

Realising decolonizing spaces: relational accountability in research events

Jones, T. and Dowling, C. and Porter, L. and Kickett-Tucker, C. and Cox, S.

Abstract

Research events are important places where disciplinary structures and norms are reproduced and challenged. This article uses the authors' experiences organising a geography research event on decolonizing settler cities on Wadjuk Noongar Country in Perth, Western Australia, to interrogate the transformations that a decolonizing ethic demands. Learning with the Indigenous research method of yarning as a decolonizing practice, we document and reflect on the persistence a decolonizing ethic requires. This project concretely revealed the interconnection between transformation at the micro-level—event conceptualisation, design, placement and conduct—and building challenges to settler-colonial structures and institutions. We conclude by interrogating the structural barriers for multi-epistemic engagement and learning and propose three principles for non-Indigenous researchers to more fully understand the invitation of being in a relationship with what has always been here: Indigenous sovereignties of law, place, and knowledge.

Keywords: settler-colonial university; decolonization; research events; Indigenous research methods; relational accountability; yarning; urban geography.

Introduction

In April 2016, three well-meaning white settler geographers had an idea to organise an event about decolonization and settler cities in Australia. The catalyst was a conversation at a symposium where the settler colonial context of Australian cities had been a central topic. Australian urban geography has been remarkably silent on the relationship between settler colonial orders and urbanisation, making the discipline as culpable in the erasure of Aboriginal law and place as settler-colonial urbanisation itself (Jackson et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2017). Fortunately, it did not take too long to become aware of the racialized privilege that enabled proposing such an event. Far from undoing that privilege, the very act of verbalising and pursuing the idea marked the extent and politics of racialized privilege in the contemporary order that is settler-colonial universities.

This paper is the story of how an imperfect decolonizing space was brought into being from these challenging and limited beginnings. The three well-meaning white geographers – Tod, Libby and Shaphan – began a collaboration with two Aboriginal scholars – Carol and Cheryl. Together, we realised a space, that we called the Decolonizing Settler Cities Symposium 2017, that explicitly sought to unsettle the expectations of conventional academic research events. Held on Wadjuk Noongar Country, in what is now known as Perth, Western Australia, the event brought a diverse group of scholars, community activists and practitioners into conversation. This project concretely revealed the interconnection between the micro-level of event conceptualisation and design, and challenging dominant structures and institutions.

As a group of two Aboriginal and three non-Indigenous academics, our experiences reveal many of the challenges, tensions and limits of intercultural collaboration in contexts that remain indelibly marked by colonial relations of power. The purpose of this paper is to share an

examination of these experiences and what they reveal about the possibility and politics of creating change in those relations of power and the structures that retard change in geography. In so doing, we contribute to an emerging body of scholarly reflection on such practices (see Attewell et al., 2014; Daigle & Sundberg, 2017; de Leeuw & Hunt, 2018; Hunt, 2014; Sundberg, 2013) by drawing critical attention to the formative relationship between race, colonisation, whiteness, and knowledge disciplines. Drawing on concepts of decolonization and allyship in settler colonial contexts (de Leeuw et al., 2012; Hunt & Holmes, 2015; Larsen & Johnson, 2017; Mei-Singh, in press), we interrogate both the practices of academic research events as well as our own imperfect attempts, as differently situated researchers, to address the colonial practices and structures that dismiss and marginalise First People and knowledge.

Through Carol and Cheryl's expertise in Indigenous research methods, we use yarning as an Indigenous decolonizing practice. As proposed by Noongar researcher Dawn Besserab and Bridget Ng'andu (2010), yarning centres Indigenous protocols of relationship and responsibility while honing skills of listening, respecting, sharing, and letting-be (Hughes & Barlo, 2020). Aboriginal protocols and practices are central to creating the conditions for decolonization events including allyship through providing culturally safe places for Aboriginal people. We found practices like yarning to be transformative because they both establish differentiated relationships with each other and place, and facilitate the attention and comportment required to shift capacities to speak and listen.

The focus of the paper is on the conditions that enable research 'events'. Event here has two meanings. The first refers to the symposium and the organisational work required to make it happen. This is the 'event' in event planning, and we refer to our event here as the Symposium or Decolonizing Settler Cities (DSC). The second order consists of prehensive occurrences (in

the sense used by Whitehead (1953)) or moments where we sense and witness the emergence of new things and understandings, becoming conscious of the potential of relationships in which we are embedded and responsible. Taking seriously the premise that knowledge production and sharing is always already in relationship with Indigenous sovereignty and the law of Country then accountability in that relationship is not a disciplinary choice and exceeds conventional disciplinary boundaries. The paper, then, is not about ‘doing Indigenous geographies’ but instead developing critical practices that bring white geographers into a relationship of accountability with the ethics of decolonization and Indigenous knowledges and law (de Leeuw & Hunt, 2018; Larsen & Johnson, 2017). While we situate this account in the context of geography’s disciplinary structures, sharing our experiences is intended to contribute to the sea change of developing these critical practices and accountabilities across universities, disciplines and fields.

We acknowledge the Wadjuk-Noongar people are the sovereign custodians of the Country that now includes the Greater Metropolitan Perth where Decolonizing Settler Cities was held. From the arrival of British settler-colonists in their Country in 1829, Noongar and then other Aboriginal groups experienced the violence and ruptures of colonisation with few of its protections (Hunter, 2012). The region is infamous for paternalistic and oppressive policies, in particular the removal of children from their families, as well as the remarkable resilience of Aboriginal people (see for example, Haebich, 1992, 2000; Kinnane, 2003) .The Wadjuk Noongar people are one of 14 language groups that constitute the Noongar nation whose Countries cover the southwest corner of Australia. While the accepted terminology when describing Indigenous Australians is “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people”, we use the term Aboriginal in this article as there are relatively few Torres Strait Islander residents in Perth and none were at DSC. When referring to the specific Nation and place, we use Wadjuk

Noongar. When referring to the international scale, we use the terms First Peoples or Indigenous. We acknowledge that all labels are political, and that terms like Indigenous or Aboriginal are a product of the colonial encounter.

