

The role of ethnography and hip-hop in community-based research: toward a decolonial pedagogy

Alysa María Handelsman

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Wofford College,
Spartanburg, South Carolina, USA

The SoJo Journal:
Educational
Foundations and
Social Justice
Education

97

Received 11 September 2025
Revised 25 September 2025
Accepted 25 September 2025

Abstract

Purpose – What is the role and when and where is the power of ethnography in projects that strive toward decoloniality? By tracing my trajectory as an ethnographer-educator, the purpose of this article is to critically examine the role of ethnography in community-based initiatives, particularly its potential to foster community partnerships, cultivate new pedagogies and work toward community-identified change.

Design/methodology/approach – Grounded in decolonial thinking and action, examples from ethnographic research projects in Ecuador and South Carolina illustrate efforts toward doing research (and teaching) otherwise. Through a discussion of mixed-methods research projects, faculty–student research collaboratives and ethnography as decolonial pedagogy, this article grapples with ethnographic missteps and decolonial (mis) understandings that line the processes of relationship-building.

Findings – Reflecting on ethnographic research projects on hip-hop, condemned and abandoned properties, youth perspectives on neighborhoods and employment barriers experienced by residents of public housing, this article demonstrates the shifting role of ethnography across research contexts. Sometimes serving as a tool to build trust, other times serving as a collaborative teaching tool and other times useful in participatory action efforts, the diverse roles of ethnography in the community-centered projects described in this article demonstrate the work-in-progress of decoloniality.

Originality/value – Decoloniality cannot happen in silos, and this article draws upon Maldonado-Torres to underscore the barriers that separate Academia and communities as well as the opportunity and challenge to disrupt hierarchies and commit to an ongoing collective praxis that brings together our teaching, research and engagement.

Keywords Participatory action research, Social justice education, Qualitative methods, Critical pedagogy, Transformative learning, Educational anthropology

Paper type Research article

What is the role and *when* and *where* is the power of ethnography in projects that strive toward decoloniality? In this article, I discuss segments from my trajectory as an ethnographer-educator, from Guayaquil, Ecuador, to Spartanburg, South Carolina, and how my experiences “in the field” have led me through my own (mis)understandings of decoloniality and the role of ethnography in community change, especially its potential. Across these experiences, Nelson Maldonado-Torres’s conceptualizations of decoloniality have influenced my practice as an anthropologist. Decolonial thought, as he notes, must find its roots and routes with people – “cuerpo a cuerpo y respiro a respiro” – especially with those outside of academia, to resist systemic racism and academic elitism (2020, p. 192). Walsh (2023) emphasizes that this kind of resistance is reflected through decolonial “cracks,” which are essential for challenging dominant systems of knowledge and power. According to Walsh, “[. . .] the fissures and cracks evidence actionality, agency, resistance, resurgence, and insurgent forms of subjectivity and struggle [. . .]” (Walsh, 2023, p. 7). My own efforts of doing ethnography with its missteps and “cracks” have taught me that, in effect, these practices are not “solutions,” but rather ongoing processes toward decolonizing the ways we do community-based research (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018; Walsh, 2023). This article is a personal testimony of that *ongoingness*.

Fieldwork and the coloniality of power: ethnographic lessons in learning to unlearn

My first fieldwork experience in Ecuador took place when I was an undergraduate. I’d spent a semester abroad in Mérida, Mexico and was feeling confident and inspired to be a researcher of



The SoJo Journal: Educational
Foundations and Social Justice Education
Vol. 12 No. 1, 2026
pp. 97-109
© Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 2381-5213
p-ISSN: 2381-5183
DOI 10.1108/SOJO-09-2025-0026

Latin America. I applied for a research grant the summer before my senior year, and I flew to Guayaquil to conduct an ethnographic project on an underground movement of hip-hop as art and social protest. I'd read a fascinating article by a performance studies scholar who had recently conducted a related study – that study formed the basis of my own project.

Guayaquil was not new to me, as my family is from there, and I had traveled there most summers my entire life. But doing research there was new. Nevertheless, I felt confident – I was a native Spanish-speaker, I knew Guayaquil, and I'd read a relevant article. I was ready. . . or so I thought.

When I got there, a professor recommended that I connect with a local non-profit dedicated to creating peace among gangs; he believed they could help connect me with the hip-hop scene. When I arrived at the non-profit, however, they told me they had no idea about a hip-hop movement in Guayaquil. Discouraged, I nevertheless continued working with this organization, and after a few weeks, one of the organization's leaders changed his tune and told me he had an interview scheduled for me with a rap artist, if I was still interested. The leader of a local gang was my guide, and he took me to the South Side, beyond where I'd always thought the city ended. We went to an area called "las 4 manzanas." There were endless rows of side-by-side garages that housed businesses – there were people selling clothes, shoes, televisions and toys. We walked into a barbershop.

I could tell my guide knew most of the people there, and he introduced me to the barber who was finishing up a haircut. The barber gave me a blank stare, which didn't match my eager smile. He was the one I was going to interview. My confidence began to waver. More customers came in, and we continued waiting. My attempts at small talk with those in the shop were met with confusion and caution. So, I sat there and listened to my guide and his conversations.

