

COMMENTARY

Decolonizing Methodologies 15 years later

*Eve Tuck**

The following commentary is based on discussant remarks in response to a lecture given by Linda Tuhiwai Smith in New York in April this year. The lecture anticipated/commemorated the 15th anniversary of Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, published in 1999 by Zed Books. It also marked the release of the second edition of *Decolonizing Methodologies* in 2012. The lecture took place on the traditional homelands of Lenee Lenape peoples—land called Manahatta, now called Manhattan—at The Graduate Center of The City University of New York.

In 2010, while preparing to write an essay on what I have called a methodology of repatriation/repatriation (Tuck, 2011), I re-read the first edition of *Decolonizing Methodologies* from cover to cover for the first time since my first year of graduate school, when my mentor Michelle Fine pressed a copy into my hands. In my re-reading, I was captivated by the layered wisdom in this text for novice, more experienced, and expert researchers. Published nearly 15 years ago, *Decolonizing Methodologies* has profoundly influenced my generation of critical researchers. It has given us an anti-colonial lexicon of research, and an ethics of *making space and showing face*. I know my statement of the book's influence to be true because as a rare Alaska Native student in predominantly white institutions of higher education in the United States, I often ended up serving as ambassador to texts written by Indigenous authors. Though

I usually bristled at this role of ambassador to all things Indigenous, I was willing to serve as emissary for Dr. Smith's book because it did so much to explain my own fraught relationship to the academy and to research, and sent me light beams of recognition and fortitude. This book is very important to me.

To prepare tonight's remarks, a few weeks ago I read the second edition of *Decolonizing Methodologies*, again from cover to cover. I paid attention to the footnotes, because I believe that Indigenous women and women of colour are always writing to each other in our footnotes. I listened to the footsteps of my young son playing with my sister on the floor above as I read in my basement office. I looked at the new cover, a human footprint made of small bits and fragments—cartographic markers that form the instep and the toes; a constellation that forms the heel. I thought about mapping, about

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cartographies and constellations.

What I most hope to express is my deeply felt gratitude for *Decolonizing Methodologies*, and for the web of 25 Indigenous projects articulated in the book. What I have found in closely reading the second edition is that many of the ideas that seemed to me to be so fresh, and to be updates added to the new edition, were actually *already* in the first edition. Several times, I read ideas and thought to myself that they must be new, but then, when I went searching in the first edition, they were already there! I see this as a book that is timeless in that way, because it continues to reveal and renew itself. It has a complexity that grows as the reader becomes more experienced, and it resonates meaningfully and recursively with each re-reading.

I have also had another humbling experience in my re-reading of this book over the past nearly 15 years. Though I am still holding my identity as an academic at arm's length, I do love the part of this work that is my writing life, and I love to use writing to think and express complex lived contradictions or everyday dialectical experiences. Some of this work has garnered enthusiastic responses from readers, but it is humbling to go back and see that many of what I thought to be my best, most unique impactful ideas were already framed out by Smith in *Decolonizing Methodologies*. This means that I have been marked by my reading of this book in ways that I cannot trace, cannot distil.

In my most recent re-reading, I attempted to draw out the intentions of the book, looking for places where Smith marks the aspirations of *Decolonizing Methodologies*. The book:

“disrupts relationships between researchers (mostly non-indigenous) and researched (indigenous), between a colonizing institution of knowledge and colonized peoples whose own knowledge was subjugated, between academic theories and academic values, between institutions and communities, and between and within indigenous communities themselves” (Smith, 2012, p. x);

connects an “indigenous agenda of self-determination, indigenous rights and sovereignty, on the one hand, and, on the other, a complementary indigenous research agenda that was about building capacity and working towards healing, reconciliation, and development” (p. xiii);

“identifies research as a significant site of struggle between the interests and ways of knowing of the West and the interests and ways of resisting of the Other” (p. 2);

“acknowledges the significance of indigenous perspectives on research and attempts to account for how, and why, such perspectives may have developed” (p. 3);

is an anti-research book on research (p. 17); and

“provokes some revolutionary thinking about the roles that knowledge, knowledge production, knowledge hierarchies and knowledge institutions play in decolonization and social transformation.” (p. xii)

She writes that it is a book on the issues faced by Indigenous researchers, a book to help ourselves. It is concerned with the institution of research, its values and practices. It works to disrupt a colonizing institution of knowledge and the subjugation of Indigenous knowledges. It identifies research as a site of struggle between interests and ways of knowing of the settler West, and interests and ways of resisting by the Other. It honours the significance of Indigenous critiques of research, emphasizing traditions of researching back, talking back and writing back, invoking a knowingness of the colonizer and a recovery of ourselves. She wonders if it is an anti-research book on research. The book provokes revolutionary thinking about the roles that knowledge, knowledge production, knowledge hierarchies and knowledge institutions play in decolonization and social transformation (Smith, 2012, p. xii).

