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

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Greetings to all of you who are here in this session from Australia and specifically from Sydney, the largest city in Australia on the banks of, or 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 100 years ago. It was the British who named it Australia, which is a name that literally means 'the Southland', or in rough cultural translation, as far away from home as the British can possibly get. Contemporary Australia is therefore a continent with two civilizations. One derived from the European colonization, one which has been in the land for something like 60,000 years, effectively from the beginning. And I want to illustrate that with two pictures. One, a picture of one of the grand houses built by rich colonists, about 100 years after the initial settlement in the colony that they named Victoria, after the then Queen of England. And 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, the headquarters of the pastoral property, you will see four white men standing on the European style lawn, and they're all holding guns, which I think is a kind of encapsulation of the process of colonization. The second picture I want to show you is a painting done by an Aboriginal woman, an artist from the Central Desert Region, from one of the many Indigenous communities on the continent, which is a representation of a certain kind of knowledge. This painting is called *Honey Ant Dreaming*. There's a story, there's knowledge associated with the image and only certain people possess this image and are entitled to put it into the public and explain at least part of its meaning to other people. In that knowledge is geographical knowledge of where this particular food source, the

honey ant, it can be found, at what time of year, under what climatic conditions, what are the roots towards it, where water is to be found in the desert, and also it involves social knowledge. So it is in fact equivalent, not just to the artwork with which such images are received in the colonial society, but it's also a documentation of a variety of forms of knowledge and of social position. So I want to start with this to illustrate both the different kinds of knowledge formations that exist and 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 theme, my title, *Working Methods*, is to emphasize the theme of decolonial, anti-colonial method as 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. Okay, so I want to do this in four steps. I first want to talk about intellectual labor, and what I call the global economy of knowledge, the dominant knowledge system in the world today. Secondly, I want to talk about ways in which attempts have been made to democratize knowledge and the production of knowledge. Thirdly, I want to talk about the way we teach, especially how we teach methods in universities, particularly, but 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 it.

So, let me go then to my first topic, that is the character of intellectual labor and the significance of the workforce. Making knowledge is an intensely practical matter. And I think methodology, the discussion of the processes of making knowledge can really 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 engaged in, in producing it, or more exactly the different 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. In the first chapter, you will find my analysis of the labor process of the production of knowledge, that is 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. And I'll give you a very, very quick run-through of what they are. First of all, the consulting of the archive, the relation of the worker to existing knowledge, to the work of other knowledge producers in that same area. Secondly, 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, et cetera, whatever it may be, there is an encounter with materials. Then there is a process which I call 'patterning', that is the work of finding patterns in the material that you have encountered, your collective as well as your individual, that may be statistical analysis, it may be the search for common themes in quantitative social science, it may be the development of concepts, the refinement of concepts, et cetera. The next form of labor is what I call the labor of critique, which is not just criticizing other people, although that's sometimes involved, but it's basically criticizing existing knowledge in the light of patterns you've found in the new materials, or the new encounters, that your project, that 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 the reflection on the literature is something that most writers of journal articles find terribly boring, and which students often find hard to understand why they're required to do this, that 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, publication, communication in conferences, teaching itself, the many ways in which the products of the labor of research are put into social circulation. Okay, 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, always being 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 formation. It's in the knowledge formation that was illustrated by Mary Anne Nampitjinpa's painting of the *Honey Ant Dreaming*, the knowledge holders, the bearers of the archive, are the elders of the community, greatly respected in Australian Indigenous societies, and 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 hard developed knowledge, and who are engaged in a continuous process of engagement with that knowledge and development 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, specialized researchers, the workers, often forgotten in the listing of authors of journal articles and so forth, but this 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.

Now, if we look at the history of the knowledge system constituted by disciplinary knowledge, whether it is biomedical knowledge, whether it's social knowledge, whether its literary knowledge, if we go back into the history of almost any of the disciplines across that spectrum of 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, although they were all important, but there was also a dividend of knowledge. So modern botany developed by European scientists such as Linnaeus in Sweden, well, 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, what he called his apostles, to different parts of the world to collect botanical specimens. So 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 basically developed. One of those apostles was actually on the ship, when Captain Cook of the

Royal British Navy sailed in through the heads of Botany Bay, as the body of water near where I live was called, and astonished scientists with the wealth of new plants that they could find.

