

**Professor Jeong-eun Rhee**

**7<sup>th</sup> December 2021**

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

**URL: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5d-h\\_-Hrph8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5d-h_-Hrph8)**

**Organised by: Dr Leon Moosavi, University of Liverpool, UK**

**Sponsored by: National Centre for Research Methods (UK)**

**Transcribed by: Ms Intan Syazwani**

So I think this is the cue for me to start. And firstly, thank you, Dr Leon Moosavi and University of Liverpool for inviting me to be part of this wonderful series of conversation. I'm very grateful to have this opportunity to converse with our audience from all different geographical regions of the globe. And well, this may sound minor but for someone who has been surrounded by US-centric thinking and practice, how this webinar schedule is announced using different geographical locations was such a refreshing decentering practice. I couldn't help noticing. And so, I just kind of wanted to comment that I appreciate it a lot.

And partly due to my own personal trajectory as a migrant intellectual and knowledge worker in the United States, I try to consider a geocultural and historical context of where I do and share my work. So, in this regard, I want to acknowledge the continuing history of settler colonialism in the territory of the US before my talk. And land acknowledgement is not without controversy, as there are debates on how this practice may remain as a mere lip service, especially when it is not accompanied with the political and material actions. So, taking such a political engagement seriously and also, following one of our previous speakers, Professor Walter Mignolo's argument about how our onto-epistemological level of engagement still matters in activating decolonial work, I put out my acknowledgement that I reside in unseeded Indigenous land, especially the homeland of Lenape peoples. I also acknowledged the genocide and continuing displacement of Indigenous peoples since the colonial era and beyond. Today's Lenape communities include Lenape people who belong to the Delaware nation and Delaware Tribe of Indians in Oklahoma, the Stockworth-Munsee Community in Wisconsin, and the Munsee-Delaware nation, Moravian of the Thames' First Nation and Delaware of Six Nations in Ontario. This acknowledgement is to express my solidarity with both local and global Indigenous communities for their continuing fights for sovereignty.

So, in this particular location, my talk today will draw mostly from my recently published book *Decolonial Feminist Research: Haunting, Rememory and Mothers* so that I can actually

advocate for research that works with and for healing knowledge, both in process and as a product. So, if I give a short introduction of my book, my book documents my own transnational, intergenerational and very personal inquiry, which actually was demanded by my dead mother's haunting rememory, across time, geographies, languages, and ways of knowing and being, and I assume that some of audience may wonder what I meant by rememory and haunting as we're talking about research. And these are the concepts that I'll explicate further soon, so please bear with me until I get there. But at this point, I want to bring your attention to a language play that I engage you with to challenge our presumed notions about 'mother'. As you can see on the slide, I blur and integrate two somewhat conflicting concepts of motherness, and otherness. While it may be assumed that mother is a figure that given birth to self, so there's certain intimate connectivity is expected and presumed, otherness is what distinguishes self through differentiation, distance from the other. However, in working through my own inquiry, I discuss how my own mother had otherness that I couldn't have access to or understand. So, I put a slash between mother to highlight that otherness of mother and then I also discuss how my others became my mother's rendering and helping nurturing hands for me. So, putting letter 'M' inside a parenthesis to reveal motherness of others. Eventually, I have recognized accepted all these figures as my many mothers and these shifting fragmentations and connectivities become important elements of my discussion. So, whenever you hear me invoking mothers in today's talk, I hope you can consider distinct relations of mother and other.

Through this inquiry, I dare to present a quite messy entanglement of my personal, academic, structural, theoretical, and spiritual relations and selves as educational research and share my murky layered process of conceptualizing, researching, and writing my mother's transnational rememory as a collective knowledge project of intergenerational decolonial feminist of color.