I kept my journal in my bag, and I felt a bit silly about my excitement earlier that day that I would finally get to take some real fieldnotes. An hour or so later, the barber – who was the leader of a local hip-hop group – called out to my guide. It was time to start.

I stood up, thinking we'd go to a separate room, but I realized this interview was going to involve everyone – or, at least, take place in front of everyone. I pulled out my notebook and tape recorder, and with my pen in hand, I thanked him for agreeing to talk with me about hip-hop in Guayaquil. Before I could go on, he stopped me and asked: "What do you know about hip-hop?" He and his entourage seemed unphased when I talked about the article I'd read. They told me they had no idea who wrote it. They'd never heard of her. I kept talking to try to prove why I was the right person to have this conversation with them. I talked about my love of folk music and how folk music was also part of a social movement, and I mentioned Joni Mitchell and James Taylor and Joan Baez. Nothing. I mentioned that I sang and played guitar. "Ok, so sing. . ." he instructed me. I was startled and responded by saying that I rarely sang without a guitar. "We'll get you a guitar," he said. With a head nod, someone from the group took off. Apparently, there were guitars in *las 4 Manzanas*, too. Any confidence I'd arrived with was gone by this point, and as the minutes passed, I became more and more anxious. All eyes on me. The guitar arrived. It was in tune. This wasn't at all how I'd pictured my first interview.

My voice was less shaky as I finished the first verse of *House of the Rising Sun*. I was proud of my performance by the end and looked up, expecting applause and congratulations. Instead, everyone looked at Omar. He looked at me. And he told me I could ask him my first question.

Through that first fieldwork experience, anthropology came to life for me. Critiques of the discipline that I'd learned about through books and class discussion made sense now in a new way. The colonialism inherent in research was more than just a concept – my own approach to research made me complicit in an extractive research practice in which I felt entitled to others' knowledges and lived experiences because I had read an article and received funding. Just because I had family in Guayaquil, I was not an "insider." I did not "know" Guayaquil. I did not have the right to conduct my own research project there just because it seemed interesting.

There were a lot of layers to that first interaction, and I didn't grasp them all right away. But it's an experience I have often come back to in conceptualizing the hierarchies embedded in research relationships. I got to know Omar and his friends during that summer, and they were very welcoming to me after that initial experience. Our interview lasted two hours, after that first question I got to ask. I later learned that they resisted even agreeing to do that interview – they owed my guide a favor (I'm not sure for what!). They didn't like feeling studied. They didn't like talking to people whom they didn't know and who weren't from their community.

This first fieldwork opportunity was my introduction into what research looks like for “the researched” and how we can re-think research – un-learn our methods – so that we design projects that work against the power and verticality inherent in research relationships. I have devoted my career as an ethnographer to engage in decolonial research endeavors, and because decoloniality is an aspiration, my own processes are modest works-in-progress.

The following year, I continued this research under the auspices of a Fulbright grant, and my research evolved into a community organizing project, which served as a crucial step in my (un)learning process. I began to understand that the research I was involved in needed to be relevant to the communities I was working with. As I met with rappers, break dancers and graffiti artists in performance settings and interview settings, I learned of their interest in increased visibility. At that time, Red Bull was sponsoring freestyle battles as part of their marketing campaign, and artists became inspired to have more of these public performance spaces in Guayaquil for others to better understand their art and their messages. I soon became part of organizational meetings to create a non-profit group: M.A.S. Hip-Hop (*Movimiento de Acción Social por el Hip-Hop*). Planning sessions and informational sessions about M.A.S. Hip-Hop became my “research.” I was part of brainstorming, note-taking and helping establish contacts. Our first major event featured artists from across Ecuador who engaged in freestyle, break dance, graffiti and DJ battles. It was held in a local theater. When we think of making research mutually beneficial, my own networks through my family and through the Fulbright provided contacts and opportunities – like renting this theater – that the community I was working with did not have access to in the same ways. Throughout my research both in Ecuador and in the United States, my positioning as a grant-funded ethnographer and as a university professor has highlighted different points of access and privilege as compared to the communities I've worked with; I've found that “in return,” using my own connections to support community efforts has become part of our process.

My research with the hip-hop community in Guayaquil taught me how research can be a vehicle toward community organizing initiatives and how the work researchers do needs to be of interest to the communities they are working with. Anthropologist [Scheper-Hughes \(1992\)](#) discusses a moment in her own fieldwork in Brazil in which the women ask her: “What's anthropology to us, anyway?” (p. 7). This is a line I continually reference to my students to critically examine the value of research and ways in which we can ensure it is of value to the people involved in the project and not just to the researchers advancing their own careers. [Maldonado-Torres's \(2020\)](#) vision of the act of making community necessarily involves collaboration. Thinking through and working toward mutually beneficial relationships is a way of co-authoring goals and expectations – it's a way of building community.

