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**Webinar Series: Decolonial Research Methods: Resisting Coloniality in Academic Knowledge Production**

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## **Working Methods in Anti-colonial Research**

Greetings from Australia! Specifically from Sydney, the largest city in Australia, on the shores of the South Pacific Ocean. Modern Australia is a settler-colonial society, the result of the invasion of the continent by the British, a couple of hundred years ago. It was the British who named it 'Australia'. This name literally means 'the South Land' - or, in rough cultural translation, as far away from Home as the British could possibly get.

Contemporary Australia is therefore a continent with two civilizations. One is derived from the European colonization. The other has been in the land for something like 60,000 years, effectively from the beginning. I want to illustrate that with two pictures. One is a picture of one of the grand houses built by rich colonists, in the colony that they named Victoria (after the then Queen of England), about a hundred years after the British arrived on the continent. You can see the way that the colonization process attempted to create, in this very remote part of the globe, something that was familiar to the upper classes of the colonizing power. And if you look very closely, at this picture of what in Australian is called a "station", a pastoral property, you will see four white men standing on the European-style lawn. And they are all holding guns. I think this encapsulates the process of colonization!

The second picture I want to show you is a painting done by an Aboriginal woman, Mary Anne Nampitjinpa. She is an artist from the Central Desert region, from one of the many Indigenous communities on the continent. This painting, called *Honey Ant Dreaming*, is a representation of a certain kind of knowledge. There is a story and knowledge associated with the image. Only certain people possess this knowledge and image, and are entitled to put it into the public domain, and explain at least part of its meaning to other people. That includes geographical knowledge: it tells where this particular food source, the honey ant, can be found, at what time of year, under what climatic conditions, what are the routes towards it, where water is to be found in the desert. The image also involves social knowledge, about who can go there and what ceremonies might be involved. So the image is not only an artwork - the way such images are understood in the colonizing society. It is also a documentation of knowledge and of social position.

I want to start with this contrast of images, both to illustrate different forms of knowledge that exist in the world, and to indicate their coexistence in the country where I live. And, in addition, to show you a very fine artwork, the product of the labor of a very skilled artist.

My title 'Working Methods' is meant to emphasize that decolonial or anti-colonial method is a practical activity. I'm not going to offer abstract rules about knowledge. I'm not interested very much in a search for rules governing knowledge. But I'm intensely interested in the practical activity of producing knowledge, and in the lives and situations of the people who do that work.

I will do this in four steps. I first want to talk about intellectual labor, and about the way the dominant system of knowledge production is organized through a global economy of knowledge. Second, I want to talk about attempts to democratize knowledge and the production of knowledge. Third, I want to talk about the way we teach, especially how we teach methods - in universities particularly, but also more broadly than that. And finally, I want to think a bit about the politics of knowledge on a world scale, from the perspective of knowledge as practice and the workforces who produce knowledge.

## **Intellectual labour**

So to my first topic, the character of intellectual labor and the significance of the workforce. Making knowledge is an intensely practical matter. And I think methodology can helpfully be understood as a form of what, in industrial sociology, we call 'labor process analysis'. We can understand the production of knowledge in terms of the labor that is involved in producing it, more exactly the multiple kinds of labor that are involved in it. Here I have to do a little bit of advertising, I'm afraid, and recommend this excellent book, *The Good University*. In the first chapter, you will find my analysis of the labor process of the production of knowledge. That is called 'research', in the disciplinary knowledge formation that is dominant in universities around the world today.

I break down the process of research basically into five forms of labor. First, consulting the *archive*, which relates the worker to existing knowledge, to the work of other knowledge producers in that same area.

Second, the process of *encounter*, the work of engaging with the materials that you're working on. For instance, data collection, or the study of documents, or the encounter with other human beings, if you're a psychiatrist, or a sociological observer, etc. Whatever it may be, there is an encounter with materials.

Third is the process which I call *patterning*, the work of finding patterns in the material that you have encountered ('you' collective as well as you individual). That may be statistical analysis, it may be the search for common themes in qualitative social science, it may be the development of concepts, the refinement of concepts, etc.

