

DECOLONIZING AS AN EVER BEGINNING

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ABSTRACT

The decolonial agenda calls for bringing the colonized and colonizers together to restore the past and recommit to the future. This essay accounts for the experiences of four research teams co-travelling the space-time continuum with a quest at once simple and complicated: How do we begin decolonizing?

¹As we sit in circle, our voices carry equal weight, and our message is shared. Our names are listed alphabetically.

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Although each experience is unique and still unfolding, all four teams converged on a shared insight: decolonizing is a succession of new beginnings. As the river is never the same, each team's encounters led to many new ways of seeing, being, and doing decolonizing. This essay invites us to begin again. Decolonizing as an ever-beginning brings four intertwined aspects: (1) the land, (2) the body, (3) the ethics, and (4) the politics. Together, these continue to transform us profoundly and might offer some hope for new beginnings toward decolonizing the colonial legacy of our fields.

Keywords: Body; decolonial beginnings; ethics; land; politics

ENTERING THE SPACE-TIME CONTINUUM

My entry into the world of the Païter Suruí was not just a crossing of physical boundaries but the gateway to an entirely new paradigm of existence. Before setting foot in the Amazonian village of the Païter Suruí, my only knowledge of their world came from media snippets of their leader, Gasodã Suruí, speaking at climate crisis roundtables and deforestation forums. However, I quickly learned that no amount of information could prepare me for the richness, complexity, and profound beauty that awaited me in their land.

Decolonial beginnings start with an eagerness to listen, learn, and walk alongside the people who preceded us. This walk is rife with vulnerability yet offers potential for deep transformation. Indigenous partners welcome us to a space-time continuum where the past needs to be witnessed and understood before it can begin to be corrected. In this space-time continuum, knowledge is asked for and granted, inscribed on the land and the bodies, impregnated with not yet familiar ethics that transcend generations' past and future, and overtly political in the aim to expose and stop re-traumatization that has already gone on for far too long. In this space-time continuum, the past's inhumanities, injustices, and indignities teach us about the strangling of souls, the robbing of voices, and the violation of decisions that have stewarded the good since times immemorial. Decolonizing land to land, body to body, ethics to ethics, and politics to politics is much more than a project. It is an invitation to relearn our worlds repeatedly.

In Australian Aboriginal languages, "time and place are usually the same word – they are indivisible" (Yunkaporta, 2020, p. 66). I recently glimpsed this indivisibility when I was invited by one of my research partners to walk with them in their country. As I walked, my research partner, a Darkinjung man, explained how, for thousands of years, his ancestors had walked the Songlines of this Country, at times alongside some of my ancestors, the Awabakal people, as they gathered to perform ceremonies in the shadow sacred Mount Yanko. Songlines are the invisible pathways that crisscross Australia, tracks connecting communities and following ancient boundaries. Along these lines, Aboriginal peoples pass the songs that reveal the land's creation and the secrets of its past (Chapman, 1998). These Songlines are the repository of knowledge. As Yolju woman Sienna Stubbs (2021) explains for her people, "Songlines can be looked at like a method or procedure. They hold all of the information required to see the world and live as Yolju." The invitation offered by my research partner to walk his ancestors' Songlines and listen to their stories was an invitation to share knowledge. Walking the Songlines allowed me to honour my ancestors, and this honouring lies at the heart of all my dialogues with Indigenous peoples.

Our teams' beginnings were gently yet firmly guided, from first encounters with the land to progressive embodiments that carried us forward by opening and broadening a variety of ethical and political spaces.

DECOLONIAL BEGINNINGS

The Land

Decolonizing cannot begin without a relationship with the land. Land is kin. Land is the teacher. Land also holds us together – humans and beyond humans, past, present and future generations, and our responsibilities as stewards and settlers. The land was stolen and divided as colonization aimed to appropriate land not meant to be owned but cared for. Decolonizing is emplaced. It takes place not only on but for the land one's ancestors and successors care for – the land carries through time experiences that exceed the experience of a single or few generations. Non-Indigenous researchers can only enter the time-space continuum on the land. Learning to make kin with the land often requires multiple beginnings – appreciating how Indigenous partners care for the land much more.

