**Desire over Damage:**

**Epistemological Shifts and Anticolonial Praxis from an**

**Indigenous-led Community Health Project**

# Abstract

This article offers an overview of Indigenous methods and ‘desire-based’ participatory action research co-developed by rural land defenders in Central America and the Caribbean as a way to engage in recent dialectics related to complicity and decolonising methodologies. In doing so, we centre Maya conceptions of health, wellbeing, and what ‘living well’ means to community members. For context, in 2015, the Maya people of Southern Belize obtained a landmark court order in the Caribbean Court of Justice affirming their rights to land. Amidst tensions with the state that followed the ruling, the Toledo Alcaldes Association, an organisation of traditional leaders, and the Maya Leaders Alliance, an autonomous movement composed of grassroots organisers, turned their attention towards imagining and constructing a self-determined future. In turn, the communities initiated an exercise to articulate a collective vision of a healthful Maya future. The immediate questions that emerged in the project included: How might a space for imagining a future outside of colonial-liberal worldviews be created? And relatedly, what do Maya visions of healthful, sustainable futures look like? This paper details the collaborative process/project; the complexities/complicities of research involving Indigenous communities; and how Indigenous epistemologies are generative vis-a-vis unsettling conventional knowledge production.

[200 words]

# Keywords

complicity; decolonisation; health and wellness; human-environment interdependency; Indigenous methods and epistemologies; politics of knowledge production

# Introduction: The Global-biomedical complex and alternative epistemes of health

The study and practice of global health[[1]](#footnote-0) aspires to the equitable distribution of and access to biomedical care, including its technologies, practices, policies, and promises of optimal health to all people, in all places (Herrick and Reubi, 2017; Lock and Nguyen, 2010). Merged with market logics, biomedical interventions have become the default way that governments and international development agencies seek to ameliorate disease and disability worldwide (Clarke, 2014). However, much critical scholarship within the fields of medical sociology, anthropology and Science and Technology Studies (STS) have demonstrated that the biomedical enterprise itself is not an apolitical, value-free entity reflecting some sort of objective ‘truth’ (Mol, 2002; Jasanoff, 2018). Consequently, recent decades have witnessed an increasing critical account of the global-biomedical complex (Biehl and Petryna, 2013). Specifically, attention has turned to decolonial approaches for global health that includes documenting the colonial histories of medical and academic institutions (Lawrence and Hirsch, 2020); debating neocolonial legacies (Horton, 2013; 2019) and advocating for alternative ontologies and epistemes (Affun-Adegbulu and Adegbulu, 2020).

Although the importance of critical perspectives cannot be overstated, there remains significant underrepresentation of Southern epistemes and Indigenous systems of knowledge within the field (Dion Stout, 2018; Sarmiento et al., 2020). This raises questions as to whether new forms of complicity emerge even as Western scholars adopt critical, reciprocal, and reflexive stances in their decolonial research efforts. And yet, remedying such complicity is particularly difficult when the structuring apparatus of global health sees over 80% of funders based and research agendas being set in Europe and North America (Abimbola and Pai, 2020; Global Health 50/50, 2020). Whilst social scientists are increasingly orientated to the coloniality of the global-biomedical complex, there is still urgent consideration required concerning who is doing this critical framing, from where, and for whom. Simultaneously, we cannot ignore concerns surrounding the proliferation of critical knowledge becoming ‘white knowledge’ (Kumar, 2020; Mills, 2014) and the fact that many Western scholars operate within the constrained environment that now characterises neoliberal academia (Cupples and Grosfoguel, 2019). It is unfortunate that even the most well-intentioned and decolonial efforts risk becoming yet another iteration of Western hegemony and colonial power (Greenwood, de Leeuw and Lindsay, 2013).

We adopt the position that people and their wellness practices are not the same everywhere and that conceptualisations of health are formed within differing geographies, histories, and social relations. Crucially, our approach to research within a Majority World/Global South and racially diverse context––such as Belize––draws from the work of Caribbean psychiatrist and revolutionary Frantz Fanon (1963; 1967). Fanon’s writings on the psychopathology and dehumanisation that is ingrained within colonisation have become cornerstones of both postcolonial thought and liberation movements (Gibson, 2011). Fanon posited the role of Western medicine as ‘…an integral part of colonisation, of domination, of exploitation’ (1967, 134). Recently, Fanon’s work has faced a resurgence in critical global health studies, specifically in light of increasing trends towards a ‘global’ mental health project. Such a project has been charged with being a reiteration of neocolonialism (Mills, 2014) and deploying its researchers as ‘the new missionaries, guilty of naivety, self-righteousness and grandiosity’ (Summerfield, 2012). Adopting a Fanonian analytical stance sees the movement for global health as propagating Euro-American imposed diagnoses whilst dismissing local idioms of disease and legacies of oppressive political regimes (Kundani, 2020; The Fanon Project, 2010).

