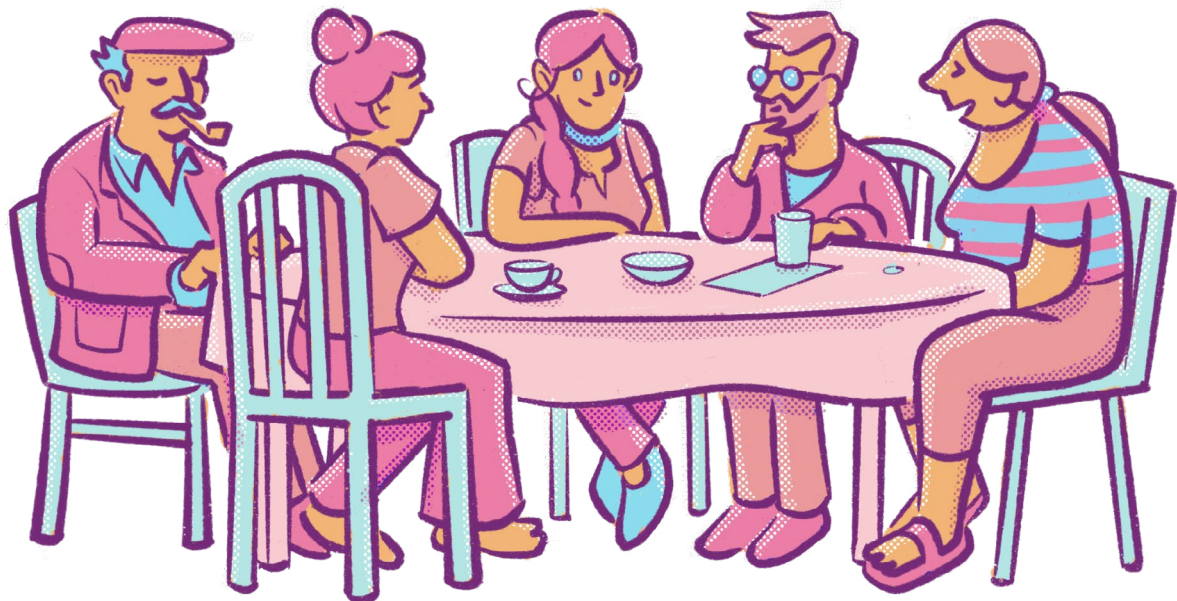# Decolonising Praxis:
A Researcher's Handbook

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1 Introduction

"Research has been one of the most powerful tools for the oppression of Indigenous peoples, and the production of knowledge about Indigenous peoples has often been motivated by the goal of controlling and subjugating them"

(Smith, 1999, p. 1).

While resources on decolonization and higher education have proliferated in recent years, and rightfully so, these tend to focus on learning and teaching.

Instead, this resource focuses on how we might decolonise our research practices considering the power research has to legitimise and shape knowledge (for better, or for worse), which then forms the basis of our teaching.

As Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith's above quote highlights, academic research has long been shaped by colonial world views, reinforcing knowledge hierarchies that privilege Eurocentric ways of knowing while marginalizing or erasing Indigenous, Black, and Global South epistemologies.

Decolonising research is not simply about inclusion of subjugated knoweldges—it is about challenging the deep-seated structures of power that continue to shape what knowledge is valued, how research is conducted, and who benefits from it.

In a world powerfully shaped by ongoing colonial legacies, decolonisation in academia is essential for fostering more just, ethical, and representative knowledge production.

This resource was born out of a 1-day 'Decolonizing Praxis' workshop organized and facilitated by Dr Carly Bagelman (Education) and co-facilitated by Dr Sreya Datta (University of Leicester) in The Bluecoat, Liverpool.

This workshop was attended by Hope academics from 10 disciplines as well as a third sector organisation (Liverpool World Centre) who contributed their thoughts on decolonising praxis in their fields.

This resource will share some of the workshop activities and present some additional ideas for evaluating our research through a decolonial lens. In particular, it encourages us to consider the ways our work currently reflects colonial practices of extractivism, hegemony, and positivism - and how it could it instead reflect decolonial values like reciprocity, relationality, epistemological disobedience. It proposes some ways we can evaluate and reimagine concrete aspects of research such as the ethics process in the spirit of decolonizing our practice.

Decolonising our work and institutions is a contested and ongoing process - this is just one small gesture towards fostering a research culture rooted in social and epistemic justice.

How Faculty Can Use This Handbook

Self-Reflection: As researchers, we can use the materials in this resource to spark reflection on how our research methods, assumptions, and relationships align with colonial knowledge production or challenge it.

Reframing the Research Process: If aspects our current research reflects traits of colonial knowledge production (e.g. extraction, positivism), this resource indicates some ways can actively work to reframe our methods, positions, and relationships to make them more relational, reciprocal, and representative of many ways of knowing.

Dialogue and Collaboration: This and other resources can help us to engage with scholars and communities whose knowledge systems and ways of being have been marginalized to cultivate a decolonial research environment.

### Defining Colonisation and Decolonisation in Research

Colonisation refers to the historical and ongoing processes by which imperial powers and other coercive forces seize control over people, land, material and immaterial resources, imposing their socio-political, economic, and epistemic systems.

Colonisation is not just about physical occupation—it also extends to the domination of knowledge, where Western epistemologies are positioned as superior while Indigenous, African, Asian, and other ways of knowing are dismissed as inferior or unscientific (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986; Smith, 2012). This has commonly been expressed through academic research.

Decolonisation, in the context of research, is the active process of critiquing and dismantling these colonial practices, which deepen marginalisation and influences what gains academic credibility and power.

Decolonisation insists on just and representative research. This involves unsettling dominant epistemologies, amplifying marginalized voices, and restructuring academic practices to be accountable to historical and ongoing inequalities as well as to the communities they engage with (Mignolo, 2011; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Crucially, Tuck and Yang write that decolonisation is not a metaphor. In the case of decolonizing research, moving beyond the symbolic change requires material and structural changes in how research is conducted, funded, disseminated, and applied.

2 Where does research *take place?*: Place and land acknowledgements in our work
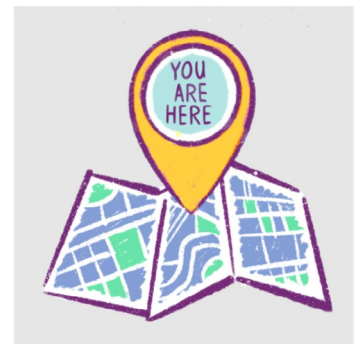
A place or land acknowledgment is a formal recognition of the Indigenous or historically displaced peoples whose land a researcher is working on, or an acknowledgement of the colonial legacy of a particular site.

Originating from Indigenous-led activism in settler-colonial states such as Canada, Australia, and the U.S., land acknowledgments aim to identify historical and ongoing colonial dispossession while affirming the continued presence and rights of these communities (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Smith, 2012).

In research, land acknowledgments can serve to ground our work in specific political geographies as a way to challenge hegemonic knowledge production, recognize histories of violence, and commit to ethical, place-based methodologies.

A concrete example:

When opening the Decolonizing Praxis workshop at The Bluecoat, Dr Bagelman invited Bryan Biggs (Bluecoat's Director of Cultural Legacies) to give a tour of the space. He identified how the building is deeply connected to the transatlantic slave trade, as it was funded by Bryan Blundell - a slave trader and Mayor of Liverpool.

This tour exemplifies a practice of land and place acknowledgment by explicitly situating the workshop within the colonial and historical legacy of the physical space where the discussions are taking place. Rather than treating the workshop setting as a neutral space, Mr Biggs explicitly connected the building's history to colonial slave trade, highlighting its origins in exploitation and racial violence. By acknowledging this history at the outset, the tour created space for critical reflection on how institutions continue to benefit from and are connected to colonial legacies (Bhambra et al., 2018). This sets the stage for discussions on reparative research, ethical methodologies, and the fair redistribution of institutional resources.

How can I engage in land/place acknowledgements in my own work?