It's hard to put into words how profoundly this project has transformed me and my relationship with/to the land. I always knew the land was underneath my feet but never fully acknowledged it. This connection goes beyond acknowledgment; it is about embracing my symbiotic relationship with the land. It is a journey of listening and learning, allowing the rhythms of nature to shape my thoughts and actions.

The connection to the land is not merely symbolic; it is a relationship that must be grounded in dialogues sustained by reciprocity, respect, and refusal (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). Engaging with the land requires embracing new ways of seeing, challenging entrenched beliefs, and reevaluating established paradigms. As one's kinship with the land develops, the wisdom, history, and narratives of generations embedded within the land become comprehensible in ways that extend beyond Western ways of knowing.

I realized that the tree was not merely a provider of sustenance but a sacred entity that sustained life in ways I had never imagined. It was a living embodiment of the people's connection to the land, its branches reaching into their cultural practices, social structure, and territorial relationships. The tree, once just an object in my Western understanding, now stood as a bridge between the physical and the spiritual, holding the key to an intricate human-nature balance that I was only beginning to comprehend.

Comprehension is not a solo act but one guided on and for the land by Indigenous partners. Elders and knowledge keepers speak for the land, explaining its sacred meaning and defending its centrality against trespassers that violate its rights. Such guidance can be offered as one form of defense, as without comprehension, present-day colonization robs current generations of their heritage and future generations of the possibility of kinship. One of our teams was so strongly guided that in less than one hour, we went back hundreds of years and witnessed the sacrilege perpetrated on a river confluence in two-dimensional (360-degree views) and three-dimensional space. Our imaginations saw the relief

and appreciated configurations of the stars and positions of the sun, even though access to the most sacred portion of the land was being physically colonized, abducted and restricted to Western ways to view and evaluate something that could not and should not be captured and contained.

The Body

New beginnings move and shake every fiber of our bodies. We viscerally confront injustices as we sense and sense-make in the space-time continuum. Real-time injustices call forth the body by enrolling all senses at once. We witness the contrast between unbridled beauty and rhythms of life in reverence of nature on the one hand and the abomination of nature enslaved to modern dominion in the name of profit – the vistas of the few blocks out of the many. Heritage is bottled and sold to those on, but not for, the land.

Embodied metaphors stand in where senses no longer reach. Clouded by colonizing beliefs, the way of seeing the world is refined as abundant clear water is poured. As sediment settles, the transformation of our ways of seeing runs through our bodies, enabling us to embody a holistic engagement with the land that goes beyond what we can currently comprehend to what we can see, focus on, question, and discover anew. These revelations wash over us, clean remnants of biases, and make room for learning in and through kinship.

The methodologies I had once relied upon were rendered obsolete by the sensory richness of the forest; my mind, body, and heart were all engaged in a harmonious dialogue with the land. The Brazil nut tree, in its grandeur, was no longer just a subject of research but a source of life, deeply respected and cherished. The sense of belonging I felt as I participated in the community's daily rhythms was a profound revelation, showing me that the sacred interaction between space, time, and nature could be understood without the need for structured knowledge.

The body is often guided. Non-Indigenous researchers come to discover their senses as they engage with the land and come to trust their senses as sensemaking devices that transcend prior ontologies, often impoverished by the priority given to thought.

Walking the space colonized by the Amazon headquarters, the two of us learned to see the subjugation of the river. Its desecration by an abomination became comprehensible as our bodies climbed up steep hills to reclaim obstructed vistas, turned right and left to breathe in the difference, and followed the broken flight of migratory birds whose access had been curtailed.

The Ethics

Entering the time-space continuum opens a dialogue with Indigenous people, requiring us to be prepared to sit without knowing. As our full bodies learn to partake in deep listening on the land, we appreciate the broader ethics of engagement that afford safety in shared vulnerability. The methodologies we employ must allow us to be open to “responding to what is not understood, to what unsettles existing knowledge, and to that which cannot be explained easily through causal relations and claiming to know the other person’s intention” (Page, 2017, p. 19).