The next form of labor is what I call *critique*. This is not just criticizing other people's work, although that's sometimes involved. It is, basically, criticizing existing knowledge in the light of patterns you've found in the new materials, or the new encounters, that your project, your

work, has involved. And that is the moment where knowledge grows, where a former state of collective knowledge is transformed into something new. And I think that is a crucial point. Even though reflecting on the literature is a task that most writers of journal articles find terribly boring, and students often find hard to understand why they're required to do this, that work of critique is in fact crucial to the collective project of producing knowledge and allowing knowledge to grow.

And finally, there is the work of *broadcasting* your results. This includes publication, communication in conferences, teaching itself, the many ways in which the products of the labor of research are put into social circulation.

Now, these processes are all social processes done in the presence of others. They contribute to the collective life. And to an increasing extent over time, they are done collectively - there is always a significant element of group labor in the production of research-based knowledge. Collective labor implies a workforce, and that is absolutely crucial to what I will be saying today.

There are workforces in all knowledge formations. In the knowledge formation that was illustrated by Mary Anne Nampitjinpa's painting of the *Honey Ant Dreaming*, there are the knowledge holders, the bearers of the archive, the elders of the community, greatly respected in Australian Indigenous societies. And there are those people who encounter new situations and bring information to the elders and thus develop the collective body of knowledge.

In Islamic jurisprudence, Islamic sciences of many kinds, the workforce has traditionally been understood as the *ulama*, the Islamic scholars, who are the bearers of existing bodies of very carefully developed knowledge. They are involved in a continuous process of engagement with that knowledge and developing it as new situations and new problems arise.

And in the research-based knowledge formation that is characteristic of most universities in the world today, the workforce of knowledge production is the academics, the specialized

researchers, and the technical, professional and support workers who make the production of knowledge possible in the university as an organization. Okay, so you get some sense, I hope, of the significance of the workforce, in thinking about the production of knowledge and thinking about method.

### **The global economy of knowledge**

Now, if we look at the history of the knowledge system constituted by disciplinary knowledge, whether it is biomedical knowledge, social knowledge, or literary knowledge, if we go back into the history of almost any of the disciplines that make up the curriculum in the modern university, we will encounter Empire.

That knowledge formation has been developing for something like 500 years, and those are the 500 years of the expansion of European and North Atlantic based empires across the globe, until effectively the whole of the world was part of the economy that had been constructed by imperial expansion. And one of the crucial facts about those centuries of imperial expansion and transformation into the contemporary global economy, is that the dividends of Empire were not just the gold, not just the slaves, not just the cotton, important as they were. There was also a dividend of knowledge.

Consider modern Botany, developed by European scientists such as Linnaeus in Sweden. Linnaeus never went out himself to other parts of the world from Sweden (though he did go to the colonized north of Scandinavia at one point). But he sent out his followers, whom he called his 'Apostles', to different parts of the world to collect botanical specimens. There was a massive flow of specimens and botanical knowledge back to headquarters, so to speak, from which the modern classification systems of biological science developed. One of those Apostles was actually on the ship *Endeavour* back in 1770 with Lieutenant Cook of the Royal British Navy, when the ship sailed in through the headlands of a large bay and astonished the scientists with the wealth of new (to Europeans) plants that they found on shore. They were so impressed that

they called the place 'Botany Bay', and that is still its name. I live in a suburb a few kilometres away. The information brought back to London led to the British colonial settlement of Sydney.

That was one episode in the story. Here's another, even more famous. This is a picture of another British naval vessel, a warship called *Beagle*, in the post-colonial world off the south coast of South America. Aboard that ship, which was on a knowledge-gathering expedition to the colonized and post-colonial world, was another young scientist, or natural historian as they were often called at the time. His name was Charles Darwin. He sailed on that ship collecting specimens, geological and biological, for three years. Sailed back to England, took his specimens to shore, and his observations became a crucial element of the creation of modern evolutionary Biology.

So the connection with Empire was deeply important in the formation of the modern disciplinary knowledge system. We can trace similar processes in the history of the social sciences. We can trace the development of institutions in the imperial center which gathered that data together - Botanic Gardens, scientific societies, even universities - and developed the theories and methodologies that became standard in the disciplinary knowledge system.

