

Collaborative untangling of positionality, ownership, and answerability as white researchers in indigenous spaces

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Abstract

Decentering whiteness and decolonizing educational research is not a simple matter for researchers who may (initially) be unaware of their social locations. This paper begins by describing the three authors' individual work within indigenous populations and subsequently explores the impact of their critical journey together as a community of scholars working to decolonize their research practice. Following an overview of their individual stories, the authors share principles of ethical scholarly engagement within indigenous communities, particularly positionality, ownership, and answerability, that they hope will be valuable to others who may embark upon similar critically reflective journeys. Alongside each of these principles, they pose “unanswered questions” so as not to uphold their journey as a model, but rather to illuminate how this work is messy, challenging, eye-opening, unsettling, and ongoing. The authors conclude that it is the “methodological responsibility” of white scholars to do the ethical work to understand, untangle, and dismantle potentially harmful dispositions, orientations, and practices before engaging with indigenous communities, and suggest that such transformation may be most powerfully pursued in a purposeful and collaborative space.

Keywords

Collaboration, decolonizing research, indigenous spaces, music education, ownership, positionality

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The ideological structures of settler colonialism can be observed as permeating educational research today. In her book, *Decolonizing Educational Research*, Patel (2016) notes that settler colonialism lives on in people who see each other, land, and knowledge as property, and in people's constant, insistent competition for finite resources. Relatedly, Kallio (2020), in her article titled "Decolonizing Music Education Research and the (Im)possibility of Methodological Responsibility," states, "historically, academic research about the indigenous other has conceptualized knowledge as a possession to be discovered, extracted, appropriated, commodified and distributed" (p. 180). Hess (2018) further considers the complexity of these issues in tandem with the expectations of the neoliberal research university, and proposes an anti-colonial approach to music education research for work that "requires speaking for and about Others" (p. 574). This scholarship encourages us to consider how the approaches of (white) researchers working in indigenous spaces are never value neutral nor separable from colonial legacies of harm. In fact, as Tuhiwai Smith (2012) reminds us, academic research practices have historically caused great harm to indigenous and marginalized communities. Within the context of research practices that are inseparable from the "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 1997), we suggest that it is the "methodological responsibility" (Kallio, 2020) of white scholars to do the ethical work to understand, untangle, and dismantle potentially harmful dispositions, orientations, and practices before engaging with indigenous communities.

The question of how to do this meaningful work, however, remains under-examined. In this paper we share how three white scholars working with indigenous populations came together to reflect upon, critique, untangle, and learn from the tensions embedded within our respective projects. Through a series of 23 weekly conversations, each between 1 and 2 hours in length, what emerged was a powerful intellectual space within which we learned from and challenged one another while delving more deeply into literature that helped us expand our understandings and improved our scholarly practice. Each scholar represented a common reason music teachers might enter an indigenous space to conduct research: (1) to conduct research on teaching and learning music (Kate's collective case study of Hawaiian teachers' uses of culture-based approaches to music education), (2) to create resources for music teaching and learning (Brent's co-development of a music education resource with Balinese scholars, artists, and musicians), and (3) to engage with or build music programs within local communities (Cat's beginning stages of a critical autoethnography, as she works toward building a vocal music program with and for indigenous children in Moshi, Tanzania).

We begin this paper by discussing how our collective journey toward transformative learning evolved and became centered in a desire to do the necessary work to decolonize our scholarship. We then continue with sharing aspects of our individual work within indigenous communities and how particular disorientations, ruptures, and transformations prepared us for our collective critical journey. Following these stories, we share principles of ethical scholarly engagement within indigenous communities (Patel, 2016) that especially resonated with us, particularly conceptualizations of positionality, ownership, and answerability, that we hope will be valuable to others who may embark upon similar critically reflective journeys. Alongside each of these principles, we pose "unanswered questions"—questions that emerged for us as we worked through these topics and which linger within our continuing discussions. Through these unanswered questions, we hope to emphasize the unending, messy, and complicated nature of transformative learning. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of implications for scholarly practice.

Dilemmas, transformations, and coming together

Decentering whiteness and decolonizing educational research is not a simple matter for researchers who may (initially) be unaware of their social locations. Realizations of one's positionality in an

inequitable world are often uncomfortable, for example, many white researchers grapple with what DiAngelo (2018) has termed “white fragility.” Even those researchers already working to untangle colorblindness, ignorance, and implicit bias will encounter many new realizations—epistemic ruptures (Kallio, 2020), disorienting dilemmas (Mezirow, 1997), and incongruencies (Kegan, 1994)—as they learn to work in partnership with oppressed communities.

