Mobilising decolonial approaches for community-engaged research for racial justice

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This article will describe some projects at Victoria University that have sought to enact community-engaged scholarship concerned specifically with matters of race, racism and racialised exclusion. I will discuss some of this research within the changing broader landscape of critical community psychology contexts. The projects discussed sit within a program of work broadly focused on the challenges to living that people face in different contexts because of histories of colonialism, racism, displacement and exclusion. Community-based projects are described to show efforts to contribute to empowerment-oriented, community-engaged work. Important features of this work have included the creation of spaces within the university that are committed to inter-disciplinarity, creativity, support and survival within a neoliberalised institution. The connections made with community agencies and groups are equally important: they help to reduce the distance between university and community. Through these relationships, we participate in producing new ways to support individuals, groups and communities in actions aimed at individual and group self-determination and wellbeing.

Race and racism have been central to the colonisation of Indigenous Australians. Stratton (2011) described Australia as a settler colonial nation with a shameful history of colonising Indigenous Australians. Colonisation and the ideology of race and racism are not phenomena of the past. Quijano (2000) argued that even though colonialism may formally have ended, “coloniality of power” names the continuities in the so called “post-colonial era” of the social hierarchical relationships of exploitation and domination between Europeans and non-Europeans built during centuries of European colonial expansion based on cultural and social power relations. Maldonado-Torres (2007) suggests that; … coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and every day. (p. 243).

In the Australian context researchers have similarly argued that colonisation and
coloniality are not phenomena of the past. For example, Krieg (2009) commented that “colonisation was not a moment—but is an ongoing experience with multiple persistent contemporary traumatizing events continuing to impact daily on Aboriginal families and communities” (p. 30).

The colonising experience of Victorian Aboriginal people has included the systematic dispossession of culture, land, language, family and community. Colonial projects were realised through “massive violence, forcing the history, culture, and genealogy of blacks into oblivion” (Bulhan, 1985, p. 297). For Aboriginal people, particularly those removed and institutionalised, and their descendants, this has been further compounded by a removal of identity, including their legal identity and disconnection from Aboriginality, and by racism, as well as institutionalised physical, sexual and emotional abuse (Atkinson, Nelson, Brooks, Atkinson & Ryan, 2014; Dudgeon, Wright, Paradies, Garvey, & Walker, 2014; Quayle, 2017). But while violence and removal impacted severely upon the lives of Aboriginal people, such negative forces did not completely break connections with family and community.

Indigenous people continue to face various forms of exclusion, such as racism and marginalisation, that require responses from them and that have implications for the health and social emotional wellbeing of individuals and communities. Consultation with Aboriginal groups in the western region of Melbourne has identified a priority need for specific support for people who come to discover their identity as Aboriginal, particularly children and young people, and also people displaced through dispersal whose needs for understanding and care are insufficiently acknowledged or satisfied at present (Balla, McCallum, Sonn, Jackson, McKenna, & Marion, 2009). This population is diverse, because people have moved into the area from other parts of Victoria and Australia for a host of reasons, including to connect with family and to be closer to family members in prison.

Race and racism have also played a significant role in shaping Australia’s early immigration policies, which privileged white immigration under the immigration restriction Act of 1901 (known as the White Australia Policy) until its removal in the 1970s (Hage, 1998; Stratton, 2011). These historical policies alongside histories of colonialism and subjugation of Australia’s First Nations, have led to a racialised white Anglo national identity, positioned against a marginalised and excluded black “other” (Ahluwalia, 2001). While policies have changed towards social inclusion of immigrants, several studies have highlighted that racism and racialisation continues to characterise the experiences of immigrant groups, in particular those of African origin. Markus (2016), for example, reported that 60-77% of migrants from African countries (including Ethiopia, Kenya, South Sudan, Zimbabwe) reported having experienced discrimination that it is linked to the colour of their skin. The Australian Human Rights Commission (2010) also found that the majority of African-background Australians reported that their appearance influences their experience and manifests in racism and prejudice. There is also continued pernicious racialisation of Africans within media and political discourse, often constructing African people as criminal, culturally incompatible, and as being hampered by experiences of trauma and lack of education (Baak, 2011, 2018; Hatoss, 2012).