So, with this overview of the my book, obviously, we're not going to be able to talk everything about, you know, like what I discussed in the book, but I want to open up today's talk by positioning myself as a researcher who commits herself to doing decolonial work but who is also continuously bound by colonial ways of being and doing but to disconnect me from various possibilities of different words, experiences, connections, and knowledge. So, from this positionality, I pose a question: "If researchers themselves are not decolonized, is it possible for us to do decolonial work?". So, today's talk, I'd like to bring our attention to our researcher self, or we can frame it as our onto-epistemological engagement, rather than method per se. Since we as academics are trained in reason, logic, science-centric thinking, we desire and seek out various levels of analysis that can explain. With this pursuit of

explanation, we often fail to consider that we simply cannot understand or grasp the weight, depth and complexity of the reality exactly because of our arrogant desire for explanation for everything. Because explanation is possible, if we think about it, only within the boundary and limit of what we can understand, think, and imagine. Our search of pursuit is in academia, more than often accompanied by choosing trendy, popular, or classic theories that celebrated scholars in our disciplines use, and we find assurance and comfort, even of our existence and agency in our explanation through are less than perfect, less than complete and less than successful attempts that may even perpetuate violence we want to stop. Yet, what if not all are explainable? In other words, my argument is that we do need to delink from this onto-epistemological assurance and clarity before we seek for decolonial methodological directives, especially if our purpose is to produce a healing knowledge in process and as a product. Unless we can confront our own demons and our own colonial habitual ways of being and doing, and this is Gloria Anzaldúa's work, unless we look them in the face and live to write about them, any technical assurance will always find a way to bring us back to the ever-expanding design of coloniality.

So, before I dig further into my recent work, dig further into how my recent work has opened up ways for me to address this question, I'm going to actually start with my personal context, which may be considered as somewhat inappropriate in certain academic disciplines, but as I shared, as the overview of the my book, my transnational feminist knowledge project began with my mother who died in Korea and then has kept showing up in my life in the United States. So, I need to start from here.

Since I'm not going to discuss her actual stories in today's talk, the biographies of me and my mother that I share today are mostly to provide the historical context which probably allows the audience to also see different connections from where you are located. My mother was born during the time when Korea was colonized by the Japanese Empire which lasted until 1945, which is also the End of the World War II. While it is not often discussed, Japanese colonization of Korea was coordinated with the extension of the US Empire to Asia Pacific region at the time through which The United States and Japan negotiated about which part of Pacific Asian region each empire would annex. And after 1945, my mother had lived through three years of the US military government from 1945 to 1948. And then another three years of the Korean War from 1950 to 1953, so quite volatile life experiences there. I was born about 15 years after the Armistice of the Korean War. So, I didn't experience Korean War, but I'm considered the second generation of the Korean War. I grew up in Korea until 1992 and came to the United States in my early 20s, as an international student, and have resided here over the last 30 years. And my mother, who had lived her entire life in Korea passed away in 2015.

So, we're one of those millions of transnational families who have lived across different continents and countries and regions, which is also a symptom of the continuing legacy of a coloniality. And with my mother's somewhat unexpected death, I started to be effectively drawn into what I would call 'a feeling place', that is the intersection of time and space where dead mothers stay to share their memories, partly because their wronged experiences, pains and fights couldn't have been said during their lifetime, to reproduce what can be marked as a history, whether it's a world history, national history, or even family history. And this 'feeling place' was where I started to pose and work through my methodological questions. So, it's important for me to emphasize that these questions, these methodological questions, emerged from 'the feeling place', which was quite unexplainable.

So, I have the three questions on the slide that are going to guide today's talk, although not in a linear way. So, number one, "What methodologies are available to notice and study a reality that exceeds and defies modern scientific ontology and intelligibility?". Number two, "How can researchers write in the name and practice of research what can never be known or narrated with logic and reason?". Number three, "What methodologies can be used to work through and with both personal and collective losses, wounds and connections that have become your questions?". And here again, you can probably notice that I'm also highlighting different kinds of fragmentations and connectivity we can imagine as I put slash like in "y/our" as this slash puts the differentiation between your and our. And again, every moment such utilization of shifting relations and fragmentations become important for me to kind of really work through some of the new possibilities.