Community-based research in Spartanburg

At Wofford, in addition to being an anthropology professor, I am also the college's Community Sustainability Specialist. My job has been to build reparative bridges between our campus and Spartanburg. I was met with skepticism and distrust when I entered this role and started connecting with local organizations and residents. In expanding its footprint, Wofford tore down and displaced an African American neighborhood of 250 families. Many African American residents have shared stories of trauma associated with our campus because of racist, exclusionary practices. Although I am not from here and joined the college 7 years ago, as a representative of Wofford – and its inherent colonial legacies – I initially represented these

histories to the people I met and with whom I sought to build relationships. Through an “open classroom” in which students and community residents engage in discussion of shared readings and films, through resident-led histories of Spartanburg, and through shared meals and retreats to grapple with Wofford-Spartanburg history while planning for a different future, we have created crack by crack. This decolonial process that worked “to build bridges between these different areas, between the different decolonial activities, and between the different subjects and communities involved in the process of decolonization” (Maldonado-Torres, 2021, p. 30) did “not isolate knowledge from action” (p. 7), but positioned us all as teachers, learners and organizers. These decolonial approaches to community-building have resulted in a collaboration through which Wofford students and community partners run over 20 community-based programs across the city and parts of the county, primarily in low-income and high-poverty communities. Through this community-based programming, my students and I have built relationships with residents and local leadership that have led to research partnerships.

Our community-based research in Spartanburg, SC, has taken on different forms, though all are grounded in Freirean pedagogies of praxis with collaborative reflection, theory and action. Some projects have been conceptualized by local grassroots initiatives; some projects have been recommended by municipal leaders; some projects have been designed with local organizations. In this section, I will discuss our research processes in two projects: (1) abandoned properties in county neighborhoods; (2) youth perspectives on their neighborhoods in the city. Additionally, I will touch upon our employment-centered research with public housing residents. Over the last three years of working in collaboration with neighborhood activists, municipal leaders and local organizations, research findings and decolonial research methods from these community-based projects have informed city and county planning measures.

Through our Ethnography course, my students learn qualitative research methods by actually working as researchers on community-based projects. I start off my course with Ruth Behar’s *The Vulnerable Observer*. We discuss the layers of vulnerability that make up the fieldwork process and how vulnerability is entangled with power and a subject-object dichotomy. In our discussion of those layers is the vulnerability we expect of research participants. I impart my own philosophies to my students based on my own lessons as an ethnographer. There must be a willingness on the part of the ethnographer to also be vulnerable – to hand over that tape recorder! – and to answer questions and prove themselves: *What do you know about hip-hop?*

Grant and fellowship applications want to know why we are the right researchers – *why am I the right person to take on a project about hip-hop in Guayaquil versus someone else?* That’s an important question, and it’s not one we should limit to the grant proposal. It’s one we must answer truthfully for ourselves and for the people we intend to work with. Ethnographers must be willing to walk away if they are not, in fact, the right ones to take on particular projects. As one of my community partners [1] told my students and me during a recent challenge in finding interview participants: “Our community is all surveyed out. . .take an L [a loss] sometimes so that they/we can grow from it.” When projects need to take “an L,” it’s a reminder of the missteps along the decolonial pathway; learning together from these missteps, however, still represents a *crack* in our own colonial biases, if we acknowledge and learn from our mistakes as researchers.

Too many academics get lost in hierarchical understandings of “theory.” But they often forget to apply theory not just to the analysis, but to the method: *how* are projects carried out and *what* are the implications of such frameworks? There is a critical difference between research methods and research methodologies, and they should not be used interchangeably. Our research methods are how we do our fieldwork – interviews, participant observation, surveys, fieldnotes and listening sessions. Our research methodology is the theory behind our methods – *why* we do our fieldwork and *why* we conduct our research the way we do. Our methodologies showcase our philosophies behind our project design. That is to say, we are not

just conducting a survey to conduct it because we need data, but we are conducting it to gain anonymous preliminary data that can serve as a starting point for community-led conversations on data. Our philosophy might be grounded in putting quantitative data in dialogue with communities they supposedly represent. My own philosophy, which I began developing through my very first interview in Guayaquil, is based on decolonizing the research process by trying to create horizontal versus vertical relationships. It's about making research *ours versus mine*.

In Guayaquil, I found ways to incorporate youth as protagonists in research design and execution, from drafting questions to determining next steps to leading interviews in their own neighborhoods to analyzing data collectively. I learned through that experience how ethnography could serve as a decolonial pedagogy (Handelsman, 2020) and have adopted it ever since. I design my anthropology courses at Wofford with as many experiential learning opportunities as possible, and while I primarily have anthropology and sociology majors in my Ethnography course, I also have majors in environmental studies, business, economics and government; I have many pre-med and pre-law students. I tell all of them that decolonial ethnographic practices are always applicable to their respective fields, especially since our work is based on what García Salazar and Walsh (2017) describe as *un-learning in order to re-learn (desaprender para volver a aprender)* [2]. Through ethnography, we develop a skill set in project design and storytelling; we (un)learn to think *otherwise* about the broader impacts of research, building relationships, the ethics of representation and positionality. We also begin to identify our own philosophies for (un) learning, building rapport and working collaboratively.

Interdisciplinary research: putting numbers and neighbors' narratives in dialogue

[. . .] decoloniality seeks to make visible, open up, and advance radically distinct perspectives and positionalities that displace Western rationality as the only framework and possibility of existence, analysis, and thought. Such perspectives and positionalities evoke and convoke what Maldonado-Torres refers to as a decolonial attitude. For Maldonado-Torres, this attitude [. . .] “demands responsibility and the willingness to take many perspectives, particularly the perspectives and points of view of those whose very existence is questioned and produced as indispensable and insignificant.” Walsh (2013, p. 17)

Three years ago, my Ethnography courses partnered with local activists in Spartanburg who sought to bring attention to the perceived growing number of abandoned and condemned properties in 3 neighborhoods of concentrated poverty: Una, Saxon and Arcadia (i.e., USA) [3]. Our research project was designed to answer the question our community partners wanted us to focus on: What are the impacts of condemned properties on neighborhood wellness in USA from the perspective of neighborhood residents?

