

Trusting and Discomfort: A Perspective on Collaborating in Decolonizing Participatory Research

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Abstract

This article presents my deliberations on the challenges of issues of trusting and discomfort in decolonizing research, and in particular where non-Indigenous researchers work in partnership with Indigenous scholars and/or Indigenous communities. It draws on the epistemological and methodological decolonizing process of The Tipuna Project as a significant and thoughtful means of conducting decolonizing research that has transformative, reparative intent and protective practice at its core. The piece speaks to debates about decolonizing research and Indigenous methodologies that have gained a foothold of attention in the academy.

Keywords

trust, discomfort, decolonizing, participatory research, Indigenous/non-Indigenous

Introduction

Decolonizing the academy—that is, universities mainly located in the Global North and in settler-colonial societies with an historical colonizing role—has been neatly characterized (and chastised) variously as “the new black” (Sisters of Resistance, 2018), and as “elite capture” (Krugman, 2023). Decolonizing has become depoliticized as a form of academic production, absorbed by existing structures of power and governing knowledge (Tuck & Yang, 2012). On an institutional and structural level, Vineeta Sinha (2025, p. 735) warns that “decolonising agendas can be appropriated for other ends, and fashionably rhetorically involved as a branding exercise or to serve intellectually vacuous ends,” while Sisters of Resistance (2018) point to the ways that, as individuals, scholars can use decolonizing frameworks to legitimize their work without making themselves vulnerable and interrogating their own positioning in those governing structures. In the colonizing national context in which I am located—U.K. higher education, a recent review of initiatives to decolonize sees them as passionate but uncoordinated and patchy attempts to challenge colonial legacies. The report concludes that universities “structurally are not built to deal with the idea of decolonisation” (Naseem, 2024, p. 21), noting dimensions such as strategy and policy-making including research agendas. Similar comments can be made in other national contexts, such as the settler society of Aotearoa New Zealand (Finley-Smiths et al., 2024).

Assertions of and attempts to “decolonise” the research agenda can get side-tracked into comfortable “wins,” where

non-Indigenous researchers take an approach that treats decolonizing as an achievement in specific research projects (decolonization) rather than an ongoing process (decolonizing), and where cultural practices for gathering knowledge become techniques that are appropriated toward this instrumental end. Grappling with the complexities of trusting in working in partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers and communities, and the discomfort of decolonizing the self, relationships and research as part of decolonizing knowledge for non-Indigenous scholars—which are the feature of this deliberation—are less discussed. But contend with them non-Indigenous academic researchers must if they/we are to be part of destabilizing and agitating canonic epistemic understandings, and transforming what counts as knowledge practice.

I aim here to draw on the epistemological and methodological decolonizing process of The Tipuna Project as a significant and thoughtful means of conducting decolonizing research that has transformative, reparative intent and protective practice at its core. Furthermore, I highlight neglected elements of trusting and discomfort in discussions of non-Indigenous researchers working with Indigenous communities and/or in partnership with Indigenous researchers. Both

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of these intents for this contribution speak to debates about decolonizing research and Indigenous methodologies that have gained a foothold of attention in the academy.

The Tipuna Project seeks to decolonize research processes and inform decolonizing initiatives in Aotearoa (New Zealand) and beyond, using participatory action research as both a methodology and a case study (see <https://www.thetipunaproject.co.nz/>). It is a multidisciplinary Indigenous and non-Indigenous collaboration aiming to innovate and evaluate research practices that include Indigenous and settler ancestors in order to counter (a) the denigration of Indigenous ways of knowing/being, (b) the historically traumatic nature of the research space for Indigenous peoples, and (c) low settler accountability, before translating these counter-practices into local and international decolonizing initiatives more broadly. The Project is a creative collaboration between Māori and Pākehā researchers, artists, and activists (the Indigenous people of Aotearoa, and settlers of European, mainly British origin in Aotearoa/New Zealand) that is experimenting with the decolonial possibilities of including ancestors as co-researchers. The Project thus poses a decolonizing challenge to the hierarchy of “knower, knowing and knowledge” that denigrates Indigenous ways of being in the world (Carlson et al., 2025; Liebert, 2021). It is a counter to mainstream Euro-Western academic production that treats researchers as producing knowledge from the extracted experiences of research subjects who lack expert knowledge about themselves, and who are supposed to be knowable removed from and separate to their environment, their past, and the cosmos. This forms a contrast to worldviews in which there is no separation between researcher and subject, person and cosmos, knowing and being.