And that is still happening. That process, that flow of knowledge from the colonized and post-colonial world to the imperial centers, never stopped. It was hardly even interrupted by the revolt and independence of the Spanish colonies of Latin America in the early 19th century, and in French and British colonies in Asia and Africa during the 20th century. It's still going on. In November 2021, when I gave this talk, we were all glued to screen to get the news coming from Glasgow at the world climate 'summit' meeting, which ended in fiasco. We're all aware of the periodic reports of the IPCC, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Those famous reports are an illustration in themselves of the colonial structure of the contemporary knowledge economy. Because if you look at the IPCC reports closely, you will find that a great deal of the data comes from the Global South, from the majority world (some of it collected by

nowadays by automatic sensors and satellites). But almost all the theories, the computer processing of the data, and the development of computer models of the atmosphere, happen in the Global North.

That division of labor is still there, and it is deeply important. I became aware of its importance largely through the work of Paulin Hountondji, a philosopher from Benin in western Africa. I think he is actually one of the most important philosophers in the contemporary world. He has worked on questions of knowledge and its configurations for many years. In the 1990s he developed an analysis of the global economy of knowledge, based to some extent on Samir Amin's economic analysis of global capitalism, but focussing on the process of production and circulation of knowledge specifically.

Hountondji pointed to a global division of labor between the collection of data, which was the major function (in the economy of knowledge) of the colonized and post-colonial world, and the analysis and theorizing of that data, which was the special province of the elite knowledge institutions of the Global North, the imperial center.

Because of that division of labor and that history, I would never regard the dominant knowledge formation, the dominant disciplinary knowledge system, as 'Western' knowledge. It has always been *global*. But it has been structured imperially, structured by Empire. And its workforce has also always been global, though unequal in its resourcing, and often engaged in different kinds of labour in the larger economy of knowledge.

Here's a book about an early example of that division of labour. The book is called *Southern Anthropology: A History of Fison and Howitt's Kamilaroi and Kurnai*, by Gardner and McConvell. It's about 19th-century anthropology, in fact, about the analysis of kinship, which became one of the key things that academic anthropologists studied. The book has a wonderful account of the way in which the elders of the Aboriginal communities being studied - and being violently disrupted by colonization - were themselves active providers of the data on which disciplinary

anthropology was being constructed. So the knowledge workforce was not just the heroic white anthropologists with their pith helmets or slouch hats. It was also Indigenous people themselves, mobilizing the knowledge that they had as a gift, in effect - a gift to the knowledge makers among the colonizers.

Hountondji has an analysis of the attitude required of intellectual workers in the post-colonial world that is highly relevant to 21st-century social scientists outside the global metropole. Hountondji calls the attitude 'extraversion'. Other researchers, for instance Hussein Alatas from Malaysia and Singapore, have called it 'academic dependency', a more familiar phrase. 'Extraversion' I think is a useful term because it suggests that the contributor from the colonized or post-colonial world is in an *active* relationship with the center, not simply one of subordination. But it is an active contribution in a context of under-resourcing and marginalization; the worldwide division of labor still generally reserves the production of theory and methods to the center.

That is my starting point for thinking about questions of methodology: the dominance of a globally organized but nevertheless internally divided knowledge economy, found in all the disciplines of the contemporary university curriculum. The global organization of knowledge production around an imperial center, with its elite knowledge institutions like Harvard and Oxford, CERN and NIH and its mass of less elite knowledge institutions, and the global spread of even less elite knowledge institutions in the universities and colleges of the rest of the world, has institutionalized a massive social hierarchy underpinning the production and circulation of knowledge. (Visible in the global 'league tables') It is a deeply anti-democratic economy, without the slightest doubt. There's every reason why we should be interested in methods of democratizing that production process, and that spread of institutions.

### **Democratising projects**



I now turn to some examples of democratizing projects in the realm of knowledge, mostly in my field of the social sciences, including the human studies more broadly. They have relevance, I think, to the natural sciences as well.