In developing your research methodologies, you might reflect on how your institutional location (e.g., being funded by a UK university with colonial ties) impacts your relationship to the land and people involved in your research.

In addition to your institutional location, you may reflect on where you conduct any fieldwork, and the specific relationships you have to the land and people there.

Consider how all of these relationships will shape your approaches to ethics, collecting data, analysing data, writing and disseminating your research.

You may consider including an explicit land acknowledgement in your research activities and publications.

(Above) Bryan Biggs starts his tour of The Bluecoat inside a gallery room, explaining the direct connection of this site to colonialism.

Land Acknowledgement Resources:

A resource on land acknowledgements in settler-colonial states (eg. Australia or America):

https://www.amnesty.ca/activism-guide/activism-skills-land-and-territory-acknowledgement/

A resource on land acknowledgements in a colonial metropole (eg England or Holland).

https://research.kent.ac.uk/centreforindigenousandsettlercolonialstudies/2020/10/16/welcome-to-empire/

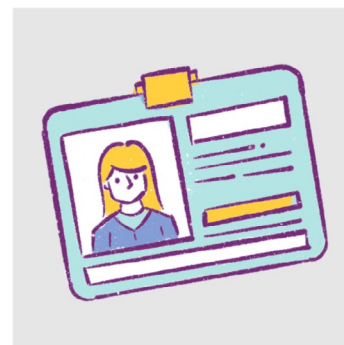Video relating to land acknowledgement, epistemic violence and research

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oWjewpB6UX8

(Above) Workshop participants gather in a row to listen in on Bryan Biggs' tour of The Bluecoat, where he discusses archival images.

3 Researcher Identity & Decolonising Research

In decolonial research, positionality refers to a researcher's awareness of their own social, cultural, and political position in relation to the ideas, issues and or communities their research focuses on. It requires critical reflection on how factors such as race, class, gender, nationality, and institutional affiliation shape the research process, influence knowledge production, and impact the power dynamics between researcher and participants (Chilisa, 2019).

Recognizing positionality is essential for conducting ethical research, as it challenges the illusion of neutrality and objectivity that has historically underpinned colonial and positivist research traditions that have done harm to many (Smith, 2012).

To explore our positionality in the Decolonizing Praxis workshop, Dr Bagelman led participants through a framework developed by Maori scholar Hēmi Kelly based on the longstanding Maori practice of pepeha. Pepeha is the Maori practice of introducing oneself in relation to the land and ancestors that are the conditions for being.

Specifically, the pepeha connects individuals to their whakapapa (genealogy), whenua (land), and iwi (tribal identity). It typically references mountains, rivers, ancestral heritage, and community affiliations—emphasizing a relational, place-based understanding of identity rather than just personal or professional status. The framework below is a 'culturally safe' framework developed by Hēmi Kelly for non-Maori peoples to use and learn from without participating in harmful appropriation.

Instead of saying, *"I am Dr. X from [University], researching [topic],"* a non-Maori researcher using the culturally safe pepeha is encouraged to reflect on their own relationship to land, ancestry, and institutions, making visible their positionality in the research process (Smith, 2012). At times, this can highlight the gaps in settlers' knowledge of their own ancestry and geographies, as well as a gap in settlers' knowledge on whose traditional territories they live on. The pepeha can therefore prompt a critical reflection on positionality and what that might mean for research.

Pepeha ā tauiwi me pākehā – Culturally safe use of pepeha

Nō aku tīpuna, engari… I tipu ahau i te maru o te maunga o I te taha o te awa/moana o I te rohe ā-iwi o	My ancestors come from but… I grew up in the shelter of Mt Next to the river/sea In the tribal area of I am

Example:

My ancestors came from Eastern Europe
But…
I grew up in the shelter of Mt Washington
Next to the Oyster River
In the tribal area of the Komox First Nations peoples
I am Carly Bagelman

In this BBC podcast a non-Maori scholar (Professor Alison Phipps, University of Glasgow) shares her elaborated version of a pepeha (referred to in this episode as a 'mihi' a type of greeting that can include pepeha).

http://www.listenersguide.org.uk/bbc/episode/?p=p02nrtq1&e=p096hx7m

(Start 1:44)

Tree activity

Dr Bagelman led a symbolic and embodied activity to underscore positionality and the importance of place in our work. Each researcher was asked to choose a tree from their home that is significant to them. For example, workshop participants identified: apple tree (England), cedar tree (Canada), mango tree (India), banyan tree (Kenya), and oak trees (Wales). We then shared reflections on decolonizing practice in turn - the speaker held a piece of yarn and then tossed it to the next speaker. What resulted was overlapping yarn that symbolised a rhizome network connecting each tree and ourselves.

By choosing a tree from their home that is personally significant in the activity, researchers acknowledge their own backgrounds, and relationships to place. Like the pepeha, this also acknowledges our 'more than human' relatives. This contrasts with positivist research traditions that erase the researcher's subjectivity in the name of objectivity (Mignolo, 2009).

By using trees as personal symbols and yarn as a visual representation of interconnection, the exercise reinforces that decolonial research is not about standing outside of history and place but about being deeply embedded within them, ethically and relationally. Instead of viewing research as something that is done **"from nowhere"**, this activity makes researchers conscious of the **cultural, historical, and geographical lenses through which they produce knowledge.**

Western academia often frames researchers as **independent scholars competing for knowledge production** (Bhambra et al., 2018). But, the act of **tossing the yarn and creating a shared web** seeks to highlight **collaborative, collective knowledge-making**. It visually represents how **research is not a solitary endeavor but an entangled process shaped by relationships, histories, and shared responsibilities.**
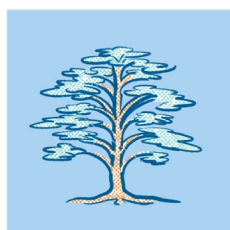
(Above) Image description: Workshop participants engage in the tree activity over a table of notes and tea.

Personal researcher vignette: Dr Sreya Datta's relationship with coloniality

An early recollection of my education as a relatively affluent, middle-class, upper caste student in an English-medium school in the metropolitan city of Kolkata, India...

I was in the third grade. It was a day like any other. The teacher walked in, and I can still remember the slightly triumphant expression on her face. She announced to the class, "from today, the class shall have a language monitor. Their job will be to make sure that in class everyone speaks only in English.

If anyone speaks Bengali or Hindi, they will report it to me." I was selected. At that age, I was jubilant with the petty power and favour shown to me by the teacher. I 'caught' my first offender soon after I became the "language monitor". She was my friend. I still remember the twinned emotions of a perverse pleasure and discomfort. The pleasure dissipated long ago; the discomfort has not left me still.

I turn eighteen in two months. I enter the gates of Presidency College (formerly Hindu College), Calcutta. I am one of the select few who has made it into the grounds of this elite institution after an intensely competitive examination. The system of humanistic education includes the study of everything ranging from the Bible to Old English poetry to Restoration Comedy to 'critical theory' which includes Postcolonialism and Poststructuralism. We are not taught the history of how the institution came to be what it is in its current form, or how the discipline of 'English Literature' came into existence.

My education at Presidency University and Delhi University, two of the premier public institutions in the country, prepare me to apply for a PhD position in the UK. I teach myself to write a language that is legible to the argumentative, stake-claiming structure followed in most UK HE institutions. As one of the few PhD students of colour in the Department, I become aware of my marginalised identity. I begin my teaching career facilitating seminars for the undergraduate module on 'Postcolonial Literature'. I have a sense I am meant to represent someone or something, or, more accurately, represent myself as someone.
(Dr Sreya Datta)

This personal story illuminates the deep entanglements of colonial legacies in knowledge production **while also highlighting the** complex, shifting identities of researchers **as they navigate different educational and institutional spaces. It speaks to how** language, power, and exclusion **operate in academia—both in the Global South and the Global North—and why** positionality matters in decolonial research.

Reflective prompt: How do we make ourselves legible to the world through our research?

Walter Mignolo (2011) introduces the concept of epistemic disobedience, arguing that scholars from the periphery must resist the imperative to translate their knowledge into Western paradigms. Instead, he calls for decolonial approaches that foreground alternative epistemologies without seeking Western validation. Yet, institutional pressures often force marginalized scholars to strategically perform legibility to secure funding, publication, or recognition.