In the next section we situate our work with recent literature on decolonization and decolonizing practices in geography and in universities. The third section emplaces us and our relationships in the context of Wadjuk Boodjar/Perth, Indigenous protocols of knowledge production, and developments in Indigenous geographies. These discussions help situate the remainder of the paper where we set out the story of how Decolonizing Settler Cities came about, the importance of yarning as an Aboriginal mode of listening and learning, and our reflections on DSC. The concluding section reflects on the limits of DSC with a focus on the structural barriers to engaging with multi-epistemic learning with Indigenous urban spatial knowledge. We finish with three principles written particularly for non-Indigenous people to develop a more critical awareness of our/their practice.

Interrogating Decolonizing in Research Events

Critical scholars have exposed universities as settler colonial institutions where disciplines are located and reproduced (Smith, 1999; Nakata, 2007). Universities enact multiple displacements of Indigenous people: through the land they occupy, their maintenance of ontologies and epistemologies that displace Indigenous relationships to Country and knowledge, and their consumptive tendencies towards those very knowledge systems (Kuokkanen, 2007; Smith, 1999). Despite some initiatives to respond (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Patel, 2015), universities remain difficult spaces for First Nations people to pursue self-determination (Peach et al., 2020). The problem of speaking, as Spivak (1988) teaches us, is not a simple question of being allowed to speak, for in contemporary times the Indigenous voice is urged to speak. Rather, the

problem is of being heard and perpetually misrecognised as the level of epistemic ignorance, and violence in the western academy disables the capacity to hear (Hunt, 2014).

Research events themselves are essential sites to interrogate as fundamentally different from Indigenous-controlled spaces and methods of knowledge sharing. Kwakwaka'wakw geographer Sarah Hunt's work (2014) challenges the closure of categories and boundaries within disciplinary practices of geographical research events by drawing on the "productive confusion" and lived, relational dimension of learning at a potlatch. She pointedly writes of the problem of analysing Indigenous spatial knowledge at a conference where few Indigenous people are involved, and that offer little opportunity for Indigenous-led methods of teaching and learning. The consequences are real, for, as Hunt argues, such practices deny the relational character of Indigenous knowledge systems and methods and undermine First Nations political struggle.

Researchers are increasingly engaging with these matters through the concept and practice of decolonization. We acknowledge the clear and present danger of whiteness turning decolonization into yet another trope affirming white supremacy. De Leeuw and Hunt (2018, p. 181) distinguish between decolonization and decolonizing practices. Decolonization encompasses efforts to undo the "privileging of non-Indigenous settler ways of knowing above those of Indigenous people" (2018, p. 6) by critically examining the role of geography in dispossession (c.f. Barker & Pickerill, 2020; Blomley, 2003). Decolonizing practices in geography aim to change the way knowledge is produced, often looking at methods and ethics to support practices undertaken in partnership with Indigenous communities and led by Indigenous peoples (Indigenous Peoples Specialty Group, 2010; Johnson et al., 2005; Tobias et al., 2013).

Self-determination must therefore be at the centre of decolonization, which has been importantly defined as:

the intelligent, calculated, and active resistance to the forces of colonialism that perpetuate the subjugation and/or exploitation of our minds, bodies, and lands, and it is engaged for the ultimate purpose of overturning the colonial structure and realizing Indigenous liberation. (Waziyatawin & Yellow Bird, 2005, p. 2)

This should inevitably trouble many approaches to decolonisation in critical geography where it:

seems to rest on ideas about (and only to a very limited extent, concrete practices for) building relationships with Indigenous peoples and communities while simultaneously and continuously addressing social power formations and identity politics that have always privileged White non-Indigenous subjects (de Leeuw & Hunt, 2018, pp. 7-8).

This underlines that decolonizing practice must unsettle the comfortable authority of disciplinary structures and practices that afford whiteness the power to record and theorise the meaning of these events.

A diverse set of literatures helps unpick the necessary practices of non-Indigenous allyship. The Zapatista concept of ‘walking with’ (Sundberg, 2013), the liberation theology concept of ‘accompaniment’ (Mei-Singh, in press) emphasise interdependence and relationship building. Sami scholar Rauna Kuokkanen (2007, pp. 117-118) emphasises the difference between “learning to know” the other and “learning as engagement with the other” through a model of “participatory reciprocity” that entails learning to perceive and accept Indigenous epistemes as part of the geopolitical present. Opaskwayak Cree scholar Sean Wilson (2008) offers “relational accountability” as a vital principle for interrogating different positions and

responsibilities, and the situatedness of knowledge. Wilson writes: “Because an idea is formed by relationships within a specific context, knowledge of what the listener or reader brings to the relationship—or their context—is needed in order to transmit the process of the idea in addition to the content” (2008, p. 23).ⁱ

Relationships of course differ between situations, and can encompass practical involvement in First Nations political activities and agendas (Larsen & Johnson, 2017), collaborative practices that disturb colonial positions and hierarchies (Bawaka Country et al., 2015; Sundberg, 2013), and developing capacity to interrogate “the broader networks of relations through which researchers are constituted and held accountable” (de Leeuw et al., 2012, p. 192). Each of these modes is experienced in everyday, felt encounters (de Leeuw et al., 2012; Hunt & Holmes, 2015; Tolia-Kelly & Raymond, 2019). Listening and learning at research events is not a simple process of knowledge-exchange, but a cross-scale politics of positioning and relationship re-setting. At the same time, the discomfort felt through polite differences of opinion, muddled room dynamics, shifting bodily comportments, and extended silence is also an opening for challenging the apparent durability of colonialism as a structuring force, creating space for the “immense value that inheres within epistemological and ontological plurality” (Attewell et al., 2014, p. 602).

