

Undoing Colonialism

Reflective Notes by Raphael Freston

“A good prognosis depends on a good diagnosis.” This was the opening statement of Dr. Catherine Hoppers for the International Panel on Decolonizing Community-Based Research hosted by CBRCanada this past May 2021. To understand what decolonization entails, she underscores, it is imperative that we should grapple with what colonialism really means. Taking a leaf from the six blind men and the elephant analogy, where the various parts of an elephant give only a limited experience rather than absolute, she contends that colonialism is meta-foundational, an overarching framework which subjugates cultural, scientific and economic life. It has fundamentally changed people’s ways of seeing and being, ways of negotiating life processes, and ways of adapting with survival techniques. “We must address the elephant in the room!” she exclaims. We must address the underlying values and beliefs which have belittled and dehumanized racially marked peoples. Undoubtedly, colonialism has been a process of violence, of elimination and integration, and of hierarchically organizing peoples, but can we put our finger on it?

Colonization, thus, is fundamentally dehumanizing. How so? This is what we grappled with in our on-line discussion groups facilitated one week after the webinar that included over twenty participants from a wide geographical field inside and outside of Canada. Many of us are steeped in academic and community engagement topics, making the discussions enriching and fertilizing the ground to sketch the contours of the colonial elephant. What follows is my subjective reflection of group discussions as informed by small-group discussion notes. As an important note, let me state that I am an intern at CBRCanada, currently completing a master's degree in Peace and Conflict Studies. Moreover, I was born and bred in Brazil, a country that carries deep racial and colonial marks, and I immigrated to Canada in 2016, where I became familiarized with decolonial projects and settler colonial legacies. I actively and enthusiastically participated in the first five webinars and live discussions in CBRCanada's series "decolonizing community-based research". The big ideas here unearthed and concocted are dressed and couched in my voice as I take the license to synthesize what was discussed in the session for the sake of initiating a conversation.

Narrative, discourse and language

As key to addressing the colonial process, many who partook in the discussion raised the nefarious forms of narratives, discourse and language which perpetuate the violent dehumanization of “the Other”. Recently, the disclosure of the ghastly and horrific atrocity of thousands of Indigenous children buried in unmarked graves in former residential schools has given some Canadians pause for thought. As a case in point, discussions around representation, language and narrative on its reporting was a central theme. A participant remarked how the children are often described in the media as having “died” or were “buried” or simply “found,” while avoiding a language that connects to the real act of being “killed.” It is important to bring forth, therefore, how language is often nested in and subservient to the colonial project. Another participant evoked a prosaic example of language bewilderment. The commonplace use of words like “society” - the possessive plural pronoun 'our' is implicit - in the singular, denies the possibility of imagining a plurality and embeds a colonial project of erasing the multiple forms of living. Better still, the word “solidarity” has a deep-rooted colonial, Catholic, and missionary connotation. It attained its currency in 19th century France at a time when understandings of individual autonomy were in flux. Solidarity set forth a way to denounce the escalating vanity-like individualism and to exalt, instead, social goods and cohesion. Yet, the word can signal an all-inclusive system which profoundly erases “the other”. How, then, can we decolonize ‘solidarity,’ ‘society’ and other critical words that form our knowledge and subjectivities?

Production of Knowledge

The live discussion also prodded colonial research methodologies. Colonial legacy has imposed and naturalized racial, political and social hierarchies. One key aspect of this "coloniality of power", a term popularized by Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano, is the imposition of a *superior, detached, and neutral* system of knowledge which centers Western subjectivity, culture, and knowledge production and denies, erases, and represses other modes of knowledge production. Colonized subjects and their mode of knowledge are inscribed as inferior to settler colonial science and knowledge. This is, in the words of Colombian philosopher Santiago Castro-Gomez, "the hubris of the zero point". Some participants called for a revisiting or re-evaluation of research to decolonize the power relations engraved in Western methodologies. This invokes re-imagining the "object" of research or of