Spivak on Epistemic Violence

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) famously writes in Can the Subaltern Speak? that marginalized voices, particularly those of colonized women, are often unheard—not because they are silent, but because their speech is rendered unintelligible by dominant epistemic frameworks.

The Western academy's insistence on particular modes of knowledge production acts as a form of epistemic violence, silencing those who do not—or cannot—translate their experiences into recognizable academic discourse.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o on Linguistic Colonization

In *Decolonising the Mind* Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) critiques how Western academia privileges scholarship produced in English (or other colonial languages) while devaluing Indigenous languages and oral traditions. Scholars from marginalized backgrounds are often compelled to write in English or French to gain legitimacy, even if these languages do not adequately capture their concepts, meanings, or lived experiences.

4 Adda as a model for research, learning and teaching

Dr Sreya Datta presented the Indian practice of Adda as a fruitful model for participating in the workshop, and beyond this, as a model for good reciprocal discussion that can be used in teaching and research.

She explains:

> **Adda** = a place where people gather for conversation or an act of informal conversations among a group of like-minded people. The word adda denotes both a place and the action itself.
>
> To give adda, or adda deya in Bengali, actually means the situated activity and the participation in the activity itself.
>
> Adda is thus both a mediated speech genre and a discursive practice through, and in which (hi) stories are told and contested." Prantik Banerjee,
>
> Adda as a cultural discourse of the Bengali Bhadralok's provincial cosmopolitanism, in J. Singh and I. Mukherjee, eds. *Posthumanist Nomadisms across Non-Oedipal Spatiality*

How Can Adda Be Integrated into Decolonial Research?

Some widely-used Western research methodologies—especially in data collection—tend to favor structured interviews, surveys, and focus groups that prioritize efficiency, objectivity, and extractive data-gathering.

By contrast, adda offers a relational and decolonial approach to engaging with participants, particularly in contexts where knowledge is traditionally oral, collective, and experiential.

Moving from Extractive to Relational Knowledge Production

- Traditional research interviews often extract data from participants without reciprocal engagement.

- Adda fosters a co-creation of knowledge, where researchers and participants engage in non-hierarchical dialogue.

- Instead of rigid Q&A structures, conversations evolve organically, reflecting the concerns and priorities of the participants rather than the researcher's prior agenda.

- Adda allows for multiple voices, interruptions, and cross-talk—all of which resist the linear, extractive logic of traditional academic research.

- This also aligns with epistemological disobedience (Mignolo, 2009), which encourages scholars to move away from Eurocentric research norms and embrace local and marginalised knowledge practices.

- Shaping Ethical and Reciprocal Data Collection

- Researchers engaging in adda must also give as much as they take—meaning they should share their own insights, vulnerabilities, and perspectives, rather than just recording others' voices.

Practical Application in Research

Example: Suppose a researcher is studying urban displacement in Kolkata.

Instead of conducting one-on-one, structured interviews, the researcher could invite participants to co-organize informal adda sessions in community spaces like tea stalls or local clubs to explore the underlying issues together.

The conversation would evolve organically, with participants taking the lead in determining which issues matter most. The researcher does not just "collect" stories but participates in meaning-making, acknowledging their own positionality.

The adda, in this scenario, might not produce "neatly coded" data, but it will capture richer, multi-dimensional insights that a structured questionnaire would miss.

5 Questions to evaluate our own Research through a Decolonial Lens
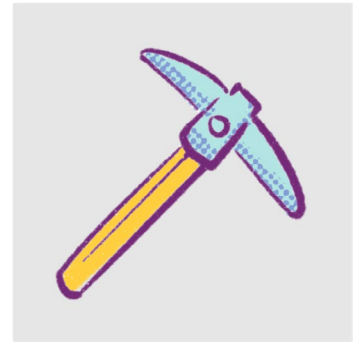
The first three sections below consider some key features of colonial research which produce and reproduce colonial power through research. These include: Extractivism, Positivism and Hegemony.

The second three sections consider key features identified by post-colonial scholars which can promote more just and decolonized research. These include: reciprocity, relationality and epistemological disobedience.

Each of these sections will open with 'evaluative questions' which we can ask of our own research projects and research culture.

Does an aspect of this work reflect extractivist approaches?

Evaluative questions:

Does the research prioritize gathering knowledge from communities or environments for the benefit of the researcher or institution without returning any benefits to them?

Smith (1999) highlights that the legacy of colonialism is deeply embedded in research methodologies. Research has often been conducted on Indigenous peoples and communities without their consent, with the knowledge extracted and used to serve the interests of colonial powers without returning benefits or acknowledging the community's role in knowledge production.

Smith (1999) powerfully critiques the one-way nature of knowledge extraction, where researchers take from communities without returning benefits or acknowledging the community's role in knowledge production. Smith writes:

"Knowledge gained by research has often been used to further the oppression and exploitation of Indigenous peoples, rather than for their benefit" (Smith, 1999, p. 5).

"The colonial project has appropriated not only the land, labor, and resources of Indigenous peoples, but also their intellectual property and knowledge systems" (Smith, 1999, p. 15).

*(Above) Image description: Workshop participants discuss decolonising practices used in their fields.*

"Research methodologies that are extractive perpetuate colonial power relations by positioning the researcher as the authority and the researched as the passive subject" (Smith, 1999, p. 19).

Does this work reflect Positivism?

Evaluative Questions:

Does the research follow the tradition of positivism, where knowledge is seen as objective, measurable, and detached from the researcher's subjectivity?

Does it reject or ignore less-quantifiable forms of knowledge such as lived experience, spirituality, or emotional and sensory knowings?
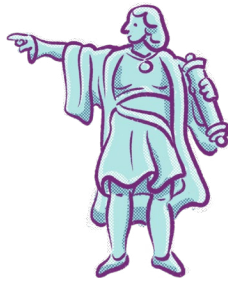
Post-colonial analysis identifies the ways in which positivism serves as a method for extraction:

"The research process under positivism often treats knowledge as something to be extracted from marginalized groups without any reciprocal benefits or respect for the ways these communities understand the world" (Fanon, 1963, p. 154).

Postcolonial scholars critique the positivist goal of universalizing knowledge because it assumes that knowledge produced in one cultural and historical context can be applied to all other contexts. This approach disregards the specific, localized knowledge systems of marginalized peoples, thereby continuing the erasure of their epistemologies.

"Positivism's insistence on generalizing knowledge across diverse cultures and contexts often leads to the imposition of a singular, Western-centric worldview" (Escobar, 2011, p. 55).

"Western science and positivist research have long been criticized for dismissing the validity of Indigenous and other non-Western ways of knowing, which often include subjective and experiential knowledge as central elements of understanding the world" (Mignolo, 2009, p. 43).

By positioning the researcher as the authority and the researched as passive subjects, positivist research reinforces colonial power structures. The researcher is often detached from the community, using an "objective" lens to study them, which ignores the agency and knowledge of the people being studied.

"Positivist methodologies are inherently unequal because they treat research subjects as objects of study, perpetuating colonial power structures and dismissing the agency of the people involved" (Spivak, 1988, p. 103).

Positivism often reduces complex social, cultural, and historical phenomena into quantifiable variables, thus oversimplifying the lived experiences of marginalized communities. Postcolonial scholars argue that such reductionism ignores the rich, context-dependent, and interconnected nature of knowledge.

"Positivism's emphasis on simplification and measurement fails to capture the complexity and richness of social and cultural life, which cannot be reduced to mere data points" (Said, 1978, p. 85).

Does this work reflect Paternalism and hegemonic knowledge?

Is there an assumption that the researcher knows what is best for the communities or groups they are studying?

Is the research designed in a way that reinforces a hierarchical, top-down relationship between the researcher and the research subjects?
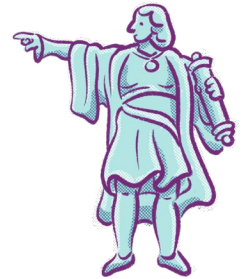
Post-colonial scholarship often frames paternalism as a system of control in which a dominant colonial power assumes the authority to make decisions for a subordinated group, under the assumption that it knows what is best for them, regardless of the people's wishes or needs.

