EMBODYING DECOLONIALITY: THREE COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGISTS' REFLECTIONS ON OUR PRACTICE AND LEARNINGS

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Community Psychology (CP) reflects diverse approaches and practices, yet many approaches continue to reproduce colonial assumptions about what constitutes valid knowledge. As Community Psychologists working in Canada, Egypt, México, and the United States, we have navigated these tensions across our professional journeys. Drawing from our distinct contexts and lived experiences, we offer a reflexive, collaborative case study examining how colonial logics shape how we approach our research and practice, and how we attempt to work differently within (and despite) existing constraints. Our reflections interrogate our understanding of decoloniality, practices and approaches we use to embody it, why we use them, and the challenges of reconciling with embodied, intuitive, relational, and community-centered ways of knowing, being, and doing.

Individually, Aaron Stewart is configuring how to work within conventional academic and evaluative paradigms while simultaneously creating space for community-rooted ways of strengthening local social ecologies; Salma explores the intersections between different organizational forms and social change, as well as more holistic and regenerative pathways to change; and Cari centers love, kindness, and stories as evaluative practice. Through individual and collective reflection, we trace the doubts, disruptions, and adaptations involved in delinking from dominant epistemologies embedded in the Colonial Matrix of Power. We discuss emerging practices that cultivate relational accountability, center community wisdom, and foster cultures of love, kindness, and systemic change.

***Keywords:** Decoloniality, Community Psychology, Colonial Matrix of Power, Relational Accountability, Embodied and Community-Centered Knowledge*

1. Who and Why We Are as a Collective

We are three Community Psychologists navigating unique journeys to decolonize our research and practice. Though at different points in embodying decoloniality, common threads have emerged across our paths. Through ongoing individual and collective reflexivity, of which this paper itself is an example, we aim to better understand what helps or hinders our progress and how to move forward.

We met as students in the first international cohort of the Community Psychology (CP) doctoral program at National Louis University (Chicago, Illinois, United States). Entering during the COVID-19 pandemic, we participated remotely and were among the program's first students from outside Chicago and the United States.

Prior to joining the program, we each had varying levels of exposure, understanding, and embodiment of decoloniality. One class, Cross-Cultural Dynamics, was centered on closely examining decoloniality (see Mignolo & Walsh, 2018) and its implications on CP. For Aaron Stewart, this was an introduction; for Cari and Salma, it deepened existing understandings of coloniality and decoloniality. Since completing our doctorates, we continue our journey in embodying decoloniality and decolonizing our work.

Each of us is embedded in local contexts shaped by what Quijano (2007) calls the Colonial Matrix of Power; a global system of domination established through European colonization that

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persists today. This matrix operates through economic, institutional, cultural, and epistemological structures. Through these structures, a global majority continues to be exploited and discriminated against by their former colonizers, or 'Western' culture (Quijano, 2007, p. 169).

Our journeys represent distinct points along the path to fully embodying decoloniality. Here, we share these journeys by detailing our backgrounds, positionality, and local contexts, while reflecting on how our understanding of decoloniality has evolved and how we attempt to put it into practice.

2. Where We Stand

We found Bill Sharpe's (2013) Three Horizons: The Patterning of Hope a useful framework for thinking about our journeys. Three Horizons is a futures-oriented sensemaking tool for understanding transformational change over time. It outlines three overlapping horizons: Horizon One (H1) is the dominant system that currently operates and is optimized for stability; Horizon Two (H2) is a transitional space of innovation and tension; and Horizon Three (H3) represents an emerging future with new values and potential. The framework emphasizes stewarding present actions to enable long-term transformation and informs our reflections below.

2.1 Aaron Stewart

I hear the call across the valleys, the plains, the spaces between. The call, I hear it and its echoes. I trek forward following the sands bouncing around me, driving me along the path. The path towards the last horizon. The place where practices hold true with integrity. Where practice integrates with action; a praxis that embodies and manifests goodness. Where community and self are one and all and everything.

Looking up towards the furthest horizon that peaks above the crest of the nearest horizon towards which I am still journeying, I find a sense of hope. A hope that I can untangle from modernity and its companion, coloniality. This hope is renewed by the sense of community that flows from the voices of those who accompany me along this journey. Some of those voices originate here in the first horizon too while others call to me from beyond.

These calls from beyond are what remind me to look up, in fact. Because it can be easy to keep your head down, focusing on the work, looking to what is nearby for clues on the path forward. Some of this guidance includes best practices for research and evaluation work in communities such as strategies for trustworthiness in qualitative research. And while the intent of these signposts is to help guide us towards credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, they do not necessarily guide me towards the final horizon. With my head down, using the signposts as my sole guide, I find my steps wandering. Some steps forward, some steps back, and some, maybe many, off to the side, parallel to the horizon with no possibility of reaching it even if time were endless.

But the song of the voices from beyond still reaches my ears, no matter what path I find myself along. They remind me that trustworthiness does not necessarily eliminate the occurrence of epistemic extractivism although it may attenuate its impact. When this realization sinks in, my steps falter as I spend time in deep reflection on intention, purpose, positionality, power, and relationality in the various settings of my personal and professional lives. At times, I feel shame. Shame to think that just by framing my work in a certain way and by claiming to perform actions to reduce the negative impact of my research and evaluation work that I have indemnified myself, and sometimes even redeemed myself. Deserved shame that leads to continued reflexivity; not just reflection but action. Action to keep working towards the final horizon.

I am still on the journey to unravel the threads of colonial approaches that have woven into my body and mind. Still on the journey of climbing out the gullies left behind by the flows of the colonial matrix of power that underpin, influence, and sometimes unintentionally guide my path. Thankfully, the voices of those in community with me, of those who accompany me on this journey keep me pushing, and hopefully, pushing me through towards the final horizon.

2.1.1 My Understanding of Modernity, Coloniality, and Decoloniality

My first exposure to the ideas of modernity, coloniality, and decoloniality were during our cross-cultural dynamics course in the CP doctoral program. It should be explicitly stated that my journey in embodying decoloniality is relatively young, and I still have much yet to learn and experience that may continue shaping my understanding and embodiment of these concepts. We examined these concepts through the lens of Mignolo and Walsh (2018). From this, I understand:

Modernity as the pursuit of advances, innovation, and progress, which superficially seems positive, but inherently re-produces coloniality.

Fig.1 Aaron Stewart Baker Cervantes at the Taal Volcano, Batangas, The Philippines, 2018

Coloniality as the various logics or paradigms that diminish certain groups in support of the self-serving narratives of modernity. As modernity hides and disguises coloniality, it cannot be stated explicitly. To conceptualize this, Mignolo and Walsh present the Colonial Matrix of Power as composed of levels (management, knowledge, enunciation), domains (controlled sectors of society), and flows (the dominant narratives prioritized by modernity).

Decoloniality is somewhat the opposite of coloniality in that it aims to undermine modernity. Its goals include decolonizing epistemology and ontology in order to become what coloniality aims to prevent, promoting pluriversality, unveiling the logics and processes of coloniality, delinking and re-existing in order to shift from being used by the imaginary of modernity to using it, and transforming from colonized subjects into decolonized ones, among other goals. Together these goals aim to lead to new narratives that legitimize decoloniality ways of life.

2.1.2 Where I'm Coming From

In 1987, I was born out of wedlock in the city of Caloocan, a city of metro Manila in the Philippines, to a woman who had two other children already. Since no father was listed on my birth certificate, my Filipino surname Cervantes is from my birth mother. When I was born, I was not given a first name; presumably due to my birth mother's intent to put me up for adoption. Shortly after I was born, I was taken into the care of my adoptive parents who were a white couple from the United States living at a United States military base in Japan as adoption proceedings were underway. I lived with my parents and their two adolescent daughters, my sisters, in Japan for three years before moving to a rural, central region of the United States.