The Tipuna Project draws on the expertise within te ao Māori, Gaelic cosmology (the ancestry of many settlers in Aotearoa/New Zealand), and embodied racial/healing justice movements. With awareness of the historically traumatic nature of the research space for Indigenous peoples and low accountability of those with White settler ancestors, the Project takes guidance from the vision of a national, Indigenous-led movement for constitutional transformation (Matike Mai Aotearoa 2016) to proceed through two fluid and overlapping participatory action research spheres: a Māori sphere for Māori participatory co-researchers and their Indigenous ancestors, and a Pākehā sphere for Pākehā participatory co-researchers that has evolved to orient toward settler, pagan, and non-human ancestors. There is also a relational sphere, where Māori and Pākehā participatory co-researchers can come together when ready. This tripartite spheres design provides a protective approach where potential harms and damage may arise from participatory co-researchers being invited to engage with ancestors, with the colonial violence done to or done by their ancestors, and from the denigration enacted historically by Euro-Western research.

The Tipuna Project is co-led by Rachel Jane Liebert (*Ngāti Pākehā—Aerana, Ingarangi, Kotirana, Hamene*) who is a sixth-generation Pākehā, based at the University of East London, mainly living in Aotearoa and attached to Whāriki—a kaupapa Māori research center at Massey University, and Teah Carlsson (*Te Whānau-ā-Apanui, Ngāti Porou, Waikato-Tainui*) who has ancestral connections to te ao Māori (the Māori world) and is a kaupapa Māori researcher at Whāriki. Rachel and Teah therefore are participatory co-researchers within the respective spheres as well as co-Project leaders. I am involved in the Project as a form of U.K.-based “backstop” protecting Project administration and helping to disseminate its research messages, working at the University of Southampton; a third/fourth or fifth/sixth generation (depending on which familial lineage is followed) British researcher with previous experience of collaborating in partnership with Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, including with Professor Helen Moewaka Barnes, the director of Whāriki. I am not, then, involved directly in The Tipuna Project as a co-researcher in any of its spheres, albeit I am privileged to discuss its processes with the co-leads, and to have conversations with them about what is considered knowledge, how to convey it and to whom. This article is written from that witness location.¹

The decolonizing commitment of The Tipuna Project has an edgy relationship with the academy. Located within the anglophone settler state of Aotearoa New Zealand, the Project, its Māori and Pākehā research team and co-researchers, sit within the settler academy and on its margins—a margin that may also be a site of possibility (Smith, 2012) or a space of hope (Sinha, 2025). In the looking glass world of Euro-Western knowledge, for the most part I sit comfortably in the academy and its methodological mainstream, and uneasily on the margins of The Tipuna Project and Indigenous worldviews—at a distance across the geographic globe and also ontologically.

We enter my deliberations on the challenges of issues of trusting and discomfort in decolonizing research, and in particular where non-Indigenous researchers such as me work in partnership with Indigenous scholars and/or Indigenous communities, through an initial consideration of the undertaking of decolonizing research.

Decolonizing Research

Decolonizing research involves disrupting the inherently exploitative system embodied in the conventional model of researchers transforming “raw” information from the researched into “finessed” knowledge. It turns established ideas about the superiority of Euro-Western ways of knowing and the subaltern status of other knowledges about the world on their head. Decolonized and Indigenous knowledges are holistic, emphasizing the interconnection and interdependency whereby people are part of the

environment of land, water, plants, and animals, and of historical roots, ancestors, rituals, and spiritual guidance, where the environment and ancestors are part of them, and where knowledge is communal (Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2008).

In contrast to knowledge in Euro-Western research, Indigenous knowing is not a package that can be owned by individuals, acquired from them by researchers, and then lifted from its context and taken away by said researchers. Rather, generating knowledge stems from the collective interests of Indigenous communities, cutting across relationships of power to decenter externally imposed agenda where the researcher is positioned as expert mediator and conveyor of knowledge. Control of the research agenda and ways of gathering knowledge are vested in Indigenous communities, and researchers are positioned as accountable to the collective (Moewaka Barnes et al., 2011; Smith, 2012). Decolonizing research centers the tribal nation or Indigenous community, to address social and political transformation and support self-determination (Smith, 2012). Indigenous voices, practices, perspectives, and knowledges are attended to through the theory of method adopted and rationale for research issues and knowledge production methods pursued—that is, the methodology and its relationship to power. Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues that decolonizing methodology locates responsibility to change society in both the non-Indigenous and Indigenous worlds, at the same time as promoting and supporting Indigenous communities (2012, p. xii). The Tipuna Project takes this stance as its heart, opening up research as spaces for intergenerational healing for Indigenous peoples and for building the accountability of settler peoples, and intending to interrupt the repetition of systematic inequities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous in collaborations.