Since publication of the first edition, Indigenous studies have become more prominent in institutions of higher education throughout the world; here in the United States, Native American Studies, American Indian Studies, Native Hawaiian Studies, Alaska Native Studies and Indigenous Studies have grown and strengthened dramatically. Indeed, the first ever Alaska Native Studies conference was held in Anchorage in early April 2013, and our keynote speaker was Graham Hingangaroa Smith, on transforming the academy.

Profoundly influential in *Decolonizing Methodologies* has been the theorizing of research, as perhaps one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world's vocabulary (Smith, 2012, p. 1). Research has a huge credibility problem in the Indigenous world (p. 122). It is relentlessly ideological, yet has the power to distort, to make invisible, to overlook, to exaggerate (p. 178, p. 2). Research is how imperialism and colonialism are both regulated and realized, thus it has traditionally benefitted the researcher and the knowledge base of the dominant settler group (p. 178).

The historical context of research in Indigenous communities is a history that still offends our deepest sense of our humanity (p. 1). In my own family, I too learned about research through cautionary tales. Between 1867 and 1959, Alaska Native peoples were treated as wards of the United States nation-state.

On the Pribilof Islands, where I am from, White Village Supervisors employed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Department of the Interior patrolled the villages. One of the ways they "managed" Unanga families was to conduct unannounced cleanliness inspections of private homes. My grandmother brought me up with stories of how her home was literally subject to a white glove test of cleanliness. Other management strategies included curfews and limitations on Unanga access to currency. All of these surveillance activities were motivated by profit; a trade agreement determined that only Unanga people could harvest the fur

seal. Thus, under U.S. occupation, many more generations were forced indentured labourers to a colonial government.

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, during the unannounced home inspections, the Government Village Supervisors were sometimes accompanied by researchers in lab coats. Though at first they assured Unanga that their participation in various studies was voluntary, the presence of the Village Supervisors communicated to Unanga that saying no was not an option. The researchers soon stopped asking permission.

In one particular study remembered by my elder, researchers collected a vial of blood from each family member over several years. My elder, a young mother of several sons at the time, was offered no explanation or mission of the study as the researchers worked to sometimes chase her boys to get the blood from them. Each family member received a dollar for their sample. My elder recalled with a shudder the first time that she overheard her eldest son refer to the dollar as his "blood money". Told there was no money to go to the movie house, he said, "But what about my blood money?"

In Russian Orthodox Aleut culture, the origin of the term blood money is significant because it refers to the 30 pieces of silver that Judas was paid to betray Jesus. The new use of the term—to refer to money paid by unknown researchers for vials of blood for unknown purposes—intermingles with the old use of the term of betrayal. "Blood money" was used by Unanga children in the ways that settler children in the United States might speak of their allowance. The juxtaposition—allowance and blood money—is striking.

This story reveals something about the tremendous personal conflictedness required for me and other young Indigenous scholars to become researchers—a conflictedness that is recognized throughout *Decolonizing Methodologies*—to personally engage with research as the legacy of blood money transactions. Smith (2012) writes that,