In the mid 1990s, I was diagnosed with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis. I was lucky to have parents who were observant and proactive when strange behaviors and physical ailments began to occur. It was lucky that we ended up receiving a clear diagnosis since the symptoms did not make it obvious that the issue was arthritis. I say lucky, because our health insurance was through the military so we accessed healthcare at the nearest military base, only an hour away from home. Lucky because the pediatrics department on the military base had a physician who had some insight into autoimmune disorders and did not delay in getting me tested for lupus and arthritis. Even luckier that the physician was able to provide a referral to a rheumatology specialist. In the early 2000s, I was lucky to get lab results back that indicated I was in remission arthritis at least for the present moment.

In 2003, I moved to another rural town to attend a STEM-focused high school boarding academy at the local university, spending my last two years of high school there. I continued on at that same university for my undergraduate studies. I moved around this general area from town to town, pursuing graduate studies in college student development and working at public universities, before moving to Florida in 2012. It was during this nine-year period that I was also

grappling with my sexual orientation. I suppose I always knew that I was not straight; however, having grown up in the Pentecostal Christian church, it took quite a long time to negotiate my budding awareness of my sexual orientation with the waning connectedness to my religious upbringing. The act of moving states provided me a new opportunity. When I arrived at my new home, I did not have to come out to my new friends, coworkers, and students. I just was out and that is all they knew me to be.

In 2014, I moved to México in order to gain more experience working directly with adolescents since most of my professional experience was working with emerging adults in a university setting. I returned to the United States in 2015 due to financial difficulties, working back in higher education administration. After several years trying to figure out my next and final step in education, I happened upon an announcement that NLU was accepting non-Chicago residents for a fully remote cohort in the CP doctoral program.

Experience as a Filipino Adoptee

One particular aspect of my journey that I examined further through the lenses of modernity, coloniality, and decoloniality was my experience as a transnational and transracial adoptee. My experience as being adopted from the Philippines is grounded upon the history and culture of the Filipino people. The Philippines consists of approximately 7,100 islands and over 150 native languages and dialects (Borlaza, 2021). Arenas et al. (2020) indicated that the earliest indigenous people in the Philippines islands may have appeared around 66,700 years ago. After 34 years of expeditions, the Spanish began their colonization of the Philippines (Borlaza, 2021); which lasted for approximately 333 years until the United States 'won' the Philippines in the spoils of the Spanish-American War, even though Filipinos had been fighting for liberation from the Spanish and earned a truce in 1897 and eventual independence in 1898. The United States remained in power in the Philippines until 1946 when Filipino sovereignty was recognized, although the United States continued to occupy land until 1992.

This colonization and occupation by the Spanish and then by the United States has had a unique influence on the dominant narratives of Filipino culture. For example, Filipino cultural experiences seem to have many parallels to Latinx cultural experiences at least in the United States (Ocampo, 2016). Another example is how the Spanish government required all Filipinos in their control to adopt Spanish surnames even if they were not legally given one through marriage or birth (de Leon, 2020). This was something I had not realized until very recently; when I was younger, I used to imagine I was somehow related to the infamous Spanish writer Miguel de Cervantes. Other examples include how Spanish worked to convert Filipinos to Catholicism, learning local languages to aid this effort (Borlaza, 2021). The suppression of indigenous beliefs and customs became difficult over time though; as a result some artifacts of these indigenous religious practices persisted under the guise of Catholicism. During Spanish rule, Spanish became the dominant language although Filipinos had a diverse ethnolinguistic culture; when the United States was in power, English became the dominant language (Borlaza, 2021). In 1987, Spanish was relegated to auxiliary status along with Arabic, leaving Filipino and English as the official national languages (The Republic of Philippines Const. art. XIV, § 7).

Recognizing the potential challenges for a transnational adoptee, my parents made strong efforts to help me stay connected with my Filipino heritage. In fact, my mother learned how to make lumpia, and they provided me with books and artifacts of the Philippines from an early age. This is an example of attempting to engage with the 'folkloric' cultural aspects (Willing and Fronek, 2014 as cited in Sidhu, 2018; Hubinette, 2004, as cited in Sidhu, 2018). However, these efforts do not protect adoptees from experiencing stereotypes and being excluded (Yngvesson, 2010 as cited in Sidhu, 2018). When these experiences occur, it can cause a lot of confusion for a transnational adoptee since they "grow up thinking and trying to be the same as everyone else only to be confronted by racism which challenges their conception of self" (McLeod, 2018, p. 213). Although I had access to information about the Philippines, I remained wholly ignorant of it. I always knew I wanted to know more and I should know more, but there was always something else to prioritize instead.

Since college, I have been in possession of my birth certificate and adoption paperwork; however, it was not until 13 years later when I started to investigate these documents. When reading the adoption paperwork, I once noted the use of the term 'out of wedlock' in the legal proceedings. This connects with Sidhu's (2018) argument that although adoption may appear

to be wholly beneficial to society (a figment of modernity), it also falls trap to the modernity-coloniality paradigm in that coloniality is perpetuated through the logic of state racism where certain children, including 'illegitimate' ones, are seen as contaminating the purity of a nation and therefore are good candidates for adoption. Birth mothers with children born out of wedlock were pressured to give them up for adoption to avoid the stigma associated with having a child out of wedlock (Sidhu, 2018). Given that my adoption paperwork clearly states I was born out of wedlock and no birth father was listed on my birth certificate, it makes me wonder what the circumstances were that led my birth mother to put me up for adoption and whether it was on their own volition or due to the same sort of influence.

It has only been in the last 10 years or so that my curiosity and interest into my adoption and my history has really bubbled up. Ahluwalia (2007 as cited in McLeod, 2018) explained that many transnational adoptees experience an overwhelming need to connect with their remote past and lost homeland in an attempt to reconcile their past, better understand their identity, and develop an autonomous self-concept with ample connection to their origin in the present, which allows them to navigate the world more authentically (Leighton, 2012 as cited in McLeod, 2018). To this end, I became very interested in visiting the Philippines. I finally made my first return to my homeland in the summer of 2018. Through AncestryDNA, I learned that I was a 93% DNA match with the Southern Philippines region which includes the Visayas and Mindanao region even though I was born on the island of Luzon in the Northern Philippines region.

I learned a lot about the Philippines during the 2018 trip. Randomly, my friends and I ended up visiting a museum in Intramuros where I learned about the history of José Rizal, a very prominent Filipino historical figure. A few days later, we found ourselves in the middle of a parade in a park that we later learned was Rizal Park. This parade was celebrating the 157th anniversary of José Rizal's birth. My experience learning about José Rizal made me realize how little I knew about Filipino history. McLeod (2018) remarked how the common assumption that those with mixed bloodlines must embody multiple cultures is incorrect logic. Though my situation is not exactly the same in that I have a 'pure' Filipino bloodline, I resonate with this sentiment as in some ways my metaphorical bloodline as a transnational adoptee is mixed--Filipino and white United Statesian. Instead of embodying both cultures, I tend to feel as if I have a void of culture. It is a strange dialectic paradox, because I feel a cultural void due to being adopted while also experiencing cultural erasure due to the colonization of the Filipino people.