In order to tackle racism and its consequences, it is important to contextualise current dynamics of exclusion within these longer histories of colonization and racism. Fine and Ruglis (2009) suggest critical inquiry needs to disrupt the circuits and consequences of dispossession because of its deleterious psychosocial consequences for racialised groups, as well as the attendant privilege that accrues to those in dominant social positions. There is a growing movement in many countries in the global South and North, calling for a reinvigoration of community psychology research and action, advocating critical scholarship inspired by decolonising methodologies.

Approaches to Decolonisation and Liberation

Critical scholars have advocated the need for the retrieval, reclamation, and renewal of subjugated knowledges and practices, and argued that these are central to processes and practices of self-determination and emancipation of oppressed groups (Montero, Sonn, & Burton, 2017). In Latin America, Martín-Baró (1994) advocated that psychology should develop a new praxis that recognises people’s virtues, based in the lived realities of the oppressed to engage in the recovery of historical memory, and to de-ideologise taken-for-granted social realities in the process of reconstructing identities and communities. Dialogue and ethics are central to this paradigm as it positions the other as a “social actor, who must be respected, who constructs knowledge, who has history. So there must be mutual respect. In those relationships, both human actors and the very relationship changes” (Montero & Sonn, 2009, p. 2). Watkins and Shulman (2008) describe the work of liberation and decolonisation this way: “…claiming resources; testimonies, storytelling, and remembering to claim and speak about extremely painful events and histories; and research that celebrates survival and resilience and that revitalizes language, arts, and cultural practices” (p. 276). Linda Smith (1999/2012) has argued for decolonising methodologies and strategies:

Coming to know the past has been part of the critical pedagogy of decolonization. To hold alternative histories is to hold alternative knowledges. The pedagogical implication of this access to alternative knowledges is that they can form the basis of alternative ways of doing things…. Telling our stories from the past, reclaiming the past, giving testimony to the injustices of the past are all strategies, which are commonly employed by Indigenous peoples struggling for justice. (p. 34)

More recently, and within the context of a growing modernity/coloniality project, Maldonado Torres (2016) wrote:

… decoloniality refers to efforts at rehumanizing the world, to breaking hierarchies of difference that dehumanize subjects and communities and that destroy nature, and to the production and counter-discourses, counter-knowledges, counter-creative acts, and counter-practices that seek to dismantle coloniality and to open up multiple other forms of being in the world (p. 10).

Decolonising methodologies and decolonial theory have their roots in different countries in the Global South (Mignolo, 2009; Smith, 1999/2012). Connell (2007) has referred to this as Southern Theories, and Santos (2007) has highlighted the need to challenge the ignorance that has been produced by “epistemicide”: the silencing of and ignorance to ways of knowing via the privileging of Eurocentric epistemologies. The decolonial project, as Ndhlovu (2016) and others (e.g., Santos, 2007) have suggested, is not dismissive of knowledges that have been developed in western contexts. Instead, the decolonial project contests universal master narratives and seeks to promote epistemological justice by including that which has been excluded, silenced, dismissed and distorted (Santos, 2007).

This writing has been central to efforts to promote racial justice through our community-based research in Australia, and in other contexts. My Puerto Rican colleague Mariolga Reyes Cruz and I (Reyes Cruz & Sonn, 2015) have advocated for a decolonising standpoint, one that seeks to disrupt essentialist understandings of cultural matters that have served historically to marginalize others. This standpoint brings into clearer view ways in which power/privilege/oppression are reproduced and contested through
racialized and ethnicized practices and discourses; that is, how social inequality is maintained and challenged through culture (Reyes Cruz & Sonn, 2015, p. 128).

The standpoint in question is not limited by a discipline; it is transdisciplinary and it has been stitched together over time through engagement with critical theories of race and whiteness studies and Indigenous approaches. The domains of displacement, racism, sexism, and the challenges in everyday life that result from injustice are the starting point. As we have progressed our work we have drawn on various critical theoretical and methodological resources to elaborate liberation-oriented community research and action to contribute to social justice and empowerment - for it to be socially engaged, responsive and progressive (see Coimbra, et al. 2012; Kagan, Burton, Duckett, Lawthom, & Siddiquee, 2011; Quayle & Sonn; 2013; Montero & Sonn, 2009).

