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Shijyaa haa research: Reflections on positionality, relationality and commonality in Arctic research

Charleen Fisher Nina Nikola Doering

Abramis

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This paper engages an Indigenous and a non-Indigenous researcher in discussion about collaboration and co-creation between researchers and Indigenous communities that include and prioritise Indigenous knowledge. It places a focus on the preconditions for respectful and goal-oriented research relationships. The paper is structured around 'small moments' in research, as a means of analysing the need for commonality and relationality. Indigenous understandings of relationality include connection to place as a living practice with a responsibility to kin. Relationality and commonality focus on friendship, shared visioning and communication across long distances. Through discourse, Dr Charleen Fisher (Gwich'in, Tl'eeyegge Hʉt'aane, Dena'ina) and Dr Nina Doering (German) focus on positionality, relationality, communication and co-creation in a variety of communication landscapes. Long-term critical discussions during the Covid-19 pandemic about ethical research with Indigenous philosophy, epistemology and ontology normalised virtual meetings as a contemporary practice. The paper addresses research in the social and natural sciences and humanities.

Key words: relationality, positionality, commonality, co-creation, Indigenous research, Arctic research, Shijyaa haa research

Introduction

Shijyaa haa is a Gwich'in term that means 'with my friend'. Literally translated, the possessive pronoun *shi* means 'my', the stem for 'friend' is -*jyaa*, and *haa* is 'with'. *Shijyaa haa* research is how we (Dr Charleen Fisher and Dr Nina Doering) came to reference the communication style and collaborative work shared in this conversational research paper on positionality, relationality, communication and co-creation in a variety of communication landscapes.

Recent years have seen growing debate on ethical research and on possible ways to improve research relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous partners in the Arctic (e.g. Arctic Council Secretariat 2020: 45-48). To counter harmful research practices and ensure that the right of Indigenous peoples to have control over projects affecting their lands and waters (e.g. United Nations 2007) is acknowledged and respected, Indigenous rights organisations, researchers and youth organisations have developed guidelines (e.g. Gwich'in Tribal Council 2011; Inuit Circumpolar Council 2022; Pedersen et al. 2020; Sámediggi 2021) and frameworks (e.g. Buschman 2022a; Yua et al. 2022) and highlighted the need to centre Indigenous knowledge in research and decision-making (e.g. Buschman 2022b). Terms such as 'co-creation' and 'co-production' in research and conservation have become ubiquitous, both describing the need for equitable partnerships and the bringing together of different ways of knowing throughout all stages of research and conservation processes (e.g. Armitage et al. 2011; Buschman 2022a; Cooke et al. 2020; Degai et al. 2022; Sarkki 2020; Yua et al. 2022). Although progress has been made, research continues to exclude and dismiss Indigenous peoples across the Arctic (e.g. Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami 2018: 5) and academic and funding systems often hinder change (Buschman 2022a; Doering et al. 2022). It is our intention with this paper to add a personal perspective on the challenges we have encountered and the possibilities that have opened for us as we – a Gwich'in and a German

researcher – are building our own relationship. We hope that such insights can help other researchers reflect on their own collaborative paths.

We are inspired in this paper by Dr Albert Marshall’s concept of ‘Two-Eyed Seeing’ (Etuaptmumk in Mi’kmaw) and similar Indigenous frameworks, as described by Reid et al. (2021), both for their potential to bring together Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of knowing, and for our joint reflections on past and present experiences with research. Two-Eyed Seeing encourages ‘learning to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, and from the other eye with the strengths of mainstream knowledges and ways of knowing, and to use both these eyes together, for the benefit of all’ (ibid: 243). We engage with research and research practices and the academic system from the perspectives of an Indigenous and a non- Indigenous researcher with the aim of exploring how our experiences relate and understanding how to improve relationships in research. We structure the sections of this paper around ‘notable moments’ in research as a means of analysing the need for relationality and commonality. We hope that our reflections will be meaningful to others by being personal to us.

About this paper

We first met at the 10th Summer Seminar of the ‘International PhD School for the Studies of Arctic Societies’ (IPSSAS) in Fairbanks in 2015 and connected on different occasions afterwards before we began to schedule weekly Zoom calls in the early summer of 2021 – ‘visiting’ each other virtually in our living rooms and office spaces for informal conversations. Our joint reflection process took place during the Covid-19 pandemic online and was sometimes interrupted by unstable internet connections and health challenges. All of this raised questions for us about what it takes to build relationships and co-work across large distances. Relationality and positionality through research are not well expressed in the academic system and we converse in this paper about how friendship and strategy can overcome structure. Relationality is not necessarily tied to literacy and our early conversations focused on listening and establishing shared understanding. In Gwich’in culture, ‘visiting’ constitutes a common method for communication and knowledge transfer. Only later did we turn these conversations into written notes contained in shared documents when our joint goals were turned to action in the form of presentations and co-authorship.

