



CHAPTER 9

Perspectives on Decoloniality for FPE

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INTRODUCTION

Our initial motivation to write this piece was to explore some of the core proposals of decolonial theories that can nurture feminist political ecology (FPE) theory and practice. But rather than engaging in a dialogue between FPE and decolonial thinking, which we recognise may be inexhaustible and therefore too vast for the scope of this chapter, we choose instead to piece together some of our intimate understandings of decolonial thought. The chapter is organised around four pieces that reflect aspects of the personal intellectual journey of the writer through their epistemic relationship with different experiences and understandings of coloniality, or, put simply, their reality as researchers.

The order of the authors is alphabetical order. It does not reflect the commitment and responsibilities of authors' contributions.

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Our aim is to be transparent to the reader about the ‘places we come from’, both conceptual and literal, and therefore ‘situate’ ourselves in each of our reflections to show who is speaking from where. This chapter’s layout also brings out the multiple voices and perspectives underlying the different colonial realities we all live as researchers from the ‘global’ South, navigating between research and activism. Each piece however discusses different issues. Through our effort to write a joint chapter for our collective, we acknowledged that our individual and unique trajectories have shaped how we understand the concepts of coloniality and how we subsequently attempt to decolonise our areas of research and ourselves. We think that our differences, which, instead of listing here, we seek to allow our readers to explore for themselves, are an outcome of thinking through decoloniality. Although the texts here may read as disconnected for those reasons, we do this exercise not just to bring forth the multiple interpretations of how decoloniality may be conceptualised, but also to highlight how both FPE and decolonial thinking can accommodate the many, and often contradictory, strands of non-extractive research approaches under the same roof.

ANKITA SHRESTHA: ON COLONIALITY AND THE POLITICAL SUBJECT

To think ‘the other’ in a colonially drenched epistemic thought is to think *of* the other as an object (Mbembe, 2001). This ‘otherness’ is inflicted upon the native body in a colonial encounter. The coloniser appears with force, either with guns and artillery, or with knowledge that the native

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must contend with. The coloniser does not ask for the native's permission; the coloniser simply violates. In this affliction, they force the native to accept their fate of becoming a *colonised, native* body—the other. In birthing the body of the 'native' into existence, the coloniser forges a common history in which he (*sic*) "owes the fact of his very existence to the colonial system" (Fanon, 2001, p. 28). Here, the nature of the encounter becomes almost irrelevant momentarily, as whether by force or with consent, neither the native nor the coloniser are the same again.

How then does one define coloniality¹ in a country like Nepal, one of the rare small nations that resisted all European colonial powers? The narrative of the 'post-colonial' nation has decidedly not been applicable to Nepal and has been reserved for neighbouring India and other smaller nations of South Asia that were actual colonies once. Yet, the ahistorical² technicality of being a sovereign nation sits oddly with the way developmental projects of modernity grips the imagination of an entire people and dictates its government. Complex relations of caste, class, religion, and gender lay bare, and often brutally so, the multiple dimensions of coloniality experienced in everyday social and political relations today. Below, I attempt to put forward my interpretation of who the 'decolonial' political subject could be, as I seek to avoid universalising all colonial experiences and to contribute to colonial scholarship that provides space for multiple temporalities to come forth.

The Decolonial Subject

Let us ask first who is the decolonial subject. Here, we are asking two ontologically motivated questions—*who* the subject is and *what* is the decolonial. The subject, in a most reductively poststructural sense, can be conceptualised as an individual, a body capable of engaging in power relations (Lukes, 2005) and of rejecting them (Butler, 2006). Outside a

¹ Aníbal Quijano's conceptualisation of 'modernity/coloniality' puts forward the idea of coloniality not merely as the state of being a colony but also refers to an epistemic form of colonisation through which Eurocentric ideologies such as modernity overpowers all other forms of epistemes.

² The colonisation of indigenous populations during the imperial campaign of the Shah rulers eventually led to the project of the modern Nepali nation-state (Regmi, 1999). These temporalities are often not seen as processes of colonisation because of the absence of its 'white European' coloniser at the centre.

phallogocentric view of the subject, it is also a sexual body, whose difference against another body is characterised through the categories of male or female (Irigaray, 1995) or through historical constructs of gender (Mohanty, 1988, 2003) that not just inform struggles of identity and representation but also reveal the political economy of subsequent knowledge production (Asher, 2017). In a more existentialist view, which is of consequence here, the subject is a person, a sentient being, a body among bodies (Jung, 1996). But against dualistic views of the body as our medium *into* the world, or, put simply, our way of experiencing the world and of making sense of it, it is important to radicalise the body as not separate from but immanent to the world (Deleuze & Guattari, 2005) in order to think the ‘decolonial’. For using the word decolonial today is to speak foremost of an attitude towards viewing the post-colonial world as a thinking people (Walsh & Mignolo, 2018), a people historically altered by the colonial encounter, but moving, for those exact reasons, towards a world which is not defined by (or reduced to) a colonial caricature, an epistemic residue of the coloniser, but by an ontological rebirthing of the native reality. In other words, it is an act—in thought and movement—that attempts to shed the colonial remnants of a brutal force that dominated, dehumanised, and decapitated the native body, to relive as the body.