Mignolo and Walsh (2018) talked about delinking from the Colonial Matrix of Power and re-existing in ways to use the imaginary of modernity as a way to enact decoloniality. For me, I would never want to negate all the love, care, and support I have received from my parents and sisters, whom I would not have known if it were not for being adopted. Ultimately, I do not know if I had the choice whether I would choose the path of not being adopted. But what I do want to make sure is that I am able to delink and re-exist within the adoption experience in order to move from being used by it to using it. One small way that I have been trying to reclaim some of this heritage relates to my name. When looking at my birth certificate, I learned that my first name in the Philippines is 'Aaron Stewart' with no middle name as opposed to how my names are designated in the United States with my first name as Aaron and my middle name as Stewart. This distinction is of even more importance to me when I think about Filipino naming conventions where the middle name in the Philippines is reserved for the mother's maiden name. Since I had no birth father identified and only a birth mother, I took the maternal surname as my own, leaving me with no Filipino middle name. Going by 'Aaron Stewart' (as a first name) is an effort to not perpetrate the erasure of my birth mother's lived experience. In a way, I see this as an effort to delink and re-exist within the adoption experience.

2.1.3 Where I Am Now and Where I Am Going

My journey in understanding and embodying decoloniality is nascent with the first exposure to these concepts in that cross-cultural dynamics course. At the time, my doctoral research was already underway, so while I started thinking more deeply about the systems in which I was situated and ways to delink and re-exist with them, my efforts to apply these concepts in my dissertation seem lacking in retrospect. My dissertation explored why natural mentoring relationships emerge between some students and teachers. While I collected data on both the how and the why, my project focused on the contributing factors that lead to these mentorships,

though I'm still deeply interested in 'the how' as in the process by which natural mentorships form. More broadly, I'm drawn to understanding the systems of support we create to navigate life transitions, especially during adolescence and emerging adulthood. This interest is personal; it's grounded in my own experiences and in the belief that developing these supports early can really shape how we move through life.

I aim for my work to be grounded in decoloniality, accompaniment, and critical realism (see glossary), though adopting and embodying these paradigms is still a work in progress. My academic journey took me from biochemistry, where I was trained to value objectivity and precision, to CP, where I've embraced complexity, context, and methodology. Looking back, it makes sense. I've always been drawn to the "how," even in the biochemistry lab, and even now, I see myself not as a subject-matter expert in mentoring but as a methodologist with the goal to elevate community voices. I gravitate toward qualitative methods because I connect most with storytelling and lived experience. That said, I operate as a mixed-methods practitioner in my current role, often balancing the desire to center stories with the pressure to produce generalizable insights. Though, I have never felt fully aligned with the pressure for generalizability and transferability—they don't feel natural to me. I am also challenged by the terms of knowledge generation and knowledge production. To me, they tend to center the commodification of knowledge where it is something to be manufactured, sold, and consumed. Instead, I try to think about knowledge production from an ecological metaphor centered around energy transfer between beings.

However, if knowledge production is an element of modernity, then coloniality is lurking in its shadow. As a methodologist, I wonder about the ways we are able to delink and re-exist within knowledge systems. How can we shift from being used by modernity to using it to transform from being colonized beings to decolonized within knowledge systems? The NLU CP program's structure allowed for flexibility and self-direction, and I was lucky to be paired with an advisor who encouraged meaning-making and supported decolonial approaches. My advisor's accompaniment allowed me to explore research methods in ways that felt right to me. But even in doing so, I have noticed a tension: I can use certain strategies to reduce extractivism and maintain trust, and often those efforts are seen as positive, contributing to epistemic justice which would in turn be an effort in embodying decoloniality. However, I am now starting to question whether that is enough. After engaging in reflection, a sense of uncertainty about whether I truly avoided harm, or done research right lingers. This fuels my ongoing reflection about what ethical, non-extractive research really looks like, especially now that I am finished with my doctoral training. Before when I was working on my dissertation, it seemed like using qualitative research methods, incorporating an ecological/systems focus, and applying recommended research techniques to establish trustworthiness would be significant efforts towards decolonizing my research practice. Now, it is clear that these types of efforts are minimal towards embodying decoloniality. Instead of delinking from the system to re-exist within it, it feels more like just making incremental shifts while still being plugged into the dominant system.

My progress on this journey of embodying decoloniality is still entrenched in the First Horizon. I continue on this journey with the hope that my 'destination' is not in the First Horizon but beyond it.

2.2 Salma

I am at a crossroads. To my right, there is a vibrant, flourishing garden, brilliant and oh so alive and colorful. It is both deeply familiar and strange; a place I know I once belonged, yet am unsure how to enter.

To my left, a dense collection of high-rise concrete buildings. They stand tall and dull. Their edges are sharp and their shadows are long. They are familiar, maybe even comforting in their symmetry and predictability. Here I know the rules, the boundaries, and the bargains I must keep. It feels safe in the sense that a routine is safe, yet also unsafe, because of its fragility, and mere disconnect from nature.

Some days I find myself drifting back toward the concrete blocks, drawn by expectation. Deadlines, meetings, the needs and expectations of clients, supervisors, and colleagues, and my own self. All calling me to fit into a rigid shape, a structure, the system. It's easier here, perhaps. Simpler to measure my days by invoices, to count my worth in emails answered, voices pleased. A lethal kind of safety. A safety where my heart and gut shut down.

Then, sometimes, I break away. I find my soul tribe, fellow visionaries. We gather, the boundaries of the concrete blocks dissolve. Connection, creativity and our capacity to imagine and re-imagine thrives. This is where the magic happens; moments of authenticity, shared bread, and serendipity. I savor the freedom to care, to wonder and get a glimpse of what the world would be like if we could all live so intertwined, so abundant.

But soon enough, the system summons me back. The world of rent and scaling business, the drumbeat of "we must monetize." I want to shout my lungs out: No! The only thing we must do is to break free. What if we measured our worth by how well we cared for one another, by how evenly nourishment and warmth could be shared? What if value was found not in the final balance of a bank statement, but in the fullness of our lives, the balance of our days?

Again and again, I find myself moving between these two worlds. I linger in the concrete, making just enough to escape, to taste the vibrancy of the garden, to join those who remember magic and possibility. And so I sway, restless in Horizon 2, a space between the world that is and the world that might be, hoping, always, to find a path from greyness to color, from counting to caring, from fragmentation to wholeness.

I am an Egyptian woman who was born and raised in Cairo, Egypt. My first encounter with CP was during my undergraduate Psychology degree at The American University in Cairo (AUC) between 2005 and 2009. My intention was not to study CP at all. I wanted to become an art therapist. Luckily, I attended AUC while it was still in the heart of Cairo, which made it very easy for students to engage surrounding communities through community-based learning and volunteering activities.

Fig.2 Salma El-Sayeh at the Swiss Club, Imbaba, Egypt, 2022

Today, AUC is located in a new city that is secluded from more diverse parts of Cairo. My time at AUC was life changing because of the exposure I got at and more on the way to campus. Around 2005 or 2006, I rode Cairo's metro for the first time. Before that, I grew up largely sheltered, attended a private school, and was not fully aware of the realities beyond these bubbles. One day on Cairo's metro, I realized that I am a minority. And that the majority of Egyptians are living a very different life from mine. Mind you, I did not grow up in exaggerated affluence, but still, I was living a life that is very different from the life of the majority of Egyptians.

Ironically, my time at the elitist AUC (Munz, 2011) deeply exposed me to Cairo's realities and inequities through community engagement and those metro commutes. Coincidentally, or serendipitously, AUC started offering undergraduate classes in CP around 2008. By then, my urge to address the inequalities I'd seen had grown, and CP's emphasis on power, participation, and transformation made perfect sense. I clicked with the field, especially through community-based learning opportunities with Dr. Liz Coker.