Positionality

Charleen: *Drin Gwinzii Ch’anjaa naii, Khehkwaii naii, ts’a’ shalak naii, nakhweenjit dagoonchy’aa? Shoozhri’ Charleen Fisher oozhii. Beaver, Alaska gwats’an ihłii. Tseenduu Gwich’in, Dena’ina, Tl’eeyegge Hʉt’aane ihłii.* Good Afternoon Elders, chiefs and all my relations, how are you all? My name is Charleen Fisher. I am from Beaver, Alaska. I am a Gwich’in, Dena’ina and Tl’eeyegge Hʉt’aane.

Nina: Thank you, Charleen! My name is Nina Doering. I grew up near Munich in the south of Germany, before moving to the UK during my studies. I now live and work in Potsdam, Germany.

Charleen: Mahsi' or thank you for sharing your introduction with me. The Gwich'in formal introduction is at least twice as long as the one I just shared and really situates a person to the land, their clans and family as part of the larger Gwich'in community. What is your connection to land, to the earth? Connection to place shapes who we are and how we think. I am very conscious of how I was taught and the foundational experiences that shaped who I am and how that impacts my children's experiences. As an educator, I found a path where I could work in my home and allow my children to live in our homeland and participate in ancestral hunting, fishing and gathering practices. Cultural connections to place have been integral to my work and personal motivation to pursue a terminal degree and research. As Margaret Kovach states: 'Indigenous methodologies require a purpose statement about self in relation to the world' (2021: 150).

Nina: I did not grow up with a practice of formal introductions in the sense that you just described. While my connections with people and places have made me who I am, in most official settings in Germany that I am familiar with, a focus tends to be placed on people's occupations and professional achievements. Among white,[1] university-educated, middle-class Germans such as myself, it has been my experience that asking someone where they are from indicates interest in a person, but does not generally establish a deeper understanding about belonging and relationships.[2] Thinking about this, I am reminded of researchers, authors and activists from around the world who have noted that the possibility to go about life without constantly being prompted to reflect upon one's own identity and relation to the world is both a cause and symptom of racism and continued colonial exploitation. Reni Eddo-Lodge writes of white privilege as 'the fact that if you're white, your race will almost certainly positively impact your life's trajectory in some way. *And you probably won't even notice it*' (2017: 87, emphasis added). Similarly, Shawn Wilson notes that 'as part of [dominant system academics'] white privilege, there is no requirement for them 'to be able to see other ways of being and doing, or even to recognize that they exist' (2008: 44). I grew up in a system that views whiteness as the norm and was educated in academic institutions, in which voices of BIPoC [Black, Indigenous and People of Colour] scholars had often been under-represented or rendered invisible.[3] As I have reflected on these dynamics and my own positionality with you, I keep coming back to Zoe Todd's (2016) article on the 'ontological turn', in which she illustrates how Indigenous thinkers continue to be excluded and Indigenous thought denied credit in the European academy. In my own studies and work, I was motivated to understand the global inequalities that have afforded me my own privileges and to learn how I could contribute to addressing them. This was not the result of abstract reflections on systemic and structural violence and exclusion: I am German, the generation of my grandparents is responsible for the atrocities of the Second World War and I had long realised that the clothes I was wearing and things I was using were produced under violent conditions. I had a deep feeling that my privileges demand that I take responsibility for them, but I did not question my own knowledge system and its role – and thus my own role – in reproducing these inequalities in my work and research.

Charleen: What do you research? I research education, Gwich'in pedagogy or as Stan Wilson has coined, Indigegogy (Wilson and Schellhammer 2021: 50), Indigenous studies and co-creation. With a K-12 teaching

certificate, principal endorsement and a Master's degree in Education I took particular interest in the common ancestral stories and curriculum. I took my doctoral research as an opportunity to reflect on these topics. It was a joy to listen to the now passed Elders, to hear the stories that they told. I treasure the interviews and still have concerns about the way that I honoured the precious stories that were communicated to me. I think of the times sitting on a porch or at the table listening to stories on ancestral homelands as sacred times. As a result of my doctoral research experience, I feel that academic writing processes are not the proper way to honour our ancestral knowledge and, in many circumstances, it should be honoured in our traditional ways only without the expectations of academia.