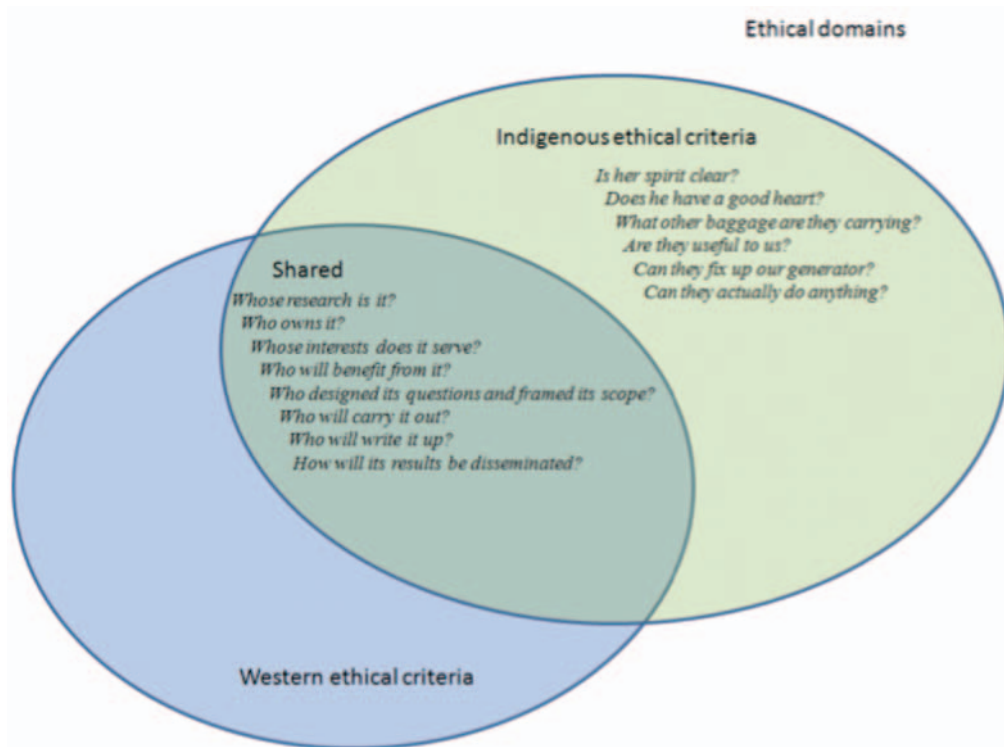


FIGURE 1 Ethical questions shared between Indigenous and Western frames (Smith, 2012, p. 10)

At a common sense level research was talked about both in terms of its absolute worthlessness to us, the indigenous world, and is absolute usefulness to those who wielded it as an instrument. It told us things already known, suggested things that would not work, and made careers for people who already had jobs. (p. 3)

Part of the generosity of *Decolonizing Methodologies* is the assertion of the ethical concerns of Indigenous communities, raised in sharp relief to colonizing past practices (see Figure 1). In fact, in several places Smith makes clear that past research has comprised colonizing acts, that to be researched is to be colonized. Thus, the criteria for research in Indigenous communities must not just be Indigenous criteria, but decolonizing criteria. Smith (2012) writes that,

Indigenous peoples offer genuine alternatives to the current dominant form of development. Indigenous people have philosophies which

connect humans to the environment and to each other, which generate principles for living a life which is sustainable, respectful, and possible. (p. 109)

Further, she writes, “What is more important than what alternatives indigenous peoples offer the world is what alternatives indigenous peoples offer each other” (p. 109). “Kaupapa Māori approaches to research”, she writes, “are based on the assumption that research that involves Māori people should set out to make a positive difference for the researched” (p. 109). Though it is a basic assumption or expectation of research—that it makes a positive difference—Western science has never made that commitment.

Perhaps the most visionary act of generosity in *Decolonizing Methodologies* is Smith’s laying out of 25 Indigenous projects (see Figure 2) which connect Indigenous self-determination, rights and sovereignty (p. iii) to pathways of Indigenous research (p. 128). Though Smith is critical of colonial mapping and naming



FIGURE 2 Smith's 25 Indigenous projects (Smith, 2012, p. 198)

practices that worked simultaneously to dispossess Indigenous peoples of land and establish settler colonial nation-states, she invokes Chandra Mohanty's (2003) notion of *cartographies of struggle* to speak to the intersecting lines of simultaneous oppressions. More than the duality of mapping, of drawing oppositions with the line, cartography is the art and science of making and remaking maps, of creating and being created by, of recognizing and conceptualizing marginality, sites of struggle, domains, place and sovereignty.

Decolonizing Methodologies offers 25 Indigenous projects as a cartographic act. Smith's work in Māori communities and with Indigenous communities all over the globe has exemplified this cartography. She has theorized the map; we must now do the walking.

Now, I turn to some of the ways that communities and scholars have been doing this walking. Among the most striking example is Idle No More—a collective Indigenous resistance against continued invasion of land and life that started in Canada in late 2012. The

spark there ignited expressions of solidarity and recognition from around the globe, as cities, towns and campuses hold teach-ins and circle dances to learn, to organize, to tell the story of pipelines, of sovereignty, of the future and Indigenous futurity in a different way.