If all three interpretations of the subject listed above could be distilled down to one, we could then say that by the very fact that it exists, *acts*, and through action (or the decision to not act), the subject occurs. We interpret the ‘decolonial subject’ then as follows. The decolonial subject acts to recuperate the body from coloniality (Quijano, 2000), an ontological imposition of the colonial encounter that irrevocably changed the social, economic, cultural, and, above all, epistemic systems of the colonised world such that Europe, or the geophysical spaces of the colonisers, and its ideals of modernity, became the cornerstone for all modes of civilisation that followed (Bhambra, 2014). The *decolonial body* then acknowledges colonisation as a historical process understood “in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content” (Fanon, 2001, p. 27). Such movements must include, then, contingencies that skip the form and content that make up history, for these contingencies, although they are left outside the margins of history, are scarcely forgotten by the body. Indeed, everyday histories

are resurrected in the experiential body; as such it does not experience coloniality but *is* that very experience, marked by temporal contingencies of colonial encounters that continue to occur in everyday life.

The Political Subject

If the task for the decolonising body is to recuperate the body, I contend that it needs the political. The 'political' is emphasised here as a body occurring as an ontological rather than an epistemic necessity. In the post-colonial world, this 'political' body is underscored by coloniality, through which colonial power regimes are not only reproduced in everyday human relations but encounters with the colonial past are also perpetually renewed in different relational spaces in the present (Mbembe, 2001). This 'political' body is therefore a body of *multiplicities*, unforgiving and unforgetting, because it refuses to be forgotten or forgiven itself, and yet also a body of *possibilities* capable of putting aside the burden that history has put on its shoulders. Without the political, the decolonising body, limited in its efforts to overturn the epistemic systems of power in society, culture, and the environment that persist under the paradigm of modernity, is restricted to the will to power, motivated either towards the obliteration or negation of the other (Sartre, 2007) or the transformation into the other (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). To reject assimilating the subject into the folds of coloniality/modernity is therefore not enough, as this cannot simply be achieved by reversing power orders or replacing power structures (Mbembe, 2001). I put forward then that the decolonial aim, instead of succumbing to the telos of power, could shift to transcending the limits of the decolonial body itself, as the political. This political body is motivated by the will to power which, however, is also the will to transcend itself (Nietzsche, 1967). I propose then that the decolonial subject extends itself towards the political, as it forces us to re-evaluate the categories of 'I' against 'the other' upon which the colonial encounter was legitimised; a political reimagination of these relations forces thus to think through the lens of forged realities, for the post-colonial world neither 'belongs to' the colonised or the coloniser but recreates itself every day through the body.

Valorising colonial encounters as a necessary step towards thinking of the other is not, however, the attempt of the decolonial thinking engaged here, and neither is the attempt being made to recognise colonial encounters as the only way to think of the other. I attempt here to facilitate an

existential imagination of the decolonial subject such that we render the decolonial subject political. I use the word render not to suggest that the decolonial subject needs either to be reduced or refined to bring it to an altered, higher state of ‘being political’. This would be tantamount to saying that other interpretations of the political, of the epistemic revolt and social movements of subversion of power that the decolonial world has been engaged in already for decades, are somehow inadequate or not worth pursuing. It is however to say rather defiantly that seeing the decolonial as political could help to bring this high pursuit of the decolonial project down to a more minuscule, everyday level of individuals capable of mutating into ‘the political’.

ILIANA MONTERROSO: ON THE MAKING OF POLITICAL SUBJECTS

This piece explores how these different understandings of the decolonial thought materialise in practice, and how feminist perspectives around the decolonial and political ecology can further our understanding of the political. The following section is based on personal engagement with research and development practice around forests. I was born and raised in the Guatemalan highlands in Totonicapan, an Indigenous region where forests are managed as *Parcialidades*.³ Forests are not only the *focus* of my research, rather, but they also represent a sense of place and reference point that has strongly influenced my professional career. Indigenous forests in the highlands became the flagship of the K’iche’ People,⁴ a stronghold for Indigenous authority systems over forests, lands, and water resources. In this text, I argue that decolonial thought and practice emerge from and help understand the making of forests and those inhabiting forestlands as political subjects (Springate-Baginszki & Blaikie, 2013). I contend that struggles around the political forests and forest people are closely embedded in processes of constant negotiation of power and assertion of authority and legitimacy of both knowledge and practice. This entails the recognition of forests as relational places, inquiring about the boundaries of forest ecosystems as defined

³ *Parcialidades* are forest systems managed as commons, with rights grounded on the negotiation of land titles since colonial times. These forests are governed by complex institutional arrangements based on kinship (Reddy, 2002).