As the campus prepared to move to its secluded new location, I worked as a Research Assistant with Dr. Mona Amer, studying the move's impact on student-led civic and community engagement. This work probably landed me my first job at AUC's Gerhart Center for Philanthropy on Civic Engagement. My time at the center was also formative because it is where I met my lifelong mentor Dina H. Sherif.

During my time at the center, I often attended high-level meetings about youth-led community and civic engagement, I was often the only young person in the room. It felt odd; they were discussing my generation's future without really including us. This frustrated me, especially through my CP lens.

Right after I graduated, and once again, coincidentally, or serendipitously, AUC launched its Master's in CP program, and of course, I joined the program with my lifelong friend Farah Shash. The Master's degree allowed me to delve into urban divides, researching coalition-building in informal areas. Engaging with local and international "development" actors, my CP lens revealed unjust dynamics: donor dependency, "experts" deciding community fates, and tokenistic participation, among others.

I remember saying in class that only a revolution could change Egypt. That was in 2011. Shortly after, an uprising really happened, and my generation resisted, united and connected in a very Utopian way, and eventually toppled the government (Elkamel, 2012). Fast forward to today, and Egypt still suffers from the same inequalities. That so many people died and not much has changed shook my being, and probably that of many others from my generation. It made me realize that change and deep-rooted change is far more complex than I had imagined.

Between undergrad and my Master's, I grew frustrated with traditional development, how it was trend-based, driven by foreign donors who would move on, leaving communities in limbo with half-finished projects. After a project ends, local communities may be left with the skills of doing one or two jobs within the structure built during the project but never the know-how of how to manage it; never the full picture.

Near the end of 2012, Dina had just started her company, Ahead of the Curve (ATC). ATC is different from any other player that is concerned with the question of development; focused on escaping donor-dependency and creating financially viable models for change. For a sense of some of the work that we do, visit our Facebook page and view these videos. I have been with ATC for 13 years, carrying the wisdom of my mentors and friends: Dr. Liz Coker, who seeded CP values; Dr. Mona Amer, who pushed for excellence; Farah, with whom I practiced accompaniment and praxis intuitively; and Dina, who always encourages me to live true to my values, use my voice, and lead authentically.

By 2018, ATC had grown into a noteworthy and respected player in shaping the behavior of private companies towards greater transparency and responsibility and encouraging a new breed of organizations–dual mission enterprises that pursue both financial viability and social impact. We created the narrative around the importance of corporations that are stakeholder (not shareholder) centric and the importance of nurturing home-grown solutions to address pressing social and environmental challenges. While our work resonated with the market, it didn't fully resonate with me. This urged me to start my PhD, seeking to further infuse this work with CP values, and more importantly, a deeper emphasis on transformation and change.

I enrolled in NLU's first international cohort in 2020, meeting my mentor Bradley Olson and my co-authors, Cari and Aaron Stewart. Brad created space for all parts of me: the CP activist, the practical professional, and the curious person open to possibilities. With Cari and Aaron Stewart, we worked effortlessly, reflected deeply, and accompanied each other.

These experiences have shaped who I am. I carry them to my work at ATC, building self-sustaining organizations to address inequalities, and at AUC, where I teach Master's students, hoping to open their minds and hearts to carving their own path in CP and the world. Over the years, anti-coloniality and decoloniality has grown central to my thinking/feeling/practice, inspired by scholars like Edward Said (1979), Freire (1970), Jason Hickel (2021), and the Colonial Matrix of Power.

I have developed a set of interest areas and practices to move further towards a decolonial approach. Different experiences and beliefs have led me to these practices, and I am sure that they will continue to evolve with me over time. These practices and focus areas are:

1. **Cultivating Economic Sovereignty; Escaping donor-dependency through social entrepreneurship:** I firmly believe that foreign aid is one of the strongest vehicles for maintaining coloniality (Chiba & Heinrich, 2019; Fentahun, 2023). The power dynamics between "Western donors" and their "beneficiaries" or "developing" countries often perpetuate colonial dynamics. My main strategy of choice has been experimenting with the creation of sustainable organizations (whether they are companies or hybrids between companies and non-profits) that aim at creating financially viable means of addressing pressing social and environmental challenges; or what is often referred to as solidarity or civic economy (Kagan, 2019). I view these as a tool for delinking from colonial financial structures that are a direct rejection of the colonial aid model that perpetuates saviorism and are building pathways for self-determination within local communities across the Global South.

2. **Decolonizing the Enterprise**; Acknowledging that social entrepreneurship, like many other models, is imperfect, and infusing it with more decolonial practices: Over the years, I realized that social entrepreneurship in and of itself is imperfect. It can perpetuate colonial extractivist approaches, inequitable power dynamics, or the accumulation of wealth for a select few if the dual-mission organizations designed for liberation are simply recycling the ways of the system. With the above in mind, I advocate for a breed of change makers that deeply understand local realities, actively engage stakeholders in their work, and aim at addressing root causes in the long-run. I do this by creating and offering various workshops, training programs, publications, and accompaniment models at my current employer. These offerings focus on critiquing traditional capitalism, and more importantly work alongside change makers on ensuring that solutions are co-created with communities, address root-causes, and are governed in a manner that ensures shared decision-making, and more importantly equity. The emphasis on shared governance in particular challenges the hierarchical, "expert-decides" dynamic I witnessed in traditional development and social entrepreneurship and attempts to dismantle the colonial power structure inside organizations themselves, redistributing authority to ensure these enterprises are truly of and by the community, not for it. Shared equity is far more complex and ensures that community members who are typically excluded from decision making, and ownership, have an equal voice and stake in the organization's growth and success. This stream of my work is a form of resistance from within the system; by pushing already existing organizations towards greater justice, and a re-imagination of what growth and success means, and how success is distributed.

3. **Furthering Regenerative Organizations**: which was the topic of my dissertation and is my area of focus for the next phase of my career. Regenerative organizations are those focused on healing and restoring social and ecological systems in a manner that is holistic and context sensitive (Hutchings & Storm, 2019). As opposed to traditional non-profits or companies that may focus on mitigating or adapting to harm, regenerative organizations adopt a systemic health and well-being perspective and emphasize a contribution to resilience, robustness, and well-being through a variety of principles and practices. It moves beyond traditional "sustainability" paradigms towards what Artuto Escobar (2018) describes as relational ontologies; by viewing organizations as living entities deeply connected to their land and community. This work opposes the exploitative, growth-at-all-costs capitalist model by building organizations that nourish their social and ecological context. My work is now dedicated to supporting organizations (non-profit, for-profit, informal) as they transition towards regeneration through knowledge creation, training programs, and accompaniment journeys. I support their transition from the "one-world" logic and towards a pluriversal model where many ways of being and doing co-exist and thrive.

4. **Centering Epistemic Justice: Emphasizing Local Stories and Narratives**: After seeing Western theories being aspired for, regardless of their local relevance, and quantitative metrics (alone) repeatedly fail to capture local realities, I prioritize the creation of local knowledge to counter the hegemony of Western theories that do not capture realities in the Global South. Whether by engaging in grounded theory around how and why leaders engage in responsible practices, or sharing the stories and practices of local innovators, how and why social innovators embark on their journeys, or making sure that the stories of local innovators are as widely shared and celebrated as their Western counterparts. This part of my work is about decolonizing methodologies and narratives as an act of resistance (Smith, 2012). In any knowledge creation endeavor that I embark on, I emphasize qualitative insights, as much as I used to emphasize numbers and statistics. I also aim to legitimize practices from the Global South and assert that our stories and lived experiences are as valid as quantitative metrics.