So, to work with these questions, we tend to listen to a question of researchers own colonised self that I opened up in the beginning of my presentation. I'm coming back to the concept of rememory finally because that concept is how I could start to work with a 'feeling place'. And I borrow this concept of rememory from African American writer, Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* which was published in 1987. It is a fictional story that loosely engages with a historical figure, an actual historical figure, Margaret Garner, a young mother, who having escaped the slavery was arrested for killing one of her children, and actually trying to kill the rest of all her children, rather than letting her children be returned to the owners of plantation. So, with this historical background, the fiction *Beloved* narrates the House 124 in Ohio, where a main character is Sethe: an ex-slave mother who killed her own baby when her slave master came to reclaim her children, and said this older daughter, Denver, were visited by this baby ghost. After my mother's death, I was almost helplessly drawn to this fiction *Beloved* since Toni Morrison was explicitly putting out ghost and hunting in the foreground without any explanation. And as I have already noted, explanation can work only within the limit of what

we know. So, how can we face not withstanding a reality that exceed, defies modern scientific ontology and intelligibility? Since I was reading *Beloved*, I could accept ghostly visitations from my mother. The possibility Morrison wrote really mattered as I was experiencing haunting in a more than metaphorical sense. Rereading *Beloved* during this time was almost like reading someone else's manual on how to navigate your haunted reality, someone else's manual at the time. I say someone else's manual because at the time I mistakenly felt that this book was not necessarily written for me. This was an African American history of a slave. But this fragmented, disconnected way of thinking is a reminder and symptom of our own ways of remembering and dismembering through origins rather than destinations. The question is not about how do others become your mother, but how do you notice others who are already your mother's rendering helping and nurturing hands?

So, it was as close as I could get at the time and not to look for any equivalents but to be instructed on how to know things behind things, like, how to be in touch with a particular yet shared historicity. Both *Beloved* and I were in that feeling place of, her mother had secrets, things she wouldn't tell, things she halfway told, that was the place that we're connected. And that particular, yet shared historicity, demanded my daughterly responsibility, my ability to respond in our interconnected relations. If such a historicity can be recognized only through fiction, I had to figure out as a researcher what restricts my access to such analysis, such knowledge in the field of research, which I considered as my field of knowledge.

So, I want to actually introduce a very long dialogue from the book *Beloved*. And this is a dialogue between Denver, the daughter, and her mother, Sethe where Sethe brings up her rememory. In this dialogue, rememory is introduced as both forgetting and remembrance and both verb and noun. And this dialogue reveals really profound insight and ways to delink our ontological assurance from what is actually colonial ways of knowing and being. And so, I thought it's a work for us to spend a little bit of time to actually read this together. And so, I'm going to just kind of read the whole thing and hopefully you can also feel like what's happening in terms of rememory.

“What are you praying for mom? Not for anything. I don't pray anymore. I just talk. What are you talking about? You won't understand, baby. Yes, I will. I was talking about time. It is so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go, pass on. Some things just stay. I use to think it was my rememory. You know, some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places. Places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone. But the place, the picture of it, stays, not just in my rememory, but out there in the world. What I remember is a picture, floating around there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture

of what I did, or knew, or saw, is still out there, right in the place where it happened. Can other people see it? asked Denver. Oh, yes. Oh, yes, yes, yes. Someday you'll be walking the road and you hear something or see something going on, so clear. And you think it's you think it up, a thought picture. But no, it's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to someone else. Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away. Even if the whole farm, every tree, grass blade of it dies, the picture is still there. What's more, if you go there - you who never was there - if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again. It will be there for you, waiting for you. So, Denver, you can't never go there, never. Because even though it's all over, over and done with, it's going to always be there, waiting for you. That's how I come, I had to get all my children out. No matter what. Denver picked at her fingernails, if it's still there, waiting, that must mean that nothing ever dies”.