I start with a lovely example of a 'from below' knowledge project, which developed in Sweden about a generation ago. The title of the book that describes it, written by Sven Lindqvist, a very interesting writer, translates as *Dig Where You Stand*. It's the story of a working-class knowledge project, to produce knowledge starting with the jobs that workers themselves had. This led on to the history of their jobs, digging up the archaeology of the industries in which they worked and the communities where they lived. It led outwards, studying the connection between their industry and the rest of the Swedish economy, and ultimately, the world economy. It was a project sponsored by the trade unions, by working-class organizations, and carried out by the workers themselves. Absolutely fascinating knowledge project, with many analogues in other parts of the world.

Now we move to the post-colonial world, to Central America. Here is a book about 'liberation psychology', a knowledge-and-practice project developed by Ignacio Martín-Baró under the inspiration of liberation theology. It concerned kinds of psychological knowledge that would be useful to the people who are marginalized and oppressed by the dominant social structures of Latin American societies, by the neo-colonial ruling classes and the imperial power of Northern-based corporations. It's a fascinating knowledge project, and of course a contribution to a field that is a familiar university discipline. You can teach this in a Psychology department. Not many Psychology departments that I know would care to do that, but it could be done. It's perfectly possible. And it's a lovely example of a project for the production and circulation of knowledge from and for the most oppressed parts of the community.

I want to mention also that knowledge production 'from below' also applies in what can be regarded as a highly technical biomedical issue, such as the attempt to stop the circulation of deadly viruses. Perhaps the most deadly one we know is not COVID-19 but the Ebola virus,

which is still a threat in Western and Central Africa. What is of interest is the social response to the epidemic. Local communities worked out the epidemiology of this virus, the way in which it was spread from person to person and from place to place. They began out of their own social resources to develop responses to stop or control the spread of the virus. They didn't wait for the white-coated scientists to come in from the laboratories of the North. They were working on it from the start, working out their own effective control responses.

Those 'knowledge from below' projects all involve the creation of a new workforce for the production of knowledge, a part-time knowledge workforce much of the time, nevertheless capable of producing knowledge that can then go into circulation. And that also is an issue to which we should attend when we're thinking about methods. How do we produce the workforces for decolonized, post-colonial knowledge, whether it's disciplinary or takes some other shape, such as the development of Indigenous knowledge formations? Well, that has been the concern of Maori knowledge workers in Aotearoa New Zealand, for decades past. And Linda Tuhiwai Smith, who has already spoken in this series, is one of the very well-known contributors to these projects. Maori communities have developed their own institutions, their own technical language; whole communities have been involved in the production of knowledge. It's a remarkable and inspiring story.

Here's another remarkable and inspiring story. This one is from India, specifically from Bengal. Here is a photograph, exactly 100 years old this year, because 100 years ago was when the famous poet and novelist Rabindranath Tagore, who'd been involved in creating village schools - given the inadequacy of the colonial school system for most of Indian population - opened his own college, which in due course became a university. Tagore was sharply critical of the colonial universities that the British had set up, although the British colonizers in India did create the largest university system in the colonized world. But they imported the curriculum, basically. It was an Anglocentric curriculum and Tagore rightly criticized this as a colonial imposition in Indian life. He put his money where his mouth was, and said, "Alright, I will develop an alternative".

And here it is. This is the foundation, the opening ceremony of the college, which was called *Visva-Bharati*. It still exists. It survived great financial difficulties, it was included in the public university system after Indian independence and it's still there, you can visit it online.

Of course, it's developed in enormous ways since those days. But the fascinating part about it was that Tagore thought of this university, not just as a local alternative to the colonial knowledge system, but as something more ambitious than that, as something that the British themselves should have imagined. Tagore brought into his curriculum European knowledge, certainly European concepts and forms of expression, and also Indian cultures, Tibetan, Chinese knowledge, conceptualization, traditions. He imagined *Visva-Bharati*, in his language, as a meeting place of civilizations. We might now call it a 'multicultural university' in a fairly strong sense. I really think this should be famous! This example should be front and center in contemporary discussions of how we might reconstitute the world university system in the post-COVID and post-neoliberal world that we are perhaps heading into.