As my students and our partners and I quickly learned, a conversation about 48 condemned properties on a 2-mile circle radius – 4 miles from 1 edge to the other – became a conversation about drugs and prostitution, about a lack of sidewalks and street lighting, about a lack of playgrounds, and about nostalgia and memories of what the neighborhoods used to be like. Conversations with residents focused on poverty, slumlords, access, and conflicting definitions and understandings related to property and neighborhood spaces. Through our research, residents discussed being under-counted in the census because of their citizenship status or their limited English proficiency. We learned about residents' fear of retaliation from neighbors and landlords. We saw the reality of not having options: what happens if you report the mobile home you rent to Code Enforcement, as it's uninhabitable? You're homeless. Neighbors expressed being exhausted at the run-around, with representatives of the county directing them to the city and the city directing them to the sheriff's office and then being re-directed to environmental enforcement and so on. Residents were exhausted.

Along with my team of students, we interviewed dozens of local officials and neighborhood leaders, and we knocked on over 500 doors to speak directly with residents. Additionally, we

hosted interactive mapping workshops, and we held listening sessions that consisted of presenting research findings to residents to gain their feedback on what and how we were learning and interpreting what we were (un)learning. By ensuring residents had access to the ways we were organizing and analyzing data, they partnered with us in identifying next steps or recommending adjustments.

This project was my first time engaging in a large-scale team research project where we designed together and conducted the project together; our capacity to reach hundreds of families was powerful and much more than I could have done as a lone anthropologist. While discussing our ethnographic research with my colleague, Jennifer Bradham, from environmental studies and data science, she explained how she and her students could support our work through GIS mapping. She and her students joined our team, and we began an innovative, interdisciplinary collaboration that opened new doors toward collective learning and policy change.

We created an informal learning community at Wofford with her quantitative students and my qualitative students. While my students led the way in conducting interviews and hosting listening sessions and mapping workshops, her students worked to quantify some of our data in addition to pulling related census-tract data. Through their methods, they were able to identify property owners – often referred to by residents as “slumlords” – and we learned that one family owned a majority of one of the neighborhoods.

One of the maps the quantitative team created showed the areas our team went to, and the x’s represented the number of “No Trespassing” signs. Through our interviews and participant observation, we learned about the differing motivations behind putting up these signs – some are linked to landlords who want to keep people from inspecting their properties (even though we have heard from those who inspect properties that those signs cannot keep them from going and inspecting!); some are linked to getting support from police if anything happens on their property; some believe the presence of the sign keeps the growing unhoused population away. This map and the explanations that accompanied it demonstrated the power of diverse forms of presentation: strictly telling people about the “No Trespassing” signs would not hold the same weight as the visual representation with all the x’s; similarly, just seeing the map without hearing motivations behind the signs would not prove useful or interesting. By putting these pieces together, we moved forward in trying to understand how residents build community and what barriers they face. While my own training as an ethnographer has always prioritized people’s stories, our collaboration taught me the power of presenting statistics and GIS maps in connecting with residents and in swaying local leaders’ decision-making.

At our workshops, my colleague and her data science students projected maps and data, such as the percentage of properties owned by one particular family. This approach formed part of our attempt to put quantitative data in dialogue with qualitative data. Working with a data scientist, we were able to take census data and other data points and share those at community meetings for people to be in dialogue with statistics. I saw how residents engaged with interest and enthusiasm when presented with visual images of color-coded maps demonstrating abandoned and condemned properties as well as the percentage of properties owned by families they had identified as “slumlords.” By categorizing residents’ “top 5” responses across certain interview questions, like their favorite parts of their neighborhood and their biggest recommendations for change, residents were vocal in their engagement with these presentations. In many ways, they were fired up, and they felt like the numerical components we shared were finally supporting what they had been saying for years. More and more people started coming to these town-hall-type meetings and asking us to show the pictures of the maps and charts. Statistics hold power – and in policy-making decisions, they hold a lot of power. But, it’s not common for folks whose communities and lives are defined “officially” by statistics to be in dialogue with those figures, nor to have the space and opportunity to react to those numbers and the stories statistics generate. That has been a major part of our investment in opening *cracks* in “official” systems that hinder meaningful community participation. In moving this project forward, we acknowledge that “fissures and cracks are not the solution but

the possibility of otherwise,” and by engaging with residents and statistics about them, we disrupt practice-as-usual (Walsh, 2023, p. 7).