In light of these considerations, our paper moves beyond critique of global health by pluralising conceptualisations and epistemes of health and wellbeing from an Indigenous (Maya) perspective. We suggest that Indigenous views on health are instrumental for transcending the narrow biomedical discourse that dominates the field of global health. To help navigate the myriad complexities and complicities that surround conducting research alongside Indigenous communities in Majority World/Global South contexts, we discuss a ‘desire-based’ (Tuck, 2009) project developed by Maya organisers in Toledo District, Belize. Whilst careful to refrain from suggesting the project is either a panacea or generalisable solution, our vignette is useful given it allows us to explore the politics and pragmatics of undertaking health-related research that was designed by-and-for Indigenous people. Before moving on to our study, we outline the key problematics of much contemporary research into Indigenous communities and health.

# Literature Review

## Research with Indigenous communities

Historically, research related to the health of Indigenous communities has predominantly focused on the presence of disease, addiction, and substandard healthcare provision at local levels (Hyett et al, 2019). Over the past 30 years, research of this nature has increasingly been contested for its limited, partial, and erroneous accounts of communities (Tuck and Yang, 2014). Charged with doing more harm than good, ‘damage- and deprivation-centred’ approaches pathologise Indigenous communities whilst eliding the role of race, class, ongoing colonial power, and dispossession. Moreover, there is no shortage of contemporary well-intentioned research that excludes Indigenous people in design and dissemination, which is a reality that cannot be divorced from empire. Indeed, as Smith (2013, 1) reminds us:

Imperialism has been perpetuated through the ways in which knowledge about Indigenous peoples was collected, classified, and then represented in various ways back to the West, and then through the eyes of the West, back to those who have been colonized.

There are two distinct yet similar points at play here. The first is that forging ahead with a global health agenda that is primarily set and financed by organisations headquartered in Europe and North America (Global Health 50/50, 2020) deepens the ‘colonial wound’ (Mignolo, 2011, 3); that is, the ‘oppressive and imperial bent of modern European ideals projected to, and enacted in, the non-European World.’ The imposition of global health––without accounting for local knowledges––constitutes epistemic violence (Adams, Estrada-Villalta, and Gómez Ordóñez, 2018; Spivak, 1994). The second point is that conventional research, which is a contested and contentious term in-and-of itself when working alongside Indigenous communities, is now being stretched, subverted, and even refused (Simpson, 2007; Tuck and Yang, 2014). There is growing recognition that it is no longer just to confine Indigenous contributions to knowledge production solely in the ‘local’ sites where Indigenous communities are situated (Coombes, Johnson, and Howitt, 2014). Whilst Indigenous conceptualisations of health and wellness are often land- and place-based and interwoven into the ecosystems of which they are a part (Big-Canoe and Richmond, 2014), essentialising and relegating Indigenous worldviews to ‘the local’ and ‘the provincial’ makes for a tenuous relationship between knowledge production and Indigenous epistemologies in any field of study or discipline.

A pertinent question that remains is why is Western biomedicine mobilised as a universal model of health, whilst Indigenous alternatives must be bounded, locked into place, and operate in isolation? Addressing the coloniality of knowledge within health research requires more than confronting biomedical logics. Rather, it necessitates a (re)orientation to what living in a state of health and wellness looks like even if such visions of health are not reflected in––or may even stand counter to––Western preconceptions. It also acknowledges that biomedical and traditional modes of healing need not be in opposition to each other and are open to the potential of practices and ideas that merge biomedical approaches with traditional forms of healing and care (Cuevas, 2007; Gallegos and Quinn, 2017). Such epistemic and practice-based shifts free ideas of health and medicine from being framed as a singular, universal whole, but rather, a diverse constellation of plural knowledge(s).

Accordingly, calls for self-determined research that is developed and guided by Indigenous communities, cultural safety protocols, and definitions of relevance are increasingly being made (Greenwood, de Leeuw, and Lindsay, 2018). However, whilst there have been important strides made in the way of inclusion of Indigenous peoples’ epistemologies, there remains no shortage of fraught research involving non-Indigenous collaborators that reproduce colonial power (relations), which often see non-Indigenous researchers complicit in (re)instantiating the very hierarchies, exploitative co-optations of Indigenous methods, and power asymmetries they would otherwise like to see undone (de Leeuw and Hunt, 2018). In turn, new forms of knowledge production rooted in Indigenous worldviews are being championed, formulated, and operationalised. Desire-based research, which was called for by Tuck (2009) in her influential piece *Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities*, is one such framework.

