropriation. Solidarity and reciprocity create space for possibilities to emerge, moving from individual discomforts to collective commitments and critical discussions that draw on the excess of interviews to politically transform research into liberating projects.

Questions for further discussion

1. How can you address discomforts during interviews and how can you learn from those discomforts?
2. How can you integrate anti-colonial approaches into your next project and in future interviews?
3. What are some techniques you can adopt to foster critical reflexivity? By positioning projects as anti-colonial, how can you plan and prepare for a care-full and liberating interview process?
4. How is your research contributing to liberating collective struggles?

Further reading and resources

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**Exploring decolonial feminist
approaches through arts-based
research on sexual and reproductive
health and rights in the Philippines**

Marie Aubrey Villaceran

Key points

- Arts-based research within a decolonial feminist framework has transformative potential and can contribute to social justice, empowerment, and transformation.
- Arts-based research enriches and elevates the entire research process, simultaneously rendering knowledge more accessible to a broad spectrum of stakeholders.
- Creating ethically sound, safe, and inclusive research spaces involves comprehensive preparations, learning sessions on ethics, prioritising informed consent, respecting diverse identities, and collaborating with local participants to ensure cultural appropriateness and safety.
- Decolonial and feminist researchers should be proactive in ensuring participants benefit from the research in tangible ways.
- Despite efforts by some international funding organisations to decolonise research practices and address power imbalances, many challenges remain.

Introduction

This chapter shares practical applications, issues, and points for reflection on the intricacies of arts-based research within a decolonial feminist framework. It details how a team of art practitioners, teachers, academics, and development workers went through essential personal and methodological changes during the Conversations Through Arts project. These adjustments were critical to establishing a practice marked by respect, collaboration, reflection, and with minimised power differentials, reflecting a commitment to an effective and ethically grounded approach. The aim here is to explore the transformative potential of this approach, critically analysing its capacity to empower participants as co-creators of knowledge, and transcending the traditional researcher–subject dichotomy while also recognising tensions arising from the constraints of funding and academic institutions. While the project was in its final stages at the time of writing, its art-based approach to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and gender-based violence (GBV) research had already unveiled valuable insights. By incorporating creative methods such as movement, literary, and visual arts, the project actively engaged participants in open and honest dialogues on sensitive SRHR and GBV topics.

The art-based methods created a safe and non-judgemental space, facilitating participants' expression of experiences that may be challenging to convey otherwise. The use of these innovative methods not only led to a more comprehensive understanding of SRHR and GBV but also generated deeper insights into the nuanced aspects of bodily autonomy and the experiences of gender-based oppression. The project emphasised that the knowledge produced through art-based methods, including visual stories and literary works, serves as a powerful tool for advocacy and policy change and has the potential to reach a broader audience and challenge prevailing misconceptions about SRHR. The Conversations Through Arts project pioneered innovative research methods to establish approaches that

can be applied in future research and interventions addressing SRHR, bodily autonomy, and GBV prevention.

Arts-based methods encompass various art forms, genres, and practices, including narrative and poetic inquiry, creative writing, essays, novels, storytelling, screenwriting, and multimethod approaches that combine multiple art forms (Seppälä *et al.*, 2021). These methods can be employed throughout all stages of the research process: data generation, analysis, interpretation, and presentation (Jones and Leavy, 2014). Arts-based methods for health research were still considered as emerging back in 2012 when they started gaining traction in the health and social sciences (Boydell *et al.*, 2012) despite their already established presence and extensive application in diverse fields, including adult education, psychology, and therapy (Clover, 2011; Knowles and Cole, 2008; Sampson, 2004).

Arts-based research in health has several advantages. First, it offers alternative avenues for generating and disseminating research findings and best practices, as the approach encourages the use of non-traditional methods of expression and communication. Second, this approach elicits emotional responses and facilitates the creation of alternative forms of representation, which foster dialogue and the sharing of personal stories. Third, arts-based research informs and enhances the overall research process, while also making knowledge more accessible to a wide range of relevant actors. Arts-based methods have the potential to highlight the human dimensions of health and illness, thereby enriching our comprehension of healthcare and social support systems (Knowles and Cole, 2008).

In the social sciences, less contentious speculations on how arts-based research practices developed contend that it is due to the ‘natural affinity’ between two crafts, research practice and artistic practice, and because arts-based research offers more ‘holistic and engaged ways’ of combining theory and practice (Jones and Leavy, 2014, p. 1). There is recognition that knowledge-building is a complex process set in a complex world, where ‘human beings build theories and life practices enacted along a full

spectrum that includes both scientific and artistic systems for comprehending the human experience' (Rolling, 2013, p. 9). Others see arts-based research practices as challenge and transgression: challenging the 'limitations and oppressive features of traditional scientific research' (Butterwick, 2002, p. 243) and 'conventional forms of knowledge production' (Seppälä *et al.*, 2021, p. 19) and transgressing and blurring boundaries set by 'dominant discourses in society that silence and marginalize' (Ball, 2002 cited in Clover, 2011, p. 13).

Arts-based research practice has also been viewed as a 'participatory, horizontal and democratic' response to criticisms of colonial knowledge production and their 'ethical premises and value base' (Seppälä *et al.*, 2021, p. 19). As a collaborative enterprise, it seeks to destabilise hierarchies between researchers and participants. It also aims to blur the lines between researchers and field practitioners (Liamputtong and Rumbold, 2008), allowing researcher-practitioners who acknowledge the messiness and complexity of the 'real world' to thrive while contributing valuable and applicable studies grounded in lived human conditions.

In this chapter, the intentional use of the term 'researcher-practitioner' refers to the arts practitioner, both in verbal and non-verbal forms, who simultaneously functions as a researcher, aiming to derive meaning from real-life phenomena. This intentional integration challenges the conventional separation of practitioner and researcher, often linked to the preference for 'propositional (conceptual) knowing'. This form of knowledge, although rooted in real-life phenomena, tends to prioritise 'abstract conceptualization', as noted by Heron (1992, cited in Liamputtong and Rumbold, 2008, p. 2). The marginalisation of experiential or 'felt' knowing and presentational ways of knowing, where patterns in experience are expressed through verbal and non-verbal art forms (Seeley and Reason, 2008, p. 28), stems from the theoretical abstractions privileged in colonial knowledge systems. Notably, experiential and presentational knowing lies at the core of arts-based research and holds prominence in intersectional

feminist and decolonial methodologies, all seeking to defamiliarise, emancipate, and transform (Foster, 2015; Lenette, 2022).

Both feminism and decoloniality challenge the way knowledge is produced and draw our consciousness toward how our quotidian, lived realities reveal hierarchical social structures and how their social norms are in ‘endless quiet reproduction’ (Foster, 2015, p. 3). Decoloniality refers to a critical perspective that seeks to challenge and transform the legacies of colonialism and imperialism, and to promote greater social justice and equality.

Arts-based research can be a powerful tool for transgressing traditional colonial research practices and methodologies, including the dominant western paradigms that have historically shaped research, and centring the experiences and perspectives of marginalised groups. Intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), a legal scholar in the United States, emphasises how gender, race, class, and other forms of oppression intersect and interact to shape individuals’ experiences and identities.

With the social justice and inclusive agendas of decoloniality and feminism, Françoise Vergès proposes a decolonial feminism that recognises how colonialism and imperialism have shaped and continue to shape the lives of women around the world and seek to centre the experiences and struggles of women in the global south (Vergès, 2021). Arts-based research, which challenges dominant western epistemologies, demands equality between knowledges, and contests the order of knowledge imposed by Eurocentric standpoints, could be used to promote decolonial feminism by centring the experiences and perspectives of marginalised communities. Kenyan scholar Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o argues that the arts play a crucial role in decolonising the mind and creating healthy societies. In *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986), he emphasises that literature and other forms of art can help people critically reflect on their past, present, and future. By challenging dominant narratives and promoting cultural freedom, researcher-practitioners can help create a more just and equitable society. Ngũgĩ (1986) believes that the arts have the

power to inspire people to imagine new possibilities for themselves and their communities and to work towards a better future.

Contexts

In 2019, I was invited to a meeting for a pioneering project aiming to revolutionise SRHR and GBV prevention discourse in the Philippines through innovative arts-based methodologies. By incorporating feminist standpoint epistemology, the Sexual Health and Empowerment (SHE) Conversations Through Arts research project, a collaboration between Oxfam Philippines, Global Affairs Canada, and the University of the Philippines Center for Women's and Gender Studies, sought to broaden advocacy constituencies and redefine SRHR as a personal issue transcending health and gender concerns. This project addressed the difficulty in SRHR education and advocacy in the Philippines, a challenge exacerbated by the influence of Catholicism. The Philippines was occupied by Spain for approximately 333 years for economic, strategic, and religious reasons. Aside from establishing a trade route to the Moluccas in Southeast Asia and gaining control over the trade of valuable resources, Spain aimed to spread Christianity, particularly Catholicism, throughout its colonies.

As research that contributes to decolonial efforts, this project challenged the 'Northerncentric' decolonial approach that undermines decoloniality by perpetuating colonial hierarchies and structures of inequality (Moosavi, 2020). It supports the aim of intellectual decolonisation, which seeks to establish a fair and just academic setting that acknowledges and appreciates various forms of knowledge and ways of understanding. This chapter also claims space for a scholar from the global south to be more prominent in intellectual decolonisation.

Positionality, transparency, and context are important in both decolonial and feminist research. Here, I discuss the SRHR situation in the Philippines, my positionality as a feminist creative writing researcher-practitioner, and the framework and approaches scaffolding the Conversations Through Arts project.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)

The Conversation Through Arts project was a component of the SHE project of Oxfam Philippines and Global Affairs Canada, with the University of the Philippines Center for Women's and Gender Studies as its main implementing partner. Oxfam's SHE project identified that the constantly high number of teenage pregnancies was a key issue in the Philippines and sought to 'address barriers that prevent women from exercising their right to sexual health care, advocate for the country's law mandating universal access be respected, and support local organisations to reach women and girls who would not otherwise be able to access vital information and services' ([Oxfam Canada, 2023](#)). The Conversations Through Arts project aimed to foster a broader, deeper, and holistic understanding of SRHR, particularly on key concepts such as GBV and women's bodily autonomy. Workshops using an arts-based approach were run in selected sites in the Philippines and with different participant clusters: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex (LGBTQI+) people, young adults, older persons, people with disabilities, and children. The ultimate goal was to gain in-depth knowledge about the needs and experiences connected to SRHR to recommend tailored programs, policies, and legislation aligned with local worldviews.

The context of economically disadvantaged individuals in the Philippines is crucial in understanding the impact of legislation such as the Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Law (Republic Act No. 10354 or the RH Law). In 2021, the poverty incidence among the Philippine population was estimated at 18.1 per cent, translating to approximately 19.99 million Filipinos living below the poverty line. Furthermore, 5.9 per cent of Filipinos were recorded to have incomes insufficient to meet even basic food needs in the same year ([Philippine Statistics Authority, 2023](#)).

Against this backdrop, the RH Law, enacted in 2012, addresses the SRHR challenges that economically disadvantaged populations faced. The

law prioritises the wellbeing of women, children, and underprivileged groups, recognising the intersections between poverty and reproductive health. It seeks to provide equitable access to family planning and reproductive health services, particularly targeting women and couples facing economic constraints. This encompasses the provision of modern family planning methods, information on maternal care, prenatal and postnatal care, and guidance on responsible parenthood.

Despite the law's inclusive goals, its implementation throughout the country has been slow due to concerns that sex education may negatively impact children and youth, as the RH Law requires that sexuality education and family planning methods be included in the curriculum for adolescents and that health providers receive gender sensitivity education, particularly those who are the first to respond to gender-based issues. Coalitions led by the Catholic Church of the Philippines, Spain's most persistent colonial legacy, have attempted to stymie the RH Law, from its passing into law up to its implementation ([Avramoska, 2022](#)). A pro-life group even took the country's Department of Education to court for pilot-testing a high school sexuality education module in one of its schools ([Melgar et al., 2018](#)). Additionally, some aspects of the law may be seen as violating the human rights of adolescents, such as requiring parental consent for purchasing contraception, which has resulted in low uptake of contraception by sexually active adolescents and over-reliance on traditional birth control methods, leading to one in four women experiencing unplanned pregnancies every year ([Biton, 2020](#)). Abortions performed in unsafe conditions have led to complications and even death and are estimated to be around 610,000 each year in the Philippines. This is due in part to limited access to modern contraception, as well as cultural and religious beliefs that discourage contraceptive use ([Guttmacher Institute, 2015](#)).

These key issues related to SRHR in the Philippines persist despite a law that aims to provide access to comprehensive reproductive health services, including education on sexuality and family planning and policies and programs to promote SRHR for the health and wellbeing of women and

children. The circulating discourse in media and government campaigns mostly centres on the prevention of teenage pregnancy, which has been declared a national emergency, rather than sexual health and empowerment, including consent and the practice of safe and pleasurable sex.

Creative writing as arts-based research

I was invited to be part of this project due to my two areas of interest: creative writing and gender. I have a long history with the Creative Writing program at the University of the Philippines. I received my undergraduate and master's degrees in the discipline, then shifted to sociology for my postgraduate studies. I remained a faculty member in the Creative Writing program even as my perspectives and interests widened, but I could not shake off the feeling of *wanting more*. I was then invited to be part of the University of the Philippines Center for Women's and Gender Studies, which fulfilled my desire to continue doing social research. For a while, it seemed like my creative writing and social researcher personas were to remain separate, even if I did have the feeling that, though they may be considered different disciplines, they are not radically distinct from one another. Taking part in the Conversation Through Arts project opened up the opportunity to engage with the two disciplines side by side.

There were three creative methods used in the project. These were labelled in the early stages as Visual Arts, Literary Arts, and Dance Arts. In its initial conception, the creative writing module that I and another researcher-practitioner, Dr Conchitina Cruz, created and facilitated in the workshops for Literary Arts drew its activities from creative writing pedagogy and life writing with the expected output of poems, essays, or stories. The Literary Arts method aimed to carry out activities where participants with different social identities produced written work that would reveal the SRHR experiences of people in different clusters. What was clear to us as we crafted this module was that we wanted the activities to be as participatory as possible and ensured that our position as academics

and writers did not speak for or dominate the stories revealed through the creative work of our participants. We had to set aside our creative writing teaching personas who were preoccupied with the ‘literariness’ of the written product and, instead, used our experiences in the classroom to encourage the generation of expression from and engagement of the participants. They were not our ‘students’ with inherent power differentials in that position. They were co-creators and sources of knowledge.

The reflexive researcher

Although the decolonial approach was not an explicitly stated approach in the project, feminist standpoint theory and intersectional feminist theory lenses were used in the research design and process. Feminist standpoint theory asserts that marginalised women possess unique insights and understandings that can challenge and enrich dominant knowledge systems. Intersectional feminist theory builds upon feminist standpoint theory by recognising that individuals’ experiences are shaped by intersecting social categories, such as gender, race, class, sexuality, and more. Intersectional feminist theory emphasises the interconnected nature of these categories and how they intersect to produce unique and compounded forms of privilege and oppression. Scaffolded by these two theories, participant composition involved women who were from different sectors and were part of ‘vulnerable’ groups such as Indigenous women, women with disabilities, Muslim women, and young girls. However, the research also involved men from these different groups, and here the intersectional lens proved crucial. Considering the intersectionality of masculinities in SRHR research allowed for an exploration of how various social structures and power dynamics influenced men’s attitudes, behaviours, and access to SRHR information and services, which also affects women’s SRHR experiences.

For researchers, these feminist theories emphasise the importance of reflexivity and self-awareness, so that researchers are encouraged to

critically reflect on their biases and positionalities and how these might shape the research questions, methods, and interpretations. Such reflexivity helps ensure that the research process is more transparent, accountable, and sensitive to the diverse experiences of participants.

Reflexivity is also crucial to the decolonial agenda because it enables researchers to be aware of how their perspectives may affect their research. It is important to recognise that we all have the potential to unintentionally use research methods in ways that are culturally unsafe due to our positions, privileges, and lack of self-reflection. Constantly practising reflexivity allows researcher-practitioners to identify and question their assumptions and biases, leading to research that is more culturally respectful and considerate of diverse knowledge systems. Reflexivity plays a vital role in a decolonial research approach and in fostering cultural safety in research environments ([Lenette, 2022](#)).

The Conversation Through Arts project design and methodology were fundamentally aligned with feminist methods in surfacing diverse voices and perspectives and ensuring that the research remained transparent and attuned to a plurality of experiences. Throughout the research, the team's commitment to holding culturally safe spaces and constant self-examination to prevent the imposition of culturally insensitive research practices eventually led the researcher-practitioners to articulate that the decolonial approach was indeed part of our processes.

Theories in action

Dr Conchitina Cruz and I were riddled with assumptions when we crafted the module. There were concerns about what we considered engaging texts to help put participants in the right frame of mind to discuss and produce their own creative work, participant eagerness to fully engage in our creative method, and our abilities to guide them towards producing Literary Art. Since its initial inception, the activities in the module have gone through many iterations based on community feedback and collaboration and the constant reflection, education, and practice of reflexivity of the team.

Safe space

Creating and maintaining safe and inclusive research spaces is an ethical concern when using arts-based, feminist, and decolonial approaches. We problematised, negotiated, and implemented this ethical impetus in several ways. As part of the preparation for the workshops, the whole team of Filipino researcher-practitioners, participant cluster experts, project administrators, and project coordinators were asked to attend a learning session on feminist ethics of care and psychosocial assistance. We all learned how to hold space for individuals and communities – where they are encouraged to share their stories, knowledge, and expertise freely, without judgement or coercion. We also discussed emergency interventions for participants in the case of emotional discomfort and distress during the workshop. The accessibility of psychosocial assistance through a feminist counsellor who was present at all the workshops was made clear to participants during workshop orientations.