According to Mezirow (2000), adults have already acquired a coherent body of experiences that define their lives. These include associations, concepts, values, feelings, and conditioned responses. Adults have “frames of reference,” which can be defined as structures of assumptions through which people view and understand life experiences, primarily the result of cultural assimilation and the idiosyncratic influences of primary caregivers. Mezirow explains that uncritically examined frames of reference distort ways of knowing, believing, and feeling, which “serves as the boundary condition for interpreting the meaning of an experience” (p. 32).

Kegan (1994) states that elevations in consciousness begin by means of some incongruent influence provoking a critical assessment of assumptions. Mezirow’s (1991, 1997, 2000) transformative learning theory identifies the start of adult transformation as a “disorienting dilemma.” Transformation is here understood as the process of examining and changing limited beliefs and assumptions. Taylor (2009) emphasizes two essential components of transformative learning: critical reflection and dialogue. The former, “a distinguishing characteristic of adult learning,” regards “questioning the integrity of deeply held assumptions and beliefs based on prior experience” (p. 7). Dialogue emphasizes relational and trustful communication, which can be at times “highly personal and self-disclosing” (Carter, 2002, p. 82).

Our experiences as teachers and researchers within indigenous spaces have provoked unexpected dilemmas and epistemic ruptures beyond our cultural conditionings and prior assumptions. As a result of these experiences, each of us came to our work together thinking critically (Taylor, 2009) about our understandings and dilemmas. However, none of us had previously had the opportunity to engage in the necessary communal, trustful, and personal dialogue that could further our journey toward transformative learning. The opportunity to do so in community with one another emerged as we collectively submitted a proposal to a national music education conference in early 2020. Initially, our intention was roughly to share our individual methods and findings in a traditional manner, but following some powerful initial conversations and the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic as well as the increased visibility of the Black Lives Matter movement, we recognized an opportunity to use our collective space to more critically examine and discuss our work, to expand our understanding of ethical research practices within indigenous communities, and to work toward detangling our roles as white researchers within these communities.

What followed was not only the reworking of our symposium, but also the emergence of an unintended scholarly community that extended well beyond the symposium and became a powerful learning space. During our meetings, we selected various texts to read and discuss together (e.g. Bradley, 2012; Hess, 2018; Kallio, 2020; Patel, 2016). We maintained a collective virtual document that held our jottings, wonderments, notes, and scholarly references, and served to make our collective work more concrete. We worked toward embracing vulnerability within this space as we each reflected on the trappings of our own work and recognized opportunities for improvement. The learning that ensued brought new epistemic ruptures that inspired continued learning and collaboration.

While preparing for our conference presentation, we began to recognize the power of bringing scholars together in order to untangle complex issues, and also recognized that such a community might provide a powerful way for white researchers to do the necessary work involved in decolonizing their own research practices without placing inordinate burdens on colleagues of color. According to Allison (2020),

A common misconception white people have when starting to learn about racism is that we should ask for help from non-white people of color and Black people, and look to them to explain racism to us. While it is very important to center the voices of non-white POC and Black people in our research and education processes. . . it is equally as important to remove the burden of education from them. (para. 18)

We centered our work together within this purpose, as we began to read, share, discuss, and question our own journeys in a collective space. To begin that journey required an understanding of each other's experiences engaging with indigenous communities, aspects of which each of us shares individually using the first-person voice in the following section.

Individual scholarly stories and disorienting dilemmas

Brent

After multiple years of playing and researching gamelan within the United States and Bali, as well as many encounters with the Balinese diaspora in North America, I set out to develop a resource for music teachers that could help students learn about daily life on the island. Even with a background in ethnomusicology and an understanding of how research could be conducted ethically in global spaces, I entered the project with many colonial ways of thinking. When speaking about the project to others, I would often use the phrase, "I'm going to collect songs and games from Bali and bring them back to the United States." This form of framing set up many questions of ownership and positionality. Upon arrival in Bali, my mentor and host I Ketut Gede Asnawa asked about my goals for my time in Bali. I said, "I wanted to observe children playing and making music together both in schools and outside of schools." Asnawa recommended I meet Made Taro, a folklorist who had spent decades observing children's musical play and storytelling from across Indonesia. Made Taro had a well-established after school program for children and their families to learn music, games, and stories. The children of this after school program were filmed each week for a television show hosted by Made Taro and aired on BaliTV (the main television station).