## Desire-based research

The central purpose of the Maya project we detailed below directly align with Tuck’s (2009) proposal that historically oppressed communities, particularly studies concerning the health and wellbeing of negatively racialised groups, depart from damage- and deficit-centred research and advance work that is based on the desires of communities. Notably, Tuck’s call to prioritise desire over damage is not aimed at denying or ‘getting over’ the injuries and harm generated by the historical trajectories of race and colonialism. It also does not suggest that colonialism has ended and should simply be forgotten. On the contrary, Tuck proposes desire-oriented community-driven research as a corrective ‘epistemological shift’ away from the perils presented by research studies that fixate on and fetishise the injuries, wounds, and traumas that have been inflicted upon Indigenous communities via racialism, exploitation, and colonial domination. In warning of the hazards of damage-centred discourse, Tuck (2009, 413) writes it constitutes:

…a pathologizing approach in which oppression singularly defines a community. Damage-centered research involves social and historical contexts at the outset, the significance of these contexts is regularly submerged. *Without the context of racism and colonization,* all we’re left with is the damage, and this makes our stories vulnerable to pathologizing analyses. [emphasis added]

Tuck’s summation clarifies that health-related studies of marginalised communities, specifically studies that do not acknowledge the pivotal role of enduring racial hierarchies and aftermaths of colonialism, are as fraught as they are dangerous. In further explaining the pathologising effects of damage-based research, Tuck (2009, 413) continues:

Our evidence of ongoing colonization by research—absent a context in which we acknowledge that colonization—is relegated to our own bodies, our own families, our own social networks, our own leadership. After the research team leaves, after the town meeting, after the news cameras have gone away, all we are left with is the damage.

Tuck’s synopsis explains the discursive fallout of research that focuses on damage and deprivation, even if certain studies are motivated by good intentions. In expanding, Tuck (2009) contends that research which prompts repressed communities or groups to expose their ‘wounds’ runs the risk of not only retraumatising participants, but also of exacerbating the oppression they face via framing communities as broken, ruined, or wretched. Markedly, Tuck’s appeal to desire-based approaches prompts researchers to query what research would yield if it moved beyond labelling participants and communities as dominated and immiserated––and towards documenting and breathing life into joy, hope, and dreams. Desire-based research acknowledges the complex realities of Indigenous communities as articulated and expressed by Indigenous people themselves. It also recognises the political agency of communities and participants who are often discursively denied agency and aims to adhere to ‘responsible, respectful, reciprocal, and relevant’ research whilst not impeding Indigenous people from cultivating their own solutions to the ongoing colonial realities they face (Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991).

If seeking to avoid deepening colonial wounds and reproducing complicities, it is Indigenous people, along with their worldviews, ethics, and desires, who must guide and inform research processes, authorship, and outcomes. Here, it is paramount to note that Indigenous people are neither a monolith nor should their worldviews be considered uniform across differing places. The Maya *cosmovisión* living in Southern Belize is no exception, with wellness and health (*sahil ch’oolej* [joy-living well]) being inextricably linked to Maya notions of *se’ komonil* (togetherness-community-dignity) and *raal ch’och* (being children/people of the soil/Earth). Notably, Maya *cosmovisión* is the lifeblood at the heart of their communities’ collective efforts to end the structural violence to which they have been exposed via exploitative, extractive, and repressive institutions and research agendas. Accordingly, we present the following project not as a universal blueprint for studying health and wellness with Indigenous and ‘Othered’ communities, but as one example of desire-based research that resists and seeks to unsettle deterministic, insular orthodoxies of what it means to live well.

# Research Context and Methods

## Developing a desire- and dream-based research project

For more than five centuries, the Maya people of Central America and the Caribbean have been engaged in efforts to safeguard and revitalise Indigenous lands, as well as ways of knowing, living, and being. For present-day Maya in Belize, the current iteration of their struggle can be traced back to the 1990s when the Government of Belize (GoB) granted logging concessions to Chinese-Malaysian companies in ancestral Maya lands. This included filing a case in the Belizean courts in 1995, which did not receive a hearing. After hitting an impasse at the national level, the Maya filed a petition at the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights (IACHR) in 1998. Led by Maya land defender Julian Cho (1962-1998), the Maya mobilised to stop the concessions via numerous unsuccessful appeals to the GoB. Cho was a Mopan Maya organiser from Toledo District whose political activism on behalf of the Maya garnered international recognition. In 1998, after leading a public campaign against the multinational extractors, Julian was found dead due to head injury under suspicious circumstances; his legacy still inspires Maya activists to this day. After a more than five-year wait, the IACHR affirmed Maya land rights and determined the GoB had indeed violated them (IACHR, 2004). Subsequently, the Maya engaged in a series of legal battles, winning cases in 2007, 2010, 2013, and a watershed consent order in 2015 by the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ). The CCJ decision affirmed the lower Belizean court’s rulings in favour of the Maya, which put the legal question of whether Maya people have rights to their land to rest (Cultural Survival, 2015). Present-day Maya organisers in Toledo District are once more spearheading response to ongoing state-sanctioned encroachments upon their lands and heritage sites (Purvis, 2013). Notably, day-to-day life across Maya communities continues to involve violations of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent, which is violence and poses a persistent threat to Indigenous life and wellbeing.