In another example, recently, the Montana Wyoming Tribal Leaders Council set up the Rocky Mountain Tribal Institutional Review Board (IRB), established to “protect the rights and well-being” of member tribes. Their website observes that non-tribal IRBs have historically focused on protection of individuals as human subjects and contrasts this to their obligation to tribes as whole living entities, displacing the emphasis on individual risk and benefit. The Rocky Mountain Tribal IRB endeavours to ensure the actual benefits of research accrue to the community; the mutuality of research practices; respect for short-term and long-range tribal concerns; tribal ownership of data; and respectful practice. Though it is newly established and provisions for its sustainability are still in formation, the Rocky Mountain Tribal

IRB has signed a memorandum of understanding with the University of Montana—according to remarks made by Kathryn Shanley (Nakoda) at the Alaska Native Studies conference in April 2013—so that any research conducted with two or more tribal communities must go through the tribal IRB, instead of the university IRB. The agreement was a long time in the coming and in part arose from three conferences involving tribal community educators, elders and university researchers.

In yet another example of the walking, Melanie Cheung, a Māori neurobiologist who has been mentored by Dr. Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Dr. Graham Smith, has done some incredible theorizing to establish a decolonial mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge) science praxis in her work with human tissue. Melanie's thesis explains that her research has shown that working with post-mortem human brain tissue is tapu (sacred and restricted) because the brain has spiritual properties, because tapu is intensified by death, and because of wae-wae tapu—that which is associated with the sacredness of new ground (2010, p. 36). She describes the process of seeking blessings for her proposed research, first with her family, then in several community gatherings with the iwi (tribe). She learned of their desire for her to develop tikanga Māori (respectful customary practices) for each time that she worked with the tissue. These practices were to be “used in the laboratory to avoid violation of the intense tapu associated with post-mortem brain tissue” (Cheung, 2010, p. 46). This provided her a new impetus for her research. She learned from many advisors how to cultivate tikanga that would not only acknowledge atua (gods) and the person/family from whom the tissue came, but would also protect the scientists working with the tissue from potential harms derived from that work (p. 47). The early chapters of her thesis provide an account of all of the conversations, meetings and ceremonies she engaged in order to develop an appropriate praxis; the later chapters discuss the results she

had in growing brain cells that could yield findings that would be of use to Māori, especially pertaining to Huntington's disease.

Recently Bryan Brayboy and Elizabeth Sumida Huaman launched a new doctoral programme project in Justice and Social Inquiry for Pueblo students. The project is housed in the School of Social Transformation, Arizona State University, and is dedicated to preparing practitioner-researcher-scholars committed to Pueblo peoples and communities.

The work of the National Congress of American Indians Policy Research Center emphasizes tribally driven initiatives and development in research governance and health sciences, and in the science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) workforce. This work has been inspired by Dr. Smith's efforts to graduate large numbers of Māori doctorates who can lead decision-making on national science and government commissions and steward these national efforts to ensure local benefits. Their work is to call for representation, and move beyond representation so that tribal people are driving decision-making and taking their place at the seat of power.

The methodology of rematriation/repatriation that I lay out in my own work is meant to move *inside* the framework established by Smith to articulate research in urban communities and in Native communities as repatriation. My work on articulating repatriation could be read as an extended footnote to *Decolonizing Methodologies*. It is concerned with these three questions: How do we think change happens? What role does research have in our theories of change? What role do academic researchers have in our theories of change? My worry is that much of social science research operates from a colonial theory of change, in which the proof of neglect is displayed for the state in order to receive needed material gains. This theory of change is incompatible with notions of power and change that are part of Indigenous ways of knowing, and also, I assert, rarely works. Without making how we think change happens

explicit, we may inadvertently rely on theories of change that locate power entirely outside our communities, so that we use research to document damage to prove to someone outside that we are deserving of more, or rely on neoliberal narratives in which the only logic is a market logic (see also Tuck, 2009, and Tuck & Yang, 2014).

Of course, Smith speaks to this in *Decolonizing Methodologies*, emphasizing that research has never demonstrated itself to be beneficial to communities. As I remarked earlier, *Decolonizing Methodologies* is a cartographic act. I believe the work of our generation of researchers is to take up this cartographic act—to zoom in on its parts and overlaps, to do the finely detailed work of marking the dirt roads and blades of grass, but also the travelways and impasses, the lines of flight, the tidepools, the journeys, the erasures. Her book has done the mapping, now we must do the walking.

Dr. Smith, I ask you to receive our appreciation for you and for your work, for now and for every generation.

Glossary

atua	gods, the sons of Ranginui and Papatūānuku
iwi	tribe, bones
mātauranga Māori	Māori knowledge
tapu	sacred and restricted, tapu is the mana of atua
tikanga Māori	customary practices, rituals, ceremonies, cultural norms
waewae tapu	newcomer or person visiting the marae for the first time or person that needs to participate in pōwhiri rituals to acknowledge those people that have passed away since their last visit to the marae; explorative/breaking new ground

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