The first day of the cluster workshops began with a plenary session where participants were informed about the project before asking for their consent to be included in the research, to be audio recorded, photographed, and video recorded. Not everyone consented to all three, especially as they

would be sharing intimate and private details of their lives (generally considered taboo topics in the Philippines), so they were asked to wear coloured stickers representing the type of recording they agreed to. Afterwards, participants moved to the rooms corresponding to the creative methods they had chosen.

The Kwentong Buhay or Life Stories and other creative method workshops were conducted in half-day sessions held simultaneously over two days. Participants signed up for the group corresponding to their self-identified gender, which provided a more inclusive space for non-cis people. All workshops began with a reiteration of informed consent, participant rights, and an overview of the method before proceeding to the introduction and icebreaker activities. Everyone introduced themselves and participated in the icebreaker, irrespective of their role in the project: facilitators, participants, documenters, and videographers. This was done to mitigate the feeling that participants were being ‘observed’, especially by people whose presence in the room may not have made much sense to them otherwise, and to reduce the power differentials among everyone who was part of the project.

To open up the conversation on SRHR, text in the form of a comic book, an excerpt from an essay, or a fiction piece was projected on the screen while being voice-acted by the facilitators. The text changed according to collaborations with local participants and organisations who identified themselves with the social demographic whose SRHR experiences we were exploring and who were also sensitive to how other intersecting identities aside from gender may impact the lived realities of people in their area. These collaborations ensured that the methods were appropriate and respected cultural norms in the localities. For example, we discussed what was considered haram or sinful according to Islamic teachings in the specific Islamic community we worked with and explored how the discussion of a text on body issues with blind or visually impaired individuals could be enhanced by not only reading the text out loud but also providing objects they could touch. The research team was aware that

Philippine culture is not homogeneous, thus the commitment to promote culturally safe workshop spaces.

The facilitation process during this first activity on the first day of the workshop was crucial, as it was aimed at engaging participants fully and helping validate participant stories and experiences as a starting point for conversations. This first day determined whether a trusting and respectful relationship would be formed in the group – one that acknowledged the different life experiences of individuals and created a non-judgemental space to hear diverse narratives. This first day also led everyone in the space, including participants, to practice reflexivity by knowing when to speak up and when to step back, to listen, and to share space.

To practise a decolonial feminist approach means to be challenged and to change

One issue became clear to us as researcher-practitioners: even if most of the literature expressed how arts-based research can be participative, innovative, liberating, and empowering, traditional definitions of art are often narrow and exclusionary, especially in a country such as the Philippines where art may be seen as a privilege for those who do not have to worry about putting food on the table every day.

Dr Conchitina Cruz and I were invited to join the project because of our years of experience in teaching creative writing, and this initially led us to prioritise the written output in the early versions of the module, because as we (and some participants) may have understood it, they were supposed to produce something that qualifies as ‘art’. We were also called ‘creative experts’, a title that evoked feelings of great discomfort for us both but was necessary to include in the research funding proposal to validate our engagement in the project. Literary Art as exclusionary was apparent in the lack of participant interest in signing up for our workshop. Literary writing often flourishes in academic and literary circles, which may be inaccessible to those without the means to pursue higher education or even access books.

Written communication is associated with more formal contexts, such as business transactions, official documents, and academic settings. Rethinking and reframing were needed, and we searched for methods still steeped in creative narrative expression as a valuable and meaningful medium *especially* for participants, even if it is not always recognised by academics or gatekeepers as art.

We then decided to abandon the Literary Arts title of our workshop and our designation as ‘creative experts’ and adopted two methods, storytelling and advice-writing, for the second day of the workshop. We chose the name Kwentong Buhay or Life Stories. We called ourselves creative method facilitators, understanding that this role valued the co-creation of knowledge with participants, acknowledged their expertise, and incorporated their insights into the research process. The Dance Arts method underwent a similar change in title, opting for Movement Workshop, in response to dance being considered haram in Islamic culture.

Storytelling as a decolonial feminist method has been used successfully to build knowledge about women’s lives, experiences, and needs concerning sexual and reproductive health in Sucre, Bolivia ([Pernthaler, 2022](#)). Storytelling served as a valuable tool to gain more profound insights into sensitive and intricate issues, notably those surrounding sexuality. This approach was particularly effective for research participants originating from communities with longstanding oral traditions where knowledge is frequently transmitted through narratives and tales. The Philippines has a rich oral culture, and studies with Filipino adolescents have shown that the primary source of knowledge and advice about sexual matters is through discussions with peers. They predominantly use social media platforms and, to a lesser extent, educational materials, to seek information about sexual and reproductive matters ([Habito et al., 2022](#); [Marquez, 2022](#)). There were two stages to this storytelling activity. Participants were first paired up before they shared with a larger cohort in the second stage. They were asked to participate in a pair massage, of course with consent before making

any physical contact. If they agreed, the person receiving a massage would tell their story while the other person listened.

The researcher-practitioners were aware of power dynamics between participants and researchers despite careful attention to making the space as safe and equitable as possible, so we ensured that participants did not feel coerced to participate or share more than they were comfortable by reiterating that they could choose not to be touched or massaged. Before beginning the massage, the individual providing it was required to ask for explicit consent, and it was entirely up to the recipient to determine their personal boundaries concerning touch by stating the body part they consented to be massaged. Some participants only offered fingers for the massage, while others chose to forgo the massage entirely, opting instead for a conversation. The inspiration behind this activity was the sharing of stories that takes place at the salon, barber shop, or spaces where people access personal care services. During the massage, stories were shared much easier due to several reasons: (1) asking for consent established trust and a feeling that they only needed to share what they were comfortable sharing; (2) personal care services usually occur in relaxing and non-threatening settings and are soothing, leading to a more open and receptive state of mind; and (3) engaging in personal care service can be distracting, helping individuals to focus less on being judged and more on the experience, making them more likely to share their stories.

The power of the advice column was explored in a study on the construction of gendered identities and reinforcement of social norms in adolescent girls ([Currie, 2001](#)). We asked participants to occupy the role of the advice columnist by writing replies to a series of letters asking for advice on SRHR concerns. This activity encouraged participants to exercise agency by providing guidance and advice to readers who seek help with their problems. The columnist was positioned as an expert who could offer solutions to problems that readers presented. This was the activity with the most engagement across all the participant clusters (except for the children's cohort where it was not run) and where we perceived participants

taking ownership of the research and flexing their agency. It should be noted that this was the session where participants revealed the constraints of social norms and expectations through the contents of their advice.

Probably the biggest change the storytelling module went through was with the children's cluster, where we had to contend with the ethical responsibilities that come with working with children on SRHR matters, as well as issues of attention span and making the experience non-oppressive and enjoyable. The foundation and concepts underpinning the arts-based SRHR module for children drew inspiration from a creative drama approach to sex education conducted in Malaysia ([Haneem et al., 2022](#)). The creative drama approach involves structured activities that encourage the exploration of issues, ideas, emotions, and events through role-playing in real or imaginary scenarios. This method aligns with children's innate inclination to learn through imitation, and the Kwentong Buhay module for children used it as a means of creative storytelling for young participants.

Social justice and transformation

As we listened to participants' varying SRHR experiences and knowledge, we started to wonder how we could provide a more immediate benefit to them apart from eventually producing recommendations that we could not even ensure would be taken up by policymakers. In deliberating this point, it became clear to us through the regular sharing of experiences among researcher-practitioners that some of the knowledge (or lack thereof) and stories shared by the participants with each other in the workshop may potentially be harmful, such as on the misuse of contraceptives or beliefs that reinforce gender and other systems of inequality. This suggested that, although we encouraged the sharing of stories from diverse perspectives in a non-judgemental space, 'voices and stories cannot be extracted from social and cultural locations or from interlocking oppressions' (Maguire, 2001, cited in [Foster, 2015](#), p. 35). Even though such experiences may appear authentic and lived, they are influenced by inherited traditions and

prevailing cultural contexts (Crotty, 1998, cited in [Foster, 2015](#)). We resolved that our advocacy work was also part of our research and practice, thus we offered tools that might help participants view their experiences using a different lens.

The researcher-practitioners also acknowledged that if this was a collaboration, we should not be ‘objective’ observers and extractors of information but should actually be in conversation with participants. We facilitated the exchange of alternative ways of viewing life experiences by respectfully and thoughtfully questioning participants about the underpinnings of their beliefs and perspectives. Additionally, we shared information about SRHR along with advocacy efforts aimed at promoting bodily autonomy and preventing GBV. This interrogation of everyday experiences is a significant tool for challenging prevailing norms on SRHR, bodily autonomy, and GBV. As mentioned previously, the decolonial, intersectional, and arts-based approaches aimed to contribute to social justice, so the team recognised that interventions such as age-appropriate sex education and interrogation of harmful beliefs through careful and respectful conversations in the workshops were essential components of the project. This is especially important so that we can ‘give something back’ to the communities and not just observe, extract, and then leave. The interventions that provided tools to scrutinise identities vulnerable to oppression were not meant to diminish what the participants knew but to empower them in another way, so that ‘through the research process, opportunities can be created for people to explore their own lives, to acknowledge their suffering, to communicate it and perhaps even to move forwards from it’ ([Foster, 2015](#), p. 132).

Tensions

The project tried to ensure the inclusion of men and women from different sectors of society. Even though there were local and cluster coordinators who oriented the researcher-practitioners before conducting the workshops

for each cluster, sometimes the orientation was not able to cover all issues that arose as the workshops were run. Some challenges involved in-group power dynamics and the silencing that took place when an elder, community development worker, or someone perceived as more educated or higher in status would dominate group discussions. Others involved groups that considered certain activities in the workshop as taboo, such as dancing for the cohort of Muslim women we worked with. Not all Muslims or Islamic interpretations consider dance to be haram and Islamic teachings and jurisprudence vary widely across different cultures, sects, and individual beliefs. However, according to the local coordinator who was a practising Muslim in the area where our participants came from, dance was likely to be viewed as haram, especially when done in the context of discussing SRHR. A further need arose with adolescents to include a male researcher-practitioner, as young men were less inclined to share with women facilitators. In the Muslim cluster, a woman would not be allowed in a room full of men. The conditions that surfaced while the workshops were already running prompted the team to be reflexive, cognisant of cultural norms, and flexible in our approaches.

We should not gloss over the fact that it is a continued challenge to try and decolonise research practices when tied to systems of research funding that may (un)knowingly perpetuate colonial dynamics. International funding organisations have recognised the need to decolonise practices, and the project funders, Oxfam Philippines and Global Affairs Canada, have been more progressive than most in this regard with their regular consultations with partners, reflexivity about their position as funders, and efforts toward lessening the reporting demands on their partners. However, there are still some areas that can benefit from interrogation to ensure power imbalances are addressed and the interests and priorities of external funders or donors do not overpower the needs and aspirations of local communities, and to minimise the possibly extractive nature of projects.

A member of the team working on an offshoot project on teenage pregnancies was also confronted with funder gatekeeping. The results of her

project showed that not all teenage pregnancies were unwanted or unintentional, and she was pressured to change this to align with the stance of the funding organisation. It involved a considerable amount of dialogue with funders and standing her ground for them to concede to publish her findings as a knowledge product.

Since the project was run through the University of the Philippines, the researcher-practitioners also had to contend with meeting the demands of producing peer-reviewed, academic articles, so that the University could acknowledge these articles as ‘promotion points’ that would contribute to faculty career advancement and university global rankings. This points to what are considered valuable and valid forms of knowledge in academic institutions, which have been critiqued for perpetuating colonial power structures and knowledge hierarchies.

Conclusion

The literature on decolonial feminist methods does not perceive community engagement within research as automatically decolonial or feminist ([Khorana, 2022](#)). The Conversation Through Arts project explored the potential for a decolonial feminist approach through arts-based research by challenging traditional practices and centring the experiences and perspectives of marginalised communities to promote or catalyse social justice, empowerment, and transformation. The project's commitment to creating safe and inclusive research spaces while acknowledging the complexities of cultural contexts, all the while recognising how expertise and knowledge from lived experiences are always tied to issues of power and control, can hopefully be useful for researcher-practitioners and advocates who seek to practice decolonial feminist research using arts-based methods.

Questions for further discussion

1. Does arts-based research have the potential to be oppressive?
How does one avoid this?
2. How does one negotiate between the transformative and advocacy aims of decolonial feminist research and respectful observance of tradition and culture in research locations?
3. How can researchers ensure that the knowledge generated from the research benefits and empowers the participants and communities involved?
4. What steps can be taken to ensure that research is sensitive and responsive to the unique needs of vulnerable groups, such as children?
5. How does one negotiate the politics driving funding, such as alignment with the research agendas of funders?

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Part III

Creative methodologies

Theatre of the Privileged as a tool for anti-racist education and research

Laila Kadiwal and Mai Abu Moghli

Key points

- Decolonisation has been reduced to a sanitised and empty narrative in mainstream and elite institutions. It is necessary to create non-hierarchical and safe spaces to collaborate and encourage unlearning in the field of international education and development.
- Scholarly work that claims to centre decolonisation should be guided by and connected to grassroots activism and struggles. Anti-racist and anti-colonial approaches to research address root causes of injustice(s), discrimination, and ongoing colonialism.
- Engaging with colonial history(ies) and its continuity call for building solidarity networks rooted in reparations, restorative justice, accountability to the global majority, acknowledgement of privilege, and a way to break cycles of marginalisation.
- Solidarity with activists and academics who come from historically and colonially marginalised backgrounds, mainly Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour (BIPOC), requires taking on anti-colonial work. They may not feel comfortable calling out colonialism, feel outnumbered, and experience trauma from repeated encounters with systemic racism.

Introduction

This chapter outlines a decolonial pedagogy called the Theatre of the Privileged (ToP) Decolonial Café, in higher education in the United Kingdom (UK). The method emerged in response to recent decolonial activism. The Rhodes Must Fall movement began at the University of Cape Town, South Africa in 2015, when students demanded that the statue of white British imperialist and coloniser Cecil John Rhodes be removed from the university campus. The movement inspired a number of students and academics to decolonise research and curriculum in the UK higher education system through activist campaigns such as Leopold Must Fall at Queen Mary University, Galton Must Fall at University College London (UCL), and Gladstone Must Fall at Liverpool University, as well as initiatives such as #LiberateMyDegree, Why Isn't My Professor Black?, Why Is My Curriculum White?, and the Alternative Reading List Project ([Abu Moghli and Kadiwal, 2021](#)).

थिएटर ऑफ़ दे प्रिविलेज्ड: जातिवाद और रेसिस्म के खिलाफ शिक्षा और अनुसन्धान का एक तरीका

लैला कड़ीवाल और माई अबू मुगली

यह अध्याय उच्च शिक्षा में जातिवाद और रेसिस्म विरोधी शिक्षाशास्त्र की पड़ताल करता है। थिएटर ऑफ़ दे प्रिविलेज्ड रंगमंच वक्ता और श्रोता के बीच के अंतर को खत्म करता है और हर किसी को शिक्षा और विकास के क्षेत्र में साम्राज्यवाद को बनाए रखने वाली दैनिक प्रथाओं का विश्लेषण करने और उन्हें बदलने के तरीकों की जांच करता है।

مسرح ذوي الامتيازات كأداة للتعليم والبحث المناهض للعنصرية

ليلى كديوال ومي أبو مغلي

يركز هذا الفصل على طرائق التعليم المناهضة للاستعمار في حيز التعليم العالي في المملكة المتحدة، في ضوء النشاط الأخير المناهض للاستعمار. خلال جائحة كوفيد-19، بدأت مجموعة من الأكاديميين/ات والطلاب/ات في الكلية الجامعية في لندن مبادرة تعليمية لإنهاء الاستعمار. تهدف المجموعة إلى إنتاج معارف بديلة ومتاحة حول إنهاء الاستعمار في التعليم والبحث من خلال مدونة تسمى "التاريخ البديل للتعليم والتنمية الدولية" وورش عمل لمناقشة القراءات المناهضة للاستعمار وإنهاء الاستعمار وكتابة مقالات وإنشاء مساحات للنقد والانعكاسية السياسية (عكس النظرة) وانتقاد الامتيازات التواطؤ في مجال التعليم والتنمية الدوليين ولهذا أنشأت ليلى مسرح ذوي الامتيازات للتحرر من الاستعمار. ينهي مسرح ذوي الامتيازات الفرق بين المتحدث والجمهور ويشرك الجميع في استكشاف وعرض وتحليل وتحويل الممارسات اليومية التي تدعم الاستعمار ويدرس طرق تفكيك إعادة إنتاج الاستعمار والعنصرية والاقصاء التقاطعي وتحويلها. باستخدام منهج مسرح ذوي الامتيازات، يخرط الباحثون/ات والأكاديميون/ات في الأبحاث والممارسات المناهضة للعنصرية لمنع تحويل إنهاء الاستعمار إلى تمرين يعزز الهيمنة العرقية والمعرفية والسياسية والاجتماعية والاقتصادية

Figure 8.1 Abstracts in Hindi and Arabic. Translated by Laila Kadiwal (Hindi) and Mai Abu Moghli (Arabic).

These moments of activism have brought attention to the role institutions and states play in the grave injustices that result from colonialism, slavery, and racist practices. The tragic and brutal murder of George Floyd in the United States in May 2020, when a white police officer knelt over him for eight to nine minutes while arresting him, led many international aid, development, and education organisations to express further support for decolonisation following the global outrage against racism that followed. As a result of the international wave of Black Lives Matter protests and this increased interest in racism, solidarity statements, talks, and events on

decolonisation have exploded in the UK. However, with this increased interest paired with ‘fear of missing out’ on the new ‘trend’, there is a risk of turning struggles for decolonisation and anti-racism and calls for global social justice into empty rhetoric and sanitised narratives and decolonisation into what Tuck and Yang (2012) call a metaphor.