The Tipuna Project is committed to kaupapa Māori guidance in decolonizing participatory action research, and upholding Indigenous sovereignty in its research processes, outcomes, and knowledge contributions, and is a co-led Māori and Pākehā endeavor. As such it works against the fate that often befalls research designs and interventions that Smith (2012) warns about: the appropriation of cultural concepts by non-Indigenous researchers paying lip service to decolonization and the erasure of their Indigenous origins and elements. This obliteration can involve Indigenous researchers too, where they may be trained in and undertaking research that is judged by canonic Euro-Western academic criteria for what constitutes “good” research. My intention here is not to single out particular studies and researchers for criticism, whatever their positioning—the issue is systemic rather than personal. Indigenous ways of understanding the world and Indigenous peer or academic researchers can be co-opted and appropriated for Euro-Western desires of finding out about the world.

Euro-Western epistemologies such as symbolic interactionism, critical race theory and intersectionality, and new materialism and agent ontologies are some of the approaches that are regarded as aligned or congruent with Indigenous knowledge systems, using metaphors such as braiding or weaving or herring bone stitch. Methods applications include individual or group interviews conducted in Indigenous communities and analysis of the resulting “data,” variously adopting the specific practices of the Indigenous groups concerned: yarning, beading, story work, talking circles, sharing circles, and so on, nested within a mainstream methodological framework. As First Nation Canadian scholar Margaret Kovach (2019) points out, however, it is not the method per se that is decolonizing, rather it is the worldview within which it is situated (albeit the method can have worth as an enactment of a worldview; Cribb et al., 2025). Conversational methods within an Indigenous approach, for example, are connected to a deep purpose of sharing stories as a means of transmitting knowledge between individuals and groups, and to assisting and being accountable to others. For Kovach (2018) there can be no practice of Indigenous strategies and methods without an understanding of the Indigenous knowledge system invoked. Yet, instrumental means are often advised and adopted in pursuit of such deep knowledge that seem out of sorts with a decolonizing approach, with recommendations that Indigenous community researchers or research assistants should be recruited into a study to bring an “insider” understanding of place and cultural setting to pre-formed research endeavors.

Others point to the tensions, contradictions and questions in bringing together Indigenous and Euro-Western knowledge systems, even where the latter intellectual approaches may be regarded as resistory forces for social justice. Claims for equal legitimacy still run the risk of obscuring the power and privilege invested in the Euro-Western theories and methodologies through the academy. At the very least there is the incongruity of bringing together an academic knowledge paradigm that poses as universal and generalizable, and diverse ways of knowing and being that are embedded in specific holistic and flexible time and space contexts. But further, as Māori colleague Helen Moewaka Barnes pointed out in our blogged conversation (Moewaka Barnes & Edwards, 2020), kaupapa Māori is a knowledge space where Māori researchers can defend their right to center their experiences and practice within their scholarly traditions and mātauranga (Māori knowledge). This is the standpoint from which she may form alliances with non-Indigenous researchers. There is the risk then, that in the relationship between Indigenous worldviews and Euro-Western ones, deep historically rooted and ongoing persistent colonial dynamics and knowledge hierarchy imperatives of the academy exert their insidious power.

Institutional academic epistemological paradigms steamroller over Indigenous process-knowledge, which become relegated to a handmaiden role, rather than questioning and unraveling its advantage (Biermann, 2011). As Zoe Todd (2016), a First Nation Canadian scholar, cautions, when:

social scientists sashay in and start cherry-picking parts of Indigenous thought that appeal to them *without engaging directly in (or unambiguously acknowledging) the political situation, agency, legal orders and relationality of both Indigenous people and scholars*, we immediately become complicit in colonial violence. (p. 4, original emphasis)

There are few accounts by non-Indigenous scholars who have researched Indigenous communities that reflect on their knowledge generation practices, speak to the processes of decolonizing, and address the issues that Todd calls for. Exceptions include Emma George's (2024) grappling with the uncomfortable insight that she could only respect and value the experiences of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in her research if she engaged with the injustice that Indigenous rights are neither fully recognized nor enacted, and Paul Woller's (2022) considerations of trust and respect in his research on the intergenerational education experiences of a Māori community, where he writes (in the third person) about a "profound" decolonizing realization of reorienting himself to the community's own priorities:

He discovered during his ongoing participation in community activities that he had acquired responsibilities and obligations to support positive community development and a relationship with the community that extends beyond any research undertakings or findings. (p. 362)