Nina: For my PhD, which focused on public participation in extractive resource management, I spent nine months in Aasiaat and several other towns along the west coast of Kalaaliit Nunaat. I had spent some time in Aasiaat before while working on my Master's thesis on hopes, concerns and expectations triggered by oil exploration activities. During my PhD I began to question my own approach to research and since I moved back to Germany three years ago, I have worked together with Indigenous and non-Indigenous partners to gain a better understanding of the changes necessary within my work and my institution to enable co- creation in ethical and equitable research relationships. I am motivated to learn how to address my own biases, to understand and move away from the colonial and exploitative structures and practices that I am a part of and that I have helped carry forward. Over the past year, discussing our respective positionalities has formed the foundation for our conversations. As we have told each other stories about experiences in life and research, jointly analysed and re-interpreted them, I have gained helpful new insights into my own positionality that would not have been possible outside of our shared reflection.

Charleen: Research is part of a person's life's journey. My research journey is centred in identity, culture, language, family and community and transmission to future generations. It is only through establishing close connections with allied researchers who share common interests that I feel collaborative research between Indigenous and non- Indigenous partners takes place. I appreciate your work to break down colonial extractive practices.

Nina: I know that I am at the very beginning of this learning journey. I have learned tremendously from you, Charleen, about taking the first steps toward becoming an ally.

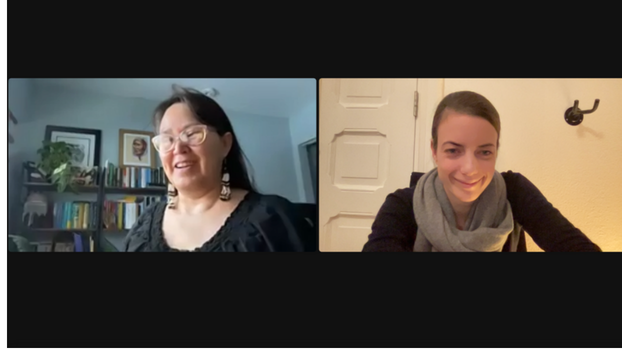
Charleen: *Aaha', shii chan*. Yes, me also. There is a need for critical allyship, linguists working on languages etc, to bridge these systems. To me, Indigenous research is not about devaluing someone else, decolonising is a positive construct and decolonising work is additive to secular cultural understandings. Weaving experiences from historical, institutional oppressive frameworks with advocacy work between generations creates positive social movements that decolonise systems, minds and hearts. Work-based on personal relationships and shared experiences that express vulnerability and relieve stresses that we feel help young researchers to frame research positively.

Relationality

[T]he 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 (Wilson 2008: 7).

When we began to talk about how we had first met and started to build a relationship, we remembered many 'small moments' – of spending time together on- and offline, chatting informally, sharing about ourselves and our thoughts. However, as we reflected more upon them, we realised that these moments had not been 'small' or mundane after all, they had required openness, energy, intention and a willingness to be vulnerable; and each of them had been consequential. We began to call them 'notable'. In particular, we feel that the work on this paper has been the result of each of us continuing to reach out. As we turned to the Two-Eyed Seeing framework to reflect, we noticed that 'seeing together' in a literal sense had been crucial: Charleen taking Nina to see places around Fairbanks that held meaning for her, seeing each other through our computer screens, sharing glimpses of our lives via camera, Nina inviting Charleen to Germany to see where she lives and works and both of us together looking at and editing pieces of text online. Many of the themes we discussed did not make it into this paper but formed an important part of our process. For example, we repeatedly discussed the role of humour as a form of resistance and a means of connecting and shared humour helped us deepen our own relationship and deal with difficult topics.

Figure 1. (a) Charleen and Nina in Fairbanks in front of the church of Charleen's father in 2015, (b) Charleen and Nina in Potsdam in 2022 and (c) on Zoom in 2022



Charleen: Small moments of care, concern and friendship led to our established relationality. We initially toured Fairbanks and shared meals 10 years ago at IPSSAS when we were both in PhD programmes. I was thankful that you reached out and kept in touch virtually and on social media. Eventually, we worked together, and this led to a visit and collaboration in Germany. Relationships are critical to the co-creation of knowledge and collaborative research. It is difficult to work to understand our own bias and how our cultural knowledge systems are impacted by research in a way that is comprehensible and contextual. Expressing Indigeneity through the medium of western languages and society should be done with careful consideration of power, bias and reflection to make sure that important Indigenous protocols aren't overlooked or diminished. Our circular planning and writing discussions also helped us be conscious of our own biases and the critical nature of our work.