During my first meeting with Made Taro, I quickly learned that he had recorded and published over 250 songs and games from across Indonesia. My initial thought was, "Shoot! Someone has already done the work I planned to do." But quickly the conversation developed into a desired collaboration on Made Taro's part, as he had always wanted to bring these songs to a broader international audience. I was thankful that this encounter occurred early on the fourth day of my arrival because it created such a disorienting dilemma to my understanding of how "my" project was going to unfold. With the assistance of Asnawa, the three of us collaboratively thought of ways to best represent Balinese culture to an international audience. I inquired about which cultural philosophies and daily activities the two Balinese collaborators thought would best represent the essence of daily life for their people. Made Taro selected 14 songs and games he knew would work well and prepared students to perform these songs and games for me to record. I hired Balinese videographers and illustrators to record and represent these works. Additionally, I Ketut Gede Asnawa, who is a world famous composer of Balinese gamelan, arranged the songs for gamelan and I helped transcribe them to be applied to classroom instruments.

Through these encounters I learned how to become a more responsible collaborator; to ask questions and listen more, to let others guide the work, to share in the work as co-author rather than sole author; and to ethically compensate artists and scholars for their contributions to the overall project. My positionality was challenged as I learned to stand aside and provide space for Balinese people to share their culture and knowledge rather than be centered in this work as a translator of another culture. Now, as I move into future global projects, including one this year in

Trinidad, I approach the experience with a much different and more flexible understanding of doing research—looking for collaborators and partners from the start and opening myself up to letting the project unfold in more organic ways that will intentionally center the indigenous voices of the space in which I work.

Kate

I have centered much of my previous scholarly work on music teaching within under-resourced schools, and within the framework of culturally relevant pedagogy in particular. I have been specifically interested in wanting to document real life stories and examples of ways in which music teachers put culturally relevant curricular ideas into practice with their students. The Hawaiian context was especially compelling to me in this regard, as a uniquely rich example of a contemporary community that is navigating institutional restoration of indigenous cultural practices and ways of knowing within schools. My initial intent within this study was to learn about the ways that Hawaiian music teachers were demonstrating culturally relevant pedagogy, as defined by scholars such as Gloria Ladson Billings. However, upon reading the work of Hawaiian scholars studying Hawaiian schools, I recognized the importance of centering such within within a culture-based pedagogical framework, which goes further in attempting to “revitalize languages, knowledge, practices, and beliefs lost or suppressed through colonization or occupation” (Kanaiaupuni et al., 2017, p. 314S). It occurred to me that many scholarly frameworks are inseparable from the cultural contexts from which they evolve, and thus they deserve thoughtful re-examination within indigenous communities. If I truly wanted to center indigenous ways of knowing within my study, I recognized that I also needed to center the work of indigenous scholars within my study, and thus changed course with regard to the framework that guided my work.

This dilemma of how to better center indigenous ways of knowing within my study was also made clear when I worked with two of my participant teachers who are Native Hawaiian. In my interviews with both of them, I learned that, despite my best efforts, I had not done nearly enough work to understand the context and culture in which I was planning to engage. In an interview with Keikilani (names are pseudonyms), a teacher of both Hawaiian language and Polynesian music, she talked with me about how she is physically and spiritually connected with her land so deeply that she simply cannot bear to wear shoes when she is chanting in Hawaiian. In another conversation with Makena, a choral teacher who composes and produces a school-wide Hawaiian opera each year, he told me how once he had literally heard music coming to him from a sacred volcano on his island while in the process of composing. These non-Western ways of knowing were new to me, and they challenged me in important ways to reconsider my positionality within this space and culture.

These disorienting dilemmas—one more academic and one more personal—caused me important discomfort and led me to seek further knowledge on what my role might be as a researcher within this community. Feeling the tension of my positionality, and trying to navigate ways that I may be more answerable to the community within which I was engaging, I decided that I needed to develop a structure wherein I could welcome a second party, an insider to the Hawaiian culture, into the data analysis process to concentrate on the cultural lens that I brought to the study, and to raise questions about any codes, themes, portrayals, or interpretations which could misrepresent, oversimplify, or minimize the complex cultural basis of my participants’ experiences. These disorienting dilemmas have led me to seek opportunities to continue growing in my reflexive practice as a scholar, as I work to not shy away from self-critique, to continually ask myself how I can improve, to collaborate with others who will challenge me, and to question how I can remain answerable to the communities with whom I work.