Allyship is of course always open to the insidious way colonial relations are relentlessly reinscribed. This can include appropriating agendas through centring white experience or action, including investments in not being racist that undermine dissent and refusal (Ahmed, 2004), claiming to overcome power-differences, the burdens placed on Indigenous researchers within allyship (de Leeuw et al., 2012), and how institutional demands can create pressures and performance measures (like teaching obligations and measurable research outputs) that place

disproportionate pressure on Indigenous academics (de Leeuw et al., 2012; de Leeuw & Hunt, 2018). The possessive nature of whiteness always wants to consume Indigenous knowledges and in so doing normalise non-Indigenous ways of knowing ‘about’ its Other (de Leeuw & Hunt, 2018). Despite aspirations for transformative engagement with Indigenous knowledge (Barker & Pickerill, 2020; Panelli, 2008), the danger of ‘ghettoizing’ Indigenous knowledge into a sub-discipline and extracting it from embodied, legal and spiritual roots for the benefit of white geographers is an increasingly present threat (de Leeuw & Hunt, 2018; Hunt, 2014, p. 31; Todd, 2016).

Recent work on allyship has emphasised the importance of everyday interactions and cross-cultural friendships because of how colonial, racialized dynamics interweave and connect with professional activities and spaces (de Leeuw et al., 2012; Hunt & Holmes, 2015). This is important, particularly for academic collaborations between colleagues, because racism manifests in everyday interactions and assumptions (Tolia-Kelly, 2017). We too found that friendships were an important part of our practice, keeping each of us aware of our varying responsibilities and relationships with community, political agendas, knowledge, and land. Relational accountability does not resolve the structural and political tensions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, but it did generate awareness and reflection on our multiple situated responsibilities, and, through yarning, helped us disturb and respond to colonial relationships within our work and with each other.

Relational accountability demands that researchers are located. While this refutes the universalising assumption of western knowledge (Mignolo, 2002; Sundberg, 2013), it also provides an important basis for interrogating our positions and relationships, fundamental to working through the tensions of organising a decolonizing research event. Each of us as

organisers/authors came into relationship with Western Australia's settler-colonial histories and realities from different perspectives.

Carol is a proud Badimia/Yamatji woman from the Central West of Western Australia. She is the result of generations of strong Aboriginal women who have navigated and survived some of the harshest realities of frontier violence and dispossession. Carol is one of Perth first Aboriginal radio producers/announcers. She was among a small group of activists who began NME (Noongar Media Enterprises) broadcasting as Noongar radio 100.9FM. She is also an national award winning radio documentary maker and has worked for over 2 years lecturing in Aboriginal and post-graduate Studies. Decolonizing Settler Cities provided Carol an opportunity to pursue a decolonization agenda that challenged university structures and presented possibilities for working with new non-Indigenous allies.

Cheryl is a Wadjuk Noongar Traditional Owner, academic researcher, children's book author, former state and national basketballer, coach, and umpire, and a community development practitioner. She recently won the WA Local Hero for the Australian of the Year Awards for her basketball wellbeing community program called Kaat (Head), Koort (Heart) n Hoopz (KKnH, now called Kaat Koort n Horizonz). For the DSC she engaged the KKnH Peer Ambassadors (aged 14-23 years) to present their views on decolonizing settler cities through Aboriginal young wisdom.

Tod, Libby and Shaphan's ethical commitments and orientations emerged from their similar backgrounds and engagement with social sciences research. They each have European or British ancestors who have been in Australia for over four generations benefiting from the processes of colonisation. Each was brought up in protestant religious households that

emphasised social justice and which has brought each, in various ways, to an imperfect awareness of their white privilege.

Relational accountability is also with and through place itself – in the Australian context, the term used is Country (Bird Rose, 1996). Aboriginal people and writers use the English term Country to translate a philosophy of an interconnected, sustaining life force (Bird Rose, 1996; Graham, 2013). Relational accountability to Country and to the First People of Country is not, then, a disciplinary choice but a matter of accountability to Indigenous sovereignty and futurity. As authors, we are each positioned in diverse and specific ways to those histories. The DSC event was born on Gadigal Country in western Sydney and was designed and held on Wadjuk Noongar Country. DSC is therefore located in a specific relationship with Noongar knowledge, place and time, and so the act of *emplacing* DSC is a necessary practice for fulfilling obligations to Indigenous-informed research.

Becoming Allies

When Tod and Shaphan began to organise Decolonizing Settler Cities, they started to meet with people in the Centre for Aboriginal Studies (CAS) at Curtin University. CAS began in 1976 and is an Aboriginal-managed research and education centre that contributes to positive social change for Aboriginal people. Like other such centres, CAS's role and accountabilities are to Indigenous communities as well as the university. CAS sits apart from the four large schools in Curtin, which gives it both a degree of independence but also financial precarity due to its small size and orientation towards community-based research.