That was one part of the story. Here's another, even more famous. This is another British naval vessel, a warship called Her Majesty's Ship or His Majesty's Ship at the time I think it was, *Beagle*, in the post-colonial world off the very far south coast of South America, and aboard that ship, which was on a knowledge gathering expedition to the colonized and post-colonial world was a young scientist, a young life scientist, natural historian as they were called at the time, by the name of Charles Darwin. He sailed on that ship collecting specimens, geological, biological, for three years, sailed back to England, took his specimens to shore, and that became a crucial element of the creation of modern evolutionary biology. So the connection with Empire was as important as that 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 global center, in the imperial center, which gathered that information, gathered that data, Botanic Gardens, scientific societies, even universities initially, 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 advent of political independence in the Spanish colonies of Latin America in the early 19th century, and in French and British colonies during the 20th century, that hardly interrupted this flow, it's still going on. We've all been glued to the news coming from Glasgow. And we're all aware of the periodic reports of 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 those reports closely about climate change, you will find that a great deal of the data comes from the Global South, from the majority world, some of it collected by automatic means and satellites, of course, but still coming from those parts of the world. But almost all the theories and the computer processing, 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 Hountonji,

philosopher from West Africa, from the country of Benin, who I think is actually one of the most important philosophers in the contemporary world. In his work, he's worked on questions of knowledge and the theorizing of knowledge, the configuration, the patterning of knowledge for many years. In his work of the 1990s, he developed an analysis of the global economy of knowledge, based to some extent on Samir Amin's economic analysis of the global economy. But in this case, confined to the process of production and circulation of knowledge specifically. And in that, Hountonji pointed to this global division of labor between the collection of data, which was the major function in the global economy of knowledge of the colonized and post-colonial world, and the analysis and theorizing of that data which was a special province of the elite knowledge institutions of the Global North imperial center. And 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 labor in the larger economy of knowledge. Now, here's a book about a very early example of that. The book is called – sorry, my picture of it is rather bad, it's by Gardner and McConvell, and the book is called *Southern Anthropology: A History of Fison and Howitt's Kamilaroi and Kurnai*. It's about 19th-century anthropology, in fact, analysis of kinship, which became, of course, one of the key things that anthropologists classically did, but it has a wonderful account of the way in which the elders of the Aboriginal communities, about which the anthropologists were trying to study, were themselves active providers of the data on which disciplinary anthropology was being constructed. So the workforce was not just the heroic white anthropologists with their pith helmets or slouch hats, but was also Indigenous people themselves, mobilizing the knowledge that they had as a gift, in effect, they weren't paid for it but it was a gift to the knowledge makers of colonial society among the colonizers. Now that is a very early example of a form of connection, which is typical in the experience of modern, of contemporary 21st-century social scientists working in the post-colonial world rather than in the Global North, in the Metropole. It's an attitude that Paulin Hountonji called 'extraversion'. Other researchers, such as Hussein Alatas have called it, 'academic dependency'. 'Extraversion' I think is a useful term because it

suggests that the position of the contributor from the colonized or post-colonial world is in active relationship with the center, it's not simply a passive one of subordination. But its active contribution in the context of under-resourcing, and in the context of marginalization in the division of labor which reserves the production of theory and methods to the center.

So, that's my starting point for thinking about questions of methodology. The dominance of a globally organized, but nevertheless internally divided knowledge economy, which you find in all the disciplines of the contemporary university curriculum in one form or another. And that has meant both the global organization and the social organization of knowledge production in the imperial center, with its elite knowledge institutions like Harvard and Oxford, and so forth, and its mass of less elite knowledge institutions, and the global spread of even less elite knowledge institutions in the universities and colleges around the rest of the world, that has produced and institutionalized a massive social hierarchy underpinning the production and circulation of knowledge. It is a deeply anti-democratic economy, without the slightest doubt. And there's every reason why we should be interested in ways and means, in methods, in fact, of democratizing that production process, and that said, of institutions.

So I now want to turn to some examples of democratizing projects in the realm of knowledge, mostly in my field of the social sciences, but of the human sciences more broadly, but with relevance, I think, to the natural sciences, as well. I want to start out with a lovely example of a 'from below' knowledge project, which developed in Sweden, about a generation ago. And this is the book that describes it, written by Sven Lindqvist, a very, very interesting writer. Some of his work circulates also in English. The title of the book translates, *Dig Where You Stand*, and it's a working-class knowledge. It's the story of a working-class knowledge project, to produce knowledge about the jobs that workers themselves had, which then led on to the history of their jobs, digging up the archaeology of the industries in which they worked, studying the connection between their industry and the rest of the Swedish economy, and ultimately, the world economy, all done by the workers themselves. It was a project sponsored by the trade unions, by working-class organizations, and carried out by the workers themselves. Absolutely fascinating knowledge

project and one which has analogues in many other parts of the world. Okay, that's in Sweden, which is now conventionally regarded as part of the Global North, although it wasn't always.