Critical theories of race and whiteness studies. A key strand of our work draws from critical theories of race and whiteness to examine how race thinking continues to structure injustice in society and everyday life. To this end, we have drawn from critical whiteness studies, where the focus is on the critique of dominance, normativity and privilege. According to Frankenberg (1993), whiteness signals the “… production and reproduction of dominance rather than subordination, normativity rather than marginality, and privilege rather than disadvantage” (p. 236). According to Moreton-Robinson (2004):

Whiteness in its contemporary form in Australian society is culturally based. It controls institutions that are extensions of White Australian culture and is governed by the values, beliefs and assumptions of that culture. Whiteness confers both dominance and privilege; it is embedded in Australian institutions and in the social practices of everyday life. It is naturalised, unnamed, unmarked and it is represented as the

human condition that defines normality and inhabits it (p. 172).

Whiteness studies (see Green, Sonn & Matseluba, 2007 for a review) have played an important role in our work. Theories from the area have been valuable in understanding how racialised privilege is reproduced through discourses and the implications of this for immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers who are negotiating ways to belonging in everyday settings in Melbourne (Sonn, Quayle, Mackenzie, & Law, 2014). These approaches have helped us to name symbolic power and how it shapes Indigenous and non-Indigenous people’s relationships in Western Australia (Green & Sonn, 2006; Quayle & Sonn, 2013). Central to the critical race work and whiteness studies and the approach that we have adopted is the notion of racialisation, which as Dhamoon (2009) writes, “alerts attention to the social processes of meaning making and highlights the significance of techniques of power, …” (p. 28). This approach means that we are able to focus on the way in which racialisation gets under the skin (Fanon, 1967), but also the diversity of white subjectivities and positioning within the context of racialised power relationships in efforts to form alliances and solidarities across lines of separation.

Indigenous approaches: Challenging epistemological ignorance. Indigenous scholars and activists in Australia and other countries, alongside critical scholars of race have argued for Indigenous and Indigenist methodologies (Martin & Miraboopa; 2003; Moreton Robinon & Walter, 2009) as part of a broader set of responses to the history of colonisation and dispossession from an Indigenous Australian perspective. A vital part of this process entails contesting and making visible the processes and practices through which Western hegemonic ways of knowing have contributed to the production of ignorance about Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing (Moreton-Robinson, 2004; Smith, 1999/2012). In psychology, Dudgeon and Walker (2015; see also Glover, Dudgeon & Huygens, 2005) have provided an argument for the
decolonisation of the science of psychology and provided several strategies for doing so. These strategies include disrupting racism and Eurocentrism, the development of new discourses and narratives that challenge mainstream conceptions of people and the origins of problems, challenge privilege and whiteness, and promote resources and strategies that are Indigenous-led and hence vital to self-determination and social emotional-wellbeing (see also Walker, Schultz & Sonn, 2014).

Given this overview of the context and theoretical landscape, I now turn to describe three examples of our current work to illustrate how we are doing community-engaged inquiry in local contexts, “across the road”, as Julie van den Eynde, my local colleague referred to it, pointing to the fact that the work is literally with agencies in the same suburb. The stories described below are illustrative of efforts at our University to produce community-engaged scholarship (Boyer, 1996), a scholarship in the academy that is a more “vigorous partner in the search for answers to our most pressing social, civic, economic, and moral problems” (p.11).

Making Spaces for Creativity, Resistance and Self-determination

Making the Community Identity and Displacement Research Network (CIDRN)

The first example is about the research network called CIDRN that we have created at VU. It is a community of learning based on collegiality and mutual support within the neoliberalising university. CIDRN is a broad network that draws together and fosters scholarly investigation of new diasporas and changing meanings of displacement and identity. The network is conceived as an intellectual space where new questions about indigeneity, racism, refugees, sense of place, social inclusion, social justice, transnationalism and xenophobia can be raised, debated and discussed. Research activities, such as the two projects described below, span across disciplinary boundaries and advance multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary perspectives. The network also aims to explore and enable new theoretical and methodological interventions around issues of identity, displacement and community in a global and local context.