Conducting research on aspects of life in or with Indigenous communities has not been my route to considering issues of trusting and discomfort. Rather my experience has been one of collaborative projects involving both Māori and Pākehā researchers that focus on decolonizing research processes. If reflections on the personal and political implications of decolonizing research by non-Indigenous researchers are few and far between, those on non-Indigenous and Indigenous research colleagues working together seem even more uncommon. One of the few pieces attending to such collegial partnerships and its rough edges came from a zoom-based project on the topic involving Helen Moewaka Barnes (Te Kapotai, Ngapuhi-nui-tonu), Deborah McGregor (Anishinaabe, Tula Brannelly (Pākehā), and me (Edwards et al., 2020). Collectively we teased out the implications of Northern epistemological claims to agendas and universality as against Southern epistemologies acknowledging diversity and challenging oppressions. Honest and uncomfortable issues about research partnerships were raised in our discussion.² For example,

Deborah: . . . [Non-Indigenous researchers] don't think that it's part of their process to make themselves known the way that Indigenous peoples are having to make themselves known, including researchers in a research process . . . I remind them that Indigenous peoples were here for thousands of years and we had our own modes of inquiry and validating our own ways and if we had problems, our own ways of solving them, and that's the appropriate frame of reference, and the other stuff is the new stuff. You completely unsettle people when you do that . . . It doesn't take much for there to have been trust and then mistrust . . .

Helen: . . . Projects that I'm involved in where people with the best will in the world want to work with Indigenous communities and want their work to look at power and to make a difference, but they really don't know how to step out of their comfort zones. And so you spend all this time draining your energies and questioning, "What's the value of me being involved in this research? How much time am I spending talking to non-Indigenous people that I could be spending time on other things?"

We asked the question why would Indigenous researchers want to collaborate on research projects with non-Indigenous researchers? We concluded that research partnerships with trusted non-Indigenous researchers can provide supportive allies in addressing the knotty contemporary challenges that face Indigenous peoples. Collaborations can help toward gaining respect for Indigenous approaches and knowledges. And crucially, it is also that the systemic issues Indigenous researchers address are not just Indigenous "problems"; non-Indigenous researchers have accountabilities and an integral role to play in addressing inequities and challenging colonization. Toward this end, we produced online text-based and visual resources aimed at researchers embarking on Indigenous and non-Indigenous research partnerships, and in particular supporting non-Indigenous researchers to think about our/their methods, assumptions, and behavior.

My current experiences are in a subsequent research study, The Tipuna Project, also at a zoom-based time and space remove. I appreciate that my collegial partnership trajectory is not necessarily typical, where it is more often the case that non-Indigenous researchers are working directly with Indigenous communities. Moreover, now I have arrived at involvement in The Tipuna Project, my experiences are also likely divergent in that I am not only witness to a decolonizing effort being undertaken by collaborating Māori and Pākehā researchers—the latter of whom I am both like (in my European origins) and unlike (I have no Gaelic ancestors or settler ancestry in Aotearoa), but I am also at a remove from The Tipuna Project effort and the dedicated spheres in which it is experienced; in effect in my own not-quite-here-nor-there outlier sphere. Nonetheless, the issues of trusting and discomfort I explore here are

elements that I would argue deserve more consideration by non-Indigenous researchers in any discussions of conducting decolonizing research.

Trusting

Trust and its antonyms, mistrust and distrust, are at play in attempts to decolonize research and in the broad field of Indigenous research. In Smith's oft-quoted expression (2012, p. xi):

The word itself "research" is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary. When mentioned in many indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful.

As indicated above, some non-Indigenous researchers seem to imply that utilizing specific Indigenous methods counters distrust and engenders trust. In these accounts, researchers seem to be making contact with an Indigenous community to undertake research, and may attempt to establish trust through cultural sensitivity and the research protocols and methods adopted. For others, as featured in Woller's (2022) reflections, trust extends far beyond this into acknowledgment and practice of relational responsibilities across time.

First Nation Canadian researcher Shawn Wilson (2008) has referred to relational accountability as significant in and for Indigenous ways of being in the world, describing how people are positioned as always responsible to all their relations and relationships, whether these are to people and communities, lands, waters, animals, flora/fauna, or more-than-human entities such as ancestors:

The shared aspect of an Indigenous ontology and epistemology is relationality (relationships do not merely shape reality, they *are* reality). The shared aspect of an Indigenous axiology and methodology is accountability to relationships (p. 7) . . . It is important to recognise that [an Indigenous] epistemology includes entire systems of knowledge and relationships . . . Indigenous epistemology is our cultures, our worldviews, our times, our languages, our histories, our spiritualities and our places in the cosmos. (p. 74)

This is the knowing and being world into which research is enacted by researchers. Thus, a relationship is a process action that enables Indigenous methodologies, protocols, ethics, and methods to be part of trusting, as against assertions of protocols and methods being the basis of trust (Kovach, 2018).