Approaches from white researchers are common and often awkward experiences for CAS staff. Tod and Shaphan also felt awkward, and although CAS collaborators were very supportive of

the idea of DSC, many times they considered cancelling or delaying the Symposium as the generous guidance of CAS collaborators revealed a persistent underlying orientation towards a mostly white discipline rather than to Aboriginal community needs and values. The intellectual and relational breakthrough came when Carol and Cheryl became collaborators.

Cheryl had just been appointed Professor in CAS and Tod made an appointment to meet her. By this time, Tod, Libby and Shaphan had a draft set of principles for DSC that Tod shared. Cheryl responded - discussing, changing, and identifying ways that DSC could engage with her work and community (see Table 1). Cheryl identified several initiatives, which included holding the conference at different important Noongar locations, time on Country, and a youth panel. Something was beginning to crystallise as together we began to move away from the restrictions of orthodox academic events.

Table 1: Principles developed for Decolonizing Settler Cities Symposium

- | |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Finding ways to appropriately centre Indigenous experiences, theories, knowledges and perspectives on the Australian city; 2. Creating spaces for conversation and mutual learning that are respectful, critically aware and diverse; 3. Working to de-centre colonialist white stream categories of knowing, thinking and imagining the city; 4. Identifying how mutual learning and delicate, respectful, collaborative imaginings between different streams of understanding in cities (including Indigenous and white stream) can be cultivated and encouraged; 5. Co-designing respectful methods for producing knowledge, teaching and learning about urban Australia; and |
|---|

6. Developing a set of practical outcomes and actions that participants in the symposium will take forward both individually and as a group.

Carol and Shaphan knew each other through Curtin's Human Research Ethics Committee. The team asked Carol, as a practitioner and scholar of Yarning Circles, if she would like to collaborate. Meeting for the first time, Carol explained Yarning Circles and we had a long yarn about their potential role in an event like DSC. Carol could see the possibilities for activist work through Decolonizing Settler Cities, promoting and practicing Indigenous research methods, and supporting community agendas.

Activating the principles of Decolonizing Settler Cities now became practically possible. While Tod, Shaphan and Libby had undertaken to follow these principles, their relationships of accountability had until this point been mainly to other geographers. The collaboration that unfolded enabled all of us to come into new relationships of accountability with each other, with community, and with Country, practiced through yarning. The relational accountabilities supported what Bird Rose (1999, p. 175) labels "intersubjective mutuality" where we "seek possibilities for mutual care in a system of connections and reciprocities". These reciprocities became central to the experience of participants at the symposium.

Yarning: Indigenous-Informed Approaches

The practice of being led by Indigenous worldviews requires methods capable of engaging with the protocols of Indigenous knowledge (Hunt, 2014; Wilson, 2008), the embodied ways academic exclusions operate through encounters and interactions with colleagues (Tolia-Kelly, 2017), and the collaborative and relational ways we reproduce ourselves as academics and geographers (Hunt, 2014). Carol and Cheryl's research and education practice is located in

their own community and family obligations and relationships, directing their approach to Aboriginal research methods and community engagement through their lived experience, past jobs, research, teaching, and publications (Dowling, 2007; Kickett-Tucker et al., 2017). The principles underpinning their approach are respect, inclusiveness, collective action, critical thinking, and privileging and honouring, in their case, Noongar, Badimia, and Aboriginal communities. These principles became central to the organisation of and participation in Decolonizing Settler Cities.

For Indigenous peoples, knowledge is passed on through stories, or yarning, that shape-shift in relation to the wisdom of the storyteller at the time of the telling. For Carol and Cheryl, incorporating such an epistemology into a non-Indigenous language is a troublesome task of criss-crossing cultural epistemologies. Yarning as conceptualised and practiced by Carol and Cheryl is conscious of place, deeply contextualised and “reliant upon cultural protocol, relationships and expected outcomes” (Walker et al., 2013).

Yarning can be informal, or, through yarning circles, more formally structured. A yarning circle is a “telling space” where members can share ideas, knowledge, emotion, experiences, concerns and aspirations. Yarning demonstrates the diversity of Aboriginal knowledge systems, and its flexibility allows this diversity to be catered for and respected. Yarning requires non-Aboriginal participants to position themselves as students taking a journey led by Aboriginal methods through story and memory. When yarning is accepted (as well as other Indigenous-informed approaches), it reduces the risk of trauma by honouring Indigenous ownership of the terms of discussion. As such, it is a political act because it functions to build consensus on difficult decisions that underpins collective decision making.

Yarning brings the focus to land and place as fundamental to the ethic of learning-with in Indigenous-informed research. Kombumerri scholar Mary Graham teaches that land “is a locus of identity for human beings; not a focus of identity: we can achieve the fullest expression of our human identity in a location in land” (2013, p. 190). Dene scholar Glen Coulthard also locates Indigenous knowledge in land, explaining: “modalities of Indigenous land-connected practices and longstanding experiential knowledge that inform and structure our ethical engagements with the world and our relationships with human and nonhuman others over time” (2014, p. 13).

Researchers in Indigenous geography argue for similar approaches.ⁱⁱ Larsen and Johnson advocate attention to relational moments through what they call “placework”, where “Native and non-Native people are interacting with place as a conscious being with the capacity to speak, create and teach the responsibilities required for more inclusive forms of coexistence” (2016, p. 149). They suggest an ethics of engagement through comportment, or “encountering places together” (ibid p. 153). Such a philosophy powerfully articulates responsibility to land and non-human others (Bawaka Country et al., 2015; Bird Rose, 1996; Graham, 2013; Larsen & Johnson, 2016), or as Graham succinctly states: “you are not alone in this world” (2013, p. 181).