In addition to hosting these neighborhood meetings, we pursued our community partners’ goal of presenting the research findings at a County Council meeting to raise awareness about the impacts of abandoned and condemned properties in these three neighborhoods. Many residents from the town halls attended our presentation to demonstrate their support and involvement in this research project. There were PowerPoint slides that showed the percentage of properties owned by slumlords, and they were eager for the council members to see those, in particular. I started off by presenting the research project to the Council, including our methods and the number of residents and leaders we connected with. I used our ethnographic research to build confidence in what we were going to share. I included a few quotes from residents, such as: “. . .there’s no place for kids to go here – kids are gonna turn to drugs and gangs. . . and that’s gonna keep being how life is in our neighborhood.” I focused heavily on youth perspectives and discussed funding we received to co-host a 3-week summer camp for youth (ages 5 to 14 years old) with pastors of a neighborhood church within our research zone. The camp focused on mapping and storytelling, and part of the camp involved creating maps of their neighborhoods as well as collectively creating their maps of their dream neighborhoods.

Council members listened as I shared details from children’s dream neighborhoods. One group of children designed a dream neighborhood with two grocery stores: one rich one and one poor one. The children explained that at the poor one, everything was free, “so people that’s poor can eat for free.” They explained that poor people should be able “to eat good food, too.” The dream neighborhoods had pools, skating rinks, party areas, green spaces and Apple stores. All of the neighborhoods had homeless shelters and jails that the children described as “better” than the ones that already existed. One group said it was a homeless shelter where people could pick anything they wanted to eat; another said it was a homeless shelter with a playground for kids. The groups described jails as places where you could improve your life. One group created a jail where you could study and get a Master’s degree and a PhD.

Although they appeared moved by this presentation of our research, the council members clung to my colleague’s presentation, as she showcased numbers and GIS maps. They were astonished to see a visual representation of how many properties were owned by particular families and better understood residents’ complaints about corruption and power. After the meeting, they talked with us and thanked us for shedding light on neighborhood challenges. Soon after, stories appeared in the local newspaper and on the nightly news – Wofford was highlighted as a true community partner.

Several weeks later, we hosted a more complete presentation with a turnout of over 100 people. Upon conducting this research, fire stations reported a change in practice – they started receiving monthly updates from code enforcement about condemned properties: new ones, ones taken off the list and ones that had received initial 20-day warnings. Two months later, the County decided to invest over \$3 million in American Relief funding to address the growing number of condemned and abandoned properties in all three neighborhoods, and the USA neighborhoods became the central part of the County’s 3-year infrastructure plan. The leaders we worked with were thrilled. Our college was thrilled. As the neighborhood association president told us from the beginning, her partnership with us was strategic: they needed support in conducting the research, and they needed the visibility that would be afforded to them through a partnership with Wofford College, which is a powerful Spartanburg institution. Another neighborhood leader thanked us at a neighborhood association meeting and reminded the group that he had conducted similar door-to-door interviews 10 years earlier; his work had been overlooked. He was grateful for our investment and that we were able to reach the County in ways he could not. Amidst all the applause, I could not avoid one lingering question: Were we creating *cracks* by using colonial policies and tactics, or were we using Wofford’s status to neutralize the ability of our community partners to represent themselves as subjects of their histories, current and past? This question harkens back to [Maldonado-Torres’s \(2008, 2016\)](#)

notion of metaphysical catastrophe and the systematic negation of the full humanity of traditionally marginalized communities.

Framed by a Participatory Action Research methodology (Fals-Borda, 2001) in which we worked with community leaders to take on research that was relevant and useful for their community agenda, we saw how research can amplify the voices of experience and knowledge of USA residents. Our “products” were community presentations; in fact, when I went to an anthropology conference and shared this work, it felt strange to talk about it without the people impacted by the work. I had become accustomed to being in dialogue with people represented by the research findings, not with academics concerned with theoretical connections versus practical ones.

Through this research project, I thought a lot about the dissemination of what we learn and what ethnography represents across contexts. While ethnographic vignettes of resident narratives move and excite audiences at academic conferences, they do not always fit a community workshop. Sometimes, residents appeared to feel validated upon hearing their words re-stated and highlighted; but other times, I felt like residents were uninterested in hearing their words repeated back to them. We were telling them things they already knew. Instead, residents were interested in graphs and numbers and seeing their stories portrayed in new ways. I began to question who ethnography was for in community-driven work. I concluded that ethnography as decolonial pedagogy was a key method in collecting, organizing and analyzing information; it was central in making a case for the validity of the research, and it played a supporting role by accompanying maps and charts. In community-based work, ethnography appeared to be an important behind-the-scenes vehicle for un-learning and potentially, at least, moving all of us toward decolonial change. Again, notwithstanding ethnography’s inherent colonial logic which continues to privilege “science” over grassroots forms of un-learning and un-knowing, our ethnographic practice was central in capturing stories and themes to guide our un-learning, and the community was central in determining their interests in the project and the ways in which stories were shared; they were eager to engage with numbers and visual representations and saw more potential for these to capture the attention of local officials.

In assessing the impact of our collective work, we discussed the hierarchies embedded in the final presentation at the fire station. While the response was positive and the results were the ones the community sought out, the presentation felt like Wofford’s show, overlooking the collective action that marked our research. We decided that in future projects, we needed to find ways so that we – Wofford – were not the ones leading final presentations. The following year, we engaged in a similar project with a different neighborhood and also hosted a final presentation in their community fire station. There, residents welcomed everyone in attendance and started the presentation by discussing our methods of learning together. My students then shared the findings. These changes are part of our process of decolonizing ethnographic research and are reminders that we must always evaluate and adjust our processes. As we move forward with our collaborative research in Spartanburg, we continue to evaluate public presentations and how those can showcase everyone involved as subjects and not objects of study, particularly with regard to the communities featured in the work.