Against this backdrop, the Q’eqchi’ and Mopan Maya people of Toledo District have a long history of collectively dreaming and acting to sustain life, land, and relations. Whilst these events could be broadly characterised as a land struggle, the Maya have made it clear that this is only one part of a much larger endeavour; a struggle by Indigenous people for self-determination and to live/be in a state of wellness in community (citation-removed-for-review). Accordingly, after the 2015 CCJ ruling, the Maya Leaders Alliance (MLA) led an initiative to articulate a Maya vision for being/living *well* on the land. In commissioning the initiative, organisers envisioned a:

Community driven approach in creating a long-term shared vision for development. By providing a voice to all community members, it seeks to give women, men, and youth from all villages the opportunity for their wishes and concerns to be heard and addressed. The process will explore the shared values of community members, articulate priorities for development, and reflect our culture and traditions as a Maya people.

These insights led to a desire-based participatory research project titled *The Future We Dream*, which was composed of envisioning exercises and art-making (MLA-TAA-JCS, 2019). The process involved group gatherings and dream-driven activities developed by movement organisers and village leaders (Alcaldes). Author 2, a Yucatec Maya scholar-activist from Belize with a background in Indigenous methods and who has supported the movement for over 20 years, was commissioned to facilitate the process. Author 3, a non-Indigenous social movement researcher with the University of the West Indies who has been engaged with the communities since 2015, provided support to select sessions. Author 1, a non-Indigenous researcher of Caribbean descent with a background in critical health studies who has been supporting the communities for the past two years, later joined the team for analysis, dissemination, and follow-on projects.

For context, there are a total of 39 Maya communities across Toledo District, each with two Alcaldes, who were invited to participate. The 39 communities were divided into four geographic zones where Maya researchers convened two sessions per zone. All communities were asked to select five representatives: two women, two young people, and one village elder. Separate sessions, which included dozens of participants in each session, were then conducted based upon the groupings (women, men, youth) across the four zones. To frame the exercise, participants were given blank canvases and asked to draw their dreams of a self-determined Maya future, as well as what it would mean to live with a sense of health and wellness within their communities. The methodology was based on the Maya practice of the *ab’ink*. *Ab’ink*, a Q’eqchi word meaning ‘to listen,’ refers to the practice of traditional village assemblies wherein participants engage in a process of collective decision-making by listening to community members and generating consensus on any given issue (citation-removed-for-review).

## The Maya ab’ink (listening-gathering-envisioning) as method

Notably, the research/*ab’inks* were situated within Maya ancestral territories and the realities, struggles, and communities of Indigenous people. Using the *ab’ink* to frame the methodology at once centred Maya epistemologies, *cosmovisión,* and governance procedures.[[2]](#footnote-1) Whilst the *ab’ink* reiterates collective dialogue in order to arrive at consensus, it stresses listening and recognises that consensus does not imply perfect solutions and that new consensus may be needed along the way. Put differently, addressing the question of a shared vision across a diverse constituency proved neither to be merely an academic exercise nor was it free from complexity. Maya communities are by no means monolithic and tensions sometimes emerge between villagers who prefer individual land rights versus those who prefer collective/communal rights. Similarly, any community may include some who favour more ‘traditional’ agroecological techniques and lifestyles versus ‘modern,’ marketized, or Western approaches to daily amenities, food production, and land ownership. These internal complexities are neither new nor overly problematic in-and-of themselves, however, when exploited and magnified by external actors and agendas (e.g. the promises and discourses of ‘development’ used by state officials and multinational corporations) they can be divisive and complicate local social relations. The selection of participants therefore required attention not only to questions of gender and generation, but also personal-political ideologies, convictions, and aspirations.

In addition, creative expression/drawing was an unusual procedure for most participants. Initially, for some, it seemed like play or something that was not altogether that ‘serious’ of an exercise. Other participants, though, liked the idea from the outset and engaged immediately while a few expressed lack of confidence in their drawing skills. This meant a great deal of affective labour was required from facilitators (e.g. encouraging participants; explaining the merits of the method in convincing/reassuring manners). That the drawings were communal projects held in a group setting meant that participants could capitalise on the collective energy and diversity of talents in the room. In the end, after pushing through doubt, reticence, and even uncertainty about both the process and prospective outcomes, participants were typically impressed by and proud of what they produced. The Maya research team hoped the findings would generate a clear framework that would reaffirm what it means to be Maya and serve as a guide for Maya communities, organisations, governance, and non-Maya collaborators, in addition to government officials and state administrators. Overall, the project created a space to build and develop a self-determined Indigenous methodology that went beyond conventional academic approaches. It also allowed participants to envision Maya futures that exist outside of (neo)colonial logics and liberal-capitalist social relations.