Trusting as an Indigenous relational process then involves responsibilities and accountabilities to others as well as to self, where this is not separate from human and non-human others, whether as Indigenous or non-Indigenous. Furthermore, like decolonizing, trusting is not an abstract "something" that is achieved and established. Rather, it is a

situated relational process that needs ongoing thought, maintenance and effort. As in the quote from Deborah above: "it doesn't take much for there to have been trust and then mistrust." Trusting is a skillful practice over time, embedded in context, that is continuously made through a willingness to take a collaborative step in the face of uncertainty (Möllering, 2024).

On a basic level, Kovach (2018) remarks that "investing time in Indigenous communities to form relationship is always worth the effort" (p. 224). Sarah Panofsky and colleagues' (2024) account of approaching Indigenous research as settler scholars in Canada recounts a trajectory for their own respective histories of working in and with particular Indigenous communities over long periods. They did not take their pilot project into a familiar community, however. One of the authors remarks several times upon the contrast, where the absence of the trust that comes from building relationships over time put pressure on participants:

Little Pine reflected on her tenuous relationship with us as researcher-facilitators. She described the uncertainty she was taking at the outset as the community coordinator for the pilot study: "I started to question because there is a lot of pain going on right now . . ." (p. 11)

In equally honest reflection but in some contrast, Paul Woller (2022) provides an account of his duties as a non-Indigenous researcher who is linked into a Māori Indigenous community by marriage, extended family, and community associations over a 40-year period. He writes of how his research on the intergenerational education experiences of the community has been guided and mentored within these relationships of mutual trusting and respecting, proceeding over time—the issue of mutual trusting being one I return to further below. Vicki Chartrand (2025) describes many years of being drawn and drawing into relationships before embarking on collaborative research based on what she refers to as "a brokered trust" (p. 7).

Forms of time thus are invoked in the constant remaking of trusting, and these are beyond conceptions of linear time over which trust is an end point: achieved and established. Lisa Tilley (2017) provides a framework for researchers seeking to engage with Indigenous knowledges and to decolonize the extractive relations of the dominant political economy of knowledge, urging a shift from regarding time as linear to thinking about and understanding it as spiraling. The past and the future are in the present. In my own case reciprocal and trusting relationships were built over time before spiraling through into Indigenous/non-Indigenous research collaborations. The Indigenous and non-Indigenous research partnership project with Helen Moewaka Barnes, Deborah McGregor, and Tula Brannelly was formed from such pre-existing relations. Its continuously spiraling past, present, and future stem from relationships made when

I spent time Aotearoa seeking to learn about kaupapa Māori methodologies (a valuable disconcerting experience, e.g., Edwards, 2019), and then subsequently inviting Indigenous scholars to an international decolonizing methods workshop in the United Kingdom to remake and make further relationships. My invitation to become the U.K. backstop for The Tipuna Project, where the Project itself emerged from over 3 years of dialogue with Māori and Pākehā practitioners, involved another spiraling engagement in remaking and making of relationships. An understanding of time as spiral is also an underpinning for The Tipuna Project's approach of working with ancestors as co-researchers toward reparation, where past, present, and future are folded in together in the decolonizing undertaking.

Trusting in research collaborations, whether non-Indigenous researchers working with Indigenous communities or with Indigenous researchers, is located within the long-standing context of harms, equally spiraling from the past through the present and into the future. Colonization has meant dispossession, displacement, and assimilation in attempted eradication of connections to land, culture and community, and resistory struggles for self-determination, for Indigenous peoples. Colonialism reforms itself constantly, and still enacts damage and hurt. It includes the wounds inflicted by "research" in the Euro-Western mode for colonial purposes that has and continues to position Indigenous peoples as inferior and deficient. The quote from Panofsky's colleague's account of their research process and trusting cited above, nods to the harms that research can inflict in the reporting of Little Pine's uncertainty about the research and researcher, and concerns about pain.

Rather than sashay in (in Todd's words) and walk over the violent history of broken promises toward Indigenous peoples and the long-standing denigration of Indigenous ways of knowing and being in extractive Euro-Western research, decolonizing approaches need to acknowledge these intergenerational traumas and work to create a space in which reparative trusting may form. The Tipuna Project has protection from harm through separate Māori and Pākehā participatory action spheres, and an understanding of time spirals, as part of the decolonizing process. In engaging with ancestors and colonial violence to realize transformative strategies for reparation, the Project draws on wānanga (Māori knowledge) involving a kaupapa Māori methodology of kawa and tikanga (rules and protocols) for safe and trusting relational and collective encounters, and for the "wise transmission" of knowledge between humans and non-humans, including ancestors and the land. The participatory action spheres are stretched across a 2-year period, enabling the building of trusting relationships before moving into an overlapping relational sphere to reflexively discuss reparative learnings for settler societies more widely. The Project design involves the Māori process of whitwhiti kōrero, a "spiral dialogue" that enables

co-researchers to stay accountable to each other, local Māori and global decolonizing struggles.