I want to wind up this section quickly by mentioning knowledge projects which in effect tried to shift the logic of what might otherwise have seemed to be a strong colonial knowledge system. A fascinating example of that is the work of Jomo Kenyatta, who became the first Prime Minister of independent Kenya. He had a PhD from London and the PhD was an ethnography in the form of a classic Malinowski-style, British ethnographic description of a local culture. In this case, the Gikuyu culture of Kenya. But Kenyatta turned this knowledge genre around from being colonial knowledge defining the primitiveness of the colonized people, which is the way that ethnography was mainly used in colonialism. Kenyatta turned it around to be a defense of the sophistication and value of the Indigenous culture. So he gave it a completely different political meaning and therefore developed it in different ways.

I want to move to a very contemporary example of this logic of shifting the meaning of an existing technique. Statistical techniques, census taking, counting heads and so forth, have long been used by colonizing powers in controlling Indigenous communities. That's how the census

in most post-colonial societies originated, in the colonizers' attempt to study the colonized. Some contemporary Indigenous knowledge workers, including my Australian colleague Maggie Walter, who's co-author of this book *Indigenous Statistics*, have been turning this around. They argue that statistical methods can actually be used by Indigenous people to contest the colonizers' reading of the 'deficit' in which colonized people live, of their primitiveness and inadequateness compared with the colonizers. Indigenous communities can use statistics as a weapon to challenge the legitimacy of control by the colonizing power, to assert what Walter and Anderson called, 'data sovereignty'. That is the right of Indigenous people to control and use the data about themselves and their own lives and bodies. They can use it as a political tool to gain space and resources in the post-colonial, in this case, settler-colonial, state. And that has been an effective political tool. It's a book that I heartily recommend to you as an important example of anticolonial, decolonizing method.

### **Teaching**

Now I want to turn briefly to questions of teaching, because the seminar series like this has much of its effect through our ideas of how we teach different groups of students to be knowledge producers. So I'm going to pose 3 issues that come up in teaching.

Firstly, do we teach methods by teaching rules? And here I would answer, generally speaking, no, we should not do that if we are hoping to develop a decolonizing approach. This is because decolonizing knowledge projects persistently move across the genres of the existing disciplinary knowledge formation in which the rules are formalized and taught.

I want to give you a practical example of that in one of the most remarkable anticolonial knowledge projects I know about. This is also a picture around a hundred years old. It's from South Africa, and the man in the picture with his bicycle is Sol Plaatje, who was secretary of the organization which was the ancestor of the African National Congress, which is now the government of South Africa. This was in the days of the struggle against the precursors of the apartheid regime. In 1913, the white government of the then Union of South Africa introduced

new legislation which was intended to drive African communities off their land, hand the land over to white commercial farmers, and turn black Africans into landless wage laborers, agricultural labor. This of course was resisted.

One of the strategies of opposition was to try to spread knowledge of the inhumane effects of this legislation, and Plaatje developed this as a knowledge project. He bicycled, because black men in South Africa at that time could not afford cars, he bicycled around the communities affected by this legislation and he interviewed them. So it was a sociological knowledge project, a fieldwork project to collect knowledge about the social effects of the new laws. He wrote it up in a book called *Native Life in South Africa*, which is not a traditional ethnography but a highly political analysis of the process of land theft, the politics of white supremacy in South Africa, as well as documenting the social impact of this on Indigenous people. It's quite remarkable. It's a great classic, I think, of world sociology, which also ought to be famous.

Second question, do we teach decolonial knowledge by inventing new canons, new lists of the great men of the past whom we ought to study, and regard as our intellectual ancestors, a project that's very familiar to sociologists? And again, I've always said no to this. I don't think that the invention of canons is really a useful thing. What we need to do is widen the archive that we use, widen our knowledge of the history of knowledge production in whatever area that we are working in.

So if we're working in education we should know, for instance, that the history of feminist work in education should involve Kartini, 120 years ago in what's now Indonesia, then the Dutch East Indies. Kartini is a national heroine in Indonesia, who is hardly known at all outside. She was a pioneer of the attempt to change women's subordination in Indonesian societies through education.