Given that this network is concerned with the social and political dynamics of a sense of place, Footscray with its rich history of migration and diversity provides an important site for the investigation of displacement, identity, community and change and the interaction between the local and global. Some researchers have focused on the dynamics of place and place making in Footscray with specific reference to notion of everyday multiculturalism and the meaning of diversity there (Oke, Sonn, & McConville, 2016). That work has provided important insights into unique and shared meanings that different population groups give to diversity as well as the positive symbolic capital afforded by the collective understanding of the city as a “migrant” city. McConville and Oke (2018) have also provided insight into the ways in which urban renewal projects are displacing long-term residents, and they call for a much more nuanced use of the term gentrification in contexts of transformation.

The network launched in 2011 and held its first very successful conference in 2012, and a follow up conference in 2017 on the topic of Place, Politics, Privilege. The idea for the network arose from a combination of factors including reports that higher degree researchers felt isolated and that there was not a strong culture of research in our school at the time. At that time in 2011, I had also just returned from a visit to a university in South Africa to work on a project called the Apartheid Archive Project (AAP) (Stevens, Duncan & Hook, 2013). The AAP project is focused on race and racism in post-Apartheid South Africa and involves more than 20 researchers from various disciplines, but mostly critically oriented psychologists and numerous students from fourth year to PhD. The project is multifaceted and has generated many outputs and various spin-off projects since it was launched in 2010. For me the project was a model of academic collaboration anchored in a commitment to social justice and change, and to scholarly activism. The lead researchers promoted a
mentoring model, focused on empowering and supporting women and black academics, and being collegial and supportive. I was keen to see something similar at VU where we have many people researching and teaching about issues of race, migration, displacement, and so forth. Hence, the proposal for a research network organised around themes that resonated with researchers in different disciplines, and that was open enough for people to shape the direction of projects within the framework of the network.

As I reflect on CIDRN since its beginnings, I can say that we have survived and have operated inside the university, where restructuring and neoliberal managerial practices are seemingly the norm, without becoming a formal institute, group, or centre, yet. The group runs with an open structure and people opt in. In some ways, we are protesting productively within the system. We are producing work on our terms and we are seeking to be community-engaged, both within and outside the university. We are making progress, but still need to work on practices to make welcome different groups from our surrounding communities and organisations. We are looking to speak across disciplinary boundaries, to maintain spaces for counter work within the neoliberal university and the rigid managerial practices that are constraining our roles, scholarship, and creativity. We want to do more than survive in the system. Through CIDRN we are seeking to maintain and reinforce collegiality, critique, scholarship, and to open our own horizons to the various ways of knowing and doing as they pertain to pressing local and global issues. The next two projects sit within the CIDRN research theme of Race and Coloniality.

Aboriginal People Making Place in Melbourne’s West

This is an Indigenous-led project developed over several years of collaboration between university and community. The research involves people brought together through a community development project initiated in 2013-14 by the City of Wyndham in collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in that region, and the subsequent establishment of the Wyndham Aboriginal Community Centre Committee (WACCC). The collaboration between members of the Aboriginal Community and the City of Wyndham has been ongoing for some years and was a response to Aboriginal people’s expressed needs for permanent places where people can come together, access services, foster community, and strengthen cultural identities. The specific research project evolved from initial research questions posed of Aboriginal community members, the WACCC and the Care Connect Planned Activity Group (PAG). Members of these groups are seeking to establish spaces in which they can feel cultural safety and create new community narratives together. The purpose of the research was to gather the stories of members of these groups, many of whom were members of or children of Stolen Generations. As Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999/2012) has noted, “Telling our stories from the past, reclaiming the past, giving testimony to the injustices of the past are all strategies which are commonly employed by Indigenous peoples…” (p.34). Central to the engagement was our effort to build relationships, enact reciprocity, and to follow the needs of the group.

Making links and negotiating research process. We embarked on a small collaborative study with Karen Jackson, Director of the Moondani Balluk, Indigenous academic unit at VU, who has played a key role in connecting VU researchers with local Indigenous communities as well as forging relationships with researchers at VU. Guided by a commitment to self-determination and the principles of reciprocity, the project unfolded over time. The first stage of the community engagement process included visiting the group and sharing lunch with them. The purpose of the first visit was to introduce the researchers and the research and to gauge interest and levels of interest in the story-telling project. At this stage, we discussed our roles, the project design, and the group’s ideas about the research. We
highlighted the storytelling component and that we were interested in their stories of making place in Melbourne’s west. We also offered the group a storytelling workshop delivered by renowned Indigenous author, Tony Birch. In order to continue building links, two emerging Indigenous researchers with experience in working with Aboriginal people, including those who are members of the Stolen Generations, spent time with the group over several weeks, in a sense becoming participant observers at the PAG setting.