Adhering to the principles of the *ab’ink* for a methodological framework fed into the subsequent analysis, which included a collective process of meaning-making and post-task discussions about the artwork the participants created. Overall, the findings of the arts-based dreaming activities can be thematically summarised by two key Maya concepts: *raal ch’och* and *komonil*. These concepts express the participant’s shared identity and heritage as Indigenous people; the importance of interdependency and *communal* social relations; and their strong relationship with the land and forests. When asked what it means to live well as Maya people, they summarised it as (MLA-TAA-JCS, 2019):

[To be] Peaceful, hardworking, self-determining people, rooted in our culture, open to the world and new technologies, living in community and, collectively stewarding the wellbeing of our people and lands.

Markedly, this statement captures the essence of *raal ch’och* and *komonil*, which are Q’eqchi concepts that provide an underlying framework for thinking about health and wellbeing that is distinctly rooted in Maya *cosmovisión* and ontology. Communicated in this statement is a clear articulation that to be Maya encompasses a strong sense of relationship to each other and to the land. This is how the Maya see themselves presently and how they envision themselves in the future; being open to the world and its technologies whilst retaining their Maya heritage, identity, and ways of being. For the participants, living in peace, working hard, and autonomy all constitute health and wellbeing. Anchoring our findings within the two distinct but interrelated notions of *raal ch’och* and *komonil* highlights the importance of attending to Indigenous epistemes of health and wellness to build a vision of the future that is constructed on their terms.

## Raal ch’och and komonil: Relations and wellbeing outside of colonial logics

The emphasis on *raal ch’och* that emerged underscores the Maya’s sense of belonging to, dependence upon, and care for the land. It depicts an Indigenous vision for a future wherein the interdependent relationship between human and environmental health is of central concern. This is attributed to the fact that Maya people perceive their relationship to the land as that of stewardship, care, and applicable to maintaining the health of its community members. In other words, human wellbeing and planetary health go hand-in-hand and to care for, protect, and maintain land, local ecosystems, forests, and waterways promotes, sustains, and defends all forms of life.

**[IMAGE-1: Youth group: history, tradition, and culture]**

The maintenance of healthy and flourishing environments, and the place of humans within them, is illustrated in Image 1. Presented here is an image of a ‘healthy environment’ framed within an outline of flowers depicting blue skies, birds, and green grass. On the horizon sits a Maya temple with a path leading to a contemporary Maya home. In front of the house there is a bowl of caldo (soup) and corn tortillas (a typical dish among the Maya in Toledo), a cacao pod and beans, and a clothesline with traditional attire. What is central to this image is the rich, green, fertile land that provides space for customary Maya food, cultural, spiritual, and agricultural practices. In other words, to live on Maya lands as Maya people and with a sense of health and wellness engenders all these things.

A group of village leaders, who during the envisioning activities called themselves *Molam Xam* (‘Fire Group’), stated it was ‘not enough to show who we are as Maya people’ but thought it crucial to depict how others, especially political society and select non-Indigenous Belizeans, perceive Maya people. Image 2 shows a character clothed in the Belizean flag, signifying the state and certain segments of Belizean civil society. Within this character’s thought bubble are illustrations of a begging bowl, an emaciated person, and mangy dog, as well as a person lying on the ground with garbage and flies around them. The *Molam Xam* groupexplained that ‘…the government sees us as beggars, poor, and dirty.’ When comparing these two images, we see that the vision the Maya have of themselves opposes how they feel Indigenous people are perceived by the state and civil society more broadly.

**[IMAGE-2: Leader’s group: *Malom Xam*]**

Contrary to being ‘underdeveloped,’ as a deeply layered term, *komonil* signifies togetherness and community, roughly translating to ‘living a dignified life, collectively.’ The term embodies a mutual recognition of worth and interdependency that is woven into the spiritual, material, human, and environmental worlds (citation-removed-for-review). In other words, whilst these dimensions may be distinct, they are inextricably linked. Furthermore, *komonil* reveals how vital relationality and reciprocity are to Maya notions of health and wellness. *Komonil* expresses the collective effort that communities undertake to socially reproduce themselves. This includes caring for each other, cooperatively building houses, planting corn, and maintaining communal areas. This expression of mutuality is shown via democratic practices of participatory decision-making (i.e. the *ab’ink*) and communal land ownership.

Image 3 depicts *komonil* via the construction of collectively built homes. In the top-left corner there is a family who will build and live in the house, while on the rafters, there are three community members helping to construct the home. To the right of the house is a person with a long cohune palm leaf in their hand. This collective effort is typical in Maya villages. To build traditional houses, people (usually men) will organise their labour through networks of solidarity.

**[IMAGE-3: Men’s group: collective house building]**

Images 4 and 5 present us with a complex visual representation of *komonil* and the reciprocal relationship between Maya people and the land.