This dynamic, deeply rooted in colonial histories, positions the colonizer as the benevolent figure who knows better than the colonized, who are seen as incapable of self-governance or autonomy. Scholars like Frantz Fanon and Edward Said have critiqued this as a way to justify domination and exploitation, with paternalism serving as both a tool for control and a mechanism to dehumanize the colonized by denying them agency.

Overt historical examples of this paternalism include acts like banning important economic and cultural events (like potlatches held by Indigenous peoples in Canada) and instead enforcing European economic practices. This paternalism can be expressed in more subtle ways in research today. Research which may seek to improve conditions for oppressed communities, for instance, can contribute to their oppression when using top-down approaches:

The paternalistic researcher often positions themselves as a solution to the 'problems' of marginalized communities, which disempowers the community by ignoring their lived experiences, agency, and the ways in which they already resist oppression" (Tuck and Yang, 2014, p. 223).

How could this work embody reciprocity?

Evaluative questions:

Did this research give back to the communities, environments, or knowledge systems it works with?

Have I acknowledged and centered non-Western or marginalized epistemologies in a meaningful, non-tokenistic way?

Did I ensure that the knowledge produced is accessible and beneficial beyond academic audiences?

Have I considered how the research outcomes could contribute to social, cultural, or ecological justice?

Have I consulted relevant communities, organizations, or stakeholders (where appropriate) to ensure the research aligns with their ethics and priorities?

Reciprocity challenges the historical extractivism of academic research by ensuring that the work is mutually beneficial, rather than one-sided (Kovach, 2009). This principle requires researchers to move beyond a model where communities simply provide data and instead engage in knowledge exchange that supports their needs and priorities (Tuck & Yang, 2014).

Research can embody the decolonial principle of reciprocity without direct engagement with human participants too. It can do this by ensuring that knowledge production is accountable, and contributes meaningfully to broader knowledge systems, environments, and communities through practices such as ethical data stewardship, and accessible/relevant modes of research dissemination.

For example, a medical researcher working on Indigenous health disparities could co-design studies with Indigenous health practitioners and ensure that findings are translated into tangible healthcare improvements rather than remaining in inaccessible academic journals (Walter & Andersen, 2013).

Reciprocity might involve returning research results in culturally meaningful ways, such as hosting community presentations or producing multilingual reports that serve local advocacy efforts. By embedding reciprocity, researchers acknowledge that knowledge production is a shared process rather than a unilateral academic exercise.

"Decolonizing research involves not just challenging the traditional methodologies, but also engaging with Indigenous peoples to find ways of researching that respect their worldviews, values, and self-determined priorities" (Smith, 1999, p. 24).

By adopting these more ethical, inclusive, and reciprocal approaches to research, Smith argues that researchers can begin to dismantle the legacies of colonialism embedded in academic practices and promote more just and equitable forms of knowledge production.

Even if academics in the UK do not work directly with Indigenous peoples, they can still relate this quote to their own research by recognizing that coloniality is embedded in all knowledge production. Decolonising research in the UK might mean interrogating whose knowledge is privileged, how methodologies perpetuate colonial hierarchies, and whether research serves extractive or emancipatory purposes.

Non-hierarchical dialogue vs traditional interviews: A reciprocal research method

In the period leading up to an interview, a researcher might ask participants to set the terms for the session (for instance: where would they like to meet, what topics they want to cover, what format is most appropriate eg: narrative interview). Dialogical approaches, as opposed to interviews following from a researcher's set list of questions can help to ensure that participants are collaborators in the creation of knowledge.

How could this work embody 'epistemological disobedience'?

Evaluative questions:

Does the research challenge dominant epistemological frameworks, particularly those rooted in colonial history?

Does it seek to break free from the traditional structures of knowledge production that uphold Western supremacy?

Does it validate other forms of knowing, such as Indigenous, experiential, or relational knowledge?
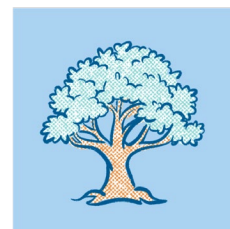
Epistemological disobedience (Mignolo, 2009) calls for researchers to challenge the dominance of Western epistemologies and methodologies by valuing and legitimizing non-Western, Indigenous, and subaltern ways of knowing. This requires challenging positivist paradigms that prioritize objectivity and measurability, and embracing alternative epistemologies that center storytelling, spirituality, and embodied knowledge, for example (Simpson, 2017).

For instance, a historian studying colonial archives could disrupt Eurocentric narratives by incorporating oral histories from marginalized communities, acknowledging that archives themselves are colonial constructs (Trouillot, 1995).

In the field of artificial intelligence, epistemological disobedience might involve designing algorithms that integrate Indigenous data governance principles, ensuring that AI systems respect Indigenous sovereignty rather than reproducing settler-colonial logics (TallBear, 2014). By practicing epistemological disobedience, researchers actively dismantle the intellectual hierarchies that uphold colonial knowledge structures.

Integrate Emotion and Experience: Positivism often privileges detached, rational analysis. To challenge this, researchers can incorporate sentipensante—a term coined by Orlando Fals-Borda, meaning "sensory thinking," or thinking through the body, emotions, and lived experience. This approach highlights the

importance of integrating intellectual, emotional, and embodied knowledge in the research process.

Example: In the field of predictive policing algorithms, a positivist approach might reduce crime data to patterns that ignore the historical context of racism, poverty, and systemic injustice that shape criminal activity. To decolonize this work, a computer scientist could collaborate with sociologists, criminologists, and the communities affected by policing to ensure that the data used is contextualized and that the model does not perpetuate discriminatory biases. Rather than assuming the algorithm can be "objective," researchers could critically assess how historical inequities are embedded in the data and the model's design.

Contextualize Findings: Positivist approaches often seek universal generalizations that ignore local context. To move away from this, researchers canplace their findings within the specific context of the study and recognize that knowledge may be context-dependent and culturally situated. This approach acknowledges the complexity of the environment, culture, history, and relationships that shape the research.

Use Case Studies or Narrative Inquiry: Case studies, ethnography, and narrative inquiry allow for a deeper understanding of the complexities of individual or community experiences. These methods consider the social, cultural, and historical contexts that are often overlooked in positivist research.

How could this work embody relationality?

Evaluative questions:

Does the research emphasize interconnectedness and relationships, not just between the researcher and the participants, but between knowledge, culture, environment, and time?
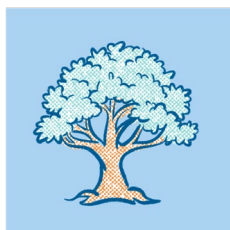
Does the research acknowledge the vitality and agency of all elements of the world, including non-human entities (such as plants, animals, and ecosystems)?

Does it move beyond anthropocentric perspectives, recognizing the interconnectedness of all life forms?

Does it recognize the dynamic, relational nature of knowledge, where knowledge is co-created rather than simply discovered?

Relationality in research emphasizes the interconnectedness between people, knowledge systems, and the environment. It challenges the individualistic and extractive tendencies of Western academia by prioritizing relationships built on trust, respect, and responsibility (Wilson, 2008). In decolonial research, relationality means recognizing that knowledge is not an isolated product but emerges through ethical engagement with communities and landscapes (Smith, 2012).

Example:

An environmental scientist studying biodiversity loss might centre Indigenous ecological knowledge by forming long-term partnerships with Indigenous communities, ensuring that their insights shape the research questions and findings (Whyte, 2017).