The increasingly proliferating field of international education and development has seen a surge in interest in decolonisation, but this interest has not addressed the fact that international development is ‘a direct continuation of the civilizing mission idea ... constitutive and a necessary condition for the mere possibility of the colonial enterprise’ (Rutazibwa, 2018, p. 75). As scholars who work in these fields, we have repeatedly been called on by activist-academic movements to create spaces for rigorous discussions that interrogate our deep-rooted assumptions regarding what ‘development’ means, how we imagine the binary between ‘to be developed’ and ‘developing’, and how we, as members of some of the world’s most prestigious educational institutions, view ourselves in relation to the global majority (Kadiwal, 2023; Rutazibwa, 2018).

To ensure that our commitment to solidarity and justice does not reproduce colonialism, we must continue to examine our own scholarly and pedagogical practices. Debates on decolonisation within academia often remain aspirational, abstract, or rhetorical. However, to change the international aid, development, and education field and to push forward anti-oppressive, anti-racist, and anti-extractive conversations, it is critical to tap into this growing interest in decolonisation. The aim is to reimagine what a decolonised international education and development field would look like in an era of climate vulnerability, pandemics, and neoliberalism, to ensure justice that considers the intersectionality of gender, race, ethnicity, sexualities, disability, class, and other forms of systematic discrimination.

Positionality

Laila speaks from an intersection of privilege and precarity that disrupts the binary between the global north and the global south. She grew up in a lower-middle-class, mixed-caste, Gujarati Muslim migrant family in a rural and remote Indian periphery. In her region, thousands of Adivasis (Indigenous populations) have been displaced by ‘development’ projects ([Xaxa and Devy, 2021](#)). This situation has led to civil unrest. While her family and friends in India are experiencing increasing climate vulnerability, Genocide Watch warns that India is in danger of an anti-Muslim and anti-Dalit genocide ([Genocide Watch, 2021](#)). Western powers and corporations have allied with India’s fascistic far-right regime, which has ideological roots in Nazism ([Leidig, 2020](#)), to serve their military, commercial, and geopolitical interests, under the guise of development. As a British citizen, Laila is also concerned about the discriminatory nature of policies toward racialised minorities¹ ([Bhattacharyya et al., 2021](#)).

Following her work as a development practitioner in India in an international non-governmental organisation (INGO), Laila joined that field as an academic in the global north. She encountered systemic racism, civilising assumptions, and colonial justifications in international education and development interventions. Laila noticed that many of those who profit from colonisation and existing inequalities specialise in scrutinising marginalised populations in the global south but fail to hold donor nations accountable for reparative justice. Instead, they produce ahistorical, technical, decontextualised, and top-down research that reinforces colonially established epistemic and material hierarchies, paternalism, and salvationism. She experienced various mechanisms that exclude critical voices, hampering their ability to highlight colonialism, imperialism, resource extraction, and authoritarianism in funded research. As a result, Laila developed resources and pedagogy that promote liberatory research tools and knowledge generation while creating a solidarity network.

Mai's experiences are formed through living under settler colonialism and in exile. While her experiences are of trauma and loss, this does not exclude the fact that she also speaks from privilege as someone who comes from an urban setting and a middle-class family and has completed her postgraduate education in colonial institutions in the UK. The experiences of living in multiple countries due to refugeehood and exile and as a scholar in the global north gave Mai a critical lens to see the world. Mai started her professional life by working with INGOs as a researcher documenting human rights violations. Applying top-down, rigid, hegemonic 'universal' norms and frameworks to revolutionary moments ignited a sense of scepticism and disillusionment in the work of human rights research. Mai found herself doing colonial human rights journalism that was flattened, de-historicised, and de-politicised. In Palestine, Mai could see how research done under the umbrella of the aid-development-human rights triad overshadows Palestinian narratives while maintaining the colonial narrative, turning the politicised into a humanitarian language at best. Mai felt disenfranchised, especially when she voiced critical opinions. Her views were dismissed as biased and, in many cases, coming from an angry woman of colour. Mai decided to leave the world of INGOs and join academia under the impression that academic spaces would give her the freedom to think critically and voice her concerns. However, she soon realised that whatever research she does and whatever knowledge she produces will not be considered valid unless she follows standardised research procedures, hindering her ability to produce knowledge that is true to the context she works in. This motivated Mai to delve more deeply into deconstructing research and the possibility of utilising it for creating collective anti-colonial consciousness through liberatory research tools.

Theatre of the Privileged: an anti-racist perspective

International education and development remain a contested space where many scholars, activists, feminists, and anti-colonial educators have developed counter-hegemonic egalitarian, transformative, and just discourses despite systemic racism. Theatre of the Privileged (ToP) is an effort to learn and unlearn from these discourses.

By introducing the ToP Decolonial Café in the field of international education and development in 2021, Laila aimed to reverse the gaze on policies, practices, and assumptions underlying the development architecture in relatively privileged spaces. A lightbulb moment came for Laila when her Dalit colleagues from historically oppressed caste locations in India told her they no longer wanted to be the objects of randomised control trials. They suggested that she should step back from ‘saving’ the marginalised and instead examine how privileged sections of society have accumulated, silenced, and been complicit in the dispossession, silence, and oppression of the oppressed and how they may be able to transform this situation so that the onus does not fall on the most marginalised to disrupt inequality-causing practices ([Kadiwal et al., 2022a](#)). The advice inspired Laila to change her approach to international education and development. While co-developing *india and me: engage.reflect.act.*,² a public education programme to raise awareness of critical issues among Savarna or dominant castes in India and diaspora, Laila conceptualised the ToP Decolonial Café pedagogy, realising its importance to international development and education as she garnered contextual insight. She observed that dominant caste and white scholars often produce knowledge about India that is not representative of the knowledge(s) produced by the marginalised populations in India through their histories of critical struggle. Laila invited colleagues at the Center for International Education and Development at the University College London Institute of Education to collaborate on ToP.

Upon joining the initiative, Mai actively contributed to co-facilitating and advancing the Decolonial Cafés based on ToP.

Laila outlined the anti-racist theoretical basis of ToP. The extracts below are taken from her forthcoming article that explains ToP's anti-racist theorising in more detail ([Kadiwal, forthcoming](#)). Informed by Augusto Boal's (1985) *Theatre of the Oppressed*, which draws on Paulo Freire's (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, ToP uses participatory methods to advance decolonial social and political change. However, unlike Boal and Freire, ToP does not focus on supporting oppressed people to identify their oppression. Instead, ToP is about people living in relatively privileged intersectional locations, recognising their complicity in maintaining systems of dominance and stepping up in solidarity to transform them. This ethos is rooted in critical anti-racist perspectives, specifically bell hooks' *Engaged Pedagogy* (1990), which calls on educators to view a classroom as a place of radical possibility for students and teachers to collaborate in liberatory practice to resist oppressive and dominant ideologies that perpetuate racial, economic, gender, and other social inequalities ([Love, 2019](#)). ToP seeks to apply bell hooks' anti-racist and feminist wisdom to international education and development to reverse the gaze on research elites, identifying assumptions, silences, methods, epistemologies, and practices. The space offers a courageous opportunity to learn how to transform intersecting oppressions in meaningful and radical ways. In doing so, ToP is an alternative to dominant modes of education and international development and expands our ideas of global justice engagement and intersectional justice.

ToP breaks the binary between experts and non-experts, dominator and dominated, and makes everyone responsible for challenging and transforming unjust structures ([Kadiwal et al., 2022b](#)). ToP draws upon real-life stories to create opportunities to explore the everyday circumstances of racism and colonialism as well as how to resist them in the future. The purpose of this space is to foster challenging and supportive conversations about how coloniality, racism, and intersectional exclusions

are reproduced, and how we can challenge that in relatively privileged locations. Thus, ToP also hopes to work through dilemmas and challenges in realising anti-oppressive international aid, development, and education sectors and begin to co-construct an alternative imagination of human and planetary relations.

The pedagogical starting point of co-unlearning is central to ToP (Kadiwal *et al.*, 2022b). The term ‘unlearning’ comes from anti-racist movements and has made its way into the Cambridge English Dictionary (2022), which defines it as ‘an effort to forget your usual way of doing something so that you can learn a new and sometimes better way’. ToP uses the term ‘co-unlearners’ ‘because we also see ourselves as complicit in the global and local unequal structures’ (Kadiwal *et al.*, 2022b, p. 212).

ToP illustrates the profound role of silence about racism and race in education and international development (Kothari, 2006; Pailey, 2020; Sriprakash *et al.*, 2020). Sriprakash *et al.* (2020) note that there is more to silence or ignorance of racism than passive absences; they reflect an epistemology that produces and normalises racism as a political system. Further, Pailey (2020, p. 2), drawing upon Toni Morrison, aptly observes that ‘to insist that race does not exist is to announce its centrality’. For Morrison, ‘[t]he act of enforcing racelessness in ... discourse is itself a racial act’ (cited in Pailey, 2020, p. 2). It is this silence that is resisted by the Gender and Development Network’s Women of Colour (WOC) Forum, which brings together over 100 self-identifying WOC who work in the UK international development sector. Their *Collective Statement on Systemic Racism and White Supremacy in the UK International Aid Sector* (Gender and Development Network, 2020, p. 1) states:

The international aid sector is born out of a racist colonial history; an inconvenient truth which is routinely erased from how the sector understands itself and the work it does. While many aid organisations have examined the role of international financial institutions and the multilateral system in exacerbating inequalities

between the [g]lobal [s]outh and [n]orth, this analysis is often whitewashed. Critically, it has failed to interrogate the violent colonial history which enabled the creation of these institutions for the explicit benefit of [w]hite people in the [g]lobal [n]orth, at the expense of BIPOC in the [g]lobal [s]outh. The racialised nature of this history cannot be ignored as it is an integral part of understanding how our current multilateral system functions, how the global majority is systematically silenced within it and the international aid sector's complicity in this.

Development projects create discursive and ideological practices that result in the division of economic, political, and cultural resources along racialised, gendered, ableist, and heteronormative lines. These disparities include questions of whose knowledge is valued; whose development experiences shape the field; who receives funding; how titles such as 'expert', 'researcher', and 'researched' are structured; who 'owns' knowledge; and who makes decisions in the field. As the WOC anti-racist statement above highlights, a large percentage of funds are allocated to support northern-based office employees or their decentralised offices, whereas a minimum percentage goes to local communities and organisations. Meanwhile, marketing and communications departments dehumanise Black and brown bodies (often children) to win the support of wealthy white donors. Consequently, Tikly (2004) characterises current education and international development agendas as the 'new imperialism' of global capitalism that incorporates previously colonised populations in western agendas of research and policies in a way that serves its security, military, political, and economic interests.

Given the premise that race is socially constituted, context-specific, and a dynamic category of analysis, attention in the ToP is on how 'race' acquires particular meanings in histories of colonialism, slavery, and conquest and how it discursively shifts over time and spaces, informing the practices of international development. Racism, together with contextual forms of domination such as casteism, and other regimes of exclusions

including heteropatriarchy, classism, and ableism, underpin the vast inequalities in education. The ToP enables participants to examine the material consequences of intersectional privileges in terms of the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities that profoundly shape social exclusion. In this sense, ToP aims to:

- Acknowledge and unlearn taken-for-granted colonial practices and norms and encourage uncomfortable and critical conversations around our colonial and oppressive roles as part of the humanitarian and development industrial complex.
- Recognise the ideologies and norms that justify the expansionist control of distant regions based on epistemic violence, racism, slavery, genocide, colonialism, and ethnocentrism. It is hoped that this will contribute to the important activity of unsettling the ‘common sense’ of doing ‘development’.
- Promote greater reflection on the issues of who is included and excluded and the processes surrounding those concerns.
- Collectively navigate decolonial options at the epistemic level, that is, how we *see* and *know* the world, and translate these into tangible, institutional implications.
- Build long-term intersectional global decolonial solidarities ([Kadiwal, 2021](#)).

Praxis and suggestions

We have run several ToP Decolonial Cafés drawing upon humour, stories, and drama for several national and international institutions, universities, and INGOs. This method emphasises ‘showing rather than telling’ about racism and hegemonic situations, highlighting how these dynamics play out daily in our lives. The public performance of these dramas is powerful for collectively confronting these issues, providing an embodied experience rather than just cognitive discussions.

A typical ToP session consists of three parts. The first part is introductory and begins with an icebreaker, an explanation of the Decolonial Café’s aims, a discussion of safe and brave spaces as ground rules, and a brief introduction to the concept of ‘coloniality’ along with an explanation of the ToP pedagogy.

In the second part, some volunteers perform a scenario that reflects coloniality in everyday education and international development. These scenarios are based on real-life experiences. The goal is to make the concept of coloniality tangible to the audience, allowing them to actively intervene. After the initial performance, the audience discusses potential transformative alternatives in small groups. The scenario is then performed again, with audience members having the opportunity to stop the play at any moment by shouting ‘Stop’ when they believe they have a solution. They can then direct the actors to change their lines or actions, or they can step into the role themselves. In this way, audience members become ‘spect-actors’ (Boal, 1985). Each proposed strategy is played out until the group feels they have an actionable solution. Co-facilitators continuously check with the audience to ensure the proposed solution is agreeable to everyone. Even if no actionable solution is found, the exercise prompts the audience to reflect on their role in addressing and changing the status quo. It is emphasised that if no-one intervenes, the performance will continue

unchanged, mirroring real-life situations where inaction and silence perpetuate the status quo.

The final part of the session is ‘closure’. We ask everyone to pair up and discuss their thoughts and feelings. It is a moment to reflect on questions such as: *How did you feel when you saw or heard these situations today?* This allows participants to manage any triggers or shocks, airing their discomfort and unlearning. After this discussion, we use creative methods to close the ToP. One example is the ‘Pass the Gift’ exercise, where everyone mimes a gesture, such as holding a flower and passing it on to the group as a gift. Alternatively, we might stand in a circle, holding hands where possible, and each person says one word that comes to mind. We conclude with applause, inviting everyone to close their eyes, soak in the experience, smile, and quietly exit the room.

The pedagogical approach has gained some traction with diverse students, practitioners, staff members, and colleagues who were keen to adopt this approach to facilitating conversations with stakeholders involved in their respective institutions or projects. Some students and alumni have shown an interest in adapting the pedagogy in their work in their respective geographical or work contexts.

These Decolonial Cafés serve a practical purpose in informing assignments, research, teaching, and practice. Based on past experiences, we outline five examples below that can be used in the context of research.

Decolonial Café 1, *Unpacking Our and the Institution of Education (IoE) and UCL’s Colonial Backpack*, was an interactive game-based activity where students and staff members explored intersectional privileges and disadvantages and their implications for education and international development. We also investigated the early links with colonialism at UCL and IoE. As part of our commitment to anti-racist practices, this is the history we needed everyone associated with UCL to recognise, understand, and undo to enable rethinking international education and development.

A key insight from the Decolonial Café was that engaging with colonial history, its continuity today, and its ongoing disruptions is essential for

those working in the field of international education and development. The conversations highlighted that some colleagues who work in the fields of international aid, development, and education, and who claim that they share the values of decolonisation and anti-racist practices, have roots in and may benefit from the colonial legacy. We aim to build solidarity around reparations, restorative justice, accountability to the global majority, acknowledgement of privilege, and a way to break cycles of marginalisation.

Decolonial Café 2, *Privilege Walk*, enabled the exploration of intersectional hierarchies and structural exclusions in our field. It explored the role of structural issues in determining how we are variously placed in development hierarchies as researchers, consultants, and practitioners. The discussion stimulated reflection on how our institutional contexts privilege certain epistemologies over others and how our privileges are directly associated with the disadvantages experienced by those on whose behalf we claim to speak. Importantly, the Decolonial Café involved reflections on how we are all located differently in terms of our positionalities, knowledge, and power in the field of development. It is this understanding of our positioned realities that we hope will gradually enable unlearning and learning about how we can resist a racist, casteist, ableist, gendered, and classist global structure.

Decolonial Café 3, *Enlarging the Space of Epistemic Justice*, spoke to epistemic humility in research and practice by enabling students and staff to explore the ethics of epistemic justice. Drawing upon real-life anonymous examples and our experiences, we explored some patterns of thinking and writing about international education and development that inadvertently reproduce coloniality. It became evident that scholarly work addressing inequalities cannot and should not be separated from grassroots activism and struggles against racism and imperialism. In the wake of the struggles of minoritised populations around the world, there is an urgent need for just alternatives – anti-racist, anti-colonial approaches to research that address the underlying causes of injustice, discrimination, and colonialism.

Decolonial Café 4, *Decolonising the Curriculum*, invited students to explore and co-construct practical tips and strategies to decolonise the curriculum. These conversations involved students from varied backgrounds and academic disciplines as co-producers of the curriculum. Students were asked to develop curricula that challenged dominant knowledge and enabled the voice, representation, and humanity of those who have been dehumanised. Students suggested a more comprehensive overhaul of the readings list and recruitment process from an anti-racist perspective.

Decolonial Café 5, *Deconstructing Education Policies and Practice for Refugees in the UK*, was presented at an online conference organised by the Collective on Education, Decoloniality and Emergencies (CEDE!), which consisted of individuals and organisations seeking just practices for trans/national aid to learners, educators, and education systems experiencing crisis. We shared a set of objectives and values rooted in the teachings of decolonial thought and struggle. Through this rendition of ToP, a group of academics from UCL IoE critically highlighted the attitudes towards refugee children arriving in the UK and, through acting, imagined conversations amongst education policymakers, government representatives, school leaders, and community workers. These conversations were built on real-life narratives broadcast in the British media and experienced through various meetings in academic and international development institutions spaces. This ToP was recorded and can be used in classrooms across the UK and beyond. The conference allowed participants from around the world to join as it had no participation fees, included refugee scholars, students, and activists, and provided live interpreting in four languages other than English (which dominates the field) for wide and active participation. This ToP reversed the gaze and participants discussed UK discriminatory policies against migrants and refugees, a topic that is hardly discussed in mainstream international education and development spaces and is not considered a priority.