Clearly, I continue to question the extent to which our collaborations are in fact enabling the communities we’re working with to assume their own subjectivity. Considering our deeply embedded coloniality, affirming one’s subjectivity requires a continuous struggle to create and implement decolonial pedagogies. In that regard, perhaps our opportunities to reflect and recognize the colonial traps and our unwitting complicity are one of our major ethnographic accomplishments to date.

Imagining Spartanburg: youth perspectives at middle schools and an elementary school

After news coverage of our research in the USA neighborhoods, a middle school Geography teacher connected with us to ask if we could teach her students GIS mapping with connections to Spartanburg. Her students were disengaged with Geography, because they didn’t see how it

was applicable; she thought that by engaging with spaces they were familiar with, they would become more interested in learning course content. We built a connection between this request and the City's 20-year strategic plan, talking with city planners about our research and how it could hopefully be applied to their plan – the City's plan incorporated youth perspectives by asking adults for their opinions; we thought this research could support them by including youth vision from youth. Accordingly, we began a multi-year, interdisciplinary research project with children from all District 7 public schools in the City of Spartanburg. We have worked with both middle schools and one elementary school so far.

Our project with the middle schoolers resulted in a data walk housed in one of the city's community centers with nearly 400 community members in attendance to hear 7th graders and Wofford student collaborators talk through the joint research endeavor about their actual and their dream neighborhoods; again, qualitative and quantitative data stood together in visual, written and oral forms, making youth perspectives accessible to multiple audiences.

Our Youth Perspectives research is a model for designing projects collaboratively and creating spaces for collective storytelling and brainstorming. Over 100 7th graders participated in this project, and we were able to collaborate across schools; a small group from each school came together for a joint research analysis workshop. In one of our workshops, students studied drawings of actual and dream neighborhoods from peers from both schools. One group of partners raised their hands and said they found a trend: students whose actual homes had limited green spaces or outdoor recreational spaces were more likely to have dream neighborhoods focused on indoor spaces; however, students whose houses are surrounded by trees and water were more likely to draw dream neighborhoods with those same features. They concluded that youth build their dreams based on what they're used to. We were inspired by their insight and their sincere engagement in learning together.

While this project aspires to emerge as decolonial practice, [Maldonado-Torres \(2021\)](#) reminds us that “decoloniality is rather an attitude that keeps subjects and collectives open to growth and corrections as well as an unfinished project” (p. 31). Our decolonial missteps in this project have been important (un)learning moments and reminders that our strides toward decoloniality are always unfinished, always in-process.

One of the pieces I emphasize to my students is the importance of notetaking; all students – college and middle school – have field notebooks, and they are expected to write. During our initial interviews, it was interesting to see the middle schoolers assume their role as researchers just as my students assumed theirs. My students would ask questions, and some of the middle schoolers would shoot back with questions of their own. During one of our early research meetings in which 7th graders drew their actual neighborhoods and then their dream neighborhoods, my students were expected to ask them questions about their drawings. I walked around the room to observe the process and to see if anyone needed additional support. As I was walking by one set of partners, I saw that a boy had drawn and labeled “the gates of Heaven” as part of his dream neighborhood. I heard him tell my student, “This is a place where you don't have to know where the bad things are.” I walked around with my field notebook, too, taking notes along with all the students. I wrote down what he said and gave a disappointed look to my student, who did not record anything in her notes.

In class the following day, I asked her why she wasn't taking notes and how she could overlook such a profound statement, which he followed by explaining how, in his actual neighborhood, he knows all the spots where he is not supposed to go and where bad things happen. She explained that earlier in the interview, he had complained about his white neighbors, who he felt were always spying on him and judging him. At that point, she felt like she would become one of those white neighbors, too, if she did her “job” as an ethnographer.

My frustration with her ethnographic research skills was eclipsed by a reminder that my micro-managing needed to be replaced by trust in students' decision-making. As I tell my students during our one month of training, notetaking can be a sign of respect, but it can also be out of place. Ethnographers need to know how to read a room and often make in-the-moment decisions. One of the challenges of an experiential (un)learning classroom in which students

learn about research by doing research is working to ensure that students in their learning do not cause (unintentional) harm to those with whom they are working. My students' training consists of reading and critiquing ethnographic texts of youth-based research, learning how to take fieldnotes, learning how to conduct interviews and listening sessions, and (un)learning the colonial histories of anthropology and how we can work to decolonize ethnographic research. While teaching these methods to my students, I also worked with the 7th graders to teach them research methods and to teach them about different approaches to research; they supported my students in the process, and we all learned together. Highlighting that we were all new to this large-scale research process emphasized our collective effort to navigate our shared work with respect and patience.