Stories and storytelling as methods have been acknowledged as central for Indigenous people and research practices (Kovach, 2010; Wilson, 2008), decolonial practices (Smith, 1999), and appropriate for interrogating the individual and interpersonal dynamics and politics of Indigenous—non-Indigenous knowledge production (de Leeuw et al., 2012; de Leeuw & Hunt, 2018; Hunt & Holmes, 2015; Tolia-Kelly & Raymond, 2019). The mode of storytelling is

crucial. All knowledge is situated in systems of power, so the authority to tell, and the protocols around practices of telling, are foundational.

For us, yarning became a conceptual framing, a method, and practice of relationship. It helped us establish relationships with each other and with place that had the capacity to honour and hold the conversations necessary for inviting transformation that at the same time brought “discomfort, pain, angst, failure, disappointment, and readjustment” (Larsen and Johnson (2012, p. 5). Yarning does not distinguish between personal and professional histories and is attentive to interventions from non-human agencies. It supports and scaffolds “action situated in the here and now, facing each other, without knowing what we shall make of each other, our history, and the damaged places of our lives” (Bird Rose, 1999, p. 184).

The Yarning Circle

Yarning was central to our practice in two ways. As set out above, it was first a method for recording and interrogating DSC. We yarned before, during, and after the formal event to both shape it, and consider its protocols and outcomes. We yarned as part of the practice of writing this paper together. Like other researchers who have collaborated to document decolonizing practices (de Leeuw et al., 2012; Hunt & Holmes, 2015), our relationships, and in particular friendships, are crucial to the production of knowledge about (and in) Decolonizing Settler Cities. They are crucial to “raising questions of reciprocity and accountability across axes of differences” (Hunt & Holmes, 2015, p. 161) where the settler colleague is always a beneficiary and sometimes a critic of colonialism. Yarning allows for counter narratives that situate settlers as vulnerable “not-knowers” when willing to examine our/their dual positions.

The second role of yarning in DSC was as an anti-colonial practice of knowledge production in the research event itself. Carol led a structured yarning circle that began with the 50 participants seated around a basket of objects. The mix of non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal participants meant that the yarning circle challenged western knowledge hierarchies and brought each participant's embodied sense of the place and time into focus. Participants crushed gum (Eucalyptus) leaves in their own hands to smell while listening with eyes closed to the sounds and sensations around the space. It was in this space that Carol explained the principles that would govern our knowledge exchange at DSC: the freedom to speak or not to speak, that Elders (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal as identified by the facilitator) were treated and listened to in a respectful manner, and that free flowing of ideas and discussion were encouraged. Once participants were welcomed into this format and introduced themselves around the circle (in the context of social yarning), Carol posed a series of questions: what has colonisation done to you; what remains today and what can we do here in this space to repair it? Inviting responses to those questions enabled a free-flowing two-hour discussion practiced as collaborative yarning and facilitated by Carol.

Framing the whole event as grounded in the principles practiced in the yarning circle powerfully shaped the kinds of conversations and relationalities that then unfolded. The reflexive practice of yarning, our focus on the personal experiences and contemporary effects and uses of imperial legacies, offered participants a space-time where culturally safe discussion of colonisation became possible. Indigenous participants spoke about loss, family and place as experienced in their daily encounter with colonialism. For non-Indigenous participants, the focus on colonisation demanded some deeper thinking about complicity and privilege. This was both personal and professional. The voices that were most confident and most often heard

in the Yarning Circle were Aboriginal, both Noongar and non-Noongar. The Yarning Circle had a powerful effect on comportment, interaction and relationship among the participants.

In these ways, conditions of attentiveness, listening, and ethical practice were positioned as the appropriate and lawful practice that bound each of us as participants into relationships of accountability. Participants could, in the words of Sarah Ahmed (2004, p. 19), turn “towards their role and responsibility in histories of racism ... and toward others”. Yarning built an ethic of relational accountability between participants, enabling us to collectively hold in that space a perspective on the co-constitution of colonisation as a structuring force experienced, albeit differently, in each of our lives. Such practices, we learned, are surely central to research practices that purport to pursue the ethics of decolonization.

Countering Privilege, Encouraging Participation

Our commitment was for DSC to meet Aboriginal community needs and concerns, and so a major challenge was to overcome the normalised exclusion of people who are the keepers and teachers of urbanist and geography epistemologies. Invitations to research events are usually constructed for and circulated to ‘researchers’, a category which has historically validated only western scientific knowledge and its mostly white holders. Paywalls, the language of abstracts and conference presentations, and places in which research events are usually held further entrench the unreachability of such events for community. The effect of these barriers is that Indigenous knowledge, where recognised, often becomes an object of interest to white academics, appropriated into projects and publications and consumed without accountability in white research events (de Leeuw & Hunt, 2018; Spivak, 1993; Todd, 2016).

We needed to develop and practice alternatives to these colonial approaches. First, we addressed barriers to Aboriginal participation. We approached and met with people from key Aboriginal organisations, and communities, in Perth, learning about what might be of value in such an event. Where there was interest, we invited them to speak and worked to ensure that at least half the presenters were Aboriginal, by building further relationships in different communities and securing financial support. For example, in a powerful panel on the first day, young Aboriginal people shared their own lived experience of contemporary urban life.

Information about Decolonizing Settler Cities was carefully circulated into community networks. Similar to Attewell et al. (2014), we did not ‘call for papers’, but invited contributions in any format. Through this approach, we were able to engender interest in the event and then secure funding to support Indigenous people to travel and participate. We curated practices to ensure Indigenous presenters controlled the terms on which their own knowledge and experience was shared. Space was created in the program to agree those terms.