Most of us appreciate the imperative of ethical and safe spaces, but who creates these spaces in the first place? Who are we to foster inclusivity, respect, and trust? Can non-Indigenous researchers appreciate the vastness and diversity of lived experience as communities flourish in symbiosis with non-human ecosystems and suffer untold when existential bonds are severed? Perhaps not at first. Respectful interactions that progressively embody the ethics of the land have oriented our teams toward de- and co-constructing the very meaning of ethical and safe spaces (Ermine, 2007). Entering the space-time continuum is an invitation into dialogues, protocols and ceremonies interrupted by colonial ethics. Such interruptions are not benign. There are risks of re-traumatization in the name of what ethics may mean to some but not others. Some aspects are non-negotiable, but ceremony and protocol are not always available. And perhaps it should not be. Whom and how Indigenous communities welcome in their midst is not a matter of consent but a profound choice. These choices can be rethought and revoked; as teams work together, the meaning of ethics and safety cannot be assumed. The question becomes not how such spaces are created but rather what processes can be co-developed so that the requisite attention continues to be devoted to maintaining these ethical and safe spaces.

Commitment to ethical and safe practices is rooted in the constant pursuit of consent, arriving in this space with an open mind, working on oneself, and always seeing oneself as a learner. Entering those spaces transforms people forever; however, the necessity to constantly re-engage means remembering the past. Colonial legacies perdure and have present effects. The past is always reconstructed and restored, even in physical objects. The continuum of time and space obliges us to enter with humility, humanity and vulnerability – not presuming what is (or is not) ethical or safe.

The Politics

My research in the Australian context has led me on a journey where I have had to lay aside my pre-existing understandings of place and time and discover my connections to my ancestors, the Awabakal people. I am always becoming both a researcher and an Awabakal person.

Beyond awareness, decolonizing is fundamentally political, but the politics of decolonizing are complex. Indigenous identity is deeply intertwined with political engagement, emphasizing the struggle for fundamental rights and greater inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in the political arena.

As I delved deeper into this research, I became increasingly entangled in political engagement. I knew there were important issues and challenges; as a settler, I knew my understanding of the situation was limited. I did not fully grasp the complexity of the various issues and the extent of the situation, such as the profound struggle for fundamental rights, particularly concerning access to land and the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in academic discourse. Still, I could not ignore my frustration when I saw silence perpetuated in the name of rules and business as usual.

Our teams have learned to welcome politics as foundational to working together. Politics are not static, and there is a necessity to make room for changes, especially as team members confront layers of assumptions at various stages of

the process. Bringing the political to the center of comprehension allows new ways to re-enter the time-space continuum.

WHAT ABOUT THE END?

For our team, decolonizing is not an end but an ever beginning. Whatever has been (not) written, (not) done, or (not) said should always be questioned. As more academics engage in decolonizing work, we must create and commit to safe and ethical spaces for those involved and those left outside, particularly those who were – and still are – colonized. This cannot be achieved without constant re-engagement with what decolonizing means and asks of us in our particular contexts.

I find it hardest to hold myself in a place between prejudice and naivete, where I listen without past judgment, but also without blind hope. Is there such a place? Who will I be when I find it? Another worry: how can I avoid becoming the kind of academic who pats himself on the back for being an antiracist, yet still treats the decolonizing project as its own empty land, waiting for his stamp? How can I, in short, reach beyond myself?

Constant re-engagement also means gifting the right to refuse to re-enter or to choose when or how to re-enter. Refusal should always exist alongside “Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, Responsibility, Relationship, and Representation” (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; McGregor, 2018). Without refusal, there can be no safety in an ethical space and no political project.

Decolonizing can be profoundly painful, evoking strong emotions of anger, shame, and injustice – particularly for the colonized. Decolonization requires us to see that there is an Other before us who has been deeply harmed both by past injustices and the ongoing effects of colonization. Although Indigenous partners do not (necessarily) hold us responsible for past harm, we bear responsibility for our present choices. Decolonizing is not an abstract, academic possibility but a deliberate practice in the continuum of space and time that begins on the land, enrolls our bodies, and (re)opens safe ethical spaces where political processes can begin again.

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