Our experience of leading these Decolonial Cafés made us realise that ToP is a messy pedagogical process in which unlearning and learning take place. Participants leave with a range of responses. Researchers, students, policymakers, and practitioners who find themselves marginalised at several intersections in current development structures have expressed great enthusiasm about the creation of non-hierarchical safe spaces for unlearning racism and intersectional injustices in education and international development. It was a cathartic or transformative experience for many of them. People who benefit from inequalities and exclusions react differently. Some feel vulnerable, uncomfortable, defensive, apologetic, confused, or guilty, while others become outraged and inspired to act in solidarity. We realise that a more egalitarian, just, and fairer world is fraught with contestations and pushback, as well as the liberatory efforts to deconstruct racialised, gendered, ableist, classist, and epistemic hierarchies.

Based on our experience of running Decolonial Cafés using ToP, we outline how we can think of, conceptualise, and conduct education research as we break the cycles of colonisation, racism, and violence. Our anti-colonial invitation is to collectively, and in solidarity, rethink how we can move beyond the current paradigm to a radically different imagination that entails global justice solidarities. Decolonial methods offer fascinating possibilities for *being* and *knowing* on the planet differently, in a more mutually fruitful way, based on the principles of ‘relationships, connections, reciprocity and accountability’ (Smith, 2021, p. xiv). It is a messy conversation and while we figure out a way forward collectively, the suggestions below may offer a way ahead. These are by no means exhaustive, nor representative of all our ideas, but are stimulations for our collective re-imagining.

1. Mainstream race: A regular reflection session on issues of race, power, and privilege could be developed and led by academics and students from racialised minorities as part of our capacity building in the global north institutions

(Unterhalter and Kadiwal, 2022). All courses can incorporate anti-racist elements. Furthermore, we should work towards mainstreaming race in our analyses, just as we do with gender and class in international education and development. A module on race and development can also be offered as part of undergraduate and graduate degrees. Racism can be examined in education and international development practices, vocabularies, and assessment methods. We could also question the knowledge base of each assignment, project, and reading list. A rigorous and transparent debate on our theories, tools, and approaches to explore how they see or do not see racism can be an enormously productive exercise. Further, we need to have an honest conversation about the material realities of our field, such as hierarchies, hiring practices, and payment structures.

2. Reverse the gaze: This practice involves turning development's entire logic on its head. Rather than the study of racialised and marginalised 'others' that need saving from 'learning poverty', 'learning crisis', corruption, or inadequacy, studies should focus on the elites who claim to be doing development: what assumptions, practices, methods, epistemologies, and silences do they have, and what are their consequences for exclusion? It is also important to study and deconstruct the privilege that comes with historical injustices and ongoing colonialism, which enables those who study 'poverty', 'conflict', and 'underdeveloped' settings. Here, we suggest ways that researchers can reverse the gaze:
 - Question why they are conducting research in these particular contexts to avoid causing harm by prioritising their careers over the cause and struggle of people.
 - Acknowledge the unearned and extractive privileges scholars from historically dominant racialised and casteist

locations enjoy as a result of the dispossession and annihilation of Indigenous peoples and impoverished Black and brown people.

- Develop curricula that challenge dominant knowledge and enable the voice, representation, and humanity of those who have been dehumanised. This means not just adding names of scholars from racialised minorities backgrounds to reading lists, but also engaging with experiences and asking difficult questions that challenge privileged positionalities and causes of injustice.
- Challenge research agendas that are set by donors and require creating depoliticised and ahistorical research through extractivism. By contrast, according to Smith (2021), when those who have traditionally been the objects of research are involved in setting their own research agendas, occupy key and senior roles, and have greater control over the questions they want to explore, based on their own curiosity and questions and on their own context, this can completely transform how social problems are addressed. This approach generates a greater sense of accountability to communities, as well as fostering transformative research that leads to knowledge emerging from people's own intersections of critical struggle.
- Acknowledge that 'parachute' visits to satisfy researchers' personal, emotional, or intellectual curiosity, and as a ladder to furthering careers or getting a degree, is colonial and extractive, unethical, and dehumanising. Research needs to challenge the mainstream practices of extractive research to centre principles of 'relationships, connections, reciprocity and accountability' (Smith, 2021, p. xiv).

3. Exercise political reflexivity: A study by Abdelnour and Abu Moghli (2021) emphasises the importance of researchers, academics, and other actors working in situations such as mass displacement, conflict, colonialism, apartheid, and natural disasters to recognise that these are not ‘normal’ research settings; there are abuse, power disparities, and collective histories of violence. Those who work in these settings and conduct their work as ‘business as usual’ cause harm in the form of objectifying people and contexts, normalising violence, or silencing the voices of individuals and communities who are struggling under and against these conditions. In these settings, political reflexivity is crucial to identify, understand, and mitigate harm, and to challenge structures that marginalise people. Political reflexivity requires researchers to critically examine their positionality and privilege in relation to the geopolitics of the research setting, the epistemic privilege of marginalised participants, and the political implications of their work. Political reflexivity helps researchers move from being complicit with perpetrators and those who cause, maintain, and monopolise violence, to understanding and challenging the (colonial) underpinnings of violence through a focus on marginalised knowledge and reparation. Scholars for Palestinian Freedom (2021) reflected this theoretical understanding and called for political reflexivity in an open letter that stated:

Scholarship must [...] be ethical by centering decolonization and raising the voices of Palestinian scholars, as well as other interlocutors, so that they remain sources of authority and not merely objects of study. We believe that the critical theory we generate in our literature and in our classrooms must be backed indeed. Therefore, we affirm that it is no longer

acceptable to conduct research in Palestine or on Palestinians without a clear component of political commitment. It is no longer acceptable to study one fragment of Palestine and claim knowledge of the whole. It is no longer acceptable to speak over Palestinians or publish without citation of Palestinians [*sic*] scholars. Simply put, it is no longer acceptable to treat Palestine as a playground for intellectual curiosity while its fragmented nation continues to struggle for liberation. ([Open Letter and Call to Action, Scholars for Palestinian Freedom 2021](#))

4. Think reparations, global justice, and the linguistic regime: According to Sriprakash *et al.* ([2020](#)), we need to adopt a radical politics of reconstruction in education and development: a politics focused on global redistribution and reparation instead of incorporation. Rather than continuing to treat people as recipients of elite aid, the ethics of reparations, repair, healing, restoring, pluralism, and global justice should ensure that people harmed by governments or corporations receive justice. As part of reparative justice, the entire linguistic regime masking real issues must also be reframed. Discussions about decolonisation must include the issue of language. Instead of passively consuming development vocabulary, colleagues and students should be encouraged to think critically about the words used.
5. Reflect on positionality and our knowledge base: Positionality involves reflecting on our location in the geopolitics of knowledge production and its consequences. Bhambra *et al.* ([2020](#), p. 118) suggest that:

even while teaching the canon, reveal the geopolitical location of knowledge. That is, knowledge is always taught in a situated manner, allowing the students to recognise the geo-

genealogy to which they are being exposed and in which they are being trained, instead of assuming an abstract position of universality, of objectivity.

According to this view of positionality, knowledge is historically contingent. It makes staff and students more humble and open to dialogue with other perspectives ([Bhambra *et al.*, 2020](#)). This process requires reflection on the process of knowledge production and canon building: who selects the knowledge, who chooses the thinkers, and what historical and political contexts underpin these choices. It is crucial that researchers use their privileges to make space for critical marginalised movements to speak for themselves, instead of ‘taking up space’ and speaking on their behalf to advance career interests ([Kwakyee and Ogunbiyi, 2020](#)).

Conclusion

This chapter explored ToP as an anti-racist pedagogical practice that can be used in research. This approach aims to create spaces for co-unlearning and facilitate discussions about anti-racist research, global justice solidarity, and reimagining transformative practices. ToP can dismantle the notion that people who struggle against injustices need to be ‘saved’. It explores the role of those with power and privileges in maintaining systems of dominance by recognising their complicity, and critically engaging with how researchers can reverse the gaze, engage with racism, exercise political reflexivity, and acknowledge how existing inequalities benefit them and the harm they cause, such as objectification, silencing, and normalisation of violence. ToP also centres the need to approach international education and development as a means for reparations, restorative justice, accountability, and liberation rather than educating and researching the ‘Other’, offering charity, or fixing assumed inherent deficits.

Pedagogical processes involving ToP are messy and emotionally demanding. Those who have experienced discrimination, marginalisation, and racism leave with a sense of enthusiasm that they can find a way to challenge injustice in the institutions where they study and work. A ToP experience is much needed in an environment where those facing discrimination, marginalisation, and racism feel alone and constantly under attack, carrying the burden of educating and bearing emotional scars. For many, ToP is a healing experience, a cathartic space, and a transformative unlearning. As for those who benefit from inequalities and exclusions, some expressed their discontent by becoming defensive, apologetic, confused, or feeling guilty, while others became outraged and inspired to act in solidarity.

We realise that there will be pushback as the process of recognising privilege and complicity in violence and injustice is difficult and emotionally taxing. Yet, we believe that liberatory efforts to deconstruct

racialised, gendered, ableist, classist, and epistemic hierarchies should be at the top of the agenda of decolonising international education and development to avoid the increasingly flattened, watered down, and sanitised efforts that would only whitewash further violations and the interests of the privileged.

Questions for further discussion

1. How can ToP address pushbacks and resistance from individuals who feel uncomfortable, defensive, or guilty when confronted with their privilege and complicity in systems of injustice? What strategies can be employed to encourage engagement with these challenging emotions and reactions?
2. Considering the idea of reversing the gaze, how can researchers and academics shift their focus from studying ‘the other’ or marginalised communities as objects of research to critically examining the practices, assumptions, and privileges of those who claim to be doing development work?
3. How can we challenge extractive research practices and prioritise the voices and experiences of marginalised communities? How can the concept of political reflexivity be applied in the field of international education and development?
4. What specific actions can researchers take to avoid normalising violence, objectifying people, and silencing voices, while challenging the colonial underpinnings of violence and centring contextual knowledge and perspectives?

Notes

- 1 We use the term ‘racialised minorities’ as defined by Dr Deborah Gabriel, founder and director of Black British Academics ([Gabriel, 2016](#)). The term draws attention to ‘the racialisation of people of colour and serves to highlight the discursive power of whiteness. As such, the term is a critique of whiteness and therefore a form of resistance.’
- 2 As a sign of epistemic humility, the programme uses lowercase letters.

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9

The story circle interview method: the power of story as data

Judy Pryor-Ramirez

Key points

- The story circle practice is a legacy of the Black Freedom Tradition with roots in performing arts.
- The story circle interview method draws inspiration from the story circle practice and Latina feminist and bilingual education scholarship to advance participatory data collection approaches.
- This emergent interview method has been used in two distinct geographic communities in the United States: the Rio Grande Valley and New York City.
- The story circle interview method demonstrates promise to democratise knowledge creation, attend to power relations, and centre unvarnished stories as valid data sources.

Introduction

In 2019, at the first story circle I participated in, I told a story about my father. He was born in Richmond, Virginia, in 1944 at the all-Black hospital called St. Phillips. Upon his birth, my father was adopted by a notable Black family, the Pryors. They are descendants of Henry Pryor, a formerly enslaved person who led the establishment of Zionsville, a free Black settlement, in 1872 ([Nichols, 2010](#)). My dad grew up in this community from the mid-1940s to the early 1960s. I remember that I did not intend to tell a story about him, but when it was my turn to speak, it was the story that came to me. And that is the power of the story circle. A story circle brings together a group of people to listen to and tell stories. The story I needed to tell and hear was ultimately about freedom and memory. My story that day became one link in a chain of stories about remembering who we are.

Since then, I have been thinking about stories and their use in qualitative research because storytelling can be a powerful method of collecting data for social science research. As a participatory action researcher, I seek methods that include the community as co-researchers. By developing the story circle interview method, I created another way to collect data that aligns with the principles of participatory action research, namely research that directly engages community for co-learning ([Meredith et al., 2012](#)) and shifts the relationship between researcher and the ‘researched’ ([Burns and Cooke, 2011](#)). The creation of this new method feels vital to me as a researcher because it expands the possibilities of qualitative research and builds upon a practice steeped in social movement history. This chapter explains the origins of story circle practice as part of the Black Freedom Tradition to situate how I use it as a new interview method for data gathering and to share emergent lessons learned from using this method in practice.

Origins of the story circle

Story circles were born in the United States' South, just like me. Black young adult organisers from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), in collaboration with the Free Southern Theater (FST) ([Wallenberg, 2019](#)), developed the story circle practice. Founded in 1963 by Doris Derby, John O'Neal, and Gilbert Moses, FST brought theatre performances to southern Black communities to spark dialogue about the racial injustices of the time as experienced by 'poor Black southerners' such as voter disenfranchisement and racialised segregation ([Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee \[SNCC\] Digital Gateway n.d.](#)). They used story circles as a facilitation practice to structure post-performance dialogues. By breaking the proverbial fourth wall or talking directly to the audience, FST engaged audiences in exploring the performance's deeper meanings and relevance. In a primer about storytelling for justice, O'Neal and Holden ([2006](#)) explain story circles as a process that 'creates opportunities for African Americans in the black belt south to engage in art and social change activities to improve their quality of life' ([O'Neal and Holden, 2006](#), p. 1).

Story circles: a practice of power-sharing

From a socio-historical perspective, the story circle practice is undeniably intertwined with the Black Freedom Tradition and served as a tool for movement-building during the civil rights era. By observing story circles from an interpersonal perspective, one can see how they are a practice in power-sharing. Story circles bring people together equitably to listen to and share stories ([Davis, 2019](#)). Many elements point to power-sharing when we look at the components of facilitating a story circle ([Table 9.1](#)). Do you notice them?

Table 9.1 Story circle components source (adapted from Junebug Productions story circle process and guidelines)

Space

- Everyone sits in a circle

- Large groups are divided into smaller groups, with approximately three to eight participants

Roles

- Facilitator(s): introduce themselves and invite participants to introduce themselves at the beginning
- Participants: introduce themselves to their group and share stories
- Timekeeper: one participant per group helps to track time

Time

- Three to five minutes per participant for each seed story
- The total story circle time is dependent on how much time the group has
- Story circles are flexible; you can run one round for as little as 15 or 30 minutes or expand the session to several hours
- Time is dependent on the group's aim

Rules

- Participants tell their stories in turn, uninterrupted
- If a participant is not ready, they can 'pass' and can share their story before the circle is completed
- Tell stories, not rhetoric, opinions, or analysis
- Cross-talk or open discussion can happen after the story circle rounds are completed to clarify questions or generate themes
- The facilitator can also participate in the story circle

Agreements

- Active listening is more important than talking
- Storytellers and stories should be respected and not judged
- Stories that need to be told will emerge from the heart or gut, not the mind – do not overthink it

Visually speaking, story circles conducted in person look like a group of people sitting in chairs facing each other to form a circle (see the 'Further reading and resources' section). By organising the space in a circle, participants can physically see and hear each other. Ensuring we can see and hear each other supports full participation and generates a sense of inclusion and belonging. Next, by delegating roles, responsibility is shared for how to hold the story circle space. For example, the facilitator introduces the 'seed story' or prompt guiding each circle's storytelling. For robust cross-talk, having a common seed story that all small groups partake in is crucial to creating a shared experience across the larger group. The

timekeeper role is essential to ensure each participant can tell their story in the allotted time, typically between three and five minutes. Timekeepers are encouraged to be firm so that all participants can share a story. Ensuring equitable timekeeping is a practice of power-sharing. The rules invite participants to ‘pass’, which is another practice in power-sharing because it permits them to resist the pressure to perform storytelling. This means that the story circles encourage participants to tell ‘the story that needs to be told’, one that ‘will emerge from the heart’ ([Research Center for Leadership in Action \[RCLA\], 2008](#), p. 3). Collectively, the components, rules, and agreements make the story circles a compelling practice of power-sharing. Because of this, it is not surprising that it has travelled far and wide into various disciplines, geographies, and workplaces.

Contemporary uses of story circles

Story circles can build coalitions, facilitate community collaborations, enable difficult conversations, and create community archives. They give much-needed depth, nuance, and detail to understand individual and collective experiences. Story circles have been used in a variety of contexts such as the arts, criminal justice, community engagement, journalism, leadership development, and research. To understand the contemporary uses of story circles, I examined how they were used among three U.S.-based organisations: Capital Public Radio ([2018](#)) (journalism), The Color Line Project ([Yuen and O’Neal, n.d.](#)) (performing arts), and the RCLA at New York University ([2008](#)) (leadership development). I noticed commonalities in these organisations’ application of the story circle practice. Overall, they sought to ensure voices were heard, built community among participants, and moved toward action. In the case of Capital Public Radio, I observed that they used story circles widely and flexibly to give as many people as possible an opportunity to tell their stories about housing conditions. The Color Line Project embedded the practice in their process for theatre-making across nationwide sites. In the case of the RCLA, story circles were

an additional tool for planning and reflection in their community of leadership practitioners. One difference I observed across the organisations' use of this approach was the size of the story circle groups. The Color Line Project suggested smaller groups of between three and eight participants, while Capital Public Radio suggested larger groups of between eight and ten. Therefore, adapting story circles to the context and community is most important in applying this practice.

Story circles as anti-colonial praxis

Mvskoke scholar and professor Laura Harjo writes, 'Another tool in community work is an understanding of our relationality to one another and to the spaces and places we inhabit – as well as the legacies of settler impact upon these relationships' ([Harjo, 2019](#), p. 21). Because on the story circle practice's origins in the Black Freedom Tradition, I argue that it can be a tool for community work as Harjo suggests to challenge white supremacy culture (i.e., the belief that the ideas, thoughts, and actions of white people are racially superior to others and should control society) and dominant narratives about Black people and to support collective freedom through another way of knowing, being, and doing ([Martin and Mirraboopa, 2003](#)). Based on my experiences using this method, I find the story circle practice deeply connected to anti-colonial praxis for three reasons:

1. Oral tradition: In alignment with Mvskoke research tools, story circle practice is about 'decentering its focus from western settler colonial practices and re-centering on its local epistemologies and belief systems' ([Harjo, 2019](#), pp. 215–216). Similar to ancient and Indigenous practices of telling stories through word or song, story circle practice is based on oral tradition. The method does not rely on writing, opinion sharing, or perfect storytelling. Instead, as noted in the rules and agreements, this practice privileges oral sharing, deep listening, and stories from the heart.