The two researchers spent several days over a 16-week period with the PAG group. During this period, nine stories were collected (from eight women and one man) from a possible 35. While many expressed an interest in sharing stories for the project, it was often very difficult to get access to people because many members are older and have health and mobility issues, and we had time constraints. The stories were transcribed and copies of the transcripts were returned to each of the interviewees for them to keep and to ensure that they were happy with the record.

After the story gathering, the next step was to organise and deliver the creative writing workshop. Tony Birch delivered the workshop to a small subgroup because other people were away on the day. He introduced strategies and techniques for writing, which included memory triggers and suggestions for writing – mnemonic devices to help trigger memory and story writing. The workshop setting was interesting and revealing in and of itself because of the dynamics between group members and seeming non-Indigenous staff. For example, while the workshop was aimed at the Aboriginal participants, staff members were free to participate. During the process of story sharing non-Indigenous members took over the opportunities to share stories. While in itself this may seem innocent, through the field work process it became clear that some of the Aboriginal group members described incidents which they felt were examples of differential treatment, such as being accused of not packing up equipment and tables and leaving the venue untidy. This setting was an Indigenous space, but within a broader non-Indigenous structure of the Community Centre. In the broader structure and power relations non-Indigenous staff seemingly took “over” the space, responding to provocations and invitations to share stories. We made this observation as participants in the session and named it at our subsequent debriefing as a group. Importantly, this insight provided additional context for understanding the interview data in relation to people’s experiences as members of PAG and their need for an Aboriginal-controlled space.

A key theme in the stories that people relayed centred around the impact of forced removals on their families and subsequent generations. Some of the effects were expressed in terms of the dispossession of culture and identity, disconnection from family and community, and racism and racialisation and its harmful psychosocial consequences. One person shared a story illustrating that she was othered as a young person – referred to as different and needing to be with “your kind”. She noted that: “… as a child I was seen by the Greeks and the Cypriots, Italians, Maltese in Fawkner when I lived there, ‘you not Australian what are you?’ I was put down because I was darker. And because my hair was different and I was always picked on that I didn’t belong. Now I know where I belong”. Several of the participants said that they affirmed their Aboriginal identities later in their lives because it was hidden or concealed. Some participants described the importance of this affirmation, but also the painful task of reconnecting and restoring these aspects of self and culture denied to them. People expressed the challenges that they have had in dealing with various institutions to get access to documents that are important to affirm their Aboriginal identity.

As a research group our initial analysis of the data also suggested that the PAG setting is central to the everyday life of this group. Participation is meaningful in different ways to people; for example, it fosters a sense of belonging derived from
strong family and social relationships as Aboriginal people making place together. The setting that people have created is productive and linked with other community settings and Indigenous community networks in the west of Melbourne and beyond. The data also suggested that participants engage in arts and creative practices to reclaim their cultural identities. These activities included knitting various items using coloured wool, typically, black, red and yellow symbolising Aboriginality, and creating paintings of landscapes and of places using dot-painting techniques. Importantly, the group members sometimes sell the artefacts that they make through networks at different venues and the funds are used to support other initiatives. The participants also send outputs to young people who are in juvenile detention centres. Through this practice of sharing, the group members are enacting support and solidarity, reminding the young people that their Aunty’s and Uncles are thinking of them.

Through this Indigenous-led project, we have been able to identify the various ways in which the PAG has come to play a central role in the everyday lives of its members. The project affirmed that PAG is a primary social setting and a main point of “access to such group-based resources that include but are not limited to instrumental support for action, leadership, channels of communication, trust, and solidarity” (Çakal, Eller, Sirlopu, & Perez, 2016, p. 356). The information provided also points to the importance of providing space and opportunity for people to have support in their efforts to establish links with different Aboriginal groups, as part of the process of reclaiming identities and contributing to epistemic justice. The collaborative process of inquiry is guided by the ethic of reciprocity; it shares with participatory research the goal of being open and dialogical, centering the experiences and voices of people who are marginalized (Martin-Baró, 1994, Montero & Sonn, 2009). What’s in a Name: From Afrobeat to Anka. A second distinct project illustrates the way in which we seek to be participatory and dialogical in centering the experiences of groups often silenced or misrepresented in mainstream media, political discourse, and everyday institutions’ social settings. The project follows on from initial student placements with an agency called cohealth Arts Generator (cAG). Their work is premised on the knowledge that access to the arts is fundamental to enriching people’s lives and therefore increasing their wellbeing. The organisation specializes in engagement with a range of African communities, in particular the Melbourne South Sudanese community, which is the largest in Australia.