In the humanities, relationality might take the form of co-authorship with community members whose lived experiences inform the research, thus shifting power dynamics and ensuring that knowledge is collectively owned rather than individually claimed.
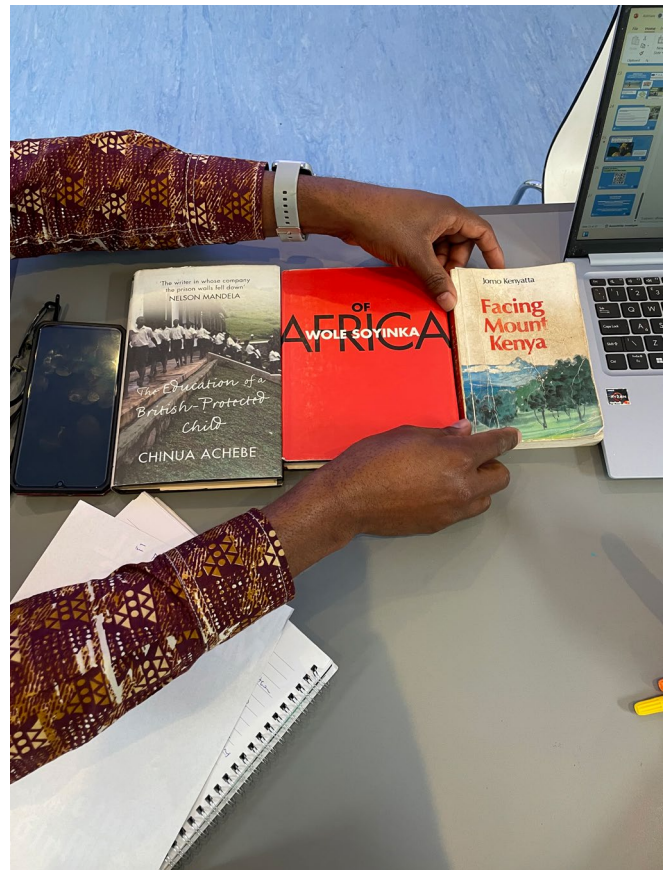
Image description: Dr Abraham Ng'ang'a shares key texts, such as 'Facing Mount Kenya" by Jomo Kenyatta, he is using in his African Theology research.

6 Useful Decolonial Theory

Pluriverse: (Arturo Escobar)

A theory of the pluriversal, introduced by anthropologist Arturo Escobar, challenges dominant, Western-centric views of the world and development. The theory promotes the idea of a "pluriverse" — a world composed of multiple, coexisting realities and ways of being, which contrasts with the notion of a single, universal reality. Escobar argues that modern Western development models often impose a singular worldview, marginalizing and erasing diverse cultures, knowledge systems, and practices.

Diverse Ontologies: Recognizing that different cultures and communities have their own distinct ways of understanding and engaging with the world. This involves acknowledging multiple ontologies, or ways of being, that coexist and are equally valid.

Sustainability and Justice: Promoting sustainable and just practices that respect and incorporate the knowledge and needs of diverse communities. This includes recognizing the rights of nature and non-human entities.

Participatory Approaches: Encouraging participatory and collaborative methods in development and governance that give voice and power to marginalized communities and respect their autonomy and self-determination

Escobar's pluriversal theory calls for a rethinking of development, globalization, and modernity, advocating for a more inclusive and equitable approach that honors the diversity of human and non-human life on the planet.

Sensipensante (Orlando Flas Borda)

The theory posits that true understanding and knowledge come from a synthesis of emotional and rational processes. It emphasizes that feelings and thoughts are interdependent and should be considered together in the pursuit of knowledge.

Participatory Action Research (PAR): Fals-Borda, a pioneer in PAR, developed the "sentipensante" approach within this context. PAR involves researchers and participants working collaboratively to investigate and address social issues. The "sentipensante" approach enhances this by valuing the emotional experiences and insights of all participants.

Decolonizing Knowledge: By valuing emotions and local knowledge systems, "sentipensante" contributes to decolonizing academic practices. It challenges the dominance of Western, rationalist epistemologies and acknowledges the richness of Indigenous and local ways of knowing.

Using Sensipensante to reflect on your own work:

Researchers can ask: does the research incorporate the concept of "sensory thinking," where the intellectual, emotional, and sensory aspects of experience are integrated? Does it invite participants to engage with their embodied, lived experiences and challenge conventionak, detached forms of knowledge creation?

7 Witnessing as a research method

But bearing witness doesn't mean just looking backward at the past. Bearing witness means taking responsibility for the future. To bear witness is to show by your actions and existence that something is true. The truth of bearing witness is found in being and acting.

https://witnessblanket.ca/explore

Witnessing as a research methodology supports the decolonisation by shifting the researcher's role from an objective observer to an ethical participant who acknowledges *responsibility for the knowledge that is shared.*

Rooted in Indigenous epistemologies, witnessing emphasizes deep listening, relational accountability, and reciprocity (Kovach, 2009; Regan, 2010). Through witnessing, researchers take on the ethical responsibility to not only hear but also act upon the testimonies shared, fostering a decolonial approach that centers justice and relational ethics in knowledge production (Bagelman, 2021; Tuck & Yang, 2014). For instance:

"In 'Unsettling the settler within: Indian residential schools, truth telling, and reconciliation in Canada' (Regan, 2010) and 'Settler Witnessing at the truth and reconciliation commission of Canada (TRC)' (Nagy, 2020), these settler authors demonstrate how privileging Indigenous perspectives through bearing witness to oral and textual storytelling is a basis for solidaristic scholarship. They applied this method when attending, analysing and writing on the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada, in which Indigenous peoples gave testimony on their experiences of the residential school system]. [This] not only meant they could use their platforms to carve out new spaces for Indigenous perspectives to be heard in academia, but they also made explicit the implications of these stories for settler society" (Bagelman, 2021).
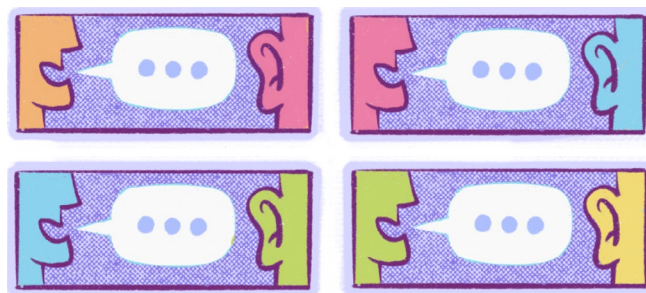
How Can Witnessing Be Used in Research?

Oral History and Testimonial Research

Postcolonial scholars emphasize that witnessing is central to testimonial research, particularly in post-conflict or postcolonial contexts (Beverley, 2004). For instance, researchers working with survivors of colonial violence or forced migration

can act as witnesses by creating spaces where lived experiences are centered rather than merely documented for academic purposes (Cabral, 1979). A study on racial discrimination in UK universities might, through postcolonial witnessing, center students' personal narratives of exclusion and resistance, rather than merely analyzing university diversity statistics.

Critical Archival Research

Trouillot (1995) highlights how historical silences are created in colonial archives. Witnessing, in this sense, requires researchers to critically engage with archives, recognizing how power structures shape historical narratives.

A historian researching British colonial records, for example, could use witnessing by reading against the archive—seeking out marginalized voices, Indigenous resistance, or omitted perspectives rather than reproducing state-sanctioned histories.

Centering previously discounted forms of knowledge or record keeping in our work can support decolonial aims, and this can take many forms. For instance, artwork like The Witness Blanket acts as an important type of testimony:

The Witness Blanket is a large-scale art installation created by Carey Newman (Ha-yalth-kingeme), a Kwakwaka'wakw and Coast Salish artist, to honor the experiences of survivors of Canada's residential school system. It is made up of over 800 objects and artifacts collected from residential schools, churches, government buildings, and cultural sites across Canada. These materials include pieces of buildings, letters, photographs, clothing, and other personal items that bear witness to the traumatic legacy of residential schools.

8 Decolonising Research Ethics:

University ethics procedures for conducting research often carry problematic echoes of colonialism.

For example, ethics applications commonly require standardized consent forms and rigid protocols that may not align with the cultural norms or communication styles of Indigenous or marginalized communities.