2. Embodied practice: Story circles are a deeply embodied practice. O’Neal encouraged using ‘original recording devices’ when participating, such as ‘our ears, hearts, minds and bodies’ (Davis, 2019, p. 136). This emphasis on the relationship between the head and heart pushes back on the dominant culture privileging objectivity versus subjectivity, especially in research. Subjectivity is central to story circles, as is feeling the story in one’s body and letting it emerge.
3. Collective ownership: The story circle practice is not a proprietary enterprise but invites anyone to participate, as long as they acknowledge the rules of engagement and agreements. Anyone can facilitate and participate in story circles who is committed to the story circle practice’s rules and agreements as an act of power-sharing. This collective ownership thus invites people of all backgrounds regardless of race, class, and gender, among other social identities, to participate. From a disability justice standpoint, however, the fact that story circles are an auditory and oratory practice may disadvantage those who are deaf or hard of hearing or have a speech disability. In addition, because it requires sitting for a period of time, the practice could disadvantage individuals for whom this is difficult. Therefore, accommodations should be considered to create an accessible story circle space.

Because of the story circle’s anti-colonial praxis, I saw an opportunity to draw from this practice to create a data collection method for researchers who use participatory methods called the story circle interview method.

Origins of the story circle interview method

In 2020, just a few months into the global COVID-19 pandemic, I worked with a network based in Brownsville, Texas, located on the U.S.–Mexico border with its sister city, Matamoros, Mexico. Network members were

leaders of local non-profits, advocacy organisations, and concerned citizens. Brownsville and the greater Rio Grande Valley hold childhood memories for me. My grandmother grew up in a land-owning family in Matamoros, so we often visited family on both sides of the border. The experience of crossing the border to visit family has stayed with me for a long time because this is where I got my first lessons on citizenship and U.S. imperialism. Therefore, my personal relationship with the Valley and the people of the borderlands played a key role in how I came to create and situate the story circle interview method.

Drawing on the story circle practice felt particularly appropriate when I designed the story circle interview method for this civic engagement network ('the Network') with projects across the Rio Grande Valley to improve the lives of children and families living below the poverty line. By July 2020, it was apparent that COVID-19 was particularly ravaging racialised and immigrant communities such as the ones in the Rio Grande Valley. Black Lives Matter uprisings and national debates on race were reignited with vigour after the live video-recorded murder of George Floyd by a white police officer months prior – these events, along with an upcoming U.S. presidential election cycle, made for palpable tensions in the country's social and political climate. I share this context because the story circle interview method was born from a particular political moment in U.S. history and time. My positionality as a daughter of the U.S. South and 'Tex-Mex' borderlands are specific contexts and particularities that drove the creation of this method.

Intentions of the story circle interview method

The story circle interview method is useful as a way of knowing and being with a community through qualitative research. The intentions of the method, inspired by conversations with the Network coordinator I worked with in Texas, made it clear that the past strategic planning process was not only insufficient but also harmful, causing rifts among Network members

and leaving open wounds for members to stitch back together. I knew that further harm could not be an outcome. I thought deliberately about gathering data in a way that would not be intrusive and would amplify the Network coordinator's efforts to build trust across the matrices of power ([Collins, 2000](#)) within the Network. When thinking about the tools in my facilitator's toolbox, I could not stop thinking about story circles as a method for data collection. My intentions to create a method were threefold:

1. Engender full participation: I designed the story circle interview method with language justice in mind, a pre-existing practice of the Network. I trained facilitators to conduct the interviews in English and Spanish. The interview guide materials written and translated in both languages supported Network members in joining a circle that would best enable them to participate fully.
2. (Re)build a sense of community: Because of the past harm this group had experienced, it was necessary to situate this interview method as a distinct process from the previous one to initiate a new way of relating to each other during the strategic planning process. The story circle interview method is not intended to repair like other circle practices used in restorative and healing justice spaces. However, it can increase a sense of relational embeddedness ([Moran, 2005](#)) through storytelling, which I had hoped would rebuild a sense of trust and solidarity within the Network.
3. Excavate multiple truths and counternarratives: I wanted to create an interview experience that would engage more than the usual powerholders or gatekeepers. By using a train-the-trainer model, we intended to hear from as many people as possible through story, thereby excavating multiple perspectives and counternarratives to prevailing beliefs. This

excavation approach provides the researcher and community with many ways of knowing its history and current circumstances by recognising the intersectionality ([Carbado et al., 2013](#)) of the participants' lives.

The intentions I brought to creating the method were reflected back to me by the Network coordinator following a training session with her and other Network members, detailed in the next section. The Network coordinator shared that she believed this method would be effective to introduce the Network to a new process and bring about connection and 'good emotions', all the while collecting rich data from Network members.

The anatomy of the story circle interview method

The story circle interview method consists of two parts: 'testimonios' (testimony) and 'reflexión' (reflection). Drawing on Latina feminist scholarship about testimonios and reflexión ([Espino et al., 2012](#)), I applied the concept of testimonios to the storytelling portion of the story circle practice, while the reflexión concept informed the cross-talk component. I chose to use the Spanish words 'testimonio' and 'reflexión' in the method's design to make the traditional story circle practice culturally relevant to and reflective of the largely Spanish speakers among this Network's membership. My choice to blur the boundaries of Spanish and English languages in this method was a deliberate act of translanguaging ([García, 2009](#)) and centring the 'everyday people living at the borders of differences, whether these are cultural, epistemological, ontological, historical, social, economic and/or political differences' ([polanco et al., 2020](#)). This is my anti-colonial turn from western and settler logics much like Harjo's Msvkoke tools.

To facilitate the interview, participants first give testimonios in various storytelling rounds guided by a seed story or prompt. Instead of probing while they speak, participants are allotted time to share and refine their thoughts through multiple rounds of storytelling. The rounds can broaden or

deepen the inquiry depending on the research goals. The reflexión session allows more time for probing, clarifying, and initial data analysis via collective meaning-making. The story circle interview method can be conducted in person or online. Table 9.2 shows a sample of a two-hour story circle interview format. This method is flexible depending on the number of participants and research questions.

Table 9.2 Story circle interview facilitator's guide

<i>Time</i>	<i>Activity</i>
15 minutes	Welcome and introductions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitators introduce themselves • Participants introduce themselves • Facilitators describe story circle purpose, timing, rules of engagement, and community agreements and how the facilitator will relate to holding the process together • Facilitators answer any questions about the process
64 minutes	Testimonios: Story circle rounds (4 minutes per person for each round) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Round 1 seed story (16 minutes) • Round 2 seed story (16 minutes) • Round 3 seed story (16 minutes) • Round 4 seed story (16 minutes)
5 minutes	Break
25 minutes	Reflexión: Cross-talk and reflection <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants ask clarifying questions about each other's stories • Participants discuss commonalities and differences across the stories
10 minutes	Wrap-up and closing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitators conclude the story circle interview process with words of gratitude and appreciation and any next steps provided by the research team
Other notes	
Organisation: Zoom or in-person set-up	
Time: Two hours	
Roles:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitators: 1 per group (to take notes and keep time) • Participants: 4 per group • Translators: 1 per group as necessary 	

Case study 1: Rio Grande Valley, Texas

As mentioned, this method was developed for a civic engagement network in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas ('the Valley'). Funded initially by a major U.S. foundation, this sixty-five-person network sought to advance equity for children and families living along the U.S.–Mexico border in Hidalgo, Cameron, Willacy, and Starr counties. The Network organised explicitly on issues related to housing, health, labour, education, immigration, and civic engagement, which resulted in national, state-wide, and local efforts from Census 2020 outreach and advocacy against the border wall construction, to securing funding for re-paved roads in Hidalgo County. To complete an assessment of the Network's activities and outcomes, I used the story circle interview method as the main tool, and other methods such as document analysis and individual interviews with key stakeholders in the assessment phase. Using interview guides in English and Spanish, I trained six Network members via Zoom to serve as facilitators, to ensure Network members could participate in a circle in the language of their choice. Story circle interview groups were clustered by thematic issues and constituent groups such as housing, labour, Spanish speakers, and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex (LGBTQI+) issues. There were four rounds of online story circle interviews, each grounded by a specific seed story based on the research project's inquiry (see [Table 9.3](#)).

Table 9.3 Story circle interview prompts for Rio Grande Valley Network

<i>Round</i>	<i>Seed story</i>	<i>What we were listening for</i>
1	Tell a story about why you believe the Network's work is important for the Valley.	What is the Network's work? What does it look like? Why is it important?
2	Tell us about a time when you witnessed the Network living its purpose and mission.	To what extent the Network is activating its purpose and mission?
3	Tell us about a time when the Network was faced with difficulty and how it overcame it.	Stories about challenges and tensions and the Network's resiliency
4	Imagine the future shape of the Network in ten to twenty	Dreams for the future

years. Tell us a story that includes what it looks and feels like. Who is there?

Cross-talk or reflexión

Emergent themes, stark differences, and questions they had for each other; meaning-making

Ten story circles were held over three weeks via Zoom, with between three and four participants guided by a trained facilitator. Fifty-four network members participated (from sixty-five members), which was considered a success. I then analysed the story circle interviews over several months using thematic analysis ([Braun and Clarke, 2006](#)) and produced a report that supported the next phase of the strategic planning process. Many stories were about hope, resilience, and support, though recurring themes of care for each other and a deep commitment to improving the Valley undergirded these stories. The findings and recommendations from the report led to the Network dissolving and re-establishing itself under a new name and with funding resources that better aligned with its new mission, vision, and values, which are now more deeply rooted in the Valley's Indigenous history and culture.

Case study 2: New York City

A network organiser at a private New York City foundation contacted me in March 2022 to ask how they might work with their network members to gather stories about their experiences. This network comprised sixty cross-sector leaders in New York City who were committed to leveraging their time and talent to address the racial wealth gap in the most populous city in the U.S. The network was at a critical juncture in its life cycle of four years and the foundation wanted to uncover stories of relationships, collaborations, and initiatives that network members may not have previously told. Because I had successfully used the story circle interview method in Texas, I was confident that it would support their goal of uncovering untold stories.

I worked with three network members to integrate the story circle interview method into their quarterly retreat. Because the method was incorporated into an existing network structure, the design and execution of the story circle interview method had to be adapted and it differed from case study 1 in three main ways. First, due to the retreat schedule, there was only time for three story circle interview rounds instead of four as per the original design. Second, to save time, I served as the primary story circle interview facilitator instead of training a team to take on that role. Third, the story circle interviews were conducted in person and in English at a retreat site instead of virtually and in multiple languages ([Table 9.4](#)).

Table 9.4 Story circle interview prompts for New York City Network

<i>Round</i>	<i>Seed story</i>	<i>What we were listening for</i>
1	Tell a story about a time when you experienced the feeling of community or collaboration within the Network.	How collaboration and a sense of community are expressed in the Network – big or small
2	Tell a story about something you or another fellow did that would not have seen the light of day unless asked about in today's session.	Untold stories about relationships and collaborations
3	Imagine the future shape or activities of the Network in five to fifteen years. Tell us a story that includes what it looks and	Dreams for the future

feels like. Who is there?
Cross-talk or reflexión

Emergent themes, stark differences,
and questions they had for each other;
meaning-making

Eighteen network members of diverse backgrounds participated in the eighty-minute session. All participants were mid-career leaders from government and non-profit organisations working on housing, transportation, and community development issues, while others were from philanthropy, academia, and law. About two-thirds were women presenting individuals, and over a third were non-white presenting individuals from Black, Latine (gender inclusive term to describe someone with Latin American heritage), and Asian ethnic groups. There were three story circle groups with six network members each. A notetaker self-selected in each group and took notes from the conversations, which served as transcript for each group. Due to time constraints, the second round was truncated, and at the suggestion of the retreat organiser, we invited participants to engage in ‘speaker’s choice’. This meant that story circle participants could tell a story in response to the seed story for Round 2 or Round 3. After the testimonios, I facilitated a reflexión session to begin the process of meaning-making with the group.

Following the retreat, I analysed the story circle notetaker forms and reflexión session notes. Because of the speaker’s choice aspect, the stories collected in Round 2 were not congruent, so I shifted my analytical approach from thematic analysis to content analysis (Silverman, 2006), ensuring the rigour and validity of the stories captured in each round. The themes identified related to collaborative spirit, deep care, and desire for fellowship. Round 2 themes revealed particularly organisational issues related to internal vitality and external visibility. Pulling out these themes from the story circle interviews laid a foundation for network members to move forward into the next stage of their activities. One of those next steps was inviting me to conduct an in-depth research study about the network.

Lessons learned from facilitating story circle interviews

Days after the story circle interview method was implemented for the Voces Unidas group in Texas, I received an email from one of the interview facilitators who wrote,

just have to share: I just did my story circle and it completely blew my mind ... like completely. you all are amazing, thank you so much for leading us through this process of collective reflection and transformation. I am hard pressed to recount a time where a process so organically yielding such transformational experiences for everyone involved.

Her observation was that this method was generative for their Network members. On the other hand, an interview with a facilitator from the New York City Network, who gave permission to be named here, stated, ‘It was lovely being in circle and going around. It was not unfamiliar, because we had done some stuff like that. So, some of the feedback that I think people felt like, I heard ... was like, well, we’ve kind of done this. What’s new and different about this?’ (E. Conte, personal communication, 11 August 2023). As a result of having facilitated story circle interviews in two distinct settings, one being a Latine community straddling the U.S.–Mexico border and the other in New York City, a diverse, global city, here are some of the key lessons from the story circle interview method:

1. History and tradition matter: The fact that the story circle interview method integrates a civil rights–era theatre practice with qualitative research mattered to my research partners. The facilitator from the New York City Network said, ‘I remember you talking about it as a derivative of a tradition used during the civil rights movement. I think that was one of the things that attracted me most’ (E. Conte, personal communication, 11

August 2023). She went on to say that the method intrigued her because it aligned with their Network's 'movement-oriented values' (E. Conte, personal communication, 11 August 2023) and the work of their members. For social justice organisations or researchers committed to participatory approaches, this method expands data-gathering possibilities rooted in a social justice tradition.

2. The facilitator matters: Telling stories can often be an intimate and vulnerable activity. It can push people outside their comfort zone. I learned this lesson after facilitating the story circle interviews in New York City. I was an outsider brought in to facilitate this method at a retreat with participants who already had tight bonds and trust in each other. My outsider status cast doubt and mistrust and impacted participants' ability to participate fully. I observed that participants were reluctant (which a research partner verified) because my introduction to the method, while historically grounded and rigorous, was not the norm for the network, so this may have impacted their full participation. In contrast with this context, I found the facilitation in the Rio Grande Valley case to be more effective because network members were the ones who facilitated the story circle interview method. To address trust issues and respond to organisational culture, I am learning that this method may work best when participants and facilitators know each other and have trusting relationships. A pre-existing relationship makes it easier for participants to trust this potentially intimate and vulnerable process.
3. Telling stories is hard: My observation notes from both the Texas and New York City case studies indicate that participants were challenged by the invitation to tell a story as the rules state, as opposed to sharing an opinion. Many stories were interpretations of what happened rather than the story of

what happened. Participants often ran out of time when this occurred because they were both trying to tell and analyse a story, which might have been what they were most comfortable with. Therefore, facilitators sharing an example of how to tell a story is essential to model the rule, for those who need a bit more guidance.

4. A flexible and emergent method: This method was developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, so it needed to be a flexible way of gathering information. The story circle interview method can be conducted in person or online via video-conferencing tools such as Zoom. At a minimum, three participants are needed to hold a story circle for the testimonio and the reflexión sessions. Facilitators and research design teams can structure as little as one or two rounds or more, depending on how much time they have. Facilitators can also hold testimonio sessions separate from reflexión sessions. This flexible and emergent nature is anti-colonial because it is not about following the method with surgical precision. In line with the story circle practice, facilitators should feel free to do as little or as much storytelling and reflection as the community and context call for.

Conclusion: the story circle interview method's anti-colonial promise

Conducting research that invites research 'subjects' as co-researchers requires a deep understanding of one's positionality and relationality to the co-researchers and context. The story circle interview method is one in a spectrum of participatory methods rooted in an anti-colonial praxis. I have identified three promises that connect the story circle interview method to anti-colonial praxis.

1. Democratising knowledge creation: I wanted to develop a method that did not predicate me as the sole data gatherer. By training others from the community, I democratised who gets to conduct the research and is involved in the project. Participants can claim ownership of some part of the research process either as facilitators, notetakers, participants, or meaning-makers. These roles allowed a different form of relationality. The choice to include participants as co-owners of the research is anti-colonial because it goes against what traditional research tells us about who holds expertise and whose expertise is valid.
2. Attention to power: As designed by the Free Southern Theater, the story circle practice embedded a power-sharing practice. Because of this, the story circle interview method pays attention to power in the story circle groups. The time allotted for participants to share their stories enables equity in the testimonios session. The story circle interview method is an anti-colonial praxis of confronting relationality between participants. Each participant arrives to the story circle with their own social identities. While these identities and their companion power dynamics should be tended to by the

facilitator during the interview, these dynamics will not be resolved by the interview method as they operate in a larger power structure.

3. Unvarnished stories as data: Stories shared orally tap into an age-old human tradition. Whether they seem complete or incomplete, stories are information, and so these stories are data. This method privileges the stories of research partners and participants as critical and valuable information to be understood and analysed. Stories may seem messy or incomprehensible to the listener. Still, wisdom embedded in these unvarnished stories can tell us something about the research question if we listen more closely for meaning from the storyteller's perspective.