Like, whenever I read, I don't know how many times I read this but still it's really really jarring. Because I encountered this dialogue in a 'feeling place' I want us to pause, not to think but to feel, although thinking and feeling are not disconnected. Feel this particular onto-epistemological tension that rememory generates for most of us. As you can see, rememory simultaneously refers to both forgetting and remembering at the same time. Rememory is both doing and being, or non-being. In addition, rememory exists both inside and outside an individual's experience, thinking and knowing. It is the picture of what I did or knew or saw floating around out there outside my head. So, then whose rememory, really, can you understand this? Denver thought she would understand this, but Sethe knew Denver couldn't. Still ironically, Sethe still shares what she knows about rememory with Denver. This is where I actually noticed a possibility. How about you? Will you understand this? Rememory stays in the place where it happened. Thus, rememory is or becomes the place forever transcending the temporality of past, present and future. Because even if the house burns down, the place is still there. Is the place then a being that rememories? Stay with me here, take a moment to feel this head-spinning way of knowing, rememorying. Can you notice how rememory generates different relationship between you, me and place, time-space, that carries our and your ancestors' rememories? Morrison suggests that anyone can hear or see someone else's rememory. It will happen again, when you bump into a rememory that belongs to someone else. If you go there - you who never was there - because where I was before I came here, that place is real. Have you bumped into someone else's rememory in that place which is real? Even though it's all over and done with, even if the whole farm, every tree, grass blade of it dies, it's going to always be there waiting for you.

So, the concept of rememory challenges and divides our modernistic and thus colonial ways of knowing the world. If we just summarise the couple of points that we all felt, first, the

rememory tells us that sovereign self is not in possession or control of one's own interiority, meaning mind, memory or thinking because my rememory is floating around outside my head. So, even if you want to keep it secret, it can be out there. There is no such division between self and her environment. My rememory is in the place where it happened. There's no separation. Individuals are not independent because my rememory will happen again to you when you bump into it. Temporality is not linear, my rememory will happen again, even after I die. Space and time are intertwined. My rememory will happen again right in the place it happened. And materiality and spirituality are not separate. My rememory, even after I die, is still out there in the world. If we, who never was there, go there, then these ancestors' rememories will happen again across time, enter into our rememory, and change our consciousness, identity, and embodied experiences. So, then, where does the self begin and end with rememory? There are no separations. In this sense, rememory is a haunting. When you are haunted, it's not your choice.

So, I'm going to get into the concept of haunting here. Sociologist, Avery Gordon, reminds us that being haunted throws us effectively, sometimes against our will, and always a bit magically into the structure of building of a reality. We come to experience, not as a cold knowledge, but as transformative recognition. And I argue this offers healing power. According to Gordon, a ghost is simply not a dead or missing person, but a social figure, and investigating can lead to the downside where history and subjectivity makes social life.

So, let me a little more concrete about what it means to encounter rememory or being haunted by mother's rememory. In this 'feeling place', I noticed that making a living and claiming my citizenship on this stolen land represses the memory of a continuing settler-colonialism in my flesh, born out of my Korean mother's body. This is how we with different origins get linked, connected, haunted through your mother's rememories. When you hear me saying "y/our mother's" again, like, I like us to kind of get to that slash and parenthesis, to kind of really remember that mothers can have both mothering and othering fragmentations and connections in this kind of messy relationship and shifting relationships go on with any kind of history. So, expecting unequal right in US democracy that is based on black exclusion buries in my flesh rememory of black mothers whose children were sold away and whose children's lives still do not matter. Writing my resistance amidst the ongoing brutality of migrant children caged and families separated stores this violence in my body. I am helplessly witnessing this violent act without much ability to stop them, yet I can be responsible. In other words, I commit to my ability to respond. At the same time, the presence of my Korean body brings out the specters of my ancestors right in this territory, demanding to rememory countless death in an aftermath of Cold War, including Korean Wars, which became the condition of possibility for

American prosperity in the 20th and 21st centuries. Now, my mother's memories demand that your daughterly responsibility in this place.