Picking up on the mutuality element of trusting recognized by Woller, discussions of non-Indigenous researcher collaborations with Indigenous communities overwhelmingly focus on establishing and maintaining trust of the community in the researcher. The relational pathway in the alternative direction—the trusting of Indigenous peoples by non-Indigenous—is silent. In a rare consideration, in the Aotearoa context and in response to political calls for Māori to put aside past injustices and trust Pākehā, Ani Mikaere (2004) counters:

For Pākehā to gain legitimacy here, it is they who must place their trust in Māori, not the other way around. They must accept that it is for the tangata whenua [people of the land] to determine their status in this land, and to do so in accordance with tikanga Māori [customary Māori practices]. This will involve sorting out a process of negotiation which is driven by the principles underpinning tikanga, a process which Pākehā do not control. There is no doubt that many Pākehā will find this challenging: their obsession with control over the Māori-Pākehā relationship to date could almost be categorised as a form of compulsive disorder. Giving up such control requires a leap of faith on the part of Pākehā. (p. 18)

Time and trusting here are not in the service of overcoming the past, but in repairing its violent colonial damages. Given the reparative nature of The Tipuna Project, trusting of Māori by Pākehā is an element of decolonizing research practices that has bubbled to the surface as part of reflections in the Pākehā sphere of The Tipuna Project.

I am a (one) witness to The Tipuna Project decolonizing research practices, rather than a participant in them. Whether or not I have stepped up to the potential trusting offered to me through an invitation to collaborate in the Project as protection for its administration and support for disseminating its messages, and established and conveyed my trusting of my Project colleagues, is not for me to judge. Certainly from my perspective, trust was a foundation in conversations with my colleagues about the nature of this article as an output on and from the edge of The Tipuna Project, as well as some uncomfortable moments as we debated the doing of knowing, forms of making knowing known, and who to address in doing so. Trusting is an uncertain and perhaps unnerving process, along with other forms of discomfort involved in reorienting to decolonizing and Indigenous knowledges through my collaborative involvements.

Discomforting Reflexivity

Attempts to decolonize ourselves and our work are not comfortable processes. Leon Moosavi has called for a heightened 'decolonial reflexivity that "involves offering

an honest assessment of the complexities and limitations of efforts to decolonise . . . Decolonial reflexivity may also result in asking uncomfortable questions and reaching awkward conclusions” (Moosavi, 2025 p. 659). Moosavi (2023) enacts this by turning the decolonial gaze on himself and interrogating his own positionality, where he found himself reinscribing coloniality through his efforts at academic decolonization, stating: “As I can attest, decolonial reflexivity can be an uncomfortable exercise” (p. 139). The discomfort of the sort of decolonial reflexivity that Moosavi advocates is also nodded toward in the reflective accounts of conducting Indigenous research as settler scholars. Sarah Panofsky, for instance, writes that she experienced discomfort “with the academic framing in which the [participants’] stories rest and wonder about the authenticity of the work as a whole. This is something I am grappling with—how to ensure that the representation of the research is also aligned with Web’suwet’en ways. I see this grappling as part of my responsibility” (Panofsky et al., 2024, p. 7), and further writes that as a non-Indigenous settler she has only the barest of grasps of the lived experience of ancestral connection to place. As is evident from Moosavi’s call and Panofsky’s demonstration, discomfort is far from a reason to eschew decolonial reflexivity—quite the opposite.

Although not addressing decolonizing research specifically, Wanda Pillow’s (2003) call to embrace a reflexivity of discomfort offers perceptive insights into the important potential of uneasiness and uncertainty in decolonizing research and for non-Indigenous researcher collaborations with Indigenous colleagues and communities. Pillow critiques common use of self-reflexivity as a cathartic and transcendent solution to the problematic challenges of representing the Other and the researcher’s own privilege when studying marginalized communities:

[The reflexive trend] is marked by a desire to use reflexivity to write our research subjects, issues, or settings as familiar. I argue that using reflexivity to write towards the familiar works against the critical impetus of reflexivity and thus masks continued reliance upon traditional notions of validity, truth, and essence, in qualitative research (p.180) . . . Reflexivity then always occurs out of an unequal power relationship and, in fact, the act of reflexivity may perpetuate a colonial relationship while at the same time attempting to mask this power over the subject. (p. 185)

Such reflexive strategies center the researcher, prop up their claims to generating legitimate representations, and thus reinforce the colonialism of the tripartite “knowledge, knower, knowing” denigration of Indigenous epistemologies. Pillow refers to them as “strategies of comfortability” that reflex toward the familiar. They operate on the secure and accepted territory of a knowable and containable subject who through self-reflexivity may obtain better data and thus produce better knowledge. Comfortable reflexivity

offers the researcher an accustomed end-point and closes off discomfort. Rather, Pillow (2003) envisages the reflexivity of discomfort as a methodological tool for helping researchers to interrogate their research from the unsettled position of seeking to know while also recognizing that knowing is tenuous, as we grapple with the simultaneous limits and importance of possibility in knowledge production, “exposing the difficult and often uncomfortable task of leaving what is unfamiliar, unfamiliar” (p. 177).

The Tipuna Project collaboration has been a “something else” experience for me, where I am invited into another existence—a world where the past is alongside you; where bodies, land and water are listened to; where ancestors can be included as respected co-researchers in collective community participatory action research; and where methodology involves separate but fluid spheres that move with historical violence and intergenerational trauma to keep people safe. I keep a reflexive diary of my exchanges and involvement in The Tipuna Project and can see a recurrent uncertainty and discomfort in my entries: “. . . realised how little I really grasped of it” (14.12.22), “I hang on the edge, uncertain . . .” (14.4.23), “I am adrift . . .” (4.7.23), “I don’t really . . .” (4.3.24), interlocked with an eagerness to understand a worldview that I can reach out and touch but, like Panofsky, not fully grasp—a collective consciousness that is larger than and beyond my individual self. Accepting this discomfort as part of decolonizing how I think about knowing and the process of seeking knowledge, rather than treating it as a tension to overcome, is a continual and difficult work-in-progress.

There are echoes here with discussions of pedagogies of discomfort and decolonizing. Megan Boler (1999) coins the term pedagogies of discomfort to identify the way that the emotions engendered when people go beyond their comfort zone, notably discomfort, can be a point of departure that sparks critical reflection and transformative learning in antiracist teaching. Michaelinos Zembylas (2018) takes this further, bringing pedagogies of discomfort into engagement with decolonizing pedagogies. He argues a need to go beyond individual grappling with discomfort as an emotion to see it as an affect that is part of the colonial structures and practices that need to be replaced with socially just processes³:

A decolonial framework, then, is an appropriate conduit for enriching critical pedagogy’s framework of pedagogies of discomfort so that it confronts white discomfort on a renewed basis. A decolonial framework not only exposes the roots of white discomfort—that is, white colonial structures and practices—but also enables pedagogic agents to engage in theoretically inflected actions toward anti- and decolonial ends that offer alternative ways of being in the world.

Ditto for decolonizing work and the purpose of discomforting reflexivity within this.

Centering the concerns and frameworks of Indigenous scholars in collaborative work bears the uncomfortable risk of revealing the implication of non-Indigenous researchers and their institutions in colonial power relations. As Tilley (2017) asserts, “this is discomfiting for scholars who wish to deny the realities of the colonial episteme but productive for those who wish to dismantle it in part because it reveals the power relations that structure research encounters.” (p. 38). I reflect in my struggles to decolonize what I understand as knowing and being, and to respect and engage with Indigenous philosophies and the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples, that decolonizing also needs to involve recognizing and working toward dismantling the privileges of Euro-Western academia. There is—or should be—discomfort in how non-Indigenous researchers are positioned, position ourselves and are advantaged by, current academic structures and discourses. Non-Indigenous researchers like me cannot be oblivious to and disregard power, especially where it acts to legitimate and disseminate sanctioned knowledges. My own efforts over several collaborations with Indigenous researchers have been to attempt to intervene and disrupt the knowledge hierarchy, disseminating the worldviews, energies and approaches of my Indigenous colleagues so far as I am able, by reaching out to Euro-Western methodological audiences in publications and resources that prioritize and convey Indigenous perspectives. Such decolonizing work is not a neat linear progression with an endpoint, but an open ended, messy and unpredictable process (Biermann, 2011)—an ongoing practice that involves the critical and skeptical form of reflexivity described by Pillow (2003).

The Tipuna Project and its separate spheres takes kaupapa Maori and mātauranga—the Maori way and knowledge—seriously, working within it for decolonization and protection, and toward reconciliation. Decolonization is an unsettling perspective (Tuck & Yang, 2012), and indeed the process is one that “ought to unsettle” (Kovach, 2021, p. 266). In the same way that decolonizing is an ongoing process rather than an end to be achieved and then move on, the sort of discomfort that non-Indigenous researchers can experience—even for those who are involved at a time and distance remove such as me—is an ongoing process and not a problem to be overcome and “solved.” All of this is to say nothing of the discomfort that non-Indigenous collaborators may cause their Indigenous colleagues, as by turns we struggle with, are bewildered by, and misunderstand the spirals of another worldview, and demand their time and energies in patient explanation and accommodation. Colonialism is far from being finished business, and decolonizing methodology is neither a checklist nor a defined endpoint. It is a continual process that actively works to dismantle and recreate. Discomfiting reflexivity can be productive as we rethink, revise, reconsider, and rework in its wake.

Conclusion

In this deliberation I explored debates, complexities, and issues of trusting and discomfiting reflexivity drawing on my remote attachment to The Tipuna Project’s destabilization of epistemic understandings and knowledge practice through decolonizing participatory action research. The creative collaboration between Māori and Pākehā researchers, artists, activists, and ancestors challenges the hierarchy of knowers, knowing, and knowledge and provides ways forward to undertake transformative and reparative work in safe and protective ways through a foundational two spheres process of working.

For non-Indigenous researchers such as me, The Tipuna Project can act as inspiration and exemplar. While we are not ourselves able to draw on the deep well of a particular Indigenous worldview, context, and feeling, the Project encourages us to open up to another worldview and envisage entanglements of corporality, time, and space. Through accounts of the process and rationale of The Tipuna Project practice, we can understand the importance of working within spheres of existence for safety in participatory research involving partnerships with Indigenous researchers and communities, and for engaging in accountability. We are then facilitated to position ourselves as part of coalitions to disrupt hierarchies of knowing and being, and we can actively celebrate innovative decolonizing participatory action research practice within our mainstream methodological spheres of influence.

Decolonizing the academy and research has become a recognized part of academic institutional rhetoric at least. Beyond this, moving into methods practice, there is evidence of good intent, and going further into decolonizing methodology as a guiding philosophy for creating knowledge, there are excellent exemplars of ways forward such as The Tipuna Project that challenge narrow, reductive, and extractive ways of knowing about the world. To have the time and resources for pursuing decolonizing work acknowledged within higher education is a positive sign, and others have expressed optimism about universities as places that are nourishing challenges to the status quo and enabling decolonizing transformations (Racimo et al., 2025). But there are concerns that the space even for good intent, and for cultivating trust and provoking discomfort, is being constrained. There are cold winds of austerity and authoritarianism blowing through higher education generally, and specifically in my own U.K. context and that of my colleagues in Aotearoa, threatening the conditions under which we can generate knowledge. In Aotearoa, the New Zealand government has cut research funding for social sciences and humanities, a funding shift that challenges recognition of Indigenous knowledge systems and with major consequences for Māori research agendas (Schindler et al., 2025). In the United Kingdom, government is explicitly

directing research funding toward its own policy priorities, sidelining social justice and decolonial initiatives (Department of Science, Innovation and Technology [DSIT], 2025). Universities in both national contexts are facing department closures and job redundancies in the same fields suffering slashed research funding.

Nonetheless, for non-Indigenous researchers working alongside Indigenous colleagues, it is important to avoid feeling only despair about the prospects for decolonizing research and the university. It is important to hold on to how Indigenous peoples have asserted themselves in the face of colonialization and survived the historic trauma of efforts to erase their existence. Non-Indigenous academics such as myself can learn from Indigenous collective resilience and active resistance in the face of oppression and constraints, and persist and remain accountable in the ongoing work of decolonizing the academy.

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Ethical considerations

My involvement in The Tipuna Project as U.K. protection for the project administration, discussions with the co-leads, and for outputs was approved by the University of Southampton under ERGO ID 81806. No research data was generated as part of my role so participant informed consent is not relevant, but the article itself is sole authored with the consent of the Project co-leads who have reviewed its contents.

Consent to participate

No research data was generated as part of my role so participant informed consent is not relevant.

Consent for publication

The article is sole authored with the consent of the Project co-leads who have reviewed its contents.

Data availability Statement

No data is discussed in this article.

Notes

1. This piece is sole authored by agreement, given the perspective and the audience it is written from and for. I am grateful to Rachel Jane Liebert and Teah Carlsson for their comments. The responsibility for the arguments in this article lies with me.
2. Transcript of discussion can be accessed at: <https://www.indigenous.ncrm.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/311/2019/11/Footprints-in-the-sand-audio-transcript.pdf>.
3. I am reminded of a key learning that I took away from reading Renni Eddo-Lodge's (2018) *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*—that White people are centering themselves when they talk about the guilt of White privilege; that it is not all about me (White person), it is about racism and oppression and dismantling the structures that support them.

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