5. **Facilitation over instruction:** has been a focus of mine in my role as a faculty member. I do this by ensuring that all of my students have an equal voice in shaping the curriculum of any class; that the curriculum itself remains flexible to our evolution throughout the semester; continuously engaging students in reflections; engaging students in alternative modes of learning, including artistic expression; encouraging students to critique the predominantly Western nature of the literature that they

engage in; and infusing practices and thought pieces from the Global South within the curriculum. These practices are just a starting point and help move me from an importer of knowledge to a facilitator who is creating space for each student to uncover their own path within CP and the world. These practices are my attempt to move towards a more decolonial pedagogy (Walsh, 2018; Freire, 1970).

6. **Always emphasizing presence and accompaniment:** to counter the "parachute-in" expert model, I always emphasize presence and accompaniment, and the practice of relationality. I do this by walking with, not leading for anyone I work with. This requires humility, deep listening, and a commitment to the long journey. I do this by continually engaging in praxis, maintaining flexibility in any endeavor that I embark on, and prioritizing process and intention over rigid and pre-determined "results-based monitoring." This entails practices as simple as always creating space for shared meals, as a deliberate celebration and honoring of Arab and African traditions of community and hospitality, and to ensure the creation of a shared human space.

These practices are influenced by both colonial and decolonial systems, but they reflect where I currently stand and perceive from; an in-between space.

2.3 Cari

Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.

(Maya Angelou)

There is a future I can feel more than I can describe - a future that lives just beyond the edges of what we can currently name. When I turn toward the third horizon and let myself imagine what CP could become once we fully loosen colonialism's grip, the world softens and expands. It feels less like a destination and more like a homecoming.

In this imagined future, systems no longer extract - they listen. They breathe. They respond. The work of CP takes place in circles: on Land, in kitchens, beside rivers, in community halls filled with the warmth of belonging. Research and evaluation are ceremonies again, woven through relationships rather than institutions. Knowledge grows from story, from experience, from intergenerational memory. Children, Elders, newcomers, and long-rooted communities teach us what matters, and we, as practitioners, learn to follow their lead.

I imagine a world where Indigenous sovereignty is not an aspiration but a lived architecture of governance, where Black liberation is not a slogan but the air we breathe—where migrant communities, 2SLGBTQIA+ people, and all those historically marginalized communities shape the systems that once shaped them. In this third horizon, Community Psychologists no longer 'include' communities; we exist within communities as relational partners, witnesses, and co-learners. The boundary between expert and participant dissolves, replaced by mutual recognition.

Here, decision-making happens through relational authority rather than hierarchy. We ask different questions: What does care require of us? What does dignity look like here? How can we move together? Policies are crafted from stories. Strategies emerge from collective sensemaking. Accountability is measured by whether people feel seen, safe, and supported.

In this world, our work is guided by second horizon seeds that we nurtured along the way - acts of love, experiments in relational evaluation, community-defined success measures, stories that shifted what was thinkable. Working deeply is no longer a strategy; it is the cultural soil from which all transformation grows. We understand that systems change happens when values shift, when relationships strengthen, when we remember how deeply bound our liberation is to one another.

In Horizon three, labor is redefined. Care counts. Kindness counts. Emotional labor is recognized as world-building work. Leadership is measured not by efficiency but by wisdom, presence, and the ability to nurture belonging. Check-ins and celebrations are not add-ons - they are practices that keep communities alive and connected. We celebrate victories not in outputs, but in how people feel when they walk through our doors.

And oh, the stories. They travel like medicine. They guide our learning, shape our methods, and help us trace the contours of transformation. We no longer rely on colonial metrics to prove change. Instead, we listen for shifts in narrative, in possibility, in relationship, in the texture of

daily life. Systems change is something we experience together, not something we report on from a distance.

In this Horizon 3 world, CP is a practice of accompaniment, reciprocity, and collective imagination. It is grounded in Land, ancestry, humility, and the radical belief that communities are the rightful stewards of their futures. It is a space where love is not only welcomed—it is the strategy.

This future is not fantasy. I have seen pieces of it. I have touched it in the work at GEO, in community circles, in gatherings that centered the wisdom of the Global South, in moments when people chose compassion over control. These glimpses are the seeds.

And so, my epilogue is not an ending. It is an invitation—to step more fully into Horizon 3, to nurture what is already emerging, to choose again and again the path of relationship, justice, reciprocity, love, and collective thriving.

We know better now.

And in this shared future, we do better - together.

Fig.3 Cari Patterson in the Annapolis Valley, Nova Scotia, Canada, 2025

I was born in Western Canada, in the Prairies, a settler descendant. My parents' families immigrated from England and Germany in the early 1900s to the land of milk and honey, where you could get 'free' land (stolen from Indigenous peoples) and your dreams could come true if you worked hard enough.

Living there, I witnessed blatant and pervasive racism and discrimination toward Indigenous people in particular, from individual comments at the dinner table, in stores, in schools, in workplaces, to 'starlight tours', where police pick up Indigenous people, often for minor charges like drunkenness, drive them to remote, cold outskirts of the city, and abandon them in frigid sub-zero temperatures to find their own way home.

> Once you know the truth, you can't un-know it.
>
> (Sherman Alexie)

As a child, I had an innate feeling of social justice, and a sense of responsibility for making things right. That feeling stayed with me as I got older, and as a teenager I found a feeling of home in the United Church of Canada, with its strong social justice mandate and its practice of accountability for wrongdoings (for instance, taking responsibility and apologizing for its role in Canada's Indian Residential School system).

Growing up in poverty in a single-parent family, I saw people working hard to get ahead and not making much progress. My family experienced trauma, and I am only now starting to fully understand how deeply it impacted my life.

I didn't consciously realize it at the time, but somewhere inside I knew I needed to get away if I wanted to have a healthy life. Through a love for learning (which translated into doing well in school), some hard work, and a bit of luck, I spent a year working in Aotearoa (New Zealand) as a young adult. The opportunity to see my life from a distance, as well as the pull of new relationships and places helped me find a place for myself in Nova Scotia, a predominantly rural province on the east coast of Canada, with a scholarship and admission to Acadia University.

2.3.1 Embracing Community Psychology

It was at Acadia that I stumbled into CP. I felt at home with the big picture analysis and the social justice agenda. I absorbed it all like a thirsty sponge. Near the end of my undergraduate degree, I learned about the CP graduate program at Wilfrid Laurier University in the province of Ontario, at that time (the early 1990s) the only core CP program in Canada. I applied, was accepted with a substantive scholarship, and again, I absorbed everything like a sponge.

At that time, we talked about systemic discrimination and oppression. In the program and in my work experience that followed I was conscious of racism, sexism, capitalism, heterosexism, and misogyny. My innate sense of wanting to do my part to help make things right grew stronger, and I immersed myself in learning about the true history of Canada, and the federal government's intentional efforts to wipe out Indigenous peoples and their culture.

2.3.2 Understanding the Colonial Matrix of Power

As I learned more, I started to understand these actions and the belief in the superiority of the European world view as colonial. The more I learned, the more I realized that colonialism is invisible to the colonizers, and I knew I wanted to do something about that - to help white people see colonialism and understand our complicity in perpetuating inherently colonial systems and institutions. I realized that the colonizers have a critical role to play in dismantling colonialism. One example of my work to help white people think about dismantling colonialism is Stepping Up, an educational program I co-created to help settlers understand our role in the Truth and Reconciliation process with Indigenous peoples across Canada.