So, we, the dead and the living, the past and the present, and what has happened here and what has happened there, all co-exist and are still in our bodies. There's neither subject nor object. There's neither self nor others. There's neither agency nor fate. There are only inexplicable ties to what cannot be experienced or subjectified fully. It is not about origin, but about innumerable vested connectivities.

So, with this kind of different understanding toward self as and of connectivity or as and of inexplicable ties that I noticed that through memory, I now want to briefly turn to a Korean-American writer, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*, which was published in 1982, like as another kind of lens that allows me to address those three methodological questions in that 'feeling place'. So *Dictee* is considered an experimental autobiographical essay that transcends the self as the book kind of shows juxtapositions of fragmented stories of multiple women across several continents in different time periods. But this work became significant only posthumously after her tragic death on the day she received her author's proof of the book. So, what this meant was that none of the readers could ask the author, Hak Kyung Cha, any questions about the book. We're left with the book for our own use. And in this work, Cha writes a non-linear, non-unifying, multilingual, Korean migrant American woman's subject by putting together mostly invisible, individual, and conflicted collective histories of Korea, as well as embodied interactions and biographies of various historical cultural woman subjects and so I listed, you know, some of the, kind of, figures that she used to write this book. And one example is Korean anti-colonial student leader, Yu Guan Soon in early 1900s, Joan of Arc from France in early 1400s, Demeter and Persephone from Greek myth, Cha's mother's Hyung Soon Huo, and Cha herself, written in multi-languages of Korean, Chinese, English and French with photos, diagrams, and handwritten letters. And so, this book, her autobiography, that juxtapose incongruent, multilingual, multicontinental, and multigenerational horror stories in a multi-representational modes demands readers to know differently. In other words, Cha instructs an inevitability of fragmentations and disrupts easily consumable totalizing common identifications in gendered Korean migrant postcolonial experience. So, I actually kind of sampled a couple of pages from the book to kind of really show what I meant by incongruent juxtapositions that kind of reveal the postcolonial fragmented being and knowing. And so, the first - the left side, the first picture is the first piece of the book that shows Korean language is scribbled on the wall. And then the second picture, next to it, shows a text, left side, I don't know if you can actually see the language, but the left side is the French and then the right side is English and it's a poem that Cha wrote. And the



third picture is what looks like persecutions either during Japanese colonisations or Korean War. And then the fourth is illustration of Chinese medical points in Chinese language. And as you can see, what frustrates readers the most with such kinds of multi-modal stories is that, in fact, the book doesn't provide any titles, context or captions of what she includes. So, there's no explanation of what, like, this picture illustrations of figure mean, and where she got it, and like, what is the context. And so, this kind of fragmented narratives, images, and sometimes blank pages I read in *Dictee* resemble what I have seen in my mother's rememory. In other words, you can bump into someone else's rememory, but that doesn't guarantee that you're going to understand it.