A second key element was the format of the event itself. We sought to both flatten historical hierarchies of knowledge and hold appropriate Indigenous-led space at the centre. A vital principle was to bring everyone into an explicit relationship with each other and with Country. To this end, Cheryl’s idea was to locate DSC in two different Noongar places across each of the two days and to locate specific practices and activities within those places. Day one was held at Katagarup (its colonial name is King’s Park). Katagarup has been the home, birthplace, and meeting ground for Noongar people for thousands of years. Today, Katagarup is a large park next to Perth’s CBD with a substantial area of extant eucalyptus forest.

At Katagarup, Noongar Elder Noel Nannup welcomed participants as a custodian, enabling Katagarup to become a participant in DSC. This welcome, now a standard practice at events in Australia, was treated as a practice of law, rather than a formality. This led into the yarning circle discussed earlier. Later on the first day, Noel led a walk around Katagarup to teach about its history and spirit, and assist participants to practice learning with Country.

The next day was held at CAS on the Curtin University campus. While located on a conventional university campus, CAS is a unique Indigenous-designed space. Holding the second day there brought participants into relationship with CAS's history and purpose of pursuing self-determination and equality. We also paid attention to small but important details. The conference food was procured from a local Noongar caterer. We built time into the program for facilitated discussion using a consensus model to discuss a forward agenda. This was a challenging discussion and collectively we decided that sufficiently deep relationships did not exist at that time to set a distinct forward agenda. These practices enabled us to collectively decide what would happen after the event – from the sharing of the audio and video material to ideas for publishing or circulating the contributions.

The Discipline Strikes Back, and What We can do about It in Research Events

The point of departure for DSC was addressing the silence in Australian urban theory and practice about the relationship between urbanisation and colonisation. As our journey here attests, that purpose expanded to include working through an ethics of decoloniality from within a discipline and institution that remains implicated in the dispossession and erasure of Indigenous peoples. Decolonizing Settler Cities tried to create a space informed by Indigenous modes of thought, behaviour and knowledge that would generate different kinds of

relationships for understanding urban Australia as Country and as already knitted into First Nations governance, knowledge and law.

Everything we have described in this paper achieved little reach into mainstream (white) Australian urban geography scholarship. In name, DSC was the second in a now annual Australian Urban Theory Symposium event. Much like *Decolonizing Cascadia* (Attewell et al., 2014), our disciplinary colleagues were not present in great numbers as participants at DSC, and we received very few expressions of interest from the Australian urban geography community. Centring Indigenous practices of knowing displaced the categories and vocabularies familiar to urban geographers, such that they *could not recognise* DSC as an urban theory event.

This raises difficult questions about the capacity of the field to respond to the invitation of relationships of accountability with Aboriginal custodians regarding contemporary urban lives and processes. Our sense was that DSC marked an epistemic limit regarding identification and the nature of disciplinary interests, and ‘expertise’. Porter (2018) has identified how the tendency to discipline relationships of accountability into a box called ‘Indigenous work’, or ‘Indigenous engagement’, structures the culture of denial within urban studies about the inherent relationship between contemporary urban theory, First Peoples sovereignty, and Country. Thus, there is ‘Geography’ as a discipline and ‘Indigenous geography’ as a sub-discipline. Only in the latter are relationships of accountability seen to be relevant, and only for those who “do Indigenous work” (a problematic yet common phrasing heard in our corner of the world). Examining such an effect requires sustained critical reflection, because as Attewell and colleagues (2014) pointedly ask: “What are the political implications of

understanding decolonization as outside the scope of one's work, and upon what assumptions and silencings is such an understanding built?"

This is how epistemic violence functions (Hunt, 2014). Narrow and hard disciplinary structures continue to undermine researchers' capacity to support Indigenous futurity, and to engage with epistemological and ontological plurality, through self-exclusion from the spaces where this is offered, rendering such expression near impossible in the 'main business' of geography. Events like DSC and Decolonizing Cascadia (Attewell et al., 2014) indicate how white geographers can shoulder some of the work of preparing different kinds of spaces and then getting out of the way. Our hope is that sharing our experience here has provided a critical reflection on the work of decolonization in geography. In these closing comments, then, we have distilled our experience into three principles specifically for non-Indigenous practitioners to more critically consider their role.

A **first principle** is to acknowledge that decolonizing practices are more important than the transformation of the social sciences or disciplinary practices. If non-Indigenous researchers are not committed in the first instance to the liberation of colonised peoples on their own terms, then colonial structures will persist. This is why considering the format, structure, participation and practice of research events as central to a politics and ethics of decolonization is so important. Being an ally in the work of decolonization lies in holding (not taking up) space in practices like yarning that foster the comportment, relational accountabilities, and place-specificity of Indigenous epistemologies.

As research events are sites that help reproduce disciplinary canons of knowledge, matters such as who is communicating, what can be shared, and who responds are political and ethical

questions. The role of non-Indigenous allies is to do the work to create spaces in which their voices are not central and not the most important. This is vital, for if decolonization is to have any meaning it must be forged through a persistent confrontation with whiteness and its privilege. That means the carriers of white privilege must be willing to have their privilege quite radically curtailed. Given the expected performative requirements of research events like conferences, where grand-standing, claim-making and the organisation of knowledge-power are so prevalent, this requires very significant and careful attention to how alternative spaces can be formed and different behaviours instilled. Creating a collaboration to ensure that Indigenous people are shaping the agenda and format is essential, because it is only Indigenous people who can practice Indigenous-led knowledge sharing practices and methodologies. A **second principle**, then, is for non-Indigenous people to shoulder the burden of the labour for creating space while understanding that non-Indigenous voices will be displaced in that space.