⁴ One of the Mayan ethnic groups recognised by the Guatemalan State.

by ecological and biophysical terms (Nightingale, 2018). Shaped also by the social norms, practices, and relations between humans and non-humans, the forest is itself embedded in power struggles and processes of territorialisation (Loivaranta, 2020).

Situated Engagement with Decolonial Thought and Forests

Colonial histories frame the way forests, and those women and men inhabiting forestlands, become political subjects. However, while some progress has been argued in forest studies, feminist decolonial and political ecology perspectives show the need to decolonise practices that continue commodifying forestlands and exacerbate exclusionary practices that reduce forests to commodities and forest people to environmentally responsible subjects (Agrawal & Bauer, 2005). This has implications both for framing our theoretical and methodological understanding of forests and for those living and depending on these resources. I start by laying out my journey into the studies of forests and those living in forestlands.

I pursued undergraduate studies in Biology as part of a US scholarship programme for Central American students. On my return, I joined a community forestry research programme. I travelled to the Guatemalan lowlands in the north, a frontier tropical forest region. I conducted community training in both the highlands and the lowlands. The contrast in forest landscapes in these two regions was as diverse as the social processes and community organisation I encountered. My understanding of forestlands as places for colonisation, management, and/or conservation shifted as I came to see them also as places of identity, history, and social relations. Forests became not only an issue of biophysical concern but rather highly contested and political spaces. Later, I travelled to Europe, to pursue postgraduate studies. I was drawn by critical perspectives of Latin American ecological economists and political ecologists like Leff, Escobar, and Alimonda who not only questioned mainstream perspectives but also provided situated knowledge to understand the complex histories (Escobar, 2006).

I kept relationships with local, forest, community, and Indigenous organisations, amazed by their diverse practices and histories. I worked with forest, environmental and biophysical scientists. Not all of them acknowledge the contextual elements of forests—the contested interests around them, the diverse knowledge local people had of them. In the field, until recently, I found very few women leaders, researchers, and

practitioners. I was left with the feeling that research lagged far behind the processes of mobilisation and social change. My research work expanded to other countries that required engaging with other histories. This meant a constant process of unlearning practices of research, questioning the theoretical and methodological framings I used, and contrasting my own experiences (Asher, 2017).

The making of political forests and those of forest peoples provide examples of where and how feminist political perspectives can further avoid exclusionary narratives in the context of research around forests. Feminist decolonial and political ecology perspectives can better explain how forests can become a tool of power and what this implies for the recognition of social and political subjects. First, different territorialisation practices imply processes of negotiating authority and legitimacy that determines who can engage in these debates. Second, forest dwellers and their struggle to assert their recognition as political subjects, have long been framed by technical perspectives that have reduced what can be considered a forest, who can be considered a forest community, and for what purposes a forest is used. These reflections highlight how FPE perspectives can inform decolonial thinking, providing approaches to better understand processes of ‘decolonization of the self’ that go from ‘becoming the subject’ into being political.

The Making of Political Subjects in Forest Landscapes

The making of the political forests is closely linked to issues of legitimacy, what is legitimate and how legitimacy is constructed (Fraser, 2015; Habermas, 1975). Elements in contemporary governmental assemblages—“discourses, institutions, forms of expertise and social groups whose deficiencies need to be corrected”—are also evident in the extent to which these social groups have gained statutory formal recognition of their governance structures and their ability to engage with state and market actors (Li-Murray, 2014, p. 263). This framing of governance has been criticised for the instrumental and managerial approach, that focuses on prediction and lacks a proper understanding of the historical processes that shape power relations in which governance structures are embedded (Arts, 2014).