While English is still a primary language of *Dictee*, Cha brings in French, Chinese and Korean, along with photos, figures, blank pages, blank spaces, and images of handwritten notes. And so, with her representational choices, I actually want to turn my attention to issues of language. Because I had to ask, what language can I use to speak my mother's rememory that is fragmented? In what language could my mother speak or rememory to me? Our shared language was Korean. My mother and I spoke Korean to each other. But what is a mother tongue for Korean migrant academic woman of color who speaks, writes in English as my adopted language with Korean tones? I rarely think in Korean, talk in Korean, and write in Korean anymore. I'm also fully aware of the power of English in the political economy of knowledge production. Yet still, writing my mother in English is such a pain and loss. This is what the outcome of being educated looks like for many migrants and colonized folks with hyphenated names. This is a work life I'm living shared by numerous migrants and colonized, forced or voluntary, or in between, across the continent, over many, many generations. It is just not possible to separate our individual will from a larger historical, cultural, and political force, is it? But still personal is not worse to study especially our mothers' personal, right? More worthy for your attention as your research participants? Who decided such worthiness? However my initial reluctance about how I could write my mother's rememory stored in my mother tongue with another language that is not my own didn't stop me. Rather, I noticed that my body who speaks with two tongues is the bridge, translation, and even poetry. As Vietnamese American writer, Ocean Vuong writes, "mother, this is also privilege you made possible for me with what you lost". I also heard what Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe points out. He said, quote, "So my answer to the question, "Can an African ever learn English well enough to be able to use it effectively in creative writing?" then certainly yes. If, on the other hand, you ask, "Can he ever learn to use it like a native speaker?", I should say, I hope not". End quote. At this point, what is my mother tongue and where is my refuge? I want to come back to *Beloved* before this issue of language again.

So, Sethe is obviously not only mother but also daughter who was born into slavery and didn't speak her mother's language. After her mother was killed, Nan took her in. And Nan, who used different words, words Sethe understood but could neither recall nor repeat now. She believed that must be why she remembers so little before Sweet Home – Sweet Home is where she was in slavery – except singing and dancing and how crowded it was. What Nan told her, she had forgotten, along with the language she told it in. The same language her mom spoke, and which could never come back but the message that was and had been there all along. The message is here, the language it carries is broken. I cannot use any language to seamlessly communicate with my mother's fragmented rememory, yet many daughters have fragmented stories, broken languages, and disconnected relations. Disconnections and connections may not be the opposite, as much as rememory contains both the remembrance and forgetting.

So, rememory instructs us that a myth of sinless and flowing continuity or unity of self, language, nation and even history, erases, excludes and stigmatize anyone or any traces that disrupt their presumed unity and continuity. So, everything has to sound logical and reasonable without inconsistency or incongruency. Then, fragmented, broken, and severed discontinuities are disavowed and not said and thus become unnoticed, unthinkable, forgotten, disconnected, and eventually unsayable. Remembering my Korean mother's rememory through the rememory of mothers in English like Morrison's *Beloved*, Cha's *Dictee*, is to write a testimony of woman's love, will, and knowledge for my daughters. In this task, borders of language, nation state, geographies, generations, are all interrupted. This is both an addition and loss. Doing mourning and rejoicing together. Fortunately, or unfortunately for me, this is living a feminist life. This is being called my bag, my work, my life. That's both laborious and loving. And I'm not doing this by myself, connecting and feeling with *Beloved* and *Dictee* as mother's rememories to notice my mother's rememory show how stammering, discontinuity, and seemingly incongruent juxtapositions are indeed the possibilities and potentials for enacting and narrating connectivity. These ties are what constitute a self, ever evolving connections, remembered and forgotten. To be haunted is to notice us-linked and the unspoken past of both the here and there always haunts the present. We cannot imagine the future out of what we forget. Rememory is waiting here and there for us. Rememory questions the dangerous closure, completeness, and entirety of our understanding of ourselves, belonging, temporality, and historical progress, as well as our relationship with what can be imagined and done differently in knowledge production. Mother's haunting rememories teach diverse connectivity as and of ourselves. Remembering acts matter as what has happened in the past is always with us, our present. Even if the past is from another geography, another community, or another place to which we have never been. The power, knowledge, and

connectivity we have developed are grounded within our bodies, born out of our mother's bodies, and our body bridges the past and the future. Yet many of us have forgotten those connections to the sources of knowledge stored in our bodies, born out of our mother's body, nurtured and sustained by the earth we all belong to. So then, our question is, how can we rememory our onto-epistemologies, to relearn or unlearn how to do inquiry? Thank you.