Being informed by Indigenous understandings of what knowledge is, how it can be shared and on what terms suggests a **third principle**: to include practices that foster attentiveness to comportment, emplacement, and the wide network of relational accountability in which we are each knitted. Yarning did this very well, though we acknowledge that other methods might also be appropriate. For us, the Yarning Circle asked participants to listen with care, be attentive to place and sensory learning, and share experiences that differentiated and explained people's histories and positions. Talk in Yarning Circles demands awareness and accountability to others and to Country, structured through Indigenous protocols and practices that centre trust, responsibility and respect.

These three principles address some of the barriers to Indigenous-led practices in geography research events. They are especially designed to ask non-Indigenous geographers and other

non-Indigenous participants to critically develop personal and professional capacity for multi-epistemic literacies and creating the conditions where the transformation of knowledge production is possible. A key condition is that Indigenous knowledge remains rooted in community, and those communities will seek strategic engagements with critically aware collaborators. Research events committed to supporting decolonization should focus on creating opportunities for relationship and the realisation of broader accountabilities.

In these ways, we might collectively find and create ways for academic disciplines such as geography to more fully understand the invitation of being in a relationship with what has always been here: Indigenous sovereignties of law, place, and knowledge. As modelled by Indigenous leaders, a commitment to pushing back against disciplinary indifference insists on personal and institutional responses to this invitation. This extends to engaging with national responses such as the 2022 priority reforms for Closing the Gap that emphasises two-way partnerships, community leadership, cultural safety and response. Articulating such scales of response-ability, at once national, disciplinary, institutional and personal, underlies the challenge and importance of organising research events where there are opportunities to collaboratively craft spaces for decolonising practices where such invitations are possible.

Acknowledgement

Decolonizing Settler Cities was funded by the School of Built Environment, Curtin University, the Institute of Australian Geographers, and an International Workshop Award from the Antipode Foundation.

Bibliography

- Ahmed, S. (2004). Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism. *Borderlands E-Journal: New Spaces in the Humanities*, 3(2).
- Attewell, W., Cohen, D., Collard, J., Collard, R., Dumoulin, L., Farrales, M., Grove, A., Hallenbeck, J., Hunt, S., Johns, S., Loewen, K., Luedee, J., McConchie, A., Patchin, P., Ponder, S., Przedpelska, S. M., Prouse, C., Ranslem, D., Ritts, M., Rosenman, E., Walker, S., & Webber, S. (2014). Decolonizing cascadia? [Article]. *ACME*, 13(3), 595-604.
<https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-84920665297&partnerID=40&md5=8d84e566f7e4848cbd84d0678fe1e2e3>
- Barker, A. J., & Pickerill, J. (2020). Doings with the land and sea: Decolonising geographies, Indigeneity, and enacting place-agency. *Progress in human geography*, 44(4), 640-662.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132519839863>
- Bawaka Country, Wright, S., Suchet-Pearson, S., Lloyd, K., Burarrwanga, L., Ganambarr, R., Ganambarr-Stubbs, M., Ganambarr, B., & Maymuru, D. (2015). Working with and learning from Country: decentering human author-ity. *Cultural Geographies*, 22(2), 269-283.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474014539248>
- Bessarab, D., & Ng'andu, B. (2010). Yarning About Yarning as a Legitimate Method in Indigenous Research *International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies* 3(1), 37-50.
- Bird Rose, D. (1996). *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness*. Australian Heritage Commission.
- Bird Rose, D. (1999). Indigenous ecologies and an ethic of connection. In N. Low (Ed.), *Global Ethics and Environment* (pp. 175-187). Routledge.
- Blomley, N. (2003). Law, Property, and the Geography of Violence: The Frontier, the Survey, and the Grid. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 93(1), 121-141.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8306.93109>
- Coulthard, G. S. (2014). *Red Skin, White Masks. Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* [Book]. University of Minnesota Press.
- Daigle, M., & Sundberg, J. (2017). From where we stand: unsettling geographical knowledges in the classroom. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 42(3), 338-341.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12201>
- de Leeuw, S., Cameron, E. S., & Greenwood, M. L. (2012). Participatory and community-based research, Indigenous geographies, and the spaces of friendship: A critical engagement. *The Canadian geographer*, 56(2), 180-194. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-0064.2012.00434.x>
- de Leeuw, S., & Hunt, S. (2018). Unsettling decolonizing geographies. *Geography Compass*, 12(7), n/a-n/a. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12376>
- Dowling, C. (2007). Finding your own kind or my grandmother's mother's mother : the exhibit. *Australian Feminist Law Journal*, 26(1), 17-30.
- Gaudry, A., & Lorenz, D. (2018). Indigenization as inclusion, reconciliation, and decolonization: navigating the different visions for indigenizing the Canadian Academy. *AlterNative : an*

international journal of indigenous peoples, 14(3), 218-227.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1177180118785382>

Graham, M. (2013). Some thoughts about the philosophical underpinnings of Aboriginal worldviews. *Australian Humanities Review*, 45, 181-194.

Haebich, A. (1992). *For their own good: Aborigines and government in the South West of Western Australia 1900-1940*. University of Western Australia Press.

Haebich, A. (2000). *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families, 1800–2000* (Vol. null).