Cat

Since 2007, I have traveled extensively and lived abroad, teaching and studying culturally diverse musics. For six years, I taught diverse groups of students in Thai and Japanese international schools, delivering a Western-centric curriculum. My work in indigenous communities, teaching indigenous students music through volunteer work, began in Honduras in 2011. More recently, in 2016 and prior to doctoral studies, I taught music for one month within a colored¹ community in Cape Town. The organization I worked for expected me to teach elementary and middle school students Western standard notation literacy and prepare them for the possibility of performing in ensembles. At the time, I did not question the Eurocentric focus. I aimed to be diverse by including a variety of repertoire and generally considered my presence in an underserved Cape Town school—bringing music education in ways students would likely not have had otherwise—to be positive and benevolent. At the onset of volunteer work, I considered my positionality, particularly regarding race, very little.

Over the last decade, my work in indigenous communities has brought many small disorienting dilemmas that have gradually transformed how I understand teaching and research in diverse and unjust societies. For example, in South Africa, I witnessed poverty and racial oppression in ways I had not realized before, and equity concerns were sparked for the first time. I realized my privileges more deeply and began to reflect on my responsibilities as a teacher and scholar—abroad and in the United States. Additionally, it was through my studies and independent learning amidst doctoral work that I more critically examined the narrow, Eurocentric structures inherent in my teaching that may lack relevance or even be harmful to many or most learners.

More recently, I was invited to build a vocal program with a non-profit organization in Tanzania, teaching Tanzanian children, and was thrilled at the possibility. In tandem with doctoral work, I wanted to go to Tanzania and teach in new, diverse, and decolonial ways. Building the program is problematic in many regards as an outsider and white researcher and teacher; I will conduct a critical autoethnography to hold myself accountable for honoring the community and striving to share rather than own and dictate the program. Implementing the program has been delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Supportive scholarship, realizations, and unanswered questions

Throughout our collective journey within this community of scholars, we searched for and shared resources that both guided and challenged us in our quest to improve our work. Here, we share insights from Patel (2016) and others that we found especially helpful for considering our work within indigenous communities, collapsed into the theoretical “pillars” of ownership, positionality, and answerability. These pillars emerged through our collective work as being especially powerful in challenging us to ask questions, reconsider assumptions, and critically examine our own journeys. To communicate the “messiness” of our collective journey more authentically, we also share questions that emerged within our discussions related to these principles. The questions provided are unanswered, and we pose them in order to disrupt the notion of growth as an end goal rather than as a continual and purposeful journey.

Ownership

A consistent dilemma that emerged in our discussions was the notion of ownership. We discussed how the structure of the institutions in which we teach² places the highest value on the production of single-authored publications as part of the tenure and promotion expectations. Though practices

have shifted in recent years, these expectations contribute to the troubling idea that researchers are expected to have ownership over the process of conducting research from start to finish, while decentering the contributions of those who informed and educated the researcher about these spaces and who shared their own experiences within the process. Seeking total ownership can lead to harm, as researchers who are outsiders to the culture may communicate epistemological misinterpretations leading to the perpetuation of colonial structures.

For us, an essential component to understanding notions of ownership in academic research was to consider the worldview from which it derives. We learned through the work of those committed to decolonizing educational research (e.g. Leigh Patel, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Eve Tuck, K. Wayne Yang, Marie Ann Battiste, Sylvia Wynter, and others) that ownership is a colonial construct. Historically, land has been the central organizing pursuit of this construct, which as Patel (2016) points out, “has implications for all peoples’ relationship to it” (p. 30). The perspective of the colonial enterprise is an adopted worldview where persons and societies are encouraged to “discover,” “acquire,” “tame,” and ultimately “own” land. Land from this perspective is a finite resource to be controlled. Smith et al. (2019) suggest that once land is positioned as property to be owned, humans and other beings are then also positioned in relationship to land. In settler nations like the United States, land has historically been used as an avenue toward citizenship and seen as a commodity to be exchanged within a marketplace of goods.

This logic permeates relationships between humans and between humans with the environment—contributing to definitions of what we mean by “property” and “ownership” and ultimately leading to the development of other social constructions for the justification of human subjectivity. For example, identity constructions have been historically used as markers of ownership and as goods to be exchanged. Consider: gender (where women were once viewed as “property” to be “exchanged” during marriage), class stratification (where those from lower class statuses were viewed as “labor” for property owners), or race (where human beings were stripped of their humanity to form categories for “free labor” to be “sold”). As Patel (2016) writes,

our relationships to the land, to each other, and to knowledge and learning, are deeply shaped by this settler colonial structure. Within education, the rationale of pursuing formal education is ubiquitously described in terms of the ability to increase one’s ability to earn more money. Without a doubt, being self-sufficient is a central area of concern—an undeniable material reality in capitalist societies—but to conflate learning with earning potential works from a logic that sullies what learning might organically entail (Spring, 2008). . . . Through understanding the structure and goals of settler colonialism, it’s possible to better identify how it is operationalized in societal spaces and projects, including educational research. This is fundamentally necessary to determine when, where, and how decolonial actions can take place. (p. 31)