Differing from the Guatemalan highlands, the northern forests had long been considered hinterlands awaiting the modernising presence of the State. As in other tropical forests regions, commoditisation of forests,

e.g., through the creation of markets for forest ecosystem services and other conditional incentive programmes to mitigate climate change, put forests back in the centre of national state and international policies (Sikor, 2010). However, very different approaches have been taken where options do not align with market and conservation interests. In the highlands and eastern forest regions of Guatemala, access and control of forests remain highly contested and often violently restrained (Ekern, 2006). In the north, conservation policies recognising forest communities as protected areas were established and different management models were discussed to recognise “environmental subjects”. Forest communities’ identities and knowledge systems were deemed interesting vehicles for implementing state forest policies (Agrawal & Bauer, 2005). This process of subject-making of forest-dependent groups shaped the establishment of protected areas, legitimising state authority in these forest hinterlands aligned with state conservation policies.

Power struggles underlying the contestation and negotiation process that followed the social mobilisation process often homogenised community groups, and diluted the diversity of age, gender, and ethnicity, reducing the ability to address underlying social differentiation and exclusion issues (Ybarra, 2017). In some regions, establishing arrangements between the state and the communities kept some communities from being evicted. In others, protected areas meant enclosures; green grabs that resulted in violent dispossessions with negative consequences for Indigenous communities, who were often portrayed as driving deforestation (Grandia, 2012; Ybarra, 2017). This shows how colonial legacies of structural racism strongly influence governmental environmental assemblages, creating new political subjects as needed and shaping them in such a way that maintains discriminatory practices and sustains extraction.

Divergent interests and power struggles have shaped which social groups are given the legitimacy to claim contested resources in forests. In the case of forest-dependent communities, the process was legitimised by the state and conservation NGOs based on their ability to meet conservation goals, often measured by deforestation rates, while at the same time this process consolidated protected areas as territorialisation policies. International policies that sought to consolidate state authority in forest frontier regions enforced these practices. This renewed interest in forests, as evident during COP 26, claims to recognise Indigenous peoples’ role of “forest guardianship”. However, engaging Indigenous peoples in these forest and climate change governance processes is closely tied to their

recognition as political subjects. Recognising forest peoples as political subjects must entail decolonising existing technocratic approaches around forests, pushing the boundaries of both research and practice. As Mignolo would argue (2017), this requires “epistemic reconstitutions” to “change the structure of knowledge” challenged by decolonial epistemologies underlying the way we engage with forests.

MARLENE GOMEZ: ON BODY, TERRITORY, AND CARE

My first approach to decolonial theories began when I was 22 years old. Back then, I was engaged with environmental movements and peasant activism. I was also critical of the capitalist way of life—unconsciously consuming products in mass—and I tried to alter and reduce my consumption habits. I tried to live this way during my time as an undergraduate, until I came across Latin American decolonial theories that opened my comprehension of the real crisis we were living in, which is not only institutional but civilisational. Reading Quijano, Lander, Walsh, Acosta and other decolonial thinkers informed me that the colonisation of Abya Yala⁵ (America) was only possible through the imposition of a modern rationality that comes along with the hierarchisation of societies based on racism, command–obedience relationships, gender differences, and the exploitation of nature. This modern rationality is Eurocentric, capitalist, and patriarchal and organises the modern world through the validity of epistemologies and ontologies developed in Europe. Back then, approaching decolonial theory upended my project to save the planet by contesting State politics and made me question privileges, positionalities, and possibilities, turning towards how we could care for others and the planet along with a process of decolonisation.

In this piece, I want to focus on the proposals of decolonial feminism in three different strands: the body, territory-territoriality, and care for and with the other. These proposals show that caring for the planet and others are related to the ways we engage with the world in our everyday life. Firstly, I will draw on the body as a scale of collective resistance, a host of diversity, and a vehicle for caring for and with others. Secondly, I will explore notions of territoriality that show relational and plural understandings of life. Thirdly, I will briefly touch upon political projects that

⁵ As this territory was named by the Second Continental Summit of Indigenous Peoples and Nationalities in 2004.

decolonial feminism envisions as caring pluriverses. This way, I will try to present narrative others that aim to dismantle care as a pure class-based or economic relation and position it as a powerful vehicle for social transformation. By this, I do not mean to neglect what feminist economists eloquently inform us about care and how it changes along lines of gender and race, producing labour inequalities. However, I want to draw on narratives that imagine care as work decentred from economic dynamics and out of the realm of *homo economicus*. Clues for this can be found not only in decolonial feminism, but also in feminist political ecologies, post-capitalist approaches, the commons, and other approaches that look at the roots of communitarian bonds to rebuild the social fabric based on careful collective values among people and the environment.

Situating Decolonial Feminism

Dismantling the patterns of power that constitute the modern world is the challenge of decolonial feminism in Latin America or Abya Yala. Decolonial feminism is not only a social movement, but also “a symbolic space of cultural affirmation, identity formation, knowledge production, and social and political action” (López Nájera, 2