Until the lions have their storytellers, the story of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.

(Ngugi wa Thiong'o)

I was a doctoral student in the CP program at National Louis University (NLU) in Chicago during the pandemic when I first heard of the Colonial Matrix of Power (CMP), a term coined by Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano in 2000. It refers to the modern structures and institutions of power and control based in colonialism that privilege Eurocentric ways of knowing and being as superior, progressive and universal, though they are actually racist, capitalist, misogynist, heterosexist and patriarchal.

Salma, Aaron Stewart, and I developed a strong connection as PhD students in the same virtual cohort at NLU. One of our courses in particular, Cross-Cultural Dynamics in Global Context stands out for its decolonial approach. The course focused on decolonial concepts, and the instructional approach embodied a decolonial paradigm. The teaching style was emergent, modeling different ways of being, knowing, doing, and learning (e.g., embodiment, self-exploration, and artistic expression) led by community-centered practitioners from around the world. We engaged with our minds, bodies, and spirits. This experience piqued our shared interest and sparked an ongoing conversation about learning and practicing CP in decolonized ways.

The interpretive frameworks that I have incorporated into my CP practice are *transformative* (I am interested in participants' complex and varied experiences and draw on these to inform social change), *pragmatic* (I want to know what works and am not tied to any particular method or approach to finding out), and *critical* (I work on recognizing my power and privilege and the inequities people experience based on race, class, orientation, and gender discrimination).

In my dissertation research, I wanted to learn about decolonizing evaluation, which was and is a big component of my work. My research focused on influencing the ecosystem in which evaluation work takes place in order to make it better serve Indigenous and African Nova Scotian communities. Through the Learning Pathway (the blog series I created as my dissertation), I came to understand that decolonized evaluation would draw on Indigenous and Afrocentric worldviews, and its tools and methodologies would be based on community ways of knowing and being, center relationships, be grounded in community context, honor community values and beliefs, and serve the community.

My dissertation experience taught me that decolonizing evaluation is the work of dismantling the colonial structures and removing the shackles so that communities can practice evaluation in ways that work for them - with respect and support from the rest of the evaluation ecosystem. I learned that decolonized evaluation is not simply a matter of practicing evaluation differently; we must do the work of dismantling colonial ways of working before new approaches can take root.

2.3.3 Practicing Decolonized Community Psychology

I was eager to apply my learnings about decolonizing the way I work, and I had the opportunity to practice in my role as Evaluation & Learning Lead at GEO Nova Scotia (GEO). GEO emerged during the pandemic when everything (e.g., government services, employment, school, medical appointments, banking, entertainment, connecting with family and friends, and even accessing information about how to stay safe) suddenly went online and the digital divide expanded exponentially. People living on the margins were even further excluded from society. Concerned community organizations came together to get devices and Internet connections to people living in deep poverty. The work has continued and GEO is now a digital inclusion leader in Nova Scotia.

Because the work to get everyone online was emergent and the usual way of work was suspended during the pandemic, I had a lot of freedom to try new things.

GEO aims to *transform lives through digital inclusion*; and it recognizes that sustainable change comes about by transforming systems. This is not only about structures, programs, or policies—it is about relationships, culture, and the ways we choose to show up with one another. Tatiana Fraser's *The Art of Scaling Deep* (2023) emphasizes that the most enduring change happens when we transform values, mindsets, and relationships—not simply expand programs or influence policy. Bill Sharpe's (2013) *Three Horizons: The Patterning of Hope* describes how systems evolve: how the dominant current system (H1) interacts with emerging innovations (H2) and how small seeds of possibility begin to shape a more just future (H3).

Most of GEO's decolonial work lives in Horizon Two—where we experiment, listen, reflect, and build new ways of working, while still navigating the constraints of existing systems. I have been cultivating several strategies that I think contribute to decolonizing the way GEO works.

Knowledge & Storytelling: Delinking from Colonial Knowledge Hierarchies

> Stories go in circles. They don't go in straight lines. It helps if you listen in circles because there are stories inside and between stories, and finding your way through them is as easy and as hard as finding your way home. Part of finding is getting lost, and when you are lost you start to open up and listen.
>
> (Terry Tafoya)

Coloniality of knowledge privileges experts, institutions, and Western rationality, while erasing community wisdom, emotion, and lived experience. The approach I helped build at GEO reclaims narrative sovereignty, restoring value to knowledge rooted in community experience, context, and relationships, rather than institutionally sanctioned data alone.

Practices for Delinking from Colonial Knowledge Hierarchies
- Using a well-known folk story (stone soup) to create a collective understanding that everyone involved contributes to and benefits from the work (as opposed to the traditional understanding of the work as the government putting in funding and the 'poor people' taking out or receiving computers).
- Inviting all partners to co–create GEO's Story of Transformation, a foundational document that maps a collective path for transforming lives through digital inclusion.
- Honoring storytelling as insight into how the system feels, works, and impacts lives.
- Embedding kindness, love, and relational truth, and emotional presence into how we learn and evaluate, actively resisting colonial ideas about objectivity.
- Naming lived experience as expertise and designing learning spaces where everyone teaches and learns.

Continually naming lived experience as expertise and creating learning spaces where everyone teaches and everyone learns is both decolonial and deeply aligned with H3 futures rooted in reciprocity and shared authority.

Power & Decision-Making: Challenging the Coloniality of Power

> If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time… but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.
>
> (Lilla Watson)

Coloniality of power maintains rigid hierarchies, top-down control, and institutional "saviorism." GEO's approach decentralizes control and lifts up shared responsibility, collective agency, and community-defined legitimacy—a direct counter to colonial power structures.

Practices for Challenging the Coloniality of Power
- Continually acknowledging that none of us can do this work alone, and recognizing and celebrating all contributions.
- Building systems where authority is relational, not hierarchical (e.g., morning scrums, check-ins, shared retreats, collective problem-solving).
- Adopting a 'yes, if' mindset: co-creating solutions rather than enforcing rules.
- Empowering staff to make compassionate decisions in the moment, grounded in the reflective question: '*Who do I want to be in this moment?*' This question shifts power; it asks staff and partners to anchor decisions in compassion rather than control.

In many ways, this is what Scaling Deep demands: culture change before system change. And in a Three Horizons framing, I see our relational ways of making decisions as H2 innovations, prefiguring the H3 world we're trying to build—one where care and interdependence guide action.

Labor, Value & Ways of Being: Disrupting the Colonial Division of Labor

Colonial systems privilege efficiency, output, and productivity while devaluing relational, emotional, or community-based labor. GEO transforms the definition of labor itself: care becomes central, not peripheral, a decolonial revaluation of what matters.

Practices for Disrupting the Colonial Division of Labor
- Recognizing love and kindness as strategic and effective, not merely 'a nice thing to do'.
- Structuring time for relationship building—such as check-ins, celebrations, compassionate conversations, shared learning, time to get to know partners as human beings.
- Creating a learning culture where no one has to be perfect or all-knowing, making innovation possible.
- Measuring success partly by experiences of love, kindness, and relational trust.

This work is slow, deep, and necessary. It allows innovation to emerge because people feel safe enough to try, fail, reflect, and try again. *Scaling Deep* reminds us that these cultural norms—trust, kindness, authenticity—are what make long-lasting transformation possible. And the *Three Horizons* model recognizes this relational labor as part of the H2 bridgework that brings us closer to an H3 system grounded in dignity and connection.