**[IMAGE-4: Men’s group: human-environment relationships]**

Image 4 depicts a rainforest from which a flowing river cuts across the landscape. This landscape includes humans, domestic and wild animals, and a village. Additionally, a hunter stands with his dog next to a *we'ch* (armadillo), signifying that the man is tracking a *we'ch,* which is a traditional rural Maya hunting practice. Alongside this stands a cacao plantation and cornfield. Notably, a cohune tree is made central in this image. Cohune trees are important to Maya communities as the fronds are used for the thatched roofs of traditional houses, while cohune palm hearts are used as food.

**[IMAGE 5: Women's group: human-environment relationships]**

Image 5 shows a specific vision for a future Maya village captioned ‘save the rainforest.’ Illustrated here are communal areas including schools, playgrounds, and a garden against the backdrop of a waterfall and rainforest. These images emphasise the integration of community, clean environments, and improved infrastructure––all are viewed as constitutive of the natural landscape and not distinct from it. The entire image also represents the products of the life-giving, socially reproductive labour and care-work that Maya women commonly perform.

# Discussion

## The realities and complicities of decolonial work

For our work in Toledo District, Maya communities are desiring and seeking to co-create avenues toward living dignified and harmonious lives on their own terms. A peaceful life defined by self-determination, ancestral governance (Alcaldes), and mutual visions of sustainable and healthful futures characterised by *ral ch’och* and *komonil*. These struggles are coinciding with Maya efforts to resist and end the mutable forms of colonial power that have been imposed upon their communities for centuries (Shoman, 1994). For generations, Maya people have understood that the most imminent threat to their culture, heritage, and collective health has been disavowals of their worldviews, claims to territory, traditional system of governance, and rights to land (citation-removed-for-review).

The exploitation and dispossessive violence the Maya have experienced, which continues to damage their territories, heritage, and both physical health and psycho-spiritual wellbeing, is a direct product of a Westminster-modelled state’s refusal to recognise their right to self-determination as Indigenous people (citation-removed-for-review). As contended by Fanon (1963), for Indigenous people and peasant communities, land is the lifeblood of culture, wellbeing, and dignity. Without land, the Maya would no longer be able to reproduce their communities, kinship, and ‘survivance’ as Indigenous people (Simpson, 2017). Markedly, the Maya struggle for land is not simply a fight for a piece of real estate. Their legal battle is but one element of a broader struggle for a space wherein Maya ways of knowing and being thrive.

What the Maya present is an understanding of health and wellbeing that is attained via strong, reciprocal relationships with land, forests, plants, and people––factors which are frequently absent within Western accounts of health. Their artwork exemplifies this synergistic experience and situates a way of framing health that is neither solely corporeal nor individualistic. To locate health and wellness outside of the human body and root it in relationships with territory and community, as well as ancestral and spiritual heritage, reiterates past studies showing connections to land as a social determinant of Indigenous health (Hatala et al. 2020; Schultz, 2018). Similarly, these findings echo current pedagogical commitments for training practitioners in Indigenous worldviews. For example, the Indigenous Health Sciences Programme developed by the Blue Quills First Nations College anchors their curriculum around themes of land, language, and relationship (Steinhauer and Lamouche, 2018).

As the grassroots *The Future We Dream* project demonstrates, for the 39 Qʼeqchiʼ and Mopan Maya villages of Toledo District, struggles for the recognition of their territorial rights have been anchored in practicing *komonil* vis-à-vis the structural violence they experience as Indigenous people contending with the coloniality of liberal-capitalist modernity. Being *ral ch’och* and practicing *komonil* sustains the Maya’s Indigenous *cosmovisión*, shared socio-territorial identity, and is integral to their notions of collective health and wellbeing. Nourishing each also strengthens the intergenerational and interdependent connections they have to their territories, ancestors, cultural heritage, distinct language(s), and Indigenous system of communal governance.

## Complicity and the politics of knowledge production

The exclusion of Indigenous worldviews within studies and conceptualisations of social development, health, and wellbeing are well documented (Greenwood, de Leeuw, and Lindsay, 2018) and constitute a coloniality wherein Western notions of being human, ‘developed,’ and healthy are made to appear universal. In turn, the decolonial challenge for Indigenous peoples is to imagine themselves and their futures in ways that break free from liberal-colonial logics. Recovering space for Indigenous ways of knowing/being is at the centre of what Simpson (2016) calls Indigenous ‘resurgence.’ While this paper advocates this precise type of resurgence, to simply state ‘use more Indigenous methods’ is far from a coherent and just solution to the problem of imbalances of power within global health scholarship. A glib call like this is actually quite dangerous.

With ‘decolonisation’ increasingly deployed within and by neoliberal institutions, both in the Global North and South, there is a real risk of this work remaining immaterial and being domesticated and diluted until it no longer does the work of reparation, rematriation, and collective liberation. Countless academics and institutions lay claim to ‘decolonising,’ and indeed foreground the term in their research questions, literature reviews, methods, analyses, grant applications, and citation practices, but until systemic and material inequalities and complicities related to research governance are addressed––e.g. Eurocentric financing and agenda-setting, commodifications of knowledge, ignoring issues of Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (OCAP®) (Snarch, 2004)––the colonial machinations of knowledge production will carry on.