These procedures can reinforce power imbalances by positioning researchers as the authority and community participants as passive subjects, rather than co-creators of knowledge. Additionally, the focus on individual consent, rather than community-wide decision-making, often disregards collective values and the importance of communal relationships in Indigenous and marginalized contexts. These frameworks often fail to account for the long-term impacts of research on communities, particularly when the research involves the extraction of traditional knowledge without reciprocal benefit. The following section aims to offer concrete ways to decolonize research ethics.

Informed Consent Process

Current Issues: Traditional informed consent procedures often assume a Western, individualistic model of autonomy and do not fully account for the communal or collective nature of decision-making in many Indigenous or marginalized communities.
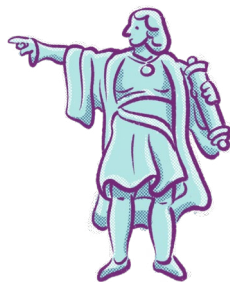
The standard informed consent forms and processes can be overly bureaucratic and fail to provide meaningful, culturally appropriate information about the potential impacts of research on individuals and communities.

Decolonizing Action:
Ethical guidelines should recognize that informed consent needs to be understood and negotiated in culturally specific ways, especially in Indigenous or communal contexts. Consent should be framed as a relational process rather than a one-time agreement, ensuring ongoing dialogue and respect for community norms and values.

Example: Consent in Indigenous communities may involve consultation with a group of Elders or community leaders rather than individual consent alone. Research processes should be transparent and allow for the community to voice their concerns and desires at every stage of the research, from design to dissemination.

Data Sovereignty

Current Issues:
In many university research frameworks, data extraction often occurs without full understanding or respect for how data is owned or used by the communities involved. This can involve the commodification of data without compensation or consideration for how it might be exploited, misrepresented, or used for harmful purposes.
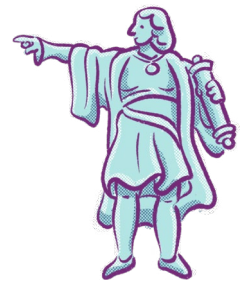
Decolonizing Action:
Data sovereignty refers to the right of communities, particularly Indigenous and other colonised groups, to own, control, and make decisions about how their data is used.
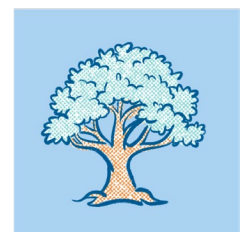
Ethical research practices should respect communities' rights to control their own data and ensure that data collection is done with their full involvement and approval.

Ethical guidelines should ensure that communities retain ownership of the data, have access to the results, and have a say in how it is disseminated. There should be transparency in how data is stored, analyzed, and used.

Example: In a health-related study involving Indigenous populations in Canada, researchers would work closely with the community to establish guidelines for how health data is collected, stored, analyzed, and shared. They would also ensure that the community benefits from the findings and that the data is not used for purposes that contradict the community's values or goals.

Research Design and Methodology

Current Issues:
University ethics committees often require rigid, one-size-fits-all methodologies, primarily shaped by Western, quantitative approaches. These methodologies are often inappropriate or irrelevant in community contexts, failing to capture the complexity, nuance, and relationality of different cultures and knowledge systems.

Decolonizing Action:
Research designs should prioritize community-driven methodologies that reflect the values, needs, and perspectives of the community. This could include Participatory Action Research (PAR), local culturally-relevant methodologies, and other relational research methods that prioritize collaboration, local knowledge, and the co-creation of knowledge. Universities should encourage flexibility in research design, encouraging the importance of Indigenous or community-based knowledge systems and qualitative methods that center lived experience, storytelling, and holistic views of knowledge.
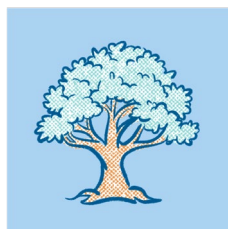
One way researchers and their participants can ensure this for their own work is to submit ethics forms in at least 2 stages.

For instance:

Stage 1) Seek ethical approval to recruit participants so that you can establish research questions based on the participants' interest.

Stage 2) Once the key research questions have been established, collaboratively agree on research design, methods and activities that will follow. Submit a second ethics application to seek approval for this work.

Power Dynamics and Ethical Review Committees

Current Issues: Ethics committees in universities often have limited representation from marginalized groups or those with lived experience of the communities involved in the research.

This can create a power imbalance in the review process, where ethical concerns may be evaluated primarily from a Western academic perspective, rather than considering the interests and rights of marginalized communities.
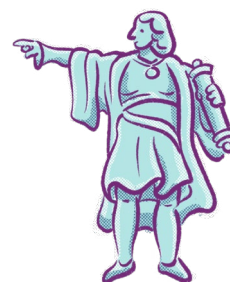
Decolonizing Action:
Ethics committees should include members from a wide range of experience and backgrounds. These committees should be trained in decolonizing ethics and sensitive to the power dynamics involved in research.
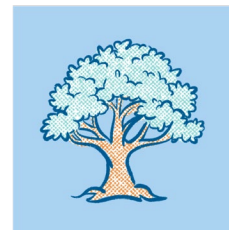
Another action individual researchers can take is to present participants (not just the university ethics boards) with university ethical application forms for their approval. As a part of this process, academics can work with participants to formally identify culturally-relevant ethical protocols that are missed from this standard university application.

Intellectual Property and Knowledge Ownership

Current Issues: Many universities operate under intellectual property (IP) policies that prioritize the rights of the researcher or institution over the rights of the community or knowledge contributors. This often leads to the privatization and commercialization of knowledge, excluding the communities from which the knowledge originated.

Decolonizing Action:
University ethics procedures should include fair and equitable distribution of intellectual property rights, particularly for Indigenous knowledge and resources.
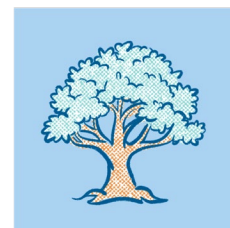
Communities should be involved in the negotiation of IP agreements, ensuring that they benefit from any commercial uses of their knowledge and that they retain the right to control how their cultural or scientific knowledge is used.

Example: A university researching medicinal plant use in Indigenous communities might enter into an agreement where the community retains ownership of the knowledge, and any products developed from that research are shared with the community, either through revenue sharing or access to the final product.

## Community Benefits and Reciprocity

Current Issues:
Traditional university ethics procedures often overlook the need for reciprocity, where the research process benefits the communities involved, especially when these communities have been historically exploited for their knowledge and resources. In many cases,

universities extract valuable knowledge without providing fair compensation or tangible benefits to the communities.

Decolonizing Action:
Universities should explicitly integrate reciprocity into research ethics procedures, ensuring that communities receive direct benefits from the research, whether in the form of financial compensation, resources, or capacity building.
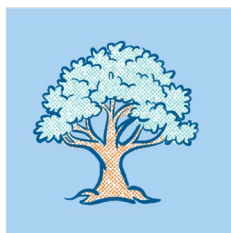
Most ethics applications simply include one question on 'benefits to participants', but - problematically - this must be decided before consulting with participants. Individual researchers can take action by using the staged approach to ethics applications for their work (as suggested above).

After gaining ethical approval to meet with participants, it is useful to have an initial discussion with them to determine what they wish to gain from the research, or what they would consider a reciprocal exchange for their participation.

This can then be formalized in the second stage of the ethical process (whereby you submit an updated ethics form that reflects the community wishes).

Implementing Indigenous Research Ethics: A Canadian example

In Canada, a joint policy for undertaking research with Indigenous communities was developed by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC), and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). The Tri-Council Policy Statement 2 (TCPS2) Chapter 9 and the Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (OCAP) principles provide specific recommendations for universities to decolonize their research ethics procedures:

1. Community Engagement and Consent:
Universities should mandate that researchers engage with Indigenous communities from the project's inception. This involves obtaining consent not only from individual participants but also from the community as a whole, ensuring that the research aligns with the community's values, needs, and priorities. Such engagement fosters mutual respect and trust.

Ethics Commissioner of Canada

2. Recognition of Indigenous Jurisdiction:
Institutions must acknowledge and respect the authority of Indigenous communities over research that affects them. This includes adhering to community-specific research protocols and ethical guidelines, which may exist alongside institutional requirements. For example, researchers

should comply with guidelines set by bodies like the Mi'kmaw Ethics Watch or Six Nations Research Ethics.