According to Patel (2016), the notion of ownership in academic research therefore sets up an ethical dilemma when working with indigenous communities as it may in part be driven by a means to enhance one’s reputation, to seek tenure, and to earn more money. As academics pursue these endeavors they often write grants or request monies from the university or outside institutions to fund the work, thus creating an expectation that a product will be produced in return that will benefit and bring prestige to those associated with the author (Patel, 2016).

For example, Brent experienced incongruency with his initial expectations for the research project in Bali; working toward sharing ownership (and compensation and authorship) within that project has caused him to consider how we might approach a similar research project in Trinidad. Throughout this project, Cat recognized that she occasionally referred to the vocal music program development in Tanzania as “her” program or something she (alone) was building. Recognizing and restructuring unexamined beliefs around ownership occurred for her through this process of learning and collaboration. For Kate, this discussion caused her to question how she could have

better navigated shared authorship with her study in Hawai'i. Although compensation was provided for participants, upon reflection she felt that she had a limited understanding of the potential for and the power of those collaborative and distributed possibilities. She considered ways that she could further partner with participants in future studies through the publication process, dependent on participants' own interests and availability.

Unanswered questions. Moving forward, the question remains for us as to how much we should direct, own, and take in future projects. Each situation raises individualized questions related to ownership in the research process. For example, who should own the direction of the research? Who determines which (research) questions to ask? Who decides what data is important? Who decides which artifacts or data is chosen in curating a resource? Whose knowledge? Whose art? Whose creativity? Whose culture?

We also question our individual tendencies to "own" the reflexive process of research in isolation rather than to share it with others such as indigenous community members and other researchers. How much knowledge is lost in independent/unshared (stages of) work in indigenous spaces? We wonder if seeking and including the impressions of participating indigenous peoples on the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the research collaboration would make the nature of the final research product and its underlying processes more transparent and balanced.

How much knowledge is lost due to abiding by rigid academic structures such as journal article page length restrictions? How can communities of scholars such as the one we developed be structured to allow for researchers to emerge from this isolation to critically examine ownership? What affordances does the communal space allow that the individual space does not? What challenges might it present?

Positionality

Another prominent and central dilemma that arose within our discussions was our positionality as white researchers who were outsiders to the contexts with which we engaged. Knowing that knowledge is constructed and presented (or rather, re-presented) through a situated and ontological lens (Talbot, 2018), we strove and are striving to better understand ourselves, our relationship with the communities in which we worked, and our understanding of the problematic interactions that can arise between the two. To help us unpack and untangle this complicated issue, we turned to the conceptualization of positionality to guide our growth.

Positionality involves consideration of how our various lenses—regarding our social identities, social capital, and status as researchers—influence and bias our understandings of the world. Importantly, these lenses may cohere with or (in our cases, often) diverge from the people and contexts we study. Within this framework, we considered how we as researchers must take a hard look at our positions so as to find answers to some of the following questions, reflexively: From which location(s) do we speak? What complex, social, and political configurations do we see, believe in, and act in response to? How do our views and beliefs contribute to or challenge power structures as people and as researchers specifically (Talbot, 2018)? Our conversations helped us to recognize the complexity of our identities and positionalities—and those of others we engage with in our research—as not being fixed, but rather fluid, complex, and changing. We ourselves, and particularly those we study, are not objects to be reified.

Importantly, with awareness of the various systems that perpetuate inequity, we were forced to confront our privilege, and to consider how we might take responsibility for naming and decoding our history in an unjust world. Further, we discussed the important journey that we, as white and otherwise socially, structurally, and institutionally privileged individuals, must take to

recognize how we have benefited from these histories. Discussing our positionality with regard to our work in indigenous spaces led us to acknowledge how unquestioned positionality can lead to misrepresentation and harm, and can make certain “realities” visible and other realities invisible (Patel, 2016). In particular, our own identities as white individuals working within indigenous spaces required deep discussion of concepts of race and coloniality, and led us to consider the intersectionality of our own and our participants’ identities. We found especially helpful the concept of white supremacy (hooks, 1997), as it frames a discourse of colonization and race within a broader structural and political system. In addition to considering racialization, we discussed how we must also take into account the intersectionality of our social locations, understanding our positionality within what bell hooks calls the “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” a phrase she uses to remind us “continually of the interlocking systems of domination that define our reality” (p. 7).