On this point, and with specific regard to complicity with academia’s status quo, consider the critique of orthodox knowledge production offered by (citation-removed-for-review), who, in detailing systemic injustices that stem from Euro-American hegemony, note:

...we flag the Global North’s illegitimate command over––and unearned, fast-paced, gluttonous space-taking up of––academic knowledge production to underscore the institutionally disadvantageous (i.e. ongoing colonial) reality that scholars working in the Global South must contend with. That is, when it comes to participating in the fraught yet often career/livelihood-enabling ‘high impact,’ ‘internationally-recognised’ publishing game––scholars in the Global South and Majority World are systemically compromised by, inter alia, a lack of access to or distanced proximity from: billion-dollar funding pools, networking opportunities, conference-goings, professional connections, seminar invitations, and informal paper-reviews with colleagues who are editors or on editorial boards of the discipline’s most ‘prestigious’ journals. Journals that are predominantly managed by corporations and scholars in the Global North.

Here, researchers might consider the ways in which they benefit from complicity with, and are privileged by, remaining silent on––or oblivious to––the preceding structural inequalities and global divides.

In addition, consider the politics of publishing in commercial journals that claim copyright over knowledge and profit from doing so via paywalls, or the ways in which ‘impact’ is defined and adjudicated by ‘expert’ review boards composed of scholars who have been trained in Western institutions. Moreover, while there are increasing calls from research councils for inclusive, co-produced research and equal partnership with the Global South, how much time is being bought out for academics in the Global North and how many large partnerships and/or fellowships from Western funders are awarded to Principal Investigators from Majority World, diasporic, or first-generation backgrounds? Such arrangements perpetuate global inequalities and the appropriation of Indigenous and Southern knowledges that have commonly been handed down from generationally, often collectively and/or orally.

Indigenous knowledges, in particular, are dynamic and generated by Indigenous people who are grappling with global challenges in the present-day but also grounded in local realities and histories. Here, the neoliberal academy’s demand for sole/first-authored outputs might prompt researchers to either deliberately or unwittingly engage in ‘*protagonismo*,’ the compulsion to be the centre of attention, which can damage relationships with collaborators. Moreover, to mitigate the self-centrism of *protagonismo*, Indigenous people tend to think of knowledge production as a collective process that eschews the prominence of a single individual/sole author. Outputs from these community-oriented processes frequently depart from convention, meaning authorship is shared, interchangeable, and/or credited to an organisation, community, or even land itself. This type of collectively does not map well onto the ways in which researchers in/from the Global North typically lay claim to demonstrating ‘leadership,’ i.e., in liberal, hierarchical ways that entail posturing for credit or to have one’s name listed first.

## Unsettling the status quo via anticolonial ‘accompliceship’

Fanon (1963), over half a century ago, warned that colonial power sought to socio-spatially confine and exclude ‘the native’ and negatively racialised ‘Others.’ Research has played a central role in these efforts. Meaning, when it comes to knowledge production and Indigenous epistemologies, scholarship within Western institutions––which prioritise neoliberal metrics and an arguably staid canon (e.g. white, masculinist, liberal-bourgeois, Eurocentric)––is guilty of the very same type of confinement and exclusion Fanon was writing against. In the contemporary moment, the risk remains that Indigenous knowledges, methodologies, and concepts may be poached, pirated, plagiarised, or co-opted by either careless or careerist non-Indigenous scholars, so a cautious approach to research with Indigenous people––one that prioritises responsibility, respect, relevance, reciprocity, and centring community desires––is necessary.

This type of research requires trust, long-term relationship-building, selflessness, and a commitment to communities. In short, it takes time, prioritises community-relevant outputs, and demands researchers attend to things other than their own disciplinary canons, research agendas, career aspirations, or paying lip service to decolonising. It may also require researchers to take political positions, engage in activism, and eschew liberal bystanding that goes against long-established yet fictive claims to ‘objectivity.’ Moreover, engaged approaches of this nature, along with its associated outputs, are not always what neoliberal managers, hiring panels, and assessment committees necessarily value. Whilst there are numerous researchers from marginal backgrounds without pedigree who prioritise community-engagement/preferences over the ‘world-leading’ demands of university managers, REF panels, and commercial journals, they are often, regrettably, passed over when permanent posts open up at any given ‘elite’ institution and tend to be rated lower by referees who view themselves as field-setting ‘experts.’