SAGE Journals

3. Implementation of OCAP Principles:
Universities should incorporate the OCAP principles into their research ethics frameworks:

Ownership: Recognize that Indigenous communities own their cultural knowledge and data.

Control: Ensure communities have control over all aspects of the research process that impact them.

Access: Provide communities with access to data and findings related to their people and lands.

Possession: Allow communities to possess and safeguard their data physically.

Incorporating these principles ensures that research is conducted in a manner that respects Indigenous sovereignty and data governance.

Queen's University

4. Training and Capacity Building:
Institutions should require researchers to undergo training in Indigenous research ethics, such as the TCPS2 Chapter 9 online tutorial. This education fosters cultural competence and ensures that researchers are aware of the ethical considerations unique to Indigenous contexts.

Sheridan College

5. Collaborative Research Agreements:
Universities should promote the development of research agreements that outline the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of both researchers and Indigenous communities. These agreements should address issues such as data ownership, dissemination of results, and potential benefits to the community, ensuring transparency and mutual understanding.

Ethics Commissioner of Canada

By integrating these recommendations into their ethics procedures, universities can foster research practices that are respectful, equitable, and aligned with the principles of decolonization.

9 "Decolonisation is not a Metaphor"

Here is a simple graphic designed by Dr Bagelman for the Decolonising Praxis workshop to illustrate the smaller acts of decolonising on the left, moving towards more radical forms of decolonising.

The top 3 text boxes in each graphic (referring to the use of land) serves as a template for this minor to radical change.
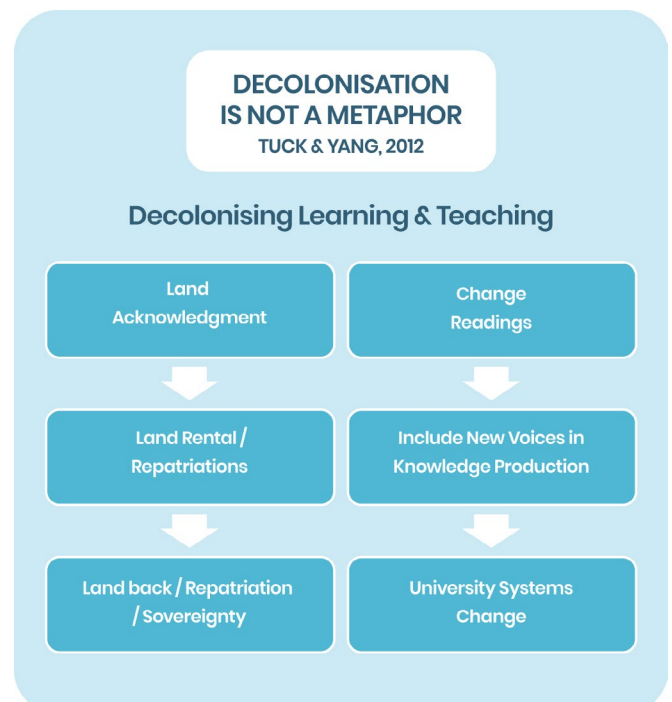
Land acknowledgements might be understood as a minor and more symbolic act, whereas repatriating stolen land to its original stewards may be understood as a more fulsome decolonial act.

The bottom 3 text boxes show what might be equivalent action within the university (from minor to radical acts).

Decolonising Learning and Teaching:

DECOLONISATION IS NOT A METAPHOR
TUCK & YANG, 2012

Decolonising Research

Land Acknowledgment	Expand Literature and Alter Research Methods
Land Rental / Repatriations	HEI Research Assessments and Ethical Frameworks Shift
Land back / Repatriation / Sovereignty	Systems Change in HEI and Beyond

Decolonising Research:

DECOLONISATION IS NOT A METAPHOR
TUCK & YANG, 2012

Decolonising Learning & Teaching

Land Acknowledgment	Change Readings
Land Rental / Repatriations	Include New Voices in Knowledge Production
Land back / Repatriation / Sovereignty	University Systems Change

10 Race Equality Charter Advance HE

1. Racism is an everyday facet of UK society and racial inequalities may manifest themselves in everyday situations, processes, and behaviours. Racial disparities are a critical issue in outcomes for staff and students, recognising that racial inequalities are not necessarily overt, isolated incidents.
2. The UK higher education sector will not reach its full potential unless it can benefit from the talents of the whole population and until individuals from all ethnic backgrounds can benefit equally from the opportunities it affords.
3. In tackling racial inequalities, it is important that actions are aimed at achieving transformational and long-term institutional culture change, avoiding a deficit model where actions are aimed at changing the individual.
4. Staff and students from racially minoritised ethnic backgrounds are not a homogeneous group. People from different ethnic backgrounds have different experiences of, and outcomes from and within, higher education, and that complexity needs to be considered in analysing data, developing solutions, and implementing actions.
5. Embracing intersectionality, from analysing data to developing actions, can better support institutions to tackle racism within the higher education sector.

https://advance-he.ac.uk/

11 Dr Datta's Reflective prompts

What are the words you would use/highlight to describe your positionality? How do you bring this, if at all, to bear on your work?

How do you tell the story of the historical forces and formations (such as imperialism and colonialism) that have shaped your discipline? How have you come to occupy the institutional space you inhabit today?

What is the difference between decolonising practice and making practice more racially inclusive?

What is an aspect of your education or training you are seeking to unlearn?

Note: Some questions were inspired, in particular, by the University of Leicester's report on 'Evaluating the Racially Inclusive Curricula Toolkit in HE' (2022).

Image description: This screenshot of the witness blanket shows small squares in a patchwork quilt style, with each square containing an artefact or artwork
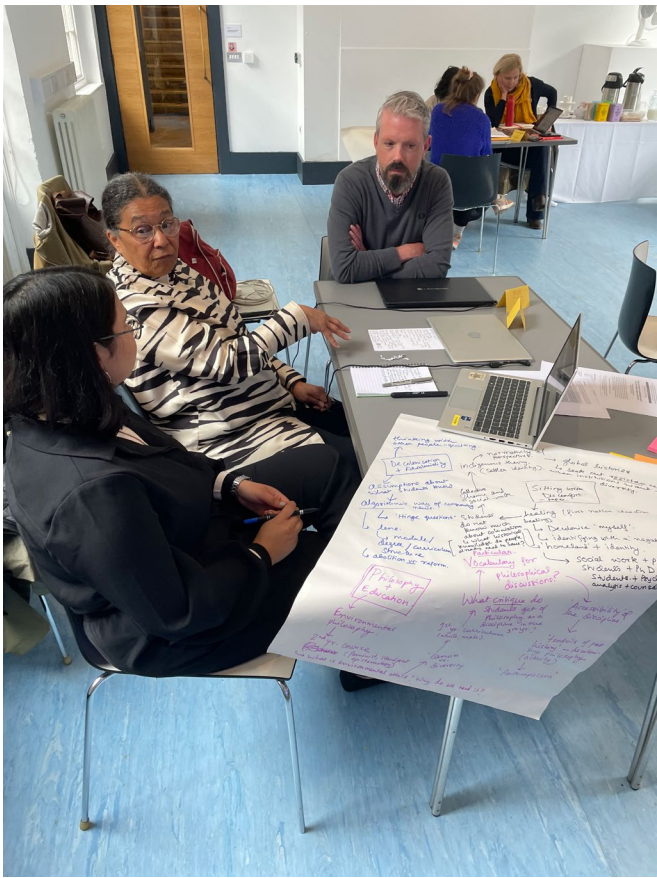

Image description: Dr Robert Booth, Dr Sreya Datta and Dr Philomena Harrison gather around brainstorming notes during a workshop breakout session

Image description: Dr Abraham Ng'ang'a and Karen Wynne (Liverpool World Centre) discuss connections between their teaching and research during a workshop breakout session

Image Description: Workshop participants discuss their decolonising praxis over a busy table of laptops and notes