cAG uses creative and participatory arts methodologies, where art is both a process and an outcome. Through arts-based and arts-informed practice, Arts Generator is seeking to:

- engage with Africans in Australia who experience limited access to arts and cultural opportunities, with the aim of improving wellbeing and increased agency through culturally appropriate arts-based practice that utilises a model of “embodied practice”;
- support community mobilisation and leadership opportunities that increase social inclusion, reduce discrimination and increase economic participation in African communities in cohealth’s catchments;
- Promote mental wellbeing in the African communities of Australia through intercultural dialogue with Aboriginal communities.

cAG is involved in an initiative to contribute to these objectives, the Afrobeat initiative. This initiative aims to empower young people through the creative documentation of the Afro Australian experience in Australia and to contribute to racial justice. The initiative involves three components:

- ‘In Our Eyes’ (working title): photo-documentary of Young Leaders in the African communities
- ‘In the Flesh’ (working title): writing about lives - intergenerational stories about identity and belonging with arts outputs of spoken word, storytelling and musical performances (live and video)
‘In the Spirit’ (working title): intercultural dialogues with Aboriginal Australians on place and country.

Critical conversations. My role has varied from mentor and critical friend, to evaluator researcher, to co-researcher since I first became involved with the group a few years ago. I have provided support for some of the staff through critical discussions about race and whiteness, and I have provided critical feedback on the art of radical listening workshops that the group has facilitated with Government organisations. These conversations are important ways of connecting with local groups and bridging the gap between the university and the community. To date, we have had several meetings with the broader group constituted by the cultural workers and the manager of cohealth Arts Generator.

While we initially discussed how we could complement the project by documenting it and gathering information to inform the evaluation of the project, I floated the possibilities for this project to follow a model of participatory and collaborative research. I attended several meetings and provided input into a staged dinner conversation on the issue of race and representation that emerged in relation to the first part of the “Afrobeat” initiative. That discussion raised many issues and challenges including the young people expressing concerns about an ostensibly white photographer re-presenting images of them. This discussion pointed to race and whiteness, and signaled deeper ethical and political matters related to voice, representation, and agency and its implications for differently positioned social actors within Australia’s racialised social system.

The conversation also showed the diverse ways in which the young people of African ancestry constructed their social and cultural identities in Australia. Subsequent to these discussions, I drafted a document proposing that we conduct a participatory case study that would capture the development and delivery of the second component of the project — called “In the Flesh” at the time. At the next meeting we had, I presented the proposal and linked the work with a broader project that we have been pursuing with an international group (Stevens, Bell, Sonn, Clennon, & Canham, 2017), and with colleagues at VU into meanings of Blackness in Australia (Smith, Sonn, & Cooper, in press). In this work, we are investigating experiences of being black, recognising that such experiences vary across context, time, and place. Michelle Wright (2015) noted that blackness is not a matter of asking what, but “about when and where it is being imagined, defined, and performed and in what locations, both figurative and literal” (p. 3). The group was very positive about these projects, so we agreed to move forward, and this meant getting ethics approval and a research agreement in place.