Likewise, research, as it is understood within Western academic contexts, is underlined by the logic of human or social ‘development’ and serves deficit narratives by producing accounts of Indigenous realities to inform Western policies and interventions, which are often packaged as ‘aid,’ ‘help,’ or altruism (Smith, 2012). As Tuck (2009) argues, even when the intent of research is to hold either empire or coloniality accountable, solely documenting injury continues to render Indigenous peoples as damaged, pitiable subjects in need of (Western) intervention and ‘help.’ To unsettle and upend this Messiah complex, not to mention avoid being complicit with reproducing it, health practitioners must be deliberate about becoming insurgent anticolonial accomplices, defining impact on community terms, and putting themselves in the service of ‘self-determined research’ (Bourassa, 2020; Schnarch, 2004).

*The Future We Dream* project is one example of self-determined, desire-based research that emerged out of Indigenous people imagining a future outside of colonial-capitalist modernity. As a grassroots exercise, it departed from the credentialism and limitations of Western research practice. Efforts like this require greater attentiveness to thinking beyond injury and damage, as well as mandate a commitment to being guided by the terms and preferences of Indigenous communities themselves. In short, if we are serious about unsettling complicity (or at least making it productive), researchers must act with intent on crafting and mobilising departures from the academic status quo and move towards political ‘accompliceship’ and anticolonial research agendas that are defined by communities in struggle. Departing from damage-centred narratives to desire- and dream-based approaches, in turn, are interventions into––or at least make generative and useful––our own complicities in the coloniality of knowledge production.

# Conclusion: Moving against convention, cautiously

*Let us decide not to imitate Europe;*

*let us combine our muscles and our brains in a new direction.*

(Fanon, 1963)

With a methodological commitment to desire-based research and a recognition of the value of Maya concepts of health and wellbeing, the collaborative project described in this paper advanced with the goal of amplifying the voices and visions of Indigenous communities on their terms. More precisely, it highlights how Maya communities in Toledo District, Belize are mobilising against a Westminster-modelled state (the GoB), corporate extractivism, and amidst internal complexities to co-create the social, cultural, and economic relations––as well as Indigenous future––of their desire. Given Maya notions of health are rooted in the pluralistic yet shared dreams and relations of Indigenous community members, this research paints a picture of human wellbeing that is deeply entwined and interconnected with the health of local ecosystems and environments within which communities are living. Overall, what the creative, participatory, and even playful *The Future We Dream* project represents is evidence of Maya contributions to wellbeing, decolonisation, Indigenous future-making, and desire-based research.

Notably, in addition to moving away from discourses of damage and deficit, the pivot towards desire-based approaches that respect and are accountable to Indigenous epistemologies, hopes, dreams, and communities requires a fundamental paradigm shift away from prevailing technocratic and mechanistic approaches to the study of health (Dion Stout, 2018). This necessitates that researchers both unsettle and be unsettled by their respective complicities, taken-for-granted disciplines, and positions within the neoliberal academy and corporate-journal-industrial-complex. Doing so will enable scholars to at once remain open to and better respect the plurality of epistemologies that exist in the world whilst disrupting the Western-liberal traditions, expectations, and performances that have come to define medical and academic institutions (de Leeuw and Hunt, 2018). For many Global North researchers, such a paradigm shift and clarion call to humility and sacrifice may be accompanied by an impulse to disaffiliate from culpability, emotional reactivity, surprise, and disbelief that their work and status as Principal Investigators and lead authors, with all their good intentions, end up reproducing structural inequalities, white supremacist worldviews, and insular academic canons in which the ‘discoveries’ of Europe and North America are purportedly central to ‘global’ health and ‘international’ development.

To shift the focus back to rooted alternatives, in their dream-driven visions of healthful and just futures, Maya participants revealed through art and creative expression that their struggle is one for Indigenous worldviews and ways of being/existing. Whilst incommensurate, the challenges they face and futures they are dreaming of are not so different from the struggles and dreams of other communities in struggle in Belize and beyond, Indigenous or otherwise, who are committed to freedom from exploitation and alienation––as well as fighting for dignified, peaceful lives characterised by self-determination and flourishing. What this research means for social scientists who promote health and wellness, ultimately, is that it is paramount to remain suspicious of, unsettled by, and move against the institutions and conventions we are familiar with and have been trained under. Because, no matter how critical or cutting-edge we claim our scholarship to be––if not politically-cautious and -conscious––we run the risk of enclosing, domesticating, diluting, and even expropriating the grounded decolonial work, praxis, and *knowledges* of Indigenous grassroots organisers and autonomous movements, which have liberation from coloniality at their heart.

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1. Following Herrick and Reubi (2017), we frame global health as ‘imaginaries.’ This allows for conceptualisations of health/wellbeing lying outside of biomedical parameters and acknowledges the multiplicity of what it means to live in a state of health/illness. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. The practice of the *ab’ink* resonates with the Maya creation story. According to the *Popol Vuh*, the creation of human beings began with silence and, in this silence, the creators came together to join their words and thoughts, agreeing how to create humans. The *Popol Vuh* notes the creators made several attempts to create beings, failing to achieve this goal in the first two attempts, later persevering and succeeding after seeking the wisdom of elders. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)