collapsing the subject-object frame of colonial research. It no longer sees in the *knowing subject* or the researcher the ability to map the world, classify people, address their problem, and seek what is good for them, but posits that research must be framed from within the voice of the stakeholders. Indeed, the researcher and the researched – a problematic distinction in and of itself – should collaboratively work together and their findings be community owned. The challenge is to develop a reciprocal methodology whereby life is regenerated rather than subjugated to the power systems embedded in colonial legacy. To decenter colonial voices and center subaltern voices, some participants shared the importance to challenge current citational practices and politics. What forms of knowledge get silenced, erased, and misrecognized due to certain academic practices and standards? Citational practices, for instance, gives the written text primacy over oral tradition and other forms of knowledge recording. Decentering colonial knowledge means challenging the primacy of the written text as the only recognizable form of knowledge.

Colonialism as violence

There was also a discussion on the forms of violence enacted by colonialism. Three types of violence were distinguished by a participant: individual violence, structural violence and cultural violence. The latter is very deep and almost imperceptible, but it is one of the elements in which coloniality of power operates. Colonialism has created cultural systems that revolve around a Eurocentric hierarchy and imposed the production and reproduction of certain goods at the cost of regenerative life. As Frantz Fanon states, violence is the 'natural state' of colonialism. It is not always violent by dint of bayonets and cannons, but by the views which dehumanize the colonized. Violence is then brought into the home and into the mind of the colonized as their world is transgressed, violated, and subjugated. How should community-based research address this surreptitious, amorphous, and cunning form of violence?

"How to move the pieces of the puzzle?"

If you only experience the trunk, how can we fully understand and engage with the whole elephant? Catherine Hopper's use of the elephant analogy is fitting as it foregrounds the gordian knot when addressing decolonization. As experiences are limited and information is parsed, Western knowledge has failed to discern and

assess colonial legacies and its hold on people's subjectivities and cultures. How can we address this haunting colonial shadow? Some hints were thrown around. Participants addressed the importance of revisiting, changing and reimagining education. The dominant curriculum has silenced voices and empowered colonial narratives. There was recognition that introducing decolonial topics to younger age groups has been positive and, citing Mary Simon, that decolonization involves a subjective transformation, a personal engagement with stories, experiences, and relationships. In addition, efforts towards acknowledgement and recognition are paramount steps to address colonial distrust between communities, foster reciprocity and see decolonial forms of living. The most pressing and the most cherished skill has been to discover, hone and undertake the act of listening to silenced voices. If coloniality constantly ingests, as Boaventura de Sousa Santos names it, 'epistemicide' - the killing, silencing, annihilating, and devaluating other knowledge systems - it is foremost to grapple with the act of listening. Deep listening is a decolonial praxis which invokes disrupting dominant language forms, knowledge systems and dominant forms of subjectivity. It is an act of unlearning whereby decolonization goes beyond theorization. It also involves moving the pieces that produce and reproduce the coloniality of power. Changing school curriculum, introducing new educational forms, unlearning systemic models, and decolonizing academic spaces were some of the actions mentioned. In addition, reciprocal research methodologies and epistemic disobedience come to the fore as pieces for imagining new decolonial futures.

Perduring questions

Decoloniality hinges upon addressing the colonial elephant in the room. Catherine Hopper's provocation struck a deep note of reflection and action for decoloniality. Key questions stood out from the discussion notes: What needs to change for decolonization to happen? What do we mean by "our society"? How can we move beyond identity politics? How can we overcome colonial distrust? And how do we rehumanize the dehumanized? Perhaps these questions can be important departures for our actions going forward as we tussle with the elephant in the room. The discussions have invigorated, for me at least, a new sense of urgency in grappling with coloniality in our everyday life. Language, knowledge and violence are centerpieces that shape everyone's imagination. To shear off the colonial imagination starts by heeding the elephant in the room.