A few months later, we began planning with our new partners at an elementary school. While working with the school's leadership to design the research project we were going to start alongside their 3rd graders, we discussed what their students would gain from the project. We decided that the 3rd graders would also participate in neighborhood history panels led by long-term residents and leaders of the neighborhoods where a majority of the 3rd graders lived. When we held the first panel, we had already been engaged in the research project for a month. We had explained the project to the 3rd graders, and we had hosted a series of interviews and small group exercises. We organized the children's responses to a series of questions into charts and graphs – mirroring our presentations to USA residents; we created a list of major quotes based on major themes we had identified from our “data.” Because I was teaching my students the importance of transparency and because we sought to create a project in which my students and the 3rd grade students were all researchers, we wanted to share the “preliminary findings” with the students. In our Q&A for our panelists, we pulled some information from the research to frame questions. One of the questions was about neighborhood safety, and we shared quotes from the 3rd graders about bullet holes in windows and gunshots that would not let them fall asleep. By taking what we were learning from them and putting it into a conversation that they were a part of, we felt like we were decolonizing the research process. But one of the panelists made us re-think our approach. What tone were we creating by focusing on the negative? How did the 3rd graders feel about having hard parts of their stories presented as data points for people to talk about in front of them? This no longer felt like decolonizing the research process; instead, it felt performative, and it felt like we were putting the young students and their stories on display to the extent that they remained objects of study and not subjects of their own stories.

Decolonial missteps cannot always be repaired. We are still working to gain back the trust of the community leader who participated that day. After our end-of-year data walk with the 3rd graders, she appeared re-invested in the project and our collaborative approach. As community partners often tell my students, trust is hard to gain but easy to lose. Certainly, trust is central to the partnerships needed to decolonize research.

Discussion: the role of ethnography as decolonial pedagogy in community-based research

My previous experiences with ethnography and hip-hop sensitized me to the colonial nature of my own thinking and behavior. This work has served as my road map in structuring decolonial ethnographic opportunities, which “do not isolate knowledge from action” (Maldonado-Torres, 2016, p. 7). The pedagogy embedded in this work is one in which we all learn and act collectively. The structure of our classes and our large-scale community-based research projects is grounded in a decolonial pedagogy that aspires to be transformative as opposed to a pedagogy that institutionalizes knowledge and behavior; it is a pedagogy of un-learning in order to re-learn.

Across the community-based research projects with which we have engaged, a goal is to create spaces for quantitative and qualitative data to be in dialogue and to teach students and discuss with community residents the power and hierarchies embedded in research and the

weight different forms of presentations hold across audiences. As we learned with residents in the USA neighborhoods, they found strength in PowerPoint slides of maps, particularly maps that showcased statistical data that mirrored the complaints they had been voicing for years. Our Data Walk with 7th and then 3rd graders was an interactive, multi-modal way of relating findings. Researchers and research participants were partners in determining questions, next steps, analyzing data and determining the best ways to display lived experiences and future visions.

Our research teams have worked primarily with communities of color in Spartanburg, whose stories and experiences of exclusion and inequity are frequently represented by statistics. Communities that are defined by statistics often do not have the opportunity to be in dialogue with the numbers and percentages that try to capture their realities. Our mixed methods work strings together narratives and numbers and brings both to the communities for further conversation. In one of our more recent projects with public housing residents, it was interesting to see their reactions to income-based data; they said that people were dishonest in sharing their income – some believed they reported higher earnings, while others believed they under-reported their income. This indecision led to an interesting conversation about the Cliff Effect and residents' vulnerability in losing benefits upon getting a job or getting a raise; the benefits cliff is one of many counter-intuitive parts of the U.S. system in which those who receive public assistance lose those benefits upon gaining employment or receiving a raise at a job. Overall, residents across research projects were motivated to see diverse representations of our research. One-page summary handouts along with PowerPoint slides inspired participation to the point that hour-long sessions became three-hour long sessions with requests for follow-ups.

Across these spaces of conversation and joint data analysis, questions about the role and power of ethnography (sometimes versus quantitative data) emerged. I believe ethnography sets the foundation and builds the bridges with communities to initiate the (un)learning process through multiple methods. Ethnography is the central mode of building rapport and “collecting data” so that the quantitative team knows what to add, what to quantify, and how to visually display information. In my experience doing community-based research, ethnography is the behind-the-scenes leader in learning, organizing and analyzing, but the quantitative components are the forward-facing segments that reach residents and convince legislators. The complementary roles our fields play in interdisciplinary research are a reminder to me that decolonial endeavors in these contexts must be partnerships across and between academic fields and, most importantly, from and with community members.

At times, I have questioned the possibility of decolonial work with quantitative language; that is, referring to stories as “data,” pulling “numbers,” creating “standard protocols” for asking questions that often go against the shared vulnerability and flexibility I attempt to infuse in my practice and teaching of ethnography. The extent to which this cross-disciplinary work has the potential to open *cracks* is evident in one of the reflections of a former student who led the quantitative part of our team. After he started a graduate program in data science, he left a research position, because it was not “human enough.” He explained that after accompanying ethnographers doing door-to-door interviews and engaging in listening sessions with neighborhood residents, he no longer thought of “data” as isolated numbers, but rather as people and their lived experiences. In effect, he learned to see “data” as storytelling and understood the responsibility embedded in that.