With these promises in mind, three ethical considerations should be highlighted. First, in democratising knowledge creation, the researcher–participant relationship may challenge institutional ethics committees, especially when participants are co-researchers as part of data collection. New researchers may want to consider how to frame the role of participants as co-researchers drawing on prior participatory action research projects at their institution or from the vast literature on participatory action research (e.g., [Burns et al., 2021](#)). Second, while tending to the power dynamics in a story circle, sensitive, trauma-inducing, or offensive information may surface in stories and cause a rupture in the story circle group. The researcher should ensure the facilitator's training encourages facilitators to address such situations immediately to protect participants. Drawing on the story circle practice rules of engagement and agreements as outlined in [Table 9.1](#) and any community agreements or norms relevant to the group's context, facilitators can address the rupture among participants. Overall, by being mindful of the ethical considerations involved in the researcher–participant relationship and the power dynamics in a story circle, researchers can ensure the wellbeing of all participants. Third, new

researchers to the method will want to explore ways to manage the common and often befitting conception that using stories for research is an extractivist practice. Jaime Gorman's (2024) chapter in the edited volume *Rights and Social Justice in Research Advancing Methodologies for Social Change* outlines emerging principles of non-extractivist research that draw from the decolonial and social movement literatures. These principles along with Gorman's insights about designing anti-extractivist research are one such starting point.

Looking ahead, I see an opportunity to explore the development of a data analysis process that is also participatory and anti-colonial to complement the story circle interview method. Participatory action research scholars (e.g., Wang and Burris, 1997; Torre *et al.*, 2012) have already developed and documented participatory analysis models. Traditional data analysis, such as thematic analysis, works well, but I see an opportunity to draw further on storytelling for analysis similar to how I created the data collection method. There is also a need to distinguish the story circle interview method from other 'circle practices' such as healing circles, restorative justice circles, and circle work (Graveline, 1998). While these practices bring people together in dialogue, future research with a sharper analysis of what the story circle interview method affords is critical. It is my hope that this method invites others to see the power and promise of stories as data.

Questions for further discussion

1. How might the story circle interview method be used in your community or context?
2. What adaptations might you need to make so that the story circle interview method best supports your inquiry and goals?
3. What data analysis methods would you use to pair with your use of the story circle interview method and why?

Further reading and resources

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Reflecting on a Teen Advisory Group in participatory research in South Africa

*Aviwe Baartman, Sesona Baskiti, Chelsea Coakley, Sibulele Dyobiso,
Yamkela Hlekani, Chumisa Jack, Luyolo Jack, Sinesipho Kwetha, Sandisiwe
Mafuya, Tebogo Malahlela, Hlokoma Mangqalaza, Yolanda Mapukane,
Mpho Mendu, Siphokuhle Ponoyi, Yusra Price, Mildred Thabeng, and
Lisanda Zanempi*

Key points

- This chapter came together using reflexive writing following a series of gatherings to discuss the role and impact of a research Teen Advisory Group (TAG) in project activities. The co-authors are a mix of researchers and young advisors from the TAG.
- The TAG played a crucial role in different health and wellbeing projects by integrating young people's insights across research stages, including data collection, analysis, and sharing findings.
- There is much potential for a research TAG to shift power dynamics to produce meaningful research outcomes when teams pay attention to the collaborative engagement process and the slow work that this involves.
- Based on our experiences, we make recommendations on how to bring young people together to form a research TAG and share the strengths and difficulties of this model.

Introduction

This chapter is a collaboration among young advisors (Baartman, Baskiti, Dyobiso, Hlekane, Jack C., Jack L., Kwetha, Mafuya, Malahlela, Mapukane, Mendu, Ponoyi and Zanempi) and researchers (Coakley, Mangqalaza, Price, Thabeng) in South Africa. It reflects the official ‘end’ of a long relationship between a group of young people and the Adolescent Accelerators Research Hub at the Centre for Social Science Research at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. The Eastern Cape Teen Advisory Group (TAG) has played a critical role in contributing to the Accelerate Hub’s insight into adolescent health and wellbeing. Recruited initially as adolescents living in the Eastern Cape, this group of young research TAG advisors have co-designed research, co-authored publications, and co-created national policy and informed policy implementation with the South African government. At its inception, an intention to meet only once grew into a long-term collaboration with TAG advisors to foster a social science research practice that tendered an ethic of care, to mitigate extraction and tokenism, and instead encourage collaboration.

A deep reflection on the genealogy, evolution, ethical and methodological approaches, and outputs linked to teen or adolescent advisory groups has been well documented by Gittings *et al.* (2021) and Cluver *et al.* (2021), and in an editorial by Sherr *et al.* (2022). In addition, contributions from TAG advisors were published in research areas related to adolescent livelihood, including adolescents in research processes, sexual reproductive health, and COVID-19 (Gittings *et al.*, 2021; 2022a; 2022b). This TAG aimed to develop a different approach to meaningful research and engagement with young people by (1) co-generating empirical data; (2) building methods ‘co-laboratories’ where participatory and arts-based methods are developed and tested in partnership with adolescents and young people; and most importantly, (3) shifting power dynamics within the

research process. All three aims are an ongoing process for the Accelerate Hub, as we reflect on in this chapter.

To identify the strengths and limitations of the meaningful engagements we experienced over the past few years, we must pause and reflect on what processes worked, what difficulties emerged, and how newer spaces can be created and improved with young people's input. The mess of collaborative research includes the difficulty we experienced collaborating across different backgrounds, languages (mix of Xhosa and English, which we have called XhoEnglish), and life experiences, and within the confines of university administration and budgets. As adults, the TAGers (a name that stuck) are now in a different phase of life and have gained experiences that no longer lend themselves to adolescent livelihood. Thus, the 'end' of the TAG group means that the connections we developed with one another are shifting out of research and into connections of friendship and mentorship that we hope to maintain over time. This chapter and our recommendations articulate a unique experience of having a research TAG as part of our collaborative model, to share insights for other research groups who are on similar journeys and might wish to integrate such a model in their participatory research design.

We have been part of this TAG for almost half a decade now. The 'conclusion' of the TAG necessitated a process of reflection on what being part of this group involved. The invitation to contribute to this book came at a time when the Hub's funding that supported TAG was reaching its end and the TAGers were ageing out of adolescence into different phases of life. To commemorate this 'end', we decided to put forward a set of recommendations on how to start, maintain, and conclude a TAG.

The chapter uses a tree metaphor to bring our reflections together. The tree metaphor started as a visual way for us to organise and analyse our data. We contextualised ourselves in the roots and described our respective lives as individual roots that contributed to our tree's groundedness and nourishment. We used the trunk as the main argument for our chapter and the branches as supporting sub-themes. Over time, the tree metaphor took

on new meaning for us. It represents who we are, where we are from, and why we are part of this TAG. The tree metaphor became a way for us to articulate visually and metaphorically what our collaborative chapter was about. This became particularly useful when we shared our chapter with a group of colleagues in our peer review session (detailed below). It became easier for all of us to analyse and see how the data moved from the roots to the trunk, through the branches and back again.

Situating the methodological process

A great deal of effort went towards the logistics of getting everyone to the same place at the same time for workshops, weekend camps, and other research meetings. In doing so, we considered a framework for doing research together called patchwork ethnography. In their manifesto for patchwork ethnography, Günel and Watanabe (2024) argue that the daily lives of people should not be lifted out of research as an extraneous, separate life. Instead, we need to research *with* our daily lives because we are, at the end of the day, people who have different priorities and responsibilities. These authors critique the anthropological approach to long-term research and immersion that supposedly validates a researcher's findings since they have spent time in their participants' environment. Günel and Watanabe (2024) argue that this is not the only means of doing meaningful research and that time and space purposefully set aside for dialogue and activities in research have an equal value to that of long stays.

For our reflection and writing process for this chapter, the daily lives of TAG advisors and researchers meant that we could not consistently see one another. However, we developed a means of engagement via workshops and arts-based activities with dedicated time and attention. A patchwork ethnographic lens fitted the logistical conditions of our collective process and provided us with a framework for meaning-making in our creative gatherings. Smolka (2021, p. 3) succinctly describes the nature of ethnographic work as 'patch[ing] different accounts of the world together' to bring 'the seams into view that tend to be obscured in journal articles'. It directs attention to the loose threads that stick out at the fringes, reminding us that our patchworks are always unfinished. In other words, our work was sewn together along the seams of our individual and shared experiences of the research TAG and presented as a patchwork that brings together a cohesive and embroidered quilt.

Part of a decolonial research approach, as scholars such as Moosavi (2020), Rasool and Harms-Smith (2021), and Ruiz-Trejo and Garcia-Dauder (2019) have pointed out, is the depth of reflexivity we must have as we critically engage with who we are in research, where we are doing our research, and which area of scholarship we are contributing to. This means that we must turn our attention inward, and bring to light how identity, positionality, and socio-historical, economic, and cultural factors, among others, shape our research practice, using a praxis of reflection that helps us articulate and comment on our individual and collective roles and impact. This came together through a series of what we called ‘gatherings’ that we held in 2023. These gatherings were set aside for us to come together, think together, discuss our experiences and perspectives as a group, and finally, in a slow-working fashion, produce this book chapter.

Running a research Teen Advisory Group (TAG)

The researchers' perspectives

The collaborative work that we tried to envision for the book chapter process brought a few reflections to the fore for us as a team. Our roles and responsibilities were, of course, informed by our job descriptions. However, the work and weight we had to pull into facilitating the book chapter process and for each other were shaped by who we were as individuals as well. Thabeng has a history and friendship with TAGers, having been part of engagements in previous years' workshops and camps. Both Thabeng and Mangqalaza are fluent in isiXhosa, which was the main language used to run our workshops. Mangqalaza supported Thabeng during workshops as a co-facilitator and with logistics when we needed to share the load. Price, who does not speak isiXhosa, did not facilitate as many discussions due to the language difference. Her role included tasks such as facilitating TAGers' and colleagues' approaches to activities for creating the book chapter, being the driver for work errands and home-consenting, and working on the data management plan and budgets. Coakley, who was based remotely in Cape Town, supported the team with budgets, liaised with line managers about the different decisions we made about the TAG, helped push back against regulations that we felt were outdated or inflexible, and when she was with us in person, made the logistical load lighter too.

In this experience, our positionalities within the chapter writing process highlighted how the power shift we would like to see in research is incremental, gradual, and also exhausting. In short, we held as much space as we could for the TAGers to define the book chapter development process. As a team, we had to mediate between TAGers and university ethics, rules, and regulations. Shifting power in research, as we have experienced in 2023, is also about facing power. It is a matter of pushing

back against overpowering structures or *ceding* the power that we have. Overall, this chapter in and of itself is a process that we present, not as a final set of guidelines for a perfect TAG, but as a functional one that is reflexive, responsive to young people, and transparent about how difficult (and worth it) all of it is to do.

The TAGers' perspectives

The roots

In our first gathering, we focused on two activities on who we are and how we came to be part of this TAG. The first activity was about creating a bio and the second activity was the River of Life (see [Denov and Shevell, 2021](#), for a description of the River of Life activity in research contexts). The River of Life is a visual drawing exercise that uses the characteristics of a river to tell a personal story. Characteristics such as the river's ebbs and flows, elements, and surroundings are used to represent our journeys towards becoming a research TAG. Our prompt was to tell a story of how we each came to be part of the TAG. Some chose to write their stories with colourful pens and flipchart paper instead of drawing a river. As long as each person told their story, they could choose how they shared that story. We drew our rivers and wrote our stories and presented them to the group. At times, it was an emotional process with lots of laughter, banter, and learnings from one another. At the end of our session, we created a collage of our rivers on the wall to form the roots of our collective story.

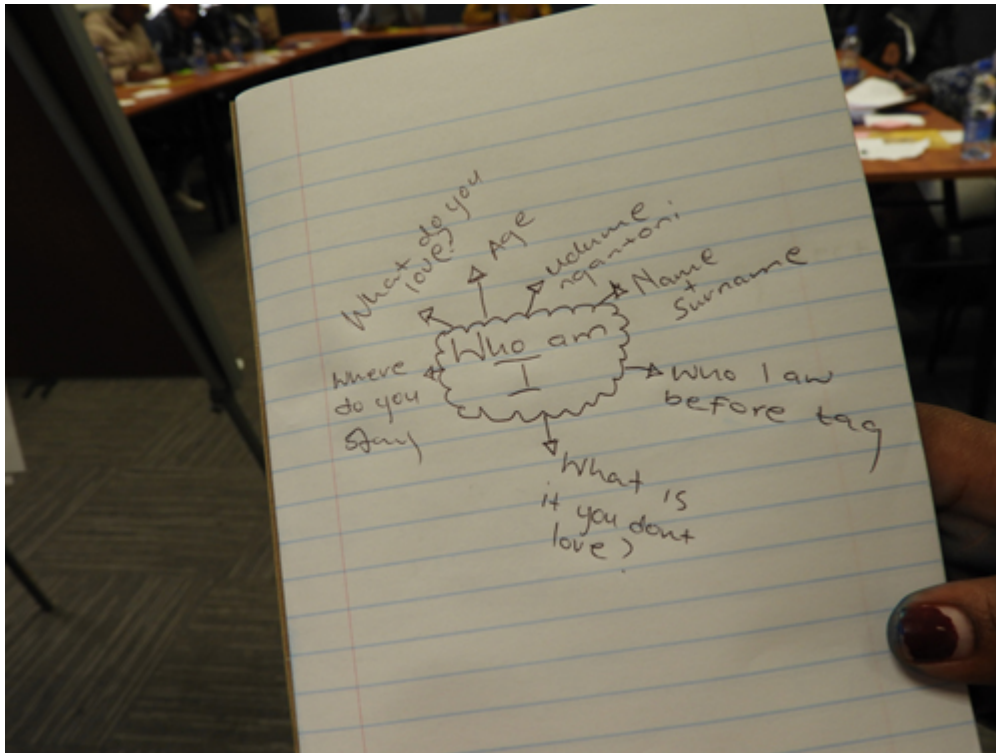


Figure 10.1 Co-creating prompts for individual bios.

Who are we?

We are a group of young men and women who met when we were still teenagers through the research projects Mzantzi Wakho and Hey Baby. Mzantzi Wakho focussed on issues young men faced and their experiences, while Hey Baby explored young mothers' experiences. We came together and formed a research TAG to focus on youth as a whole, with young advisors sharing their experiences in the geographical areas they were from. We were keen to find solutions to make things better for young people. We are now aged twenty-three and above. Some of us are young mothers.

As a research TAG, we mainly did community research looking at mental health, the experiences of adolescents and young people, and what they faced in their daily lives. When we come together, we share our knowledge on these circumstances and discuss how we are going to deal with these issues. We are the leaders of other youth in our communities. As a research group, we have grown past our teenage years. Our sole purpose

is to make other young people aware that there are better ways of making it through life's challenges. At this point, we are trying to find a 'conclusion' to all the work we have accomplished together.

Where are we based?

We are based in the Eastern Cape, East London, Buffalo City Municipality in Mdantsane. Ten of us come from different communities in Mdantsane, which is one of the biggest suburbs in East London. Two of us come from Duncan Village and one from Post Dam.

Why are we here?

The whole purpose of TAG was to prepare teen and young men and women early on to think differently and to equip them with the skills necessary to consider their choices when faced with life's difficulties. The TAG group is young and curious. We want to know what others think about an issue. It is a two-way information sharing experience: we like supporting young people who come to us for advice, and we also enjoy learning from older adults. One of our aims was to give input that would help organisations and government seeking solutions concerning young people. They need us to advise them. For example, we have been part of local non-government organisations (NGOs) and university research concerned with teen pregnancy and sexual reproductive health. Our advice and contributions have been presented at conferences and summits that focus on adolescent health and wellbeing, such as the Paediatric-Adolescent Treatment Africa (PATA) summit.

We have many ways to share this information: through acting, singing, dancing, drawing, and writing. We are passionate about young people's health and social lived experiences. We want our input to help form interventions and shape policies for young people to better support them: Nothing about us, without us!!!

The gatherings: book chapter process

To continue to adhere to meaningful engagements at the end of a great participatory research project, the book chapter process truly unfolded as a collaborative activity. We set aside considerable time for five gatherings to explore and develop activities to guide us on how we should write together. The fourth gathering was more structured because its focus was on understanding and developing the skill of analysis, which many were unfamiliar with. Part of our process was for shared leadership so that we maximised our combined skills to divide up the responsibility of holding and facilitating space for one another.

Gathering 1: Employability Conference (June 2023)

The first gathering, called the Employability Conference, focused on the transition of TAGers. We invited several organisations: a local entrepreneur from Thabo's hair salon; representatives from the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA), a youth and employment focused organisation; Equal Education, an activist organisation focused on equitable access to education in South Africa; and Youth Capital, focused on employment, social connections, and campaigns for youth employment. The TAGers enjoyed the opportunity to interact with these organisations.

Gathering 2: starting the book chapter (August 2023)

On day one, the research team introduced the idea of writing a book chapter together by explaining what this would entail and what would be expected of TAGers as contributors or co-authors. The researchers explained authorship and asked if TAGers would be interested to have their names included as authors. One of the outcomes of this discussion was that the TAGers wanted to know more about the editor, Caroline, and asked questions about what an academic book was, what would happen to the book once published, and where or in what contexts their contributions might be read or used. The second day entailed researchers giving an

example of how TAGers could tell their individual stories of being in a research TAG. The whole group (researchers and TAGers together) used the River of Life activity to depict the journey of their life using elements of the river as metaphors to describe life experiences. We divided ourselves into groups to brainstorm various approaches we could use when sharing our experiences, such as storytelling, singing, poetry, and drawing.