Hughes, M., & Barlo, S. (2020). Yarning With Country: An Indigenist Research Methodology. *Qualitative inquiry*, 27(3-4), 353-363. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800420918889>

Hunt, S. (2014). Ontologies of Indigeneity: the politics of embodying a concept. *Cultural Geographies*, 21(1), 27-32. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474013500226>

Hunt, S., & Holmes, C. (2015). Everyday Decolonization: Living a Decolonizing Queer Politics. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 19(2), 154-172. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2015.970975>

[Record #4581 is using a reference type undefined in this output style.]

Indigenous Peoples Specialty Group. (2010). Aag Indigenous Peoples Specialty Group's Declaration of Key Questions About Research Ethics with Indigenous Communities. <http://www.indigenousgeography.net/ipsq/pdf/IPSGResearchEthicsFinal.pdf>

Jackson, S., Porter, L., & Johnson, L. C. (2018). *Planning in indigenous Australia: from imperial foundations to postcolonial futures*. Routledge.

Johnson, J. T., Louis, R. P., & Pramono, A. H. (2005). Facing the Future: Encouraging Critical Cartographic Literacies In Indigenous Communities. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 4(1), 80-98.

Johnson, L. C., Porter, L., & Jackson, S. (2017). Reframing and revising Australia's planning history and practice. *Australian Planner*, 54(4), 225-233. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07293682.2018.1477813>

Kickett-Tucker, C., Bessarab, D., Coffin, J., & Wright, M. (Eds.). (2017). *Mia Mia Aboriginal Community Development*. Cambridge University Press.

Kinnane, S. (2003). *Shadow lines*. Fremantle Art Centre Press.

Kovach, M. E. (2010). *Indigenous methodologies: Characteristics, conversations, and contexts*. University of Toronto Press.

Kuokkanen, R. J. (2007). *Reshaping the university: responsibility, indigenous epistemes, and the logic of the gift*. University of British Columbia Press.

Larsen, S. C., & Johnson, J. T. (2012). In between worlds: place, experience, and research in Indigenous geography. *Journal of cultural geography*, 29(1), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08873631.2012.646887>

Larsen, S. C., & Johnson, J. T. (2016). The Agency of Place: Toward a More-Than-Human Geographical Self. *GeoHumanities*, 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2373566X.2016.1157003>

- Larsen, S. C., & Johnson, J. T. (2017). *Being Together in Place: Indigenous coexistence in a more than human world*.
- Mei-Singh, L. (in press). Accompaniment Through Carceral Geographies: Abolitionist Research Partnerships with Indigenous Communities. *Antipode*, n/a(n/a).
<https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12589>
- Mignolo, W. (2002). The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 101(1), 57-96. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-101-1-57>
- Panelli, R. (2008). Social geographies: encounters with Indigenous and more-than-White/Anglo geographies. *Progress in human geography*, 32(6), 801-811.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132507088031>
- Patel, L. (2015). Desiring Diversity and Backlash: White Property Rights in Higher Education. *The Urban review*, 47(4), 657-675. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-015-0328-7>
- Peach, L., Richmond, C. A. M., & Brunette-Debassige, C. (2020). “You can’t just take a piece of land from the university and build a garden on it”: Exploring Indigenizing space and place in a settler Canadian university context. *Geoforum*, 114, 117-127.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2020.06.001>
- Porter, L. (2018). From an urban country to urban Country: confronting the cult of denial in Australian cities. *Australian Geographer*, 49(2), 239-246.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00049182.2018.1456301>
- Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. University of Otago Press.
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the Subaltern Speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (pp. 271-313). University of Illinois Press.
- Spivak, G. C. (1993). *Outside in the teaching machine*. Routledge.
- Sundberg, J. (2013). Decolonizing posthumanist geographies. *cultural geographies*, 21(1), 33-47.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474013486067>
- Tobias, J. K., Richmond, C. A. M., & Luginaah, I. (2013). Community-Based Participatory Research (Cbpr) with Indigenous Communities: Producing Respectful and Reciprocal Research. *J Empir Res Hum Res Ethics*, 8(2), 129-140. <https://doi.org/10.1525/jer.2013.8.2.129>
- Todd, Z. (2016). An Indigenous Feminist's Take On The Ontological Turn: ‘Ontology’ Is Just Another Word For Colonialism. *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 29(1), 4-22.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/johs.12124>
- Tolia-Kelly, D. P. (2017). A day in the life of a Geographer: ‘lone’1, black, female. *Area*, 49(3), 324-328. <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12373>
- Tolia-Kelly, D. P., & Raymond, R. (2019). Decolonising museum cultures: An artist and a geographer in collaboration. *Transactions - Institute of British Geographers (1965)*, 45(1), 2-17.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12339>
- Walker, M., Fredericks, B., Mills, K., & Anderson, D. (2013). “Yarning” as a Method for Community-Based Health Research With Indigenous Women: The Indigenous Women's

Wellness Research Program. *Health Care Women Int*, 35(10), 1216-1226.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07399332.2013.815754>

Waziyatawin, & Yellow Bird, M. (2005). Beginning Decolonisation. In W. A. Wilson & M. Yellow Bird (Eds.), *For Indigenous Eyes Only: A Decolonization Handbook* School of American Research Press.

Whitehead, A. N. (1953). *Science and the modern world*. Cambridge University Press.

Wilson, S. (2008). *Research is ceremony*. . Fernwood.

ⁱ This has been a useful concept for geographers who have interrogated intercultural research teams (Tobias et al., 2013) and allyship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers (de Leeuw et al., 2012).

ⁱⁱ A paper by Bawaka County et al. (2015) similarly demonstrates the contemporary entwining of critical approaches to social worlds and disciplinary approaches to place through a “methodology of attending” (277).