Image description: Dr Carly Bagelman and Dr Sreya Datta at the start of the Decolonising Praxis workshop in The Bluecoat standing beside the projected screen
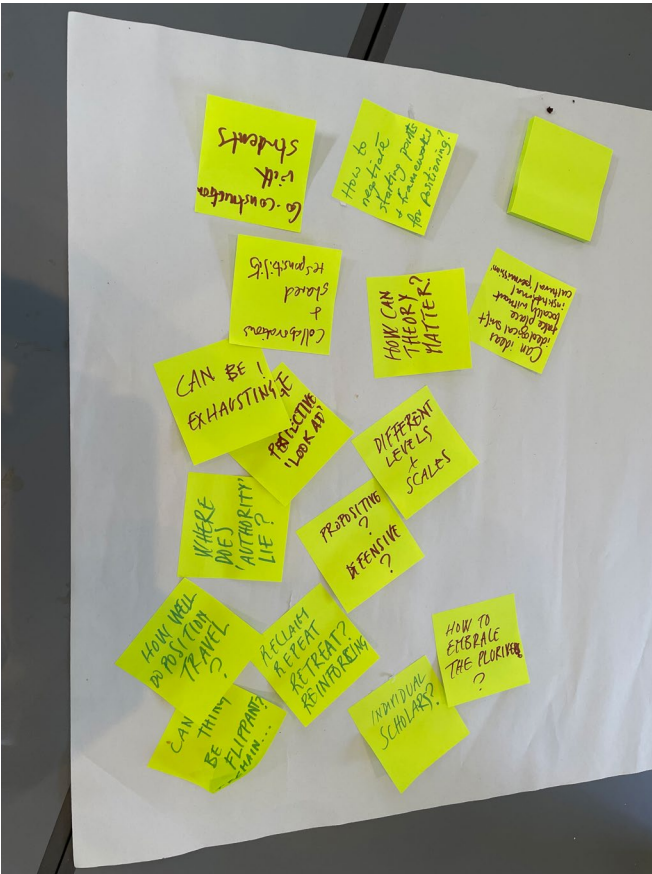

Image Description: Workshop participants collaboratively identify challenges and possibilities of decolonising praxis in their respective fields using post-it notes.
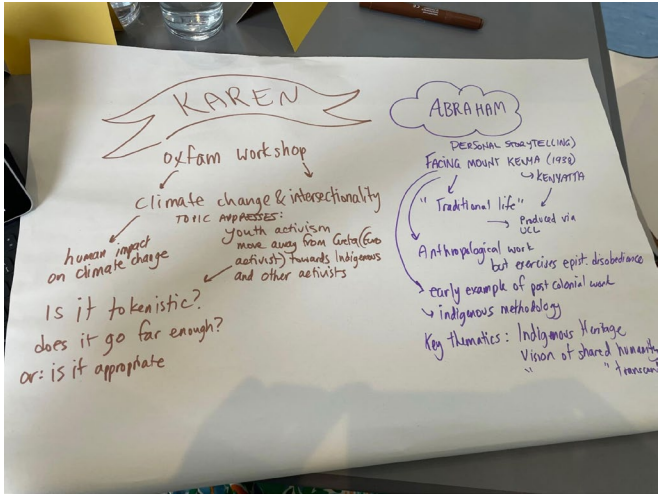

Image Description: Workshop participants created a mindmap on flipchart paper, finding connections between 3rd sector research and academic research related to decolonisation

12 Resources

1. Books

"Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples" by Linda Tuhiwai Smith
A foundational text that challenges colonial practices in research and advocates for Indigenous methodologies.

"The Wretched of the Earth" by Frantz Fanon
A critical work on the psychological and social impacts of colonization and the path to decolonization.

"Pedagogy of the Oppressed" by Paulo Freire
While not exclusively focused on decolonization, this book is crucial for understanding the relationship between power, education, and liberation.

"Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit" by Marie Battiste
Focuses on how education systems can be reoriented to better respect and integrate Indigenous knowledge and perspectives.

2. Articles & Journals

"Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society"
A peer-reviewed journal that publishes research on decolonization efforts, focusing on Indigenous communities and knowledge.

"The International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education"
Contains articles on decolonizing educational research methods, often exploring the intersection of colonization and learning.

3. Online Resources

Indigenous Nations and Indigenous Knowledge Research (Indigenous Protocols for Research)
Guidelines for conducting ethical and culturally respectful research with Indigenous communities.

The Global Indigenous Data Alliance (GIDA)
Provides resources and guidelines for conducting research in ways that respect Indigenous data sovereignty and knowledge systems.

University of Cape Town – Decolonizing Research Guide
In her 2023 inaugural lecture, Prof. Jaya Raju explores how dominant Western epistemologies continue to shape research practices in Africa. She advocates for a decolonial approach that centres Indigenous perspectives and community engagement.

University of British Columbia (UBC) – Decolonizing Research Toolkit
UBC Library's guide supports researchers in engaging with decolonizing and anti-racist research practices. It includes curated materials on Indigenous methodologies, ethical considerations, and community-based approaches.

University of Oxford – Decolonising Knowledge and the University
A research initiative at Queen Elizabeth House that explores how universities can challenge Eurocentric knowledge systems by embracing plural epistemologies and creating equitable knowledge exchanges.

University of Sydney – Decolonizing Education & Research Practices
The Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences promotes "Decolonial Epistemologies and Pedagogies," a research focus exploring how colonial legacies continue to shape curriculum and methods, and how to challenge them.

University of Edinburgh – Decolonizing Research Handbook
This publication, "Decolonizing Feminist Urban Research," critiques colonial frameworks in urban studies and suggests grounded, relational methods rooted in feminist and Indigenous scholarship.

University of Manitoba – Indigenous Research Toolkit
A LibGuide offering tools for conducting research that is respectful and responsive to Indigenous ways of knowing. Includes methods, ethical protocols, and guidance for working in partnership with communities.

Harvard University – Decolonizing Pedagogy and Research Resources
A publication from Harvard Kennedy School exploring the challenges and opportunities of decolonizing African studies, highlighting pedagogical practices and curriculum reform that foreground African intellectual traditions.

Australian National University (ANU) – Decolonizing Research Framework
Part of a course at ANU that emphasizes Indigenous perspectives and critiques colonial power structures in knowledge production, with applications in research and higher education.

University of Queensland – Decolonizing Practices in Research
Outlines practical strategies for designing Indigenous-led research, including principles of respectful engagement, co-design, and ethical considerations for working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

4. Research Centers

The Center for Decolonizing Knowledge in Teaching, Research and Practice (University of Bath)
Focuses on promoting decolonization in education, offering tools for scholars working within this paradigm.

Centre for the Advancement of Scholarship – University of Pretoria (South Africa)
This centre leads scholarship on decolonization in African higher education. It engages in cross-disciplinary research addressing epistemic justice, Indigenous knowledge systems, and the transformation of curricula.

Indigenous Research Network – York University (Canada)
This network fosters Indigenous research capacity across disciplines and promotes ethical, community-engaged, and decolonial research practices.

Global Centre for Indigenous Futures – Macquarie University (Australia)
This centre works at the intersection of Indigenous research and global challenges, foregrounding Indigenous-led methodologies and ways of knowing.

5. Podcasts

Decolonising Research Series: What Does It Mean to Do Decolonial Research?
https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/decolonising-research-series-what-does-it-mean-to-do/id1514772303?i=1000580025420

IGDC Decolonising Development Research Podcast Box Set
https://www.york.ac.uk/igdc/news/2024/decolonising-development-research-podcast-boxset/

Indigenous Insights: An Evaluation Podcast
https://indigenousinsights.podbean.com

Decolonizing Science with Drs. Fowler and Vandebroek
https://wamcpodcasts.org/podcast/decolonizing-science-with-drs-fowler-and-vandebroek/

Decolonizing in Qualitative Research
https://lumivero.com/resources/chase-your-purpose-not-currency-a-conversation-on-decolonizing-research-with-dr-kakali-bhattacharya/

Decolonizing Social Work
https://www.behaviourspeak.com/e/episode-220-decolonizing-mental-health-with-dr-julie-smith-yliniemi/

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