While I continue to grapple with the use of “data”-oriented language as well as working within Academia's colonial structures and disciplines, I cannot dismiss the potential for interdisciplinary, community-based collaborations as a pathway toward decolonial practice. Certainly, this is only possible when we leave our academic settings and work directly in partnership with community members. Maldonado-Torres emphasizes the importance of thinking and working critically in non-academic contexts and, in that process, in partnering with collective, community-driven efforts. My own trajectory as a researcher with its missteps and fumbles has clung to an action anthropology in which the research I'm involved in is

relevant to the communities I work with. And to make it relevant, I seek to co-design and co-imagine projects and products. There are instances in which projects have to “take an L” as disconnects arise, a reminder that decolonization is not “a linear process or point of arrival [...]” (Walsh, 2023, p. 7). Because of my work organizing after-school programs in public housing communities, the housing authority approached me and asked if I could put together a Wofford research team to better understand how to support residents in getting and keeping jobs. My team – made up of students who worked with public housing residents through after-school programs – was eager to take on a project to bring about resident-identified resources and priorities. We quickly learned we needed to re-imagine our approach, as residents doubted how serious the housing authority was if they were outsourcing this opportunity for dialogue to our team. Many of us, like the folks we worked with in public housing communities, are “thinking with and from the cracks;” in this case, against federal housing policies that foment systems of oppression (Walsh, 2023, p. 53). As we contemplated stepping away from this project, we were able to schedule with residents and the housing authority a joint session to directly discuss what we learned through our research, including resident-driven recommendations and action steps.

To be sure, decolonizing ethnography is an aspiration. Walsh (2013) emphasizes that coloniality is always present and that decolonial endeavors are works in progress. As an ethnographer and professor, I seek to disrupt hierarchies embedded in research projects in which the researcher solely determines the why and the how of the learning process. I have learned that decoloniality cannot happen in silos and, as Maldonado-Torres (2020) underscores, we cannot conform to keeping critical and creative work and thought strictly within universities (p. 190). Our college-community partnerships have involved hard conversations of histories of racial exclusion and feigned attempts at building connections; through these conversations, we have built reparative bridges that have allowed us together to forge a new pathway forward, even with missteps and losses along the way. Decolonial projects are collective, and when ethnographic research projects “end”, the relationships we have built do not; we must continue showing up for each other. University colleagues often tell me that I can’t be everywhere or that projects are finished, and I should take a break. Decolonial efforts, however, are ongoing as are the relationships we build along the way; there are no expiration dates. The power of decolonial ethnography is an ongoing commitment to the communities you work and (un)learn with.

Notes

1. Wanda Cheeks has served as a partner-mentor for my students and me since 2019. She is the City’s Community Engagement Coordinator; she has served as director at local community centers and serves on numerous non-profit boards. She is a Northside Voyager, which is a group of residents from the Northside neighborhood who direct change and development in their community to resist gentrification and honor the histories, experiences and visions of Northside residents. Her passion lies with youth and safe spaces for play and recreation.
2. Although this concept of un-learning to re-learn is a foundational principle in what García Salazar and Walsh (2017) call ethnoeducation, it is a clear example of *cracking* coloniality, *writ* large.
3. Note: All community-based research projects discussed in this text were reviewed and approved by the Wofford College Institutional Review Board between 2022 and 2024.

References

- Fals-Borda, O. (2001). Participatory action research in social theory: A critical and historical overview. In P. Reason, & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice* (pp. 27–37). SAGE Publications.
- García Salazar, J., & Walsh, C. (2017). *Pensar sembrando/sembrar pensando*. Quito: Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar y Ediciones Abya-Yala.

-
- Handelsman, A. (2020). Ethnography as decolonial pedagogy in Ecuador: Youth-led research and learning. In K. Caldwell, & E. Chávez (Eds.), *Engaging the African Diaspora in K-12 Education* (pp. 178-190). Peter Lang.
- Maldonado-Torres, N. (2008). *Against war: Views from the underside of modernity*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Maldonado-Torres, N. (2016). *Outline of ten theses on coloniality and decoloniality*. Paris: Frantz Fanon Foundation.
- Maldonado-Torres, N. (2020). En la búsqueda de la madurez decolonial: Una carta a Catherine Walsh. In A. Ortega-Caicedo, & M. Lang (Eds.), *Gritos, Grietas y Siembras de Nuestros Territorios del Sur* (pp. 189–208). Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, Ecuador y Abya-Yala.
- Maldonado-Torres, N. (2021). Outline of ten theses on coloniality and decoloniality. In M. C. Fernández, & R. Martínez (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Decolonialism* (pp. 67–80). Routledge.
- Mignolo, W. D., & Walsh, C. E. (2018). *On decoloniality: Concepts, analytics, praxis*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Scheper-Hughes, N. (1992). *Death without weeping: The violence of everyday life in Brazil*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Walsh, C. E. (2013). Interculturalidad y decolonialidad: El pensamiento decolonial como aspiración. *Revista de Ciencias Sociales*, 15(2), 127–148.
- Walsh, C. E. (2023). *Rising up, living on: Re-existences, sowings, and decolonial cracks*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Further reading

- Behar, R. (1996). *The vulnerable observer: Anthropology that breaks your heart*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Maldonado-Torres, N. (2007). On the coloniality of being: Contributions to the development of a concept. *Cultural Studies*, 21(2-3), 240-270. doi: [10.1080/09502380601162548](https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162548).
- Rojas, J. (2017). Place it: An ethnography of the political space of the Mapuche movement. *Cultural Dynamics*, 29(2), 153-174.

Corresponding author

Alysa María Handelsman can be contacted at: handelsmanam@wofford.edu