The process of reflexivity is encouraged as an active and ongoing process within resources such as the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Code of Ethics (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2020). Researchers are asked to engage purposefully and thoughtfully in a process of self-reflection especially as it relates to their “cultural capability” (p. 5). For example, this particular publication prompts researchers engaging with indigenous populations to ask themselves a series of questions such as, “Are you the right person to be doing the work,” “How culturally competent is the research team?,” and “Are you able to accept criticism and adapt your approach in response?” (p. 5). We would add that such questions might be most powerfully asked and scaffolded within a community of researchers.

Reflexivity can—and we argue should—be ongoing in research studies, but we questioned the ways that we have been taught to do so within scholarly work, typically within one-time written declarations of our identity. We considered the work of various scholars (Ali, 2006; Marcus, 1998; Morgaine, 2017) who have argued the need for more than “merely identifying” oneself, but rather engaging in ongoing reflection of the meaning behind the identification for a more complex dialog in one’s analysis and reporting. Indeed, this is more than something sterile, more than what Marcus calls a “formulaic incantation at the beginning of ethnographic papers in which one boldly ‘comes clean’ and confesses one’s positioned identity” (Marcus, 1998, p. 199). So, how to do this work well became a question for us. Our ongoing, critical conversations served as a powerful way to become accountable for what is often a more internalized process that leads toward what often becomes a performative declaration within scholarly work.

Through discussion and further reading on this topic, Cat deepened her commitment to pursuing critical autoethnography as a research design within her future work in Tanzania. Indeed, this design provides space for exploring positionality from a critical perspective, which will likely be helpful in reducing bias and leading to deeper and more nuanced understandings of the culture and needs of the children she will work with in Moshi. While autoethnography inherently centers the (in this case, white) researcher, invited indigenous perspectives could contribute to one’s evolving understandings. Kate recognized how the perspectives of her indigenous Hawaiian participants (particularly their discussions of connecting to land and ancestors) made more visible her own Western epistemic lens, and helped to explain the lingering discomfort that led her to seek the critical perspective of the cultural auditor she engaged with within the process of analysis. Similarly, Brent, even after studying Balinese music for many years and developing deep relationships with Balinese musicians who helped explain the music, recalled becoming increasingly aware of his narrow conceptions and understandings of how music could be structured, performed, and theorized. Western schemas of texture, intonation, performance practice, transmission, etc. could not be mapped on to Balinese musical traditions. This provided continual disruptions to the ease in which Brent assumed he could write and present the content and resources for a more universal audience,

leading him to consider various ways for Balinese people to present the resources and material to outsiders of their culture instead of through the voice and lens of Western musical frameworks.

Unanswered questions. While recognizing, untangling, and challenging our own positionality, we recognize that this process risks recentering whiteness—essentializing rather than destabilizing it. It is important that there is what Ahmed (2004) calls a “declaration of whiteness” in our work, however Ahmed has pointed out that the act of making whiteness visible may actually replicate the white privilege which we are seeking to dismantle. How can we better attend to this within our work? Further, as each of us lacks what Finlay (2002) calls a “super-human self-consciousness,” we wonder about what remains unconscious (and harmful) despite good intentions. What may be revealed through work with other scholars, as has been described in this article? How do we find the time for and commit to continuing reflexivity, likely made deeper with others, amidst busy academic schedules? Who do we turn to and what resources can guide us further? Also, much of this work pertains to a process of learning and unlearning, and although our conversations made this work more accountable and visible within our community, we wonder how we can ensure that this work can actually be tied to reduction in harm for our participants and their communities.

Answerability

As we progressed through our discussions and worked to untangle the depth to which colonial structures and processes permeated our own and our participants’ experiences, we sought to better understand how we might be more answerable and accountable to the communities with whom we work. Patel’s (2016) conceptualization of answerability as a construct and cognitive tool was helpful to us in this process. Patel uses the concept of answerability to help educational researchers articulate explicitly how their work speaks to, with, and against other entities. She explains that “answerability includes aspects of being responsible, accountable, and being part of an exchange” (p. 73), further clarifying, “there is answerability in the roles we have with each other. How we interact is not just about the specific moment and context but echoes across contexts. . . utterances” (p. 74). Answerability is about more than answering (our own) research questions. Ultimately, our conversations around answerability allowed for us to challenge and be challenged in ways we may not have experienced had we done this work independently.