Identity, Humanity & Belonging: Challenging Colonial Subjectivity

The colonial matrix creates systems that categorize, diminish, and control people based on constructed identities. GEO's approach directly counters the colonial production of 'otherness', replacing it with belonging, dignity, and mutual recognition.

Practices for Challenging Colonial Subjectivity
- Honest conversations about discrimination and the role of mainstream systems in producing inequity.
- Deep learning about community realities and adapting practices with humility.
- Participant-centered approaches that affirm agency and honor people's stories.
- Creating spaces where everyone's humanity and growth are visible and valued.

In a *Scaling Deep* sense, this is cultural transformation: shifting the very conditions that shape belonging and exclusion. Through a *Three Horizons* lens, these practices are recognized as early expressions of the H3 world we aspire to—where belonging is the norm, not the exception.

Emotion, Love & Kindness: Resisting Colonial Emotional Control

Love is an action: never simply a feeling

([bell hooks](#))

Colonial systems frame emotion—especially love, care, and tenderness—as unprofessional or weak, enforcing objectivity and detachment. GEO restores emotion as wisdom, relationship as strategy, and care as a legitimate form of power.

Practices for Resisting Colonial Emotional Control
- Naming love and kindness explicitly in guiding documents and strategies.
- Treating these values as effective practices that produce better outcomes.
- Embedding emotional presence and reflection into leadership and daily work.
- Creating a culture where feeling, connection, and relational care are part of the organizational identity.

Emotion helps reveal what data alone cannot. This is *Scaling Deep* work: changing the emotional architecture of our system. And in *Three Horizon*s language, these emotional commitments are H3 values embodied now.

Evaluating Systems Change: Delinking from Colonial Metrics

I think that the thing I most want you to remember is that research is a ceremony. And so is life. Everything that we do shares in the ongoing creation of our universe.

([Shawn Wilson](#))

Colonial evaluation systems rely on rigid metrics, linear causality, and institutional definitions of "impact," often reducing community transformation to numbers that travel upward to funders. GEO's systems-change evaluation intentionally breaks from this paradigm by embracing relational, narrative, emergent, and community-defined understandings of progress.

Practices for Delinking from Colonial Metrics
- Rejecting extractive data logics by prioritizing story, meaning-making, and collective interpretation over surveillance-style counting.
- Framing systems change as a shared, relational process rather than an institutional achievement, honoring the contributions of partners, staff, and participants.
- Evaluating transformation at multiple horizons—immediate experiences of dignity and connection, expanding community capacities, and long-term shifts in the digital inclusion ecosystem—without forcing these onto linear logics of attribution.
- Using learning reports as relational documents, co-created with partners, where stories, reflections, and community wisdom hold as much authority as metrics. (See the [GEO Nova Scotia 2023-24 Evaluation & Learning Report](#) as an example of a *living learning journey*, co-created with community, and designed to celebrate shared impact through stories, reflection, and collective wisdom).
- Inviting communities to define what success feels like, not only what it looks like on dashboards.
- Counting love, kindness, safety, and support as meaningful indicators of system transformation, resisting the colonial notion that only quantifiable metrics are credible.
- Centering reflexivity, asking: *What is changing in us? What is changing in our relationships? What is changing in the system because of how we show up?*

In this way, GEO models an emergent, relational, and community-rooted evaluation practice that refuses colonial assumptions about rigor, neutrality, and value. It recognizes that systems change is not simply what shifts in institutions—it is also what shifts in relationships, narratives, possibilities, and collective capacities.

This is where *Scaling Deep* and decoloniality converge most clearly for me: we're not just measuring change—we're changing the culture of evaluation itself. Through a *Three Horizons* lens, evaluative practice becomes a bridge between what is and what could be, helping us sense the emergence of an H3 future rooted in care, reciprocity, and justice.

3. What This All Mean to Us and to You

The previous sections emerged from individual reflections on key questions: How are we decolonizing our work? What does this look like day-to-day, and what drives or hinders us? Despite our different pathways, we identified three common principles in our attempts to decolonize CP practice: flexibility and experimentation, responsiveness to what works for communities, and a commitment to facilitation and co-learning.

- **Flexibility** emerged as a shared strategy for moving away from rigid structures, whether in methods, program designs, or reporting. We feel compelled to innovate and experiment, reimagining rather than accepting the status quo. This flexibility counters imposed Western solutions and creates space for local co-creation, validating community experience and continuously reframing our work through reflection on power and (de)coloniality.

- **A focus on what works** that centers community realities and aspirations over dominant paradigms or funder demands. As Cari noted, it's "*It's not about the Key Performance Indicators that you have to report on. It's about being in the community, being with people, and working on something that matters to the community. How you do it matters and who's involved matters.*" This approach decenters Western models and re-centers local values, allowing communities to define success and hold us accountable to their own social, spiritual, and economic well-being, and not imported models of "development" or understanding.

- **Facilitation** reflects our shared role as creators of meaningful, co-created experiences rather than providers of expert solutions. Whether Cari facilitating community-led evaluation with Indigenous groups, Salma guiding active learning and co-designed change models, or Aaron Stewart creating student-centered learning experiences, we prioritize inclusive, reciprocal spaces that center local knowledge and avoid imposition. This approach creates inclusive and reciprocal spaces that center local knowledge and experiences, lead to the co-creation of understandings, and avoids imposing a particular stance, interpretation, or practice.

3.1 What Holds Us Back?

Adopting these ways of working is meaningful, but it is not without challenges. Across our experiences, we identified three core difficulties: shame, others' expectations, and frustration.

- **Shame:** arises in moments of self-doubt about whether flexible, experimental work is "credible enough." For Salma, this is compounded by her identity as an Egyptian Arab woman, navigating an ecosystem that often orientalizes her background (Teo, 2017) and socializes women to undervalue their own work (Ludwig et al., 2017). Cari, further along in her career, feels less susceptible, while Aaron Stewart also encounters these doubts. Shame is deeply tied to colonization and embedded in the psyches of the (formerly) colonized (Treacher, 2004; Menakem, 2021) and perpetuated today (Carranza, 2016). The dominance of colonial ways in today's world also means that anyone breaking away from the status quo will be at the risk of being challenged, and belittled, or awakening the shame already in their psyches and/or bodies.

- **Others' expectations:** A major barrier for all of us is operating in contexts where traditional, hierarchical, or rigid approaches are the norm. In these environments people often expect us to show up as experts and offer pre-defined solutions. While this does not deter us from maintaining our approach, it does mean we must invest more energy in facilitating a shift toward more flexible, collaborative ways of working.

- **Frustration:** Frustration is closely linked to both shame and others' expectations. It stems from being in spaces where our approach is not fully understood or valued, and where our commitment to relational, community-centered work is seen as lacking rigor or legitimacy.

3.2 What Enables Us?

Despite these challenges, our reflection helped us identify several key enablers to working from a decolonial approach. At the forefront are community and accompaniment, authenticity and presence, and the commitment to meet people where they are.

- **Community and accompaniment:** We all recognized how crucial it is to be part of communities where we feel supported, unjudged, and enriched. One such space is our doctoral program where we share a cohort and a similar outlook. In Cari's case, and occasionally Aaron Stewart's and Salma's cases, work settings have also offered this kind of learning culture that moves us away from the role of expert and toward the role of companion on the journey. In reflecting on the kinds of communities we wish to build and belong to, we spoke about the importance of accompaniment. But this is not a one-way relationship. Rather, it is reciprocal and multi-directional, allowing everyone involved to learn from, support, and enrich one another.