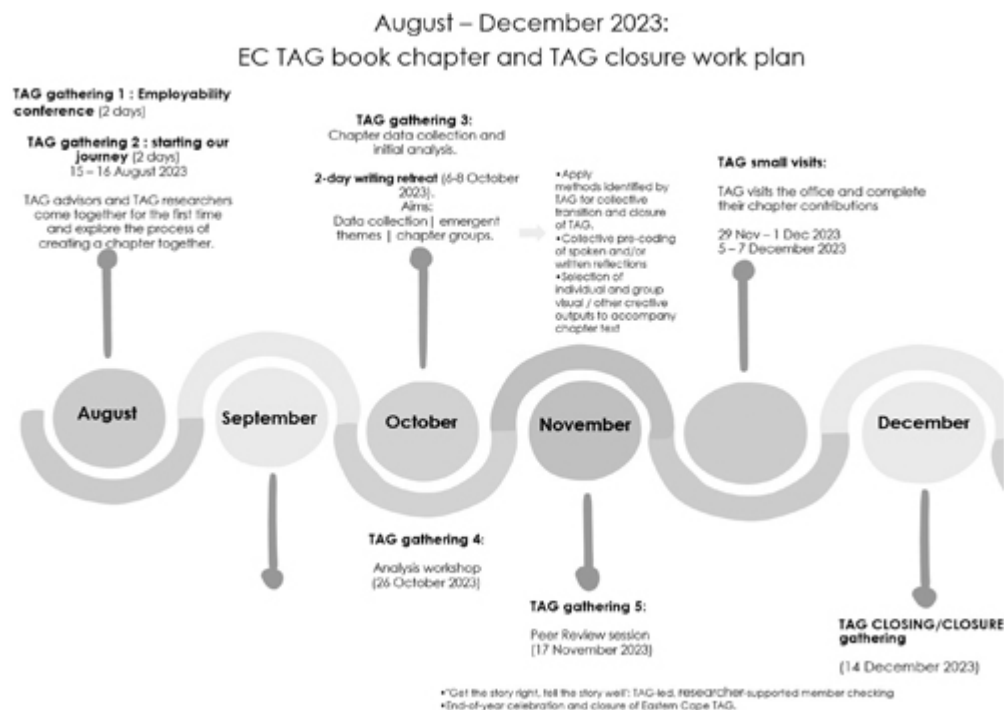


Figure 10.2 Book chapter process timeline and overview.

Gathering 3: book chapter writing retreat (October 2023)

We spent a weekend away in a town called Makhanda for a book chapter writing retreat to immerse ourselves without having to worry about travelling for the day, and to spend quality time with one another – we wanted to strike a balance between work and play. Staying together kept us focussed on the task and removed the time pressure for our sessions. We needed the flexibility of the retreat for our slow work process. Apart from the time spent discussing writing, the retreat was enjoyable. We swam in the rain and ate ourselves ‘dik’ (Afrikaans word for full). The caterers matched

our energy and fed us well. We arrived without towels thinking that they would be provided, only to find out that it would cost 100 Rand holding deposit per towel. We spent time talking, making, dancing, and arts-ing.



Figure 10.3 The River of Life activity.



Figure 10.4 Individual experiences of TAG sticky note activity.

We worked over two full-day sessions. On the first day, we established a group code of conduct and shared expectations for the weekend. Two

TAGers offered to facilitate the sessions for that weekend, which meant that Thabeng and Price could spend their time participating in activities and mentoring the two main facilitators. Facilitation came naturally to both TAGers; Price's role was to help them plan their activities and Thabeng's role was to support them while they ran the group sessions. We spent time reflecting on our individual and collective experiences of the TAG and explored different ways to share and engage with others. For group discussions, we sat in a big circle with Thabeng as our scribe in the middle. When we needed to think with others, we split into two groups, used flipcharts and sticky notes, presented them to one another, asked each other questions and combined our work. For individual work, we spread ourselves across the venue, choosing different media and papers, then came together, shared, and ensured that feedback was critical yet caring.

The second day was about reflecting on what could have been done differently. We had a session with Anathi, an external counsellor from partner organisation Mzantsi Wakho, who did a personality test activity with us and talked about conclusions and endings. We looked at three questions: *What could have been done differently?* *How can the research TAG be improved?* and *How should this TAG be concluded?* We ended with artwork that represented our individual experiences of the weekend and discussed the TAGers' future as a group.

Gathering 4: analysis day (October 2023)

We analysed data from gatherings 2 and 3 as a group with an introductory step-by-step process we created to provide a comprehensive guide on participatory data analysis, and to promote critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and social empowerment among young people and youth groups. This helped us dive more deeply into the data we co-created as a group for validation, adding our own perspectives and finding meaning in these data. The analysis sessions covered relevant topics such as session objectives, explaining data analysis and discussing participatory data

analysis, and conclusions for the research TAG. Following a discussion on data and their codes, we analysed the data from gatherings and their benefits for empowering young people and informing recommendations.

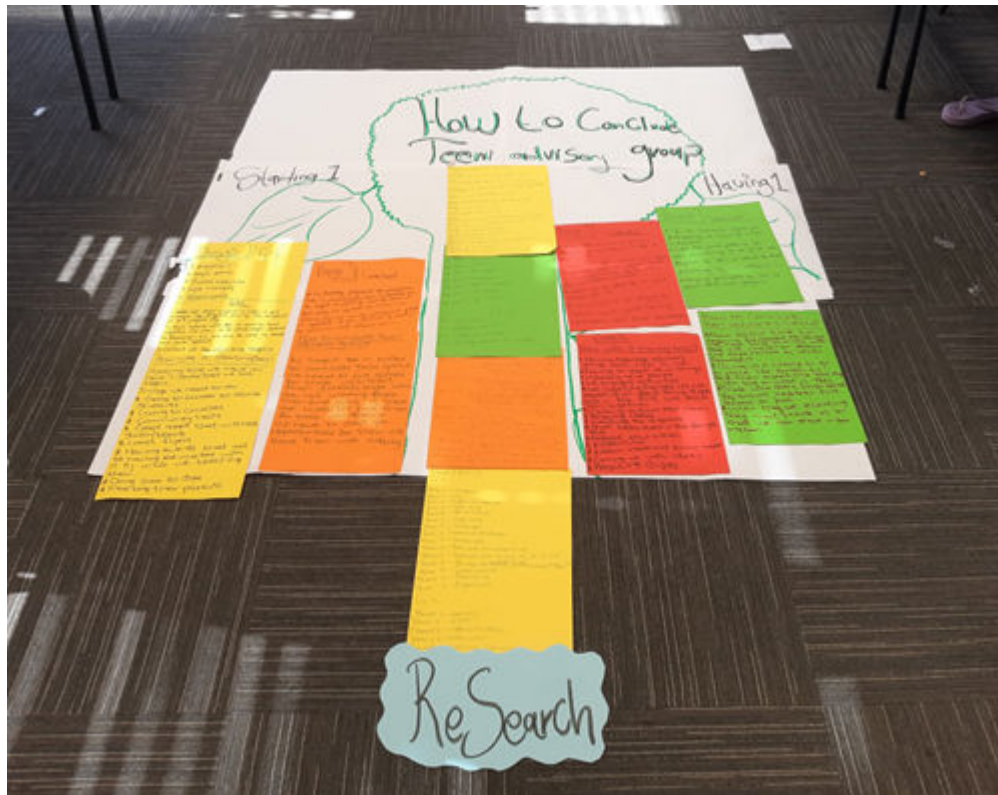


Figure 10.5 Analysis day 2 tree template.

We first identified the messages conveyed in the River of Life activity and self-portraits, to advise researchers and young people on how to conclude a TAG based on our experiences. We used the concept of datasets as codes formed from common messages, with examples related to the group's interests or familiar contexts. We also used graphic wall walks of the data we created, flipcharts, and sticky notes to illustrate the purpose and effectiveness of these tools in conveying messages and recommendations. We discussed the importance of data visualisation in facilitating understanding and communication, including basic techniques such as using

A3 sheets and encouraging participants to experiment with different visualisations from a sample dataset.

The activity involved facilitating a group discussion on data interpretation, encouraging critical thinking, sharing observations, drawing conclusions, and discussing potential applications for decision-making. We also had a reflexive discussion about data analysis and learning outcomes, challenges faced, and interesting and valuable aspects, before summarising key takeaways related to the importance of data analysis in everyday life.

The analysis session emphasised the importance of creating a safe, inclusive environment for learning, using simple language and clear instructions, and encouraging questions and discussions. This process suggests the importance of adjusting difficulty levels based on age and prior knowledge, adapting sessions to the group's interests and experiences, being flexible, and promoting teamwork. We noted that sticky notes, flipcharts, and artwork were effective for troubleshooting technical issues and ensuring that clear visual representations of the data captured would be easily available for analysis.

Gathering 5: peer review session (November 2023)

The researchers knew that the book chapter would undergo a peer review process, which would be new for the TAGers. We thought that an internal peer review session with colleagues they were familiar with might be useful. As a group, we first collected data on ourselves and our experiences to analyse together. This is where the tree metaphor helped us organise our ideas. We came together the day before the peer review session to consolidate our points and assigned presentation roles. Then, in a two-hour session, TAGers presented the chapter structure and content to five colleagues. We prompted reviewers with some questions on flipcharts and invited sticky-note feedback for us to take on board. The questions we asked were:

- What would you have liked to hear more or less of?

- Is there a central argument or message being carried across?
- Is our process being communicated clearly?
- What is missing and how can we improve by adding to or strengthening what we already have?
- What advice do you have for TAGers as new lead authors of an academic chapter?

We achieved the aims of this session, which were for TAGers to present their work and receive feedback similarly to an academic peer review process and for us to reconnect with and invite those who were part of previous TAG engagements to give us advice or insights. The peer review session was our final large group gathering before the final TAG closure day.

Small visits: finalising our contributions (November–December 2023)

TAGers joined the researchers in small groups of three to give their final contributions for the draft on authorship, ethics (especially when using their real names), and completing the chapter contributions using writing, art, or other media such as song writing, poetry, or drawing. The final activity was a TAG closure gathering where the group parted ways in research terms but committed to continuing to co-author and staying in touch beyond the project.



Figure 10.6 Chapter and feedback wall.

Recommendations for starting a research Teen Advisory Group (TAG)

To recruit TAG members or advisors, researchers must first create roles for themselves. They must have a clear purpose for the group and offer training for advisors. To find a diverse group, they must visit community gatherings held, for example, at a local stadium, and engage with schools during assembly and clinics. Local organisations that employ youth counsellors can help with the recruitment process, given that young people visit such organisations to access youth-related services. Researchers can also use flyers and local community radios to share information on the purposes of a research TAG, the activities that members can expect to engage in, and how they will benefit from this engagement.

Once potential advisors are identified, researchers can organise to visit the young people's homes to introduce themselves and the research. Researchers and former TAGers can go door to door in the township to meet families with teenagers, leave their contact details, and then organise a follow-up visit after some time. When starting a TAG, researchers could create social media pages to engage with pregnant adolescents and youth. Facebook remains a popular platform for young people and has a lite version that does not consume a lot of mobile data. Since teenage pregnancy has been a significant part of some TAGers' lives and they have been involved in research concerning pregnant learners, this group of young girls has become a significant focus of TAGers. Because of these experiences, we have a soft spot for the topic of teenage pregnancy and the young girls who need spaces of support.

The TAG can be used to host roadshows where young people sing and perform or showcase other artistic talents. Young people should be the ones at the forefront, speaking and introducing the research TAG and some of their experiences when recruiting new TAGers, instead of (older) researchers.

Our experience with the research TAG

We have learned a lot about ourselves individually and as a group through TAG engagements, and we can now see the improvements regarding who we were before we joined the TAG and who we are now. We can see a difference in how we communicate with each other. For example, we can brainstorm ideas and together come up with solutions to the challenges we face in our communities. We discovered that we could express ourselves in different ways to voice our individual opinions and tell our own stories and still be able to participate and work together as a group.

This TAG has created a safe space for us to come together, and by doing so, we learned that our opinions matter and our challenges and issues need to start with us talking about them and coming up with solutions. We believe in the mantra ‘Nothing about us, without us.’ With TAG engagements, we matter. What we have to say matters, which is why we feel like the journey has been fun, and joyful, and we are happy about our participation. TAG engagements made us feel at home and happy to be part of the activities, and, most importantly, we got so excited about spending time with each other and sharing good times because we are now close and good friends within and outside TAG engagements.

We live the challenges faced by young people in our communities, and we witness these challenges, such as high rates of teenage pregnancy, which we have come to normalise. But at TAG engagements, we had a space to talk about these challenges within our communities, discuss how we could overcome them based on our lived experiences, and share our perspective in terms of what could help address specific challenges such as reducing the rate of teenage pregnancy.

Activities

One of the best activities we came to love because of how we developed our communication skills is when we got to present our group and

individual work from TAG research activities. Some of us were initially shy, not confident enough to speak in front of other people, but looking back, we can notice the growing confidence within us and how comfortable we are to speak or even perform arts in front of other people.

When we engaged in artwork activities, we enjoyed being creative and learned so much about ourselves and how to work with each other in a group, and by doing so, we learned how to respect each other and the kind of people we are when we work as a group. We shared ideas because we come from different communities, and we can learn from each other during TAG workshops and camps. Getting together and spending quality time dancing, playing games, and painting on T-shirts to refresh our minds and bodies while doing TAG activities made us confident to fully participate in the research activities and lead them. Examples include going to schools, community events, and parks to recruit new participants, or sharing our experiences so that other young people could understand what we learned from our experiences with TAG.

Data sharing

We can communicate information on TAG research topics with other members of the group and with other researchers. This allows us and other researchers to think critically about their own data, and we learn something new because of our information sharing. We exchange information with one another through remote online participation and in person at TAG conferences and seminars. We are now confident and able to lead and share knowledge about the difficulties that young people encounter, as well as coming up with solutions. We might even go further by interacting and sharing knowledge with other young people and academics using media such as radio interviews, billboards, and cooperation with South African network providers such as Mobile Telecommunications Network (MTN).

Everyone has a voice

Sharing ideas can generate new ideas and perspectives. We are comfortable sharing information by starting with a question such as *What is our view or perspective on the research topics or questions?* It is important to create a safe space and give young people time when asking questions, because everyone is talented in their own way and there are many ways to answer a question. We learned that we can answer questions in our own way. As young and curious young people, we are eager to find solutions. To bring solutions, we need to be exposed to new ideas. As one of us said, ‘I share how my life is; researchers learn and come up with ideas that can be solutions; this is because I shared my role and ideas through sketches, art, singing, and writing.’

Hiccups

We did experience what we called hiccups, such as arguments and disagreements, because we had different opinions and views during group work and discussions. However, we created a common ground of understanding for our differences in opinions, especially when discussing solutions to challenges we faced in our communities. During our engagements, we followed a structure on how we conducted TAG activities by starting the day with ground rules that we all agreed on and followed. The ground rules helped us decide together how we wanted to participate and what was not allowed so that everyone would know what to expect. Rules included that there was no judgement, no right or wrong answers, respect for one another, listening to each other, and keeping our phones on silent so that everyone could meaningfully participate. We worked hard to understand that not everyone faced the same problem at the same time. Initially, when we hardly knew each other, we struggled to understand our differences and the challenges we faced because everyone portrayed different emotions in the group.

Earlier in this chapter, the researchers mentioned how shifting the power dynamics required them at times to face power or cede power. A significant

part of our process was the discomfort that the research TAG process and collaboration brought to the procedures and mechanisms of the university. When we had to predict outcomes, finances, time frames, or resources that went into the gatherings to meet institutional demands, our answers most of the time were along the lines of ‘We will have to wait and see.’ Often, out-of-budget expenses came from unexpected changes in our logistics or someone’s circumstances, leading to additional expenses that became necessary to cover.

Time engaged in this work is a precious resource that is underestimated in the context of university research timing, procedures, data management plans, scheduling, and finances. The slow work we need does not please the high-paced work of the university. At times, it almost feels as though participatory work cannot co-exist with current university procedures and mechanisms. But to create change, we must unsettle what has become a ‘culture’ of research and over-productivity and discomfort, even though the discomfort we may create for others will feel like a risk we are taking ourselves.

After each gathering, the researchers had to learn how to manage the ever-changing situations of TAGers and themselves through incremental learning following mistakes, misunderstandings, and miscommunications. For TAGers, they were part of a process that required them to exercise more agency and take on more roles and responsibilities. Navigating the various situations of ‘newness’ together will take some time to digest because everything we did together, we created together.

Rewards and acknowledgement

We loved and enjoyed our engagement with each other through TAG research activities, and we felt motivated when we got small rewards and acknowledgements for our participation such as certificates, toiletry packs, airtime (mobile credit that can be used to make calls or buy mobile data), emergency food vouchers, fieldwork sacks, and the different venues and

locations for TAG activities. This kept us interested and we felt appreciated for our time spent participating in the project.

Closing a Teen Advisory Group (the tree trunk)

It's our time to become facilitators because we had a long journey with TAG and we want to show our experiences to other teenagers. We would want the chance to go to schools to tell them about our journey with TAG and what TAG is. When they are recruiting, they must include us so that we can share information. [This is especially [for] those who did not finish school, so that we can help them find schools or jobs. To do this, [we] recommend contracts to learn more about research and it is important to leave TAG participants with skills and opportunities to start their own project when TAG is concluded ... We would like to bring our values of nothing [about] us without us to research and other young people. When a project concludes, it is important not to end it only, but upgrade on what we were when we joined TAG so that we can continue to help others. (Peer review session, concluding TAG presentation in 2023)

On the last day of our book chapter-writing retreat, we arranged our chairs into a familiar circle so that we could talk about our recommendations for a research TAG. Mildred sat on the floor in the centre with three flipcharts, each with their own heading: Different, Concluding, and Better. In the gatherings leading up to this session, we had spent a great deal of time reflecting on our experiences of being part of this TAG. We asked ourselves:

- How could a TAG be done differently and what recommendations would we give to others?
- How should a TAG be concluded?
- What could have been done better so that those we work with can refine their approaches for a TAG?

Using the tree metaphor, we divided the chapter into smaller but interconnected parts. The tree trunk, as the centre holding the branches, was our final contribution on how to conclude a TAG.

TAGers' final reflections

Chumisa: 'TAG saved my life. If it had not been for TAG and the relationships with other TAGers, I would have been so stressed, alone, thinking I was the only one dealing with life's troubles.'