Here we move to the post-colonial world, to Central America, to a knowledge project, developed, particularly by Ignacio Martín-Baró, in Central America, under the inspiration of liberation theology. He developed a perspective on the kinds of 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 contribution to a field which has a disciplinary representation. You can teach this in the psychology department, though 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 this issue of knowledge production 'from below' also applies in what can be regarded as a leech-dominated 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 particularly, but the Ebola virus, which is still a threat in Western and Central Africa. And there is information, which in the book that I've read about the responses, the social responses to the epidemic, there was in fact local communities who initially worked out the epidemiology of this virus, the way in which it was spread from person to person and from place to place, and who began out of their own social resources to develop responses to stop the spread of and 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.

Okay, well, those 'knowledge from below' projects all involve the production of a new workforce for the production of knowledge, with part-time workforce of course much of the time, but nevertheless, the production of a new workforce 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, not far from Australia, 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 which have developed their own institutions, developed their own technical language, involved whole communities in the production of knowledge. It's a remarkable and inspiring story.

Here's another remarkable and inspiring story. This one from India, specifically from Bengal. This is a photograph, exactly 100 years old this year, because that was the year, 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. That was when he 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 did create the largest colonial university system in the colonized world, in India. But they imported the curriculum, basically. It was an Anglocentric curriculum and Tagore rightly criticized this as a colonial imposition in Indian life and 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 a 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. And, 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, that is a university which could be a meeting place for civilizations, for different civilizations. So Tagore brought into his curriculum European knowledge, certainly European concepts and forms of expression, 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 and I really think this should be famous, this should be something that is 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 from Kenya, obviously, 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 around, 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, shifting the logic 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 a co-author of this book, have been turning this around and saying 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, and can use it in effect as a weapon to challenge the legitimacy of control by the colonizing power, 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, and to 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. And it's a book that I heartily recommend to you as an important example of anticolonial, decolonizing method.

Now I want to turn briefly, before I come to my conclusion about politics, I want to turn briefly to questions of teaching because the series, the seminar series, a discussion like this I think, has much of its effect on our ideas of how we teach methods or 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, make decolonizing modes, because decolonizing knowledge projects consistently, I think, move across the genres of the existing disciplinary knowledge formation in which the rules are formalized and taught. Excuse me. And 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 the secretary of the organization, black-controlled 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 Colonies in 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, paid labor. And this of course was resisted and opposed and 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 this legislation. He wrote it up in a book called, *Native Life in South Africa*, which is not a traditional ethnography at all, 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.

Okay. 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 I, again, I've always said no to this. I don't think that the invention of canons is really a useful thing, but 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, for instance, we should know that the history of education, for instance, the history of feminist work in education, should involve Kartini, a hundred and 20 years ago in what's now Indonesia, then, the Dutch East Indies, who is a national heroine in Indonesia, who is hardly known at all outside, but who 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, on economic structure in the larger sense, who has written brilliantly about issues to do with land, which 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 thing I've ever seen, concerned with gender issues in access to ownership of and use of land. That is the kind of exercise in expanding the archive that is available to us as knowledge workers.

And finally, do we need to teach an epistemological doctrine to students? And I – 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 centered, 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, you know, 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. But above all we need, whatever epistemological stance we finally take, I think, is 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 of mine, a feminist colleague, Chilla Bulbeck, who 20 years ago published a book about exactly this,

about how it might be possible, while respecting the autonomy and difference of feminist knowledge and feminist experience in different communities, different parts of the world, we might also set about connecting them through a respectful process that she called, 'braiding at the borders', linking and exchanging a process of mutual learning as I would think of it, rather than a process of domination.

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, because I think the project of decolonization or the ending of the coloniality in knowledge institutions concerns the Global North, as much as it concerns the Global South, the majority world, 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, and 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. But also, more interesting I think, is that the response from some of my colleagues in Global North institutions has been a concern that this process of decolonization would mean deskilling them, meaning their deskilling, the loss of professional skills on which they relied. And this, I think, is a serious response, a serious question which should be addressed and can be addressed if we understand the process of decolonizing knowledge institutions more as an amplification of skills and possibilities than one of destruction.

The issues constantly coming up 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 with and in the existing economy of knowledge, or whether we should reject it and try to construct something different from outside. I don't know that there is an 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 and rightly so. The scandal in the COVID, 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 incredible, 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 I guess, rather than separation, but there are certainly other positions worth arguing. But whichever way we go on that kind of 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 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, because 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 realised, 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. And we'll circulate that, or we'll include that obviously when this goes online.