Some time has passed and several key members of the group (all creative workers who are also students at university or have employment) have since travelled to various countries in Africa, and some have attended the decolonial summer school that is held annually at the University of South Africa, Pretoria. For those who attended the experience was significant, in fact, transformative and liberating. They spoke of major mind shifts, about a new awareness, and that they now have a language to name their project, which until this time, was constrained by a Manichean binary of black and white, colonised and coloniser, and with the title “Afrobeat”. Through various critical and reflective conversations, deeper and more profound discussion happened spontaneously as they began to share stories of their re-imagined and renamed project, one that recognises and acknowledges Indigenous peoples and their knowledges, Aboriginal sovereignty, their/our positions as settlers of colour in Australia. This shift in gaze, of centering Indigenous people and their own speaking positions as a decolonial action. The project was no longer tentatively named Afrobeat: the group have done some deep thinking and have proposed to the manager of cAG that they want to pursue a decolonial agenda through the project, as well as within the broader organisation and specifically in relation to the project.
The first part of their critical action was the act of renaming the project and producing a new vision and mission statement for it. This was a significant moment. The group discussed questions and experiences that were wide ranging, including, racism, othering, being third culture young people, oppression, imagining new futures beyond the coloniality of whiteness, and importantly, connecting with their communities and the global African diaspora and other cultures. In many ways, the discussion signaled transgression, and the expression of place-making within the African diaspora reflective of rich social and cultural histories and their own complex subjectivities (Agung-Igusti, 2017). This was one of the many intentional dialogues, each person giving meaning to their engagement through decoloniality, expressing ways in which they, as cultural workers, are seeking to claim their place in the world through their activist art and creative practice, as well as claiming a speaking position, to assert who they are in the world. The group decided that decoloniality was going to be the basis for their project named Amka, which in Swahili means to rise up or arise. This act of naming, reclaiming, and grounding the project in their own lived experiences and community and cultural histories was a decolonising act, an empowered act.

**Summary and Conclusion**

There has been a growing number of calls for more radical and politically oriented community research and action (Dutta et al., 2016; Evans et al., 2017; Fine, 2012). One of the strands of these calls is the turn to decoloniality along with the powerful call for decolonising methodologies (Smith, 1999/2012). For our group, our engagement with calls for decolonial work is reflected in our efforts to enact research and knowledge production alongside community groups and to collaborate with those who are typically excluded or problematised. Over time, we have articulated a decolonising standpoint that draws from various areas of critical scholarship, including critical studies of race and whiteness studies and Indigenous studies. These areas bring into focus the dynamics of power in our research and practices, and have been important for contesting epistemological ignorance and promoting cognitive justice (Santos, 2007). These tasks entail deconstructing dominance while normalising the worldviews and experiences of the other (Adams et al., 2015), which is an important goal of decoloniality: to expand our ways of knowing, doing and being (Fanon, 1967; Santos, 2007).

In our community-engaged projects, which include engaging with Indigenous agendas through Indigenous-led research, we are being careful to respond to whose questions we address, whose perspectives count, and what knowledge counts. We are looking for new and alternative ways to broaden knowledge production processes in critical community-engaged inquiry. This has included finding new roles such as critical friend, mentor, evaluator and researcher as well as using methods to support the goals and aspirations of groups who are often excluded from knowledge production processes. These groups include the community agencies and the various people that they support in their pursuit of health and wellbeing, valued identities and supportive communities. We are also seeking to find ways to provide psychosocial support and education, to create and participate in community conversations about issues, to speak about difficult questions and sit in spaces with vulnerability and discomfort. I concur with Watkins and Shulman (2008) when they say that:

> Liberation research is provisional. Its results do not seek to be overly generalized or to make the kind of universal truth claims that natural science has accustomed us to. It actively acknowledges the local context of most of its efforts. In some ways, it is a humble enterprise, self-conscious, self-correcting, and confessing of limitation. We place aside what we already know so that we can learn from what comes forward as new, surprising, and contradicting of our assumptions and biases. (p. 297)
As applied social and community psychologists we have roles to play in different settings, to be listeners, to document stories, to record oral histories and testimonies, to help create new ways of knowing, based on relational ethics and that can help produce supportive cultures rather than exclusionary cultures.

As I reflect on these projects in the context of critical community psychologies, as well as the virulent racism that continues to affect lives in Australia and elsewhere, the need for critical community engaged research as action becomes even more pressing. It is vital to support communities in their pursuits for self-determination and to make visible the ways in which they resist, survive and create meaningful lives within hostile contexts. This requires new approaches and epistemologies, rooted in a relational ethics, one that affirms the ways of being and knowing of communities who are marginalised and excluded (Dutta et al., 2016). It is also equally imperative to tackle the coloniality of power and whiteness to make visible, contest, and challenge the discursive and material practices through which it finds expression in everyday ways in institutions, community settings, and social life.

**References**


Decolonial approaches


Note

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