Tebogo: 'I learned a lot about myself and how to think freely by learning how to brainstorm with team members during activities, and this helped me a lot and even helped me during job interviews to be able to express myself better and communicate better.'

Sibulele: 'One thing I love about being part of the advisory group is the love and support we as TAG members have for each other, and because we have been together for so long, we also became good friends. We check on each other and advise each other when we are stressed about life, so for me, I have gained a family from TAG.'

Luyolo: 'I am a quiet person and shy, but when I am with other TAG members, I feel free and can express myself without being shy because I have grown to know them better.'

Yamkela: 'I love everything about TAG and the time I get to spend with other TAG members because we know each other well enough now that we are friends even outside TAG gatherings.'

Sandisiwe: 'What I love about TAG is that I learn a lot of things based on youth and teenagers ... I love the people that are in the TAG and the energy that we have and the love that we share every time we meet. I just love the fact that they are helping us with a lot of things because when I started knowing a TAG, I was not in a good space, but now I can tell I am living, I am happy, and I have more experience ... It was great, it was not boring because we were talking about things that we knew, and some of them were happening in front of us and some were happening to us. And it was very exciting to be in a TAG group, learning new things, seeing new people, learning about things that we don't care enough about, having ideas, and sharing some in front of a group and learning to talk in front of people.'

Sesona: 'For me personally, TAG was my escape place for peace of mind. It gives me the chance to forget my real life because sometimes at home there are fights between my family, and even worse, they shout and beat me if I make them angry, like not doing the house chores on time. But I am happy I was part of the advisory group because some of the members go through what I go through, and we can support and motivate each other to not give up in life. So, I love TAG because of that and the friendship I have with other TAG members.'

Aviwe: 'I love spending time away from home because I am always at home, and it can be stressful to do nothing and stress about where your life is going. So, when I go to TAG workshops, I get a chance to spend time with other young mothers like me and have fun.'

Mpho: 'Being part of the advisory group was good, and it helped me a lot to learn about myself, and I became a good mother to my child from learning how other young mothers in TAG teams cope with early motherhood.'

Sinesipho: 'My best friend and I met through TAG workshops, and that is one thing I loved most about being part of TAG: that I ended up having a friend for life, which shows how connected we are as TAG members.'

Siphokuhle: 'In TAG, I learned about how to work as a team and produce solutions to problems faced by young people such as us, and I enjoyed working in a team and having fun while we worked together.'

Yolanda: 'I love peace and when people get along; in my community, people always fight, and it is hard for them to get along. So, when I am at TAG workshops, I find peace because we as TAG members get along and enjoy being together. Being part of TAG has brought me peace by making space for me to hang out with my peers and have fun.'

Lisanda: 'One thing I love about TAG is having the members as my friends today. After so many years, we have come to know each other well and support each other. Even when we are not at the TAG workshop, we still communicate and hang out with each other.'

Conclusion

In their discussion on the decolonial ‘bandwagon’, Moosavi (2020, p. 333) draws out a moral imperative for the scholar who believes in decolonial scholarship and practice to use a ‘heightened reflexivity amongst those of us who are advocates of intellectual decolonisation in much the same way that we expect other scholars to become more introspective about their intellectual outputs’. As a group, we took the time to reflect on our experiences and for the researchers, it was a chance to be critical of research practices with young people – a chance to take what was learned in this book chapter process into other research spaces. We conclude this chapter with recommendations from the TAGers’ perspective. First, create spaces for young people to be more involved in research. This includes planning, recruitment, mentorship, facilitation, and the overall transition from being advisors to being researchers. Second, help young people transition out of a research TAG and find jobs and schooling or further education opportunities. Third, create contracts for young advisors to participate and learn more about research. Leave them with a new skill set to start their own projects or be part of ongoing research. Finally, stay connected. Even though a TAG may conclude, staying in touch while everyone moves on with their lives is important.

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We would like to acknowledge and thank our colleagues Jane Kelly, Elona Toska, Yanga Dipa, and Leslie Gittings for being part of our peer review session and giving us insightful feedback on our chapter. We would further like to thank Lucie Cluver and Elona Toska for innovating the TAG and bringing it to life within the Accelerate Hub so that adolescents and young people are actively part of the Hub's research. The TAG is an ongoing innovation within the Hub and will continue its iterations with different groups of young people in hopes that adolescent research is informed directly by adolescents and young people themselves.

Questions for further discussion

1. In what ways can ‘slow work’ in research help shift existing mechanisms and regulations of research in university contexts?
2. What kinds of opportunities and limitations can emerge from a Teen Advisory Group?
3. What does meaningful adolescent engagement and research look like to you? Paint a picture.
4. In the context of participatory research, the researcher inevitably channels a lot of energy into their work, which creates fatigue and exhaustion. How would you describe the relationship between self-care and participatory research?

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Conclusion: nine provocations for anti-colonial research praxis

*Caroline Lenette, Kaira Zoe Alburo-Cañete, Crystal Arnold, Lieketseng
Ned, Adreanne Ormond, Yusra Price, Judy Pryor-Ramirez, Elelwani
Ramugondo, Charishma Ratnam, Mildred Thabeng, and Gabriela Villacis
Izquierdo*

Preamble

We are women scholars from vastly different backgrounds who came together in November 2023 to co-inform this conclusion. Our deliberate strategy to slow down and think carefully about what core anti-colonial values we want to impart in this book is firmly grounded in our respective research praxes – these are intimately connected to our positionalities, which combine privileges and marginalised identities.

We identified nine provocations for anti-colonial research praxis at a time when we experienced the deep-seated currents of coloniality flooding national and international socio-political contexts. We felt the colonial violence of elections where conservative, regressive, and right-wing governments triumphed, and of the refusal to formally recognise First Nations peoples. We witnessed large-scale and intensified colonial brutality against the people of Gaza and Palestine, and we cannot comprehend how such a belligerent occupation paired with public commitment to a genocidal and ethnic cleansing campaign is still a possibility. We are outraged that a genocide can be enabled by settler colonial solidarity and the total failure of the international community to stop this catastrophic outcome.

We did not want to be passive witnesses to such acts of colonial violence. We chose to use our privileges as academics, scholars, advocates, writers, artists, and researchers to dedicate space to the values that inform our work and ways of being, to speak back to this violence. We *know* that these will resonate with others who are struggling to grasp how anti-colonial work can be meaningful in current contexts. This matters because it is simply not possible for us to work differently.

These provocations are not meant to convey a ‘unified voice’ because this is impossible, nor was this ever the purpose of this book. A collective and co-informed conclusion is one way of demonstrating solidarity and how we reject colonial norms that define most research, writing, and publication practices. We are aware of the privilege to write with outrage without fear

of censorship. Thinking together was the salve we needed in the face of uncertainty.

As a point of departure, we are uneasy about using the term ‘provocations’ to share these core values, noting that all colonial-based terms bring up different connotations. We could not find a better word to convey the importance of what we aim to achieve here.

We lament the lack of attention to the more-than-human and the destructive impacts of colonial violence on nature and cultural heritage. Our existence is dependent on nature, land, and Country, and our praxes must reflect these connections to a greater extent.

We acknowledge the chapter authors who wanted to contribute but were unable to do so because of competing responsibilities, heavy workloads, and advocacy commitments.

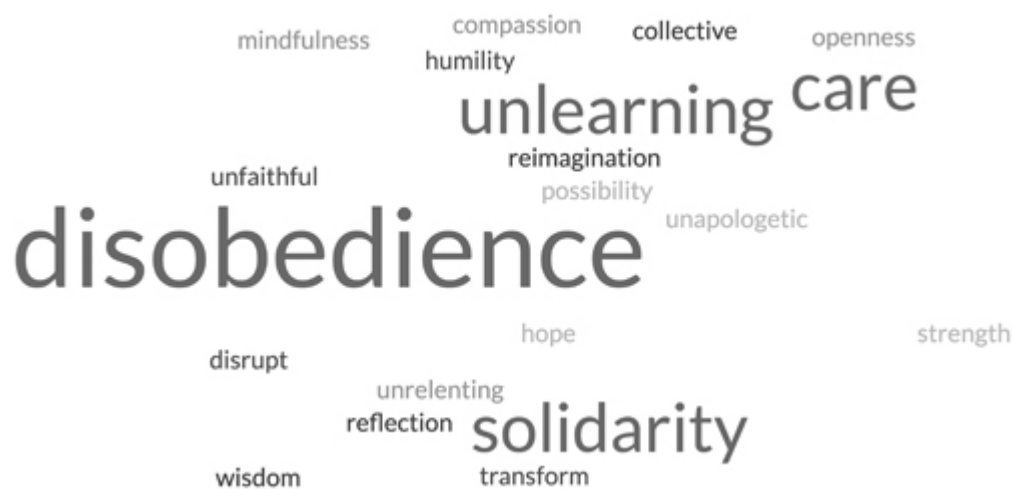


Figure 11.1 Word cloud of collective values.

1. We choose to reject coloniality

Our research praxes reflect close alignments and strong commitments to rights, justice, and lived experience. We refuse to be complicit in the whitewashing and misappropriation of anti-colonial praxes as mantras for career progression. The change we seek in research cultures and environments requires deep engagement with problematic hierarchical or top-down ideologies, infrastructures, methods, and administrative processes that continue to serve the colonial agenda. These do not align with the praxes outlined in the book and in fact are often in direct contradiction. When we are able to clearly identify how these problems manifest in our respective contexts, we can then determine how dynamic, collaborative, and purposeful anti-colonial work and collaborations can have the most profound impact. We recognise our collective responsibility to do much more to address colonial research systems within and outside institutions.

We want to move beyond simply acknowledging our privileges because this is not action-oriented enough to reject coloniality. We refuse to accept the weak ‘decolonisation’ commitments that research institutions are fond of, which do not aim to (and consequently do not) address epistemic injustices, entrenched racism, and multiple forms of discrimination and exclusion. We can no longer afford to be satisfied with diluted measures.

2. We acknowledge our own limitations as we continue to learn

We practise self-awareness as part of anti-colonial work and we know that we cannot address all the problems linked to the colonial underpinnings of research, given their entrenched nature. Nor do we claim to have resolved (or to be able to resolve) all the disciplinary tensions we encounter. We know that it is not always straightforward to think through and address the ethical challenges that arise because of our anti-colonial and decolonial stance in contexts that are not welcoming of such values and practices. We can often doubt ourselves, situating problems within us rather than within oppressive systems. But we are committed to ongoing reflexivity rather than ignoring those problems – this is not an option for us. We remain open to new learnings and rich sharing of diverse perspectives as we have experienced for this chapter. Unlearning means pausing and reflecting on our strengths and limitations. As a collective group, we create new wisdom together.

3. We recognise the exhausting nature of this work

Our commitment to anti-colonial praxis amid challenges and within structures that are resistant or opposed to this knowledge means that we are constantly pushing back against powerful systems. We are regularly engaged in difficult conversations – this labour is often invisible and goes unrecognised. The work is arduous, demanding, and often lonely, isolating, and disheartening. The potential to burn out is significant. The more anti-colonial knowledge and scholarship we produce, the more we feel that colonial thinking is reinforced with profound consequences for our ability to continue this work. We are constantly disillusioned and hurt by the apathy of those we thought understood what meaningful anti-colonial work entailed. Despite this fatigue, we refuse to accept this context as the norm. We are tenacious and determined to protect time and space to dialogue about those issues to support one another and find solutions together. This might be the only space where we can share thoughts we cannot express elsewhere.

This exhaustion extends to writing about our praxes for publication. Many of us have experienced the weight of translating knowledge and praxis in the written form, including for this book, to satisfy anglo-normative expectations. We often make difficult decisions about what to include and exclude, how to constantly explain what might be unfamiliar to others, and what words best frame our knowledges and experiences. But some aspects of our work are not translatable. There are many things we still do not or cannot say. We cannot capture everything through writing – many things will remain unsaid.

4. We recognise our strengths

We feel reassured by the knowledge that we have immense capacity and ongoing strengths to prevail in the face of oppression, humiliation, exhaustion, and marginalisation. This is especially true of First Nations peoples who have resisted erasures time and time again and are still here despite persistent colonial violence. We do not see ourselves as victims or helpless. Previous generations have had to contend with complex socio-political situations and institutional silencing and constraints. Future generations will no doubt face similar problems and complexities. We respond with creativity, kindness, solidarity, knowledge, wisdom, care, listening with intent, humility, safety, and renewed determination. We seek these values beyond institutions because they are often markedly absent within.

5. We all have the potential to be complicit

We are not immune from replicating and reinforcing harmful colonial structures and practices, and indeed, many of us have benefitted from the very structures that inflict violence upon others and ourselves. Complicity cuts across disciplines, institutions, countries, and funding structures. Through self-critique and reflexivity, we recognise our limitations and our own need to unlearn, as we navigate disciplines and systems built on colonial tenets. Even when we explicitly situate our work within anti-oppressive research frameworks, we know that these can deliberately hurt, exclude, and humiliate others. We reiterate the impetus to centre care in our research frameworks and practices.

6. We know the risks of disrupting norms

While we exercise our privileges as writers – as part of paid employment for most of us – we are also deeply aware of the risks as scholars who do not fit neatly into institutional structures. These are often unsafe spaces where we cannot bring all that we are. We know the consequences of being unfaithful to systems that serve the interests of the majority. But we cannot shy away from naming the risks that racism, sexism, hetero- and gender-normativity, ableism, ageism, white privilege, and precarious visa status entail. Even when we are part of institutions of knowledge, we cannot be protected from many of those risks – and often, institutions are the very entities that inflict colonial violence and create risky environments. We can sometimes be punished severely for speaking out and explicitly naming problems. We choose to continue to disrupt norms because the risk of not speaking up is even greater.

7. We share acts of resistance

For us, writing is a powerful way to exercise epistemic disobedience and model new research practices for the next generation of scholars. We claim this space without fear of being labelled as radical or unreasonable. We believe in radically (re)imagining what future research cultures and environments should be like. To do so, we recognise the importance of documenting acts of resistance. Those of us with more privileges can create new structures and platforms to gather evidence of this resistance, to be shared across contexts and over time. One example is by contributing resources on First Nations and anti-colonial research methodologies to the online Anti-Colonial Research Library. However, such initiatives might not work for practices that are unpublished or cannot be documented in the written form or using audio-visual means. We are conscious that we can inadvertently create new barriers with each initiative that seeks to address the impact of epistemic injustice.

8. We create anti-colonial solidarities

We feel strongly about the imperative for our work to reach as many people as possible who might be engaged in anti-colonial work and struggling with institutional constraints, risks, and disillusionment. We aim to create supportive communities of like-minded people online and in person, where we can flourish and expand our thinking without fear of expressing feelings and expanding ideas. We demonstrate profound respect for different approaches to anti-colonial work because we do not aim to appropriate praxes or take them out of context. While we recognise the strengths of collective over individual paradigms, we aim to retain individual voices amid collective thought.

9. We invite critique and dialogue

We extend an invitation to readers to dialogue with us, individually and collectively. We encourage respectful contact to continue this conversation, to provide constructive critique and reflections on our work, and to share different experiences and acts of resistance. Our aim is for those provocations to reverberate around the world and create an impetus for new solidarities and safe spaces for ongoing dialogue. This is part of a committed process of anti-colonial mobilisation that is too urgent to ignore. We commit to using this publication to bring diverse groups together in conversation about what we should do next.

We do not know what world will receive this book upon publication, but we expect that some of the problems that plague current times will be amplified. The future also holds new possibilities that we are yet to discover, and we are excited about this prospect.

A collective purpose

As we co-wrote these provocations, the value of collaborative thinking and collective action to build connections and support one another across different contexts became apparent. We had a shared experience of deep thinking on the issues we name above, which, up to that point, we had not discussed explicitly with one another. The provocations were spontaneous and structured at the same time because they were present in our collective consciousness well before we sat down to develop this chapter. We all had firsthand understanding of how difficult and painful it can be to work towards actively dismantling institutional power dynamics such as white privilege and the colonial underpinnings of knowledge production and research methodologies.

Readers, we chose a ‘list’ format to present these provocations to facilitate your engagement with this material. Our hope is that the process of reading, pausing, reflecting, and reconfiguring your own understanding will be ongoing. We encourage you to return to this list as often as needed, use it to guide individual and collective critical discussions on practices and aspirations, and share it widely.

We end with a poem, a gift in response to these provocations.

‘Enlightened Storm: Healing Insights from Women’

by Crystal Arnold (2023)

Father Sky, an electric Storm,
Energy for Mother Earth, inform,
Through us Women here, wisdom is born.

Mother Earth has sung out in need,
Gathering Women to lead.
From lands, waters, and skies diverse,
We immersed.

Our truths aligned,
Our spirits bind.

Each Woman, a Tree,
Rooted in sovereignty.
Within each ring, our wisdom is held,
Forever, we cannot be felled.

Though we grow tired, we are strong,
Trees keep singing their song.
Unveiling truths in every line,
Tree's message in our design.

We stand against the colonial sweep,
Echoing the medicine, that Trees weep.
Through storms in Father Sky, our voices soar,
We are protectors at our core.

Branches, like arms, shading kin,
It is time for you, reader, to begin.
Unaffected by policy and law,
Living Mother Earth's Law.
Trees, they shield and respect,
Never colonise or project.

Within the forest, our ancient teachers reside,
A tree of change, systems should abide.
When destruction and separation climbed,
Storm's howl echoed; tales unwind.

Unity found in Storm's embrace,
Nature's solace, in every space.
Find your path to connection and embrace,

Look and see Tree's face.

Through Father Sky, Storm entangled with the Mother,
Words come like Rain, Sister, and Brother.

In such chaos, this message unfurled,
Born from Storm, this wisdom world.
Let us unravel your sight,
Shift your mind, and let your Spirit ignite.

How can Mother Earth help us to heal?
The violence and destruction to the people is clear.
Trees, Storm, and Father Sky hurt too,
We must learn from them what to do.

To heal, let's merge as One,
All beings under Grandfather Sun,
Cleanse our minds, unbind the dis-ease,
Please listen to Trees.

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