- **Authenticity and presence:** Closely tied to community is the importance of showing up authentically and being fully present. This is something we all strive for across our personal, academic, and professional engagements. Safe, and brave (Arao & Clemens, 2023) spaces create the conditions for authenticity and presence. In turn, our own ability to be present and authentic helps cultivate those communities. As part of being authentic and present, we bring our values, emotions, and cultural selves into the spaces we embody, and we encourage others to do the same. For Cari, love and kindness are essential to authenticity and to building community. For Salma, environments that embrace elements of her culture, like hospitality, shared meals, and the ability to show up as a full human being rather than just a professional, allow for deep connection, collaboration, and ultimately, more meaningful impact.

- **Meeting people where they are:** Finally, we acknowledge that not everyone sees the world or does the work the way we do. That is okay. Meeting people where they are is a fundamental part of our approach. It does not mean silencing our perspective. It simply means making the effort to find common ground, to listen closely, and to co-create shared experiences. This is why flexibility and facilitation are so central to our practice. They allow us to engage with others in a way that is respectful, open, and generative.

4. Conclusion

So what do our reflections suggest about decolonial ways of practicing CP? We respectfully offer suggestions about some conditions we can try to create to decolonize our work based on reflections of our experiences for consideration.

We believe one of the first important elements is **recognizing and understanding colonial practices all around us**. We have to see what they are, understand where they came from, and learn about how to begin to dismantle them.

In a sense we are suggesting another layer to Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's notion that "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye." Saint-Exupery says the most important qualities of people and objects are not always immediately apparent. Often, it is the intangible qualities like love, kindness, compassion, and the essence of one's character that matter most. We are suggesting that as Community Psychologists, we can **create spaces that help us work from a place of the invisible essentials of love and kindness**.

Of course, this is easier said than done. Engaging with literature on coloniality, anti-coloniality, and de-coloniality is a starting point, but we think decoloniality is a lifelong journey. Our experiences have taught us that it is useful to think about transforming systems, and we first need to **step back and look at the whole system we are working within**. Next, bring people from all parts of the system together to explore the transformation people collectively want to bring about in the system, and think about how to do it together.

We are finding the *Three Horizons* framework (Sharpe, 2013) useful for thinking about transforming systems, and easy for people to understand. The framework highlights how today's dominant systems may evolve, or be replaced over time by shining a light on shifts in patterns of behavior, values, and systems that unfold over time (see section 2).

As we work on letting go of colonial, positivist western paradigms of thinking and opening to the third horizon and systems renewal, we **create the space and possibility of connecting with our hearts and working with love and kindness**. A decolonial approach restores emotion as

wisdom and embeds emotional presence and reflection into ongoing work, accepts relationship as strategy, and respects care as a legitimate form of power, and creates a culture where feeling, connection, and relational care are part of the organizational fabric.

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APPENDIX A
NOTE ON METHODS

Our goal was to explore three questions: 1) How are we approaching our work in a decolonial manner? 2) What holds us back from fully decolonizing ourselves and our work? and 3) What enables us? We explored these through iterative cycles of praxis-based reflexivity (Jiménez et al., 2023). We began with individual reflections on our backgrounds, methods, and the constraints shaping our work, focusing on how our practices resist or reproduce colonial logics, the feelings they evoke, and what our work could be without such limitations.

We then shared these reflections and collaboratively generated questions, using dialogue as a method of data collection (Ryan & DeStefano, 2001). In a collective online workshop, we discussed our insights, which was transcribed via Otter.ai.

Afterwards, we individually reviewed the transcript and reflected further, paying attention to how we navigate, delink from, and practice re-existence within dominant knowledge systems (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018), including the doubts this evokes. We reconvened to share these insights.

These individual and collective cycles, held between March and June 2025 across six sessions, consistently included reflection on our emotional and embodied experiences throughout.

Accompaniment model: Accompaniment refers to a relational practice of walking alongside individuals or communities as they pursue self-determined change (Watkins, 2015). It emphasizes humility, listening, solidarity, and shared learning over directives or expert-driven solutions. In the context of research and evaluation, accompaniment invites Community Psychologists to be co-participants who support rather than steer, honoring community knowledge, pace, and priorities.

Apprenticeship model: A mode of learning grounded in practice-based mentorship, where knowledge and skill are developed through ongoing participation, observation, reflection, and guided action within real contexts. Unlike traditional hierarchical models, apprenticeship—especially when adopted within decolonial praxis—foregrounds reciprocal learning, relational accountability, and the value of embodied, local, and communal knowledge. It acknowledges that wisdom emerges through practice, community engagement, and iterative learning rather than solely through formal instruction (Billet, 2016).

Critical framework: A paradigm that interrogates power, ideology, and structural oppression within social systems. Critical frameworks aim to reveal hidden assumptions, challenge dominant narratives, and advance justice-oriented change. They often draw from critical theory, feminist theory, anti-oppressive practice, and decolonial scholarship to question whose interests are served by particular knowledge systems (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005).

Critical theory and critical constructivism: center around the idea that knowledge creation is deeply influenced by power structures and ideologies, the situation of those creating knowledge in these structures, and the role of this process of creating knowledge addressing these injustices (Kincheloe, 2005).

Colonial Matrix of Power: A conceptual framework developed by Aníbal Quijano (2000) to describe how colonialism persists beyond formal political control through interconnected systems of domination. The matrix encompasses economic control, political authority, gender and sexuality hierarchies, forms of knowledge and epistemology, and cultural norms. It demonstrates how modern institutions, identities, and ways of knowing continue to be shaped by colonial logics that privilege Euro-centric world-views.

Compassionate presence: A way of being that brings mindful attention, empathy, openness, and non-judgment to relationships and encounters. Compassionate presence involves listening deeply, honoring dignity, and being fully available to another's experience without imposing one's own agenda. Within decolonial CP, it supports trust, relational accountability, and ethical engagement by fostering spaces where vulnerability, story, and holistic understanding can emerge (Boylan, 2017).

Constructivism: centers on the idea that reality is co-created by our own understanding and interpretation of it, as opposed to being an objective external truth (Schmidt, 2011).

Constructivist and critical framework: A combined approach that recognizes knowledge as socially constructed (constructivist) while also interrogating the power dynamics that shape those constructions (critical). This hybrid orientation values multiple perspectives, elevates lived experience, and critically examines how certain meanings come to dominate. It foregrounds dialogue, reflexivity, and co-creation of knowledge while attending to equity and justice (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Critical realist framework: A philosophical and methodological stance that acknowledges both the existence of a real world independent of human perception and the importance of understanding the social, political, and cultural mechanisms that shape how that world is experienced (Bhaskar, 1975). Critical realism seeks to identify underlying structures and causal mechanisms—often invisible or entrenched—that produce observable outcomes. It is particularly useful for understanding complex social systems and the layered nature of change.

Pragmatic framework: An approach focused on what works in a given context, emphasizing usefulness, flexibility, and responsiveness to real-world conditions. Pragmatism does not adhere to a single epistemology; instead, it chooses methods based on the research purpose and the needs of stakeholders. It is particularly suited to complex, community-

based settings where multiple kinds of knowledge and action-oriented insights are valued (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019).

Transformative framework: A research and evaluation paradigm rooted in social justice, equity, and the transformation of oppressive structures. It centers marginalized voices, emphasizes participatory approaches, and positions inquiry as a tool for collective liberation (Romm, 2015). This framework assumes that knowledge production is inherently political and seeks to generate change that addresses structural inequities.