Patel’s work challenges each of us to consider our answerability within three domains: knowledge, learning, and context. First, Patel (2016) asks us as researchers to become answerable to knowledge throughout the process of their work. Becoming answerable to knowledge means regarding all knowledge as incomplete, partial, contextually created, and perspectival. As Bradley (2012) stated in an Oxford Handbook chapter titled “Good for What, Good for Whom?: Decolonizing Music Education Philosophies,” we decolonize our work by exploring questions rather than foreclosing dialog and by provoking thinking rather than dispensing apparent universal truths.

Patel also asks us to become answerable to learning. Rather than mistakenly considering learning as only synonymous with “schooling” (i.e. toward narrow standards of achievement in Euro-centered curricula taught by Euro-descendant teachers), as educators and researchers have in the past, Patel asks researchers to recognize the expansive and transformative potential of learning which can be uncovered variously in diverse communities. Indeed, music learning as many Western trained musicians know it can serve as a troublesome research lens. There is a need for music education researchers to be reflexive about what they know of music teaching and learning and how their perspectives require expansion for fuller and more respectful understandings. Answerability

(responsibility to know and question, accountability) regards a commitment to this expansion rather than reliance on current notions of (good/bad, right/wrong) music learning.

Finally, Patel (2016) asks researchers to become answerable to context, stating that, “projects of systemic social change cannot pursue knowledge without regard to the context they are trying to change” (p. 80). Being answerable to context means thoroughly situating our research: that is, considering, unpacking, and connecting data with relevant, ongoing legacies of colonialism and systems of oppression. Using knowledge, learning, and context as starting points for making our practice more answerable, we become ultimately answerable to the people with whom we work and to the communities we seek to honor.

Related, it is necessary that scholars actively work to center the indigenous episteme within their methodological process (Kallio, 2020). For example, utilizing Western theoretical frameworks to situate qualitative work within indigenous spaces risks diminishing and ignoring indigenous epistemes. Methodological responsibility in this area might involve examining indigenous scholarship, frameworks, and conceptualizations to center the study within paradigms that align with the epistemology of the community itself. Vázquez Córdoba’s (2021) dissertation entitled “Building Appreciation for Indigenous Cultures in Mexico via Music Education” is an excellent example of this. Vazquez draws upon Wilson’s (2008) recommendations for using indigenous methodologies in research to frame his study, specifically drawing upon the three Rs of Relationality, Respect, and Reciprocity. The framework Vazquez draws upon comes from Chikomexochitl and the Five Stages of the Development of Corn. A contribution of this study is a concept that Vazquez coined “Indigenous Epistemic Resilience,” which acknowledges the importance of indigenous ways of knowing in current times, avoiding the depiction of indigenous perspectives located solely in a static past. Related, learning about and striving to apply indigenous typologies or categories—those that stem from the jargon or everyday speech of the indigenous community (Ryan & Bernard, 2003)—in analysis may increase methodological responsibility.

Our conversations with one another caused us to question our own situated understandings of knowledge and understanding, which are of course inseparable from our positionality. Working from within an often oppressive system from which we have benefited, we struggled with how to attend to Patel’s call for educational researchers to dismantle settler colonial structures. Patel (2016) states, “research and researchers who have succeeded have been validated through settler colonial structures of schooling and consequentially are answerable, minimally, to working to dismantle those structures” (p. 74). Recognizing how each of us has benefited from settler colonialism, and becoming cognizant of the power dynamics inherent in our research (Hess, 2018) requires that we become vulnerable, open to challenge, and willing to both acknowledge and address mistakes. Vulnerability was a central and necessary part of this process within our collective conversations—and one which we find to be greatly undervalued and underemphasized within the research process.

Our collective dialog provided opportunities for such vulnerability to emerge, as we listened to each other’s stories, considered insight from scholars such as Patel, and recognized how we have fallen short in answerability. Vulnerability was enacted within our space as we built trust with one another. We think it is important to note that the length of time scholars spend together might determine how firmly that trust is established and, in turn, how vulnerable each member is willing to be. Within our community space, this trust evolved over time as we began to learn from each others’ experiences.