Or we can come right up near the present and look at the work of people like Bina Agarwal, an Indian economist, a remarkable intellectual figure, who's worked on environmental issues and

on economic structure in the larger sense. She has written brilliantly about issues to do with land. This was of course a central issue in colonialism - the taking of land is almost a definition of colonialism. So her book, *A Field of One's Own*, is the most remarkable work I've ever seen concerned with gender issues in access to ownership of and use of land. Including such work, which is not hard to find, expands the archive that is available to us as knowledge workers.

Thirdly, do we need to teach an epistemological doctrine to students? This is something of an open question. I think there are troubling options here. The dominant knowledge formation has its own epistemology, which I call a 'pyramid epistemology', where power is concentrated at the top. Some decolonial perspectives point, I would say, to a kind of 'mosaic epistemology', where different knowledge formations are understood to sit alongside each other. And there are also notions of 'solidaristic epistemologies', where there is an attempt to connect and learn from different knowledge formations or different knowledge projects.

Above all, whatever epistemological stance we finally take, we need a practice of connection between different parts of the world, different traditions and projects of knowledge-making. And here I turn to the work of another Australian colleague, the feminist sociologist Chilla Bulbeck. 20 years ago she published a book about exactly this, about how it might be possible, while respecting the autonomy and difference of feminist knowledge in different communities, different parts of the world, to connect them through a respectful process that she called 'braiding at the borders'. That means linking and exchanging, a process of mutual learning as I would think of it, rather than a process of domination.

### **Politics**

So this brings me to my concluding remarks, about the politics of knowledge on a world scale. I hope that some of the people in this seminar, in fact a good many of the people in this seminar, will be people who work in the Global North. I think the project of decolonization, or the ending of coloniality in knowledge institutions, concerns the Global North as much as it concerns the Global South, though in different ways.

I've talked about these themes in a good many Global North institutions. Sometimes people have been glad to hear these messages and sometimes they have not. There are obviously resistances to these stories - there are resistances even in countries of the remote South like Australia! Some of that has to do with good old racism. Some of it has to do with class privilege on a world scale, rich countries perhaps feel they have little to learn from the rest of the world. More interesting is the response from some of my colleagues in Global North institutions, who express a concern that the process of decolonization would mean deskilling them and undermining the education of their students. They fear that the process means the loss of professional skills on which they have relied. This is a serious response. The question can be addressed if we understand the process of decolonizing knowledge institutions more as an amplification of skills and possibilities than one of destruction.

In work on post-colonial knowledge, decolonizing knowledge or contesting hegemony in the global economy of knowledge, the question is constantly coming up whether we should be operating in and through the existing economy of knowledge, or rather, reject it and try to construct something different from outside.

I don't know that there is one answer to this. In principle, I respect people who take either of those directions. My own approach has been to engage within the existing knowledge formation and attempt to transform rather than to delink from it. I think there is much of value in even the old imperial knowledge system and the neo-imperial knowledge system that we have now. We have relied on it to a considerable extent in the COVID pandemic. The scandal in the global COVID response has not been in the effort to produce vaccines and techniques of controlling the spread of the virus. The scandal has been in the truly incredible and appalling inequalities in access to care, to life-saving resources, to vaccines, and to the means by which safe practices can be developed and adopted. So my enthusiasm is for transformation rather than separation. But there are certainly other positions worth arguing.

But whichever way we go on that issue, I do want to argue that the project of decolonizing knowledge institutions and contesting hegemony in the global economy of knowledge is part of a larger project of producing and using knowledge democratically. In fact, the decolonizing project is now one of the cutting edges of a democratic agenda in culture. It's that important. And I hope that those of you who have joined in these sessions will be encouraged to develop this project in your own ways. There are many, many directions in which it can develop, and I will be very interested in time to hear the results of your work.

Thank you for listening. I have mentioned quite a number of different names, I realise. I thought it might be helpful for you to have the spelling, so here is a slide with the spelling of the names I have mentioned.