Nina: I reached out to you in a moment of uncertainty. I had felt increasingly unsettled by my own practices during my PhD and realised that I had come to a point at which I needed to re-learn how to work in academia. I was planning a workshop on 'Ethics and methods in Arctic transformative research' (www.arctic-ethics.org) to address some of the fundamental questions I had but did not want to put my need to learn as a burden onto others or dominate the agenda. I was also conscious of the problematic focus on 'decolonisation', often employed to serve the image of western people and institutions (see also Tuck and Yang 2012). We had many conversations while I worked with colleagues to develop a programme that I hoped would be meaningful and beneficial to all workshop contributors and we continued to speak online every week after the workshop had taken place. We met and talked with intention – to learn together and seek out possibilities to effect change from our respective positionalities – but without any plans for specific 'measurable' outputs. The relationship we have built has formed a foundation for other projects. However, this was not our goal and I now feel it would have been prohibitive. Indigenous scholars have written about the importance of time and reciprocity in relationship- building (e.g. Tynan 2021; Wilson 2008), reminding us that relationality needs to be felt and practised to be realised (Tynan 2021). I am grateful to you for not only having patiently explained, but practised with me.

Charleen: I was happy to hear from you and had finished my doctoral programme and had concerns about research also. That first workshop was interesting for me and a bit intimidating since offering the workshop

session was tied to Indigenous research ethics, but I chose to share about myself and the community priorities that were important to me as an Indigenous person. It is difficult to establish relationality as your authentic self with strangers without an ally. Relationality is expressed in every part of the Gwich'in language whether creating context from the conversation, directional terms or the subjective nature of stem languages. Indigenous protocols are often overlooked and misinterpreted by non-Indigenous people and by Indigenous people who haven't been raised with these protocols. For example, the knowledge of Elders should be accepted as given. Elders' knowledge may be understood and contextualised at a later date as the researcher learns more and their lived experiences grow. Protocols are an expression of the important connections between the systems, a way to express connection and respect between lands, water, air and animals. Protocols are also ceremony and communication. It is a spiritual connection that ties us together and to the earth, water, air and all other living creatures:

> Knowledge comes from multiple sources, such as humans, animals, birds, fish, insects, the earth, land, sky, and spirit. Indigenous epistemologies are not human centric, meaning that all species, not solely the human species, are a source of knowledge. Neither is knowledge limited solely to cognitive reasoning, though holism encompasses this source of knowing (Kovach 2021: 69).

While working on this paper, ensuring extra care to listen to each other was important to establish relationality from the beginning to address difficult subjects with sensitivity. Establishing relationality in a colonial era is laden with emotion but honest conversations and intention has been our practice. Connecting on a level of humanity brings us together in our co-creative research to understand the knowledge and ready ourselves to share with future generations. Spiritual connection, clan connection and community connection are all parts of my values- based lived experience with relationships. I feel blessed to live with a seasonal understanding of the Arctic.

Nina: I remember that early on in our conversations, you told me you were extending a hand to build a relationship that could last. It was clear that this offer contained a reciprocal responsibility to care for our relationship, to take seriously our collaborative work and to face up to the sometimes difficult and uncomfortable discussions we engaged in. I have also felt this responsibility in the relationships I built – and continue to value – during the work for my thesis. However, our discussions and our joint projects have provided me with a better understanding of how this responsibility extends to research practices, which form part of our relationships. Basing my research solely on Western concepts had rendered my efforts for ethical conduct incomplete and I understand the focus of my current work to constitute part of fulfilling my responsibilities as a researcher working in a colonial context.

Charleen: As an Alaska Native in America, with no governmental reconciliation and reclamation for past offences, I limit academic relationships to those who share common goals. Relationality and commonality create shared goals and there are many opportunities for friendship and mutual care. As an Indigenous researcher, I do end up being quite guarded and have a close-knit community of researchers that I work with on

similar goals. For an outsider, it would be very difficult to break into this close-knit community without friendship and shared goals. I appreciate you reaching out and expressing your opinions honestly. Establishing shared goals requires open discussions about difficult topics.

Nina: As I am learning, I have found the work of Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang helpful, who remind us that '[s]olidarity is an uneasy, reserved, and unsettled matter that neither reconciles present grievances nor forecloses future conflict' (2012: 3). I understand their work on '"settler moves to innocence", that problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity' (ibid: 1) to highlight that engagement with our (i.e. Western researchers') uncomfortable emotions must be decentred and addressing them is work that we need to do amongst ourselves and within our institutions. Not with an aim of resolving them (this is neither possible nor relevant), but to understand how they may keep us from honestly addressing the root causes of exploitation. I grew up in Germany with deeply personal conversations among friends and schoolmates discussing the Holocaust and how much guilt had been passed down to us. From my perspective, it is a question that is mostly not only unproductive; as Astrid Messerschmidt (2008) illustrates, the showcasing and simultaneous denial of guilt have enabled German society to divert attention from continued anti- semitism *and* have contributed to a broad refusal to address racism in Germany, which does not fit a national self-image of having faced up to the past. Statistics on anti-semitic and right-wing offences in Germany (e.g. Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community 2021) and experiences of BIPoC students at German universities (e.g. Kuria 2015) make clear that German antisemitism and racism are neither remnants of the past nor attributable to isolated incidents; both are deeply embedded in German society and institutions. Where remembrance of and engagement with the Holocaust may be described as fragile (see also Messerschmidt 2008), conversations about our colonial history and the ways in which we continue to benefit from institutions built upon extraction from Indigenous peoples and lands have barely begun. Trying to understand how I have carried forward exploitative practices in my own research and learning how to do better is what motivates me on a personal level and an attempt to engage with my own guilt. As you mention, pushing back requires constant reflection on my own biases as well as the exploitative logics of the academic system within which I work. This extends to our joint efforts for co-creation, where we have felt ourselves how the deadline- and output-driven culture of academia leads to pressures that immediately render this work meaningless. I have learned that it is sometimes better to step back to avoid contributing to these practices and pressures.

Charleen: I am conscious of the heavy weight of colonisation in many parts of my personal life and work. It is important to privilege, prioritise and honour the work of decolonisation and find a path forward through establishing shared priorities. Our path forward includes respecting each other, working toward a shared understanding and being allies. It doesn't mean we have to agree on every topic, but acknowledge each other's truths and ensure agency in our own experiences. Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers have the opportunity to co-create knowledge by knowing their own story and finding their place in an inter-connected world governed by sacred ceremonies and respect for all.

Western knowledge structures must remedy historical wrongs, critically and strategically fight oppression, and help Indigenous people to continue living in a sacred relational way. Indigenous ontology is a life lived with respect and protocols within an epistemological context and following axiological principles. The role of ceremony in decolonisation requires relationality, shared positionality and shared co-creation goals (see also Wilson 2008).

Co-creating commonality: Aligning goals around internalised colonisation and resurgence

When we started our conversations on Zoom a year ago, we let them flow freely, going where our thoughts and reflections took us. Over time, we kept circling back to the very different historical, relational, epistemological and institutional contexts we each find ourselves in, and consequently the different goals we strive to work towards, both personally and professionally. Yet on a deeper level, the problems we are trying to address – i.e. the consequences of continued colonial, economic and academic exploitation – are deeply interlinked. Returning to the Two-Eyed Seeing framework (Reid et al. 2021), we are seeing them from two perspectives/positions, which holds potential for mutually beneficial progress.

Nina: When I first reached out to you, my goal was to learn what changes were necessary within myself and my institution to improve my/our research practices – and to understand the aims of your work to find out if we could connect in a mutually beneficial way.

Charleen: I appreciate you reaching out and sharing these concerns. Indigenous knowledge documentation, revitalisation and education are work framed with urgency. Indigenous knowledge holders and youth both have a crisis in transmitting and receiving knowledge. Youth suffer from loss of cultural identity and traditional knowledge systems have encountered disruption, so opportunities for youth to learn from Elders are often programme dependent. To simply be Indigenous and to live our cultures is our resistance to colonisation. Our Indigenous agency is represented by every Indigenous voice spoken to honour our ancestral ways in our languages. One of the most difficult things for me in my dissertation writing experience was that the main elder whom I was working with passed away. Apart from the grief, this led me to have a deeper understanding of the urgency of working with our Indigenous Elders who are holding Indigenous knowledge and language. Since this time, all of the Elders whom I was working with have passed on. I feel as if I barely scratched the surface of their knowledge with the interview questions approved by my university's institutional review board. As an Indigenous person and researcher, I feel that some Indigenous knowledge can and should be shared within the culture and community outside of research and Western systems because system processes don't appreciate the urgency of documenting first language speakers.

Nina: In my experience, this urgency that you describe has not been recognised widely in Germany, one of the centres of colonialism. Kien Nghi Ha (2018) traces German (dis)engagement with its colonial role, which has long been largely absent from political and dominant public discourse and emerged relatively late as a subject of inquiry in academic debate in Germany, crucially advanced by black German and African scholars and

scholars of colour, whose voices continue to be under- represented in the German academy.[4] This has been tied with a broadly communicated public misconception that the effects of Germany's colonial rule have been relatively insignificant.[5] In recent decades, critical engagement has become more visible, as seen for instance in the work of local activist groups (e.g. Decolonize Berlin, www.decolonize-berlin. de), museums (e.g. GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig, n.d.) and calls for decolonial approaches to academic disciplines in Germany are growing (e.g. Ndlovu-Gatsheni et al. 2022 on African Studies; Layne 2019 on German Studies; Arghavan et al. 2019 on American Studies/ the Humanities). Yet despite increasing public and academic debate, sincere political efforts and a general culture of remembrance remain lacking. The topic took up minimal space in my school curriculum and little seems to have changed since in many German schools. When I moved to the UK for my Master's degree in Development Studies, my experience did not change fundamentally. While the programme introduced me to diverse literatures and perspectives and facilitated critical thinking, I can remember only few instances where we were introduced to Indigenous or other non-Western research methods and ethical clearance for my fieldwork was provided by the university ethics committee without critical reflection on the appropriateness of such procedures in the context of research taking place on Indigenous lands. Meanwhile, in Germany, many universities and research institutes continue to operate without ethics committees. At the same time, there is growing recognition among Arctic researchers in Germany that change is necessary. Debate across the Arctic on ethical research (e.g. Arctic Council Secretariat 2020), and requirements for research permits and funding applications have spurred some discussions in Germany, albeit with the often-voiced addendum that this will require a learning process.

Charleen: Our communicative research process has forced me to think about how collaborative research partnerships can benefit Indigenous people. My research has been largely documenting Indigenous cultural practices for future generations. Indigenous communities communicate learned experiences through shared experiences tied to ancestral land, cultural knowledge and language. Researchers seeking to work with Indigenous people must understand the priorities of the Indigenous community. They should ask themselves if their research contributes to language revitalisation, culture revitalisation, resurgence, reclamation or advocacy, etc? Putting the burden and responsibility of policing opportunistic research about Indigenous knowledge on traditional governing structures (for example, Alaskan tribes) should not be a question of their capacity. Our ancestors have lived here for thousands of years in a sustainable way and research can help non-Indigenous and Indigenous researchers to learn how to live in a relational way with each other, land, waters, air and animals. Researchers and scientists must view Indigenous communities as partners and not as an opportunity for information extraction.

Nina: This will require a structural transformation of the Western academic system, including funding, hiring procedures, set-up of projects, research methodologies, outcome evaluations and school and university curricula. As we have seen in our joint work on funding, it is not sufficient to provide financial resources for co-creative research. Funding programmes themselves need to be co-developed, eligibility criteria need to change, timelines need to be extended and be made flexible and long-term care for research relationships needs to be

acknowledged as part of the research cycle (Doering et al. 2022). And as you have noted, there are deeper conversations to be had on how far Western systems can change to accommodate Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies. There is also a risk that 'co-production' and collaboration become mere boxes to tick for Western researchers as the concepts are emptied of any meaning (see also Buschman 2022a: 5; Yua et al. 2022). As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) has so eloquently illustrated, our academic system is built on a foundation of colonial exclusion. Pedersen et al. (2020) highlight that, beyond respecting the rights of Indigenous peoples, Western researchers can improve the quality of their research if they learn to understand and treat Indigenous knowledge as more than 'data' to be collected for (or ignored in) scientific projects by establishing respectful and equitable research relationships.

Charleen: I am struggling to find a balance between how much time and effort I spend on decolonising or Indigenising Western systems when I can't speak my own language fluently in my own culture. When questioning my mother once about my future career path, she told me in jest: 'All you have to do is stay Native (Dinjii zhuh, Dena'ina, Denaa) until you die.' She followed up with some statements about how I should be happy and proud of my identity and feel like I am contributing in a positive way but this is it. Transformational impacts to academic institutions are a secondary impact for Indigenous research. Contributing to academia is secondary to transformational change that supports and advocates for Indigenous reclamation and resurgence. Why do I have to change the Western world when I can actively contribute to 10,000 years of knowledge transmission within my own community? Are colonists or settlers having discussions and committing lifetimes of work to ensure that their knowledge is included in Gwich'in decision-making or governance or do they make the assumption that their knowledge replaces it? Transformative research must not recolonise Indigeneity. Recolonisation by our own people reinforces colonial structures, systems and power instead of our own, by using English content and system codification to make parallels to Indigenous knowledge.

Nina: The responsibility to push for change in Western academic institutions must lie with us Western researchers. This is slow and often invisible but important work. Together with partners from the Saami Council, I worked for several months on a project proposal last year trying to achieve greater equality in the distribution of overhead costs factored into the project budget between Indigenous and non- Indigenous partner institutions. For me, this was a powerful experience and it highlighted that the foundation for co-creation is laid long before the start of a research project. Yet working on these details of the proposal together also helped us establish stronger relationships for the project work we are now engaged in.

I believe that we also have to recognise that the urgency you describe above does not only apply to Indigenous peoples. Our extractive-based Western lifestyle of over-consumption has led the world to the brink of catastrophe (although Indigenous and other marginalised communities once again will be and are already harmed disproportionately). Across the world, Indigenous lands are degrading less quickly and exhibit higher biodiversity. We cannot afford to ignore and disregard Indigenous expertise (see also Buschman 2022a).

Charleen: Western academic scholarship doesn't understand its role in healing wounds from colonisation or relating ceremonial rights of passage to a student's experience in post-secondary education. Surface discussions in westernised academia have begun to understand the cultural obligations of protocol and honouring Elders, place and knowledge systems. The academy's role is to foster research and that is what is so exciting about Indigenous studies, Indigenous researchers and co-creation. We have this wonderful opportunity to work on shared goals to learn, share, heal, revitalise, reclaim and transform systems to include those that have traditionally been oppressed.

Non-Indigenous and Indigenous researchers must endeavour to learn Indigenous language to comprehend Indigenous knowledge. Systemic transformation to the academy can eventually require Indigenous vetting of research cultural and language metrics to help situate and contextualise the knowledge. Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers must seek help to establish cultural and linguistic relevance in research. If researchers want to participate in Indigenous research, they have to step outside their own cultural understandings to learn about Indigenous priorities (Brayboy et al. 2012). Reframing academic discussions that align research priorities to community issues and language and cultural knowledge revitalisation goals should be held prior to project proposals and be embedded throughout the entire research process (Kovach 2021).

Participatory-based research can create valuable knowledge that accompanies the research content. Indigenous perspectives have different ways of knowing (Smith 2012; Wilson 2008), different ways of teaching and different ways of transmitting knowledge from one generation to the next with the intent of understanding five or seven generations down the line. Understanding your place and understanding your role contribute to understanding Indigeneity. Collaboration without true co-creation leads to extraction that unevenly benefits Western knowledge systems. Contributing to Indigenous bodies of knowledge without contributing to Indigenous goals is a one- sided colonial-constructed understanding that omits the community perspective.

Nina: Thank you for sharing your insights into the 'how to' of collaboration and co-creation! This brings me back to another point that you raised above and that you and fellow Indigenous scholars have brought up repeatedly in our discussions: how can we non-Indigenous researchers learn to do things differently without reproducing what Nora Berenstain (2016) has termed 'epistemic exploitation' by expecting our Indigenous friends and colleagues to teach us how to transform our western institutions and challenge the epistemic oppressions that are built into their fabric (on 'building self-capacity' see also Buschman 2022a: 5)? I find your focus on contributing to Indigenous goals helpful as an analytical tool to assessing the projects we choose to pursue. I have been conscious over the past year that you shared many hours with me on Zoom despite the limited time you have available. I am grateful for all I have learned from you and I have tried to reciprocate by using the resources available to me to support efforts for change in research.

Charleen: I research with strategic purpose and intention and it is usually deeply personal. This purpose is multi-faceted, loaded with the representation of accurate understandings of Gwich'in knowledge, Gwich'in language and Indigenous pedagogy. This purpose is built on the years of teaching in the K-12 classroom on my

ancestral lands and years of decentring Western content in a way that is reframed in the context of my own Indigenous perspective. For years and years, I became conscious that the information I was employed to teach was biased, historically inaccurate, and lacked a connection to the very place where we had the honour to steward for future generations. Having my students, my children, nieces and nephews be required to learn information laden with obvious bias led me to reframe, decolonise and resituate knowledge and truths to make sense to me and to my blood memory. I wasn't aware of what Critical Indigenous Research Methodologies (CIRM) (Brayboy et al. 2012) were when I began the Indigenous Studies PhD programme, I just knew that we had our own ways of knowing, being, teaching and understanding that had to be represented in academia to impact systemic change in Western education.

Nina: As I reflect on this past year, I feel that in aligning our goals and in placing a focus on 'notable' moments in our interactions – by first discussing them, acknowledging and valuing them as enabling and then seeking them out and creating them with intention – we achieved more than our initial plan to 'reflect and write together'. We found ways of working and thinking together, built connections not only between ourselves but with a growing network of colleagues seeking to effect change, and experienced joy and friendship that will form a basis for future connection. However, in line with the trade-offs you describe, I think that it is your assessment that counts regarding whether the time you invested has contributed towards your communities' goals.

Charleen: Indigenous people have been careful about how and what to share with outside researchers. Scholarship has become a path for Indigenous knowledge to be included in Western educational systems with the goal of transformation. Centring Indigenous knowledge is good for all people. In my dissertation, I was also careful to present Indigenous knowledge so that it is represented as it is within the culture. Academic research cannot replace innate cultural knowledge or blood memory instilled from birth by family, clan and community systems. The work of Indigenous researchers in western academic systems of power support inclusive knowledge co-creation, language, cultural revitalisation and advocacy but these systems are based on western thought and priorities. Indigenous researchers spend a lot of time navigating western systems to purposely advocate for their own community priorities. Indigenous knowledge is sacred and exists independently of and has value outside of Western academic systems. Indigenous research priorities established through commonality can include transformation in the academy but also includes Indigenous community priorities. I am motivated to learn my language and to participate in the generational transmission of epistemological, ontological and axiological practices. My motivation to participate in research is strategic with communicative goals and I am so happy to welcome allies who share these goals. In some circumstances, I do believe that Indigenous knowledge should be honoured in the community only but most areas are places where allies help restore traditions. Thank you for your time and friendship over all these years. I have grown considerably in this process.

Conclusion

Shijyaa haa research establishes cooperative relationality that is initiated in small moments and can grow from communication over time and across distance. Meaningful co-creative research requires work to establish relational tenets and time together virtually and/or in-person to understand positionality and strategic and thoughtful commonality. Sensitivity and careful listening are key to establishing relationality and aligning goals especially when communicating across cultures. Co- creative research is a journey and going through it together and learning about each other's processes taught us unintentional lessons along the way as we established relationality. The distance between Alaska and Germany did not prohibit us from making connections – friendship, trust and collegiality can be established virtually, but must be enhanced with in-person visits. Learning about and experiencing each other within our communities – understanding each other in place and in context – strengthened our relationship in ways that video calls cannot accomplish. We encourage co-creative researchers across disciplines to be careful about being dismissive of someone else's perspective and to participate in active listening to cultivate co-creative research. Our hope is that our work together will impact other Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers who engage in collaborative research with Indigenous communities to be reflective and think deeply and intentionally about how 'small' moments can initiate, and eventually constitute, relationships. Work on relationality includes knowing firmly your positionality to create a deeper understanding of shared goals that can clarify and grow future collaboration. Relationality may form the foundation for future research projects – but this is not necessary; relationships are valuable in and of themselves. In our conversations, we addressed uncomfortable topics, but committing to showing up online every week to communicate openly helped us establish a longer- term relationship. As Charleen's grandma, the late Charlotte Adams and most Gwich'in grandmothers would say:, 'Listen!'

Notes

Dinjii zhuh, Dena'ina, Denaa	mean 'people of place' in slightly different ways; for more information on the language families, see Krauss, Holton, Kerr and West (2011)
Shijyaa haa	'with my friend' (Gwich'in)
Tl'eeyegge Hʉt'aane	'people of the very place pointing down to the land' (Jetté and Jones 2000, p. l).

[1] I (Nina) lowercase 'white' here to avoid aligning with right-wing use of the term, and understand it as a socially constructed category

[2] It is important to note that for BIPoC Germans, being asked 'where one is from' is often an experience of racism and othering (see, for example, Obute 201: 88)

[3] See Eggers et al. (2018) for perspectives on the German context and Florvil (2020) for insights into resistance, the black German movement and black German women's intellectual activism

[4] Emily Ngubia Kuria (2015) writes about student experiences of racism and strategies of resistance

[5] Ha (2018) notes that the German Federal Agency for Civic Education ('Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung') provided support to a book that diminishes the extent of German colonialism

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Note on the contributors

Dr Charleen Fisher is Dinjii zhuh (Gwich'in), Tl'eeyegge Hʉt'aane and Dena'ina and a tribal member from Beaver, Alaska. She currently teaches at the University of Alaska Fairbanks as an Assistant Professor. She has many years of experience as a K-12 certified teacher, principal and in administration in Alaskan school districts. She has also been the executive director with the Council of Athabascan Tribal Governments, and has served as the chief of Beaver Village Council and in other positions of leadership. She has a BA in Political Science, MEd in Language and Literacy, a Graduate Certificate in Educational Leadership from the University of Alaska Anchorage and a PhD in Indigenous Studies from the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Dr Nina Doering works as research group leader at the Research Institute for Sustainability, Helmholtz Centre Potsdam (RIFS) in Potsdam, Germany. Her research has focused on public participation, extractive resource management, anticipation and change in the Arctic. She has become particularly interested in research ethics, co-creative research, research relationships and Indigenous rights. Following her studies in International Economics and Development Studies at the University of Bayreuth and the University of Oxford, she completed a DPhil (PhD) at the University of Oxford's School of Geography and the Environment.

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