Answerability as a concept felt challenging for us to translate into concrete action. We discussed how answerability intersects with our ethical responsibilities as researchers and how we need to prioritize our own learning as we work to understand systems of learning and understanding that might differ from our own, how we strive to immerse ourselves within our communities and build

trusting relationships where our participants are able to provide necessary critique and feedback, and how we work to ensure that our understandings and representations of the communities with whom we work are accurate and complete (i.e. prioritizing trustworthiness within our research designs). For Kate, these lessons caused her to reconsider not only the amount of time that she spent in the field learning about Hawaiian culture but also how she might deepen the process of member checks in future studies in order to allow for further unpacking of her understandings with participants. With limited knowledge of Tanzanian music and musical culture at the time of our work together, Cat came to approach program development with a deepened sense of responsibility to remain open to new possibilities in knowing and notions of music teaching and learning. Being answerable to context (e.g. continuing to learn about the history and culture of Tanzania, considering what context she should aim to maintain or change and why) will be fundamental in her critical autoethnography research. In our time together, Brent discussed his coming to understand music transmission through Balinese frameworks, specifically a philosophy known as *Maguru Panggul* (the mallet is our teacher), which opened up new conceptions for him about how to interpret structure, of how to listen, how to learn, where to place trust, and how to navigate fluid, dynamic, and responsive performances.

Unanswered questions. Our collective dialog as white researchers was intended to ensure that we took responsibility to untangle these issues rather than place the burden of this labor on our colleagues of color. However, we questioned whether in so doing we could unintentionally become an “echo chamber” of white voices. We wondered, how do we broaden our dialog and involve the communities and peoples with whom we were working without placing the burden of this labor on them? How can we design such conversations in the future to ensure that we are both doing “the work” and also centering the perspectives of indigenous peoples? What could such a structure ideally look like as part of a research design?

Moving forward

Each of us embarked upon the individual scholarly endeavors described within this paper out of a desire to learn from rich musical and educational indigenous traditions, and intended to attend to the complex ethical considerations embedded in this work with care. However, through research processes and coming together as a community of scholars, each of us has further recognized and struggled with the problematic nature of our positionality as white researchers working within colonized spaces. As well-intentioned as our work might be, it has required much self-reflection, critique, and actionable improvement. Turning to various theoretical structures, some of which we were familiar and unfamiliar with prior to our work together, helped us as a community of scholars to better understand the complicated nature of each of our approaches within the broader context of colonialism.

We share our own stories and journeys not to uphold them as models, but rather to illuminate how this work is messy, challenging, eye-opening, unsettling, and ever inconclusive.³ We do not leave behind an account or model of how others can follow our footsteps, but rather research pillars and questions that may guide others on their individual and collective journeys, similar or dissimilar in nature. Music education researchers working in diverse and indigenous spaces must examine and challenge their positionality. Researchers must question notions of ownership, considering for example whose name is placed on the product of the work, and how compensation (both one-time and ongoing) is handled and shared. Contemplation around the complex and subjective nature of knowledge and learning and fluid and unjust contexts in which research occurs will be important.

There are implications for not only music education researchers in all of this but for music teachers and music teacher educators as well. All of us have much to question and consider in our music learning spaces, for example, who should own and decide on what musical sources to utilize? As music teacher educators ourselves, such concerns arose in some of our meetings together. We wondered, to nurture a more just music teaching profession, how can teacher educators prepare their students to engage with the complex legacy of indigenous and historically marginalized communities and musics within their own classrooms? How do we guide music teachers in examining their own positionality, in navigating important questions of ownership, and in understanding and stepping into answerability—accountability for dismantling colonial structures (Bradley, 2012; Hess, 2018; Rosabal-Coto, 2014)?

Privileged individuals, educators, and researchers today are called to “do the work” in undoing systems of oppression—of becoming anti-racists, of being culturally responsive, of serving our communities better, and of decolonizing educational spaces. Heeding such calls leads to learning and transformation, but also to many unanswered questions. Indeed, our development has not been without mistakes and blind spots, those that we anticipate further encountering as we reflect on our past and grow in the future. Ultimately, we emphasize that this becoming cannot be undergone alone, at least not to its fullest potential.

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Notes

1. To many people, the word “colored” in a racial context may be considered discriminatory or offensive, but it is widely used today in South Africa regarding the multiethnic community. The colored community in South Africa number approximately 4.2 million and are the descendants of European settlers from the Netherlands, Germany, France, indigenous people of South Africa, and slaves from the Dutch East Indies who were brought to the country during the 18th and 19th centuries (Colored People of South Africa, 2021).
2. We are music education professors who work at three different US Universities.
3. In final edits of this article, we found additional guiding sources, such as “Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies” (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2012, 2020) and the “UNESCO policy on engaging with indigenous peoples” (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, n.d.), which provided further possibilities for navigating ownership, answerability, and methodological responsibility. Indeed, our learning continues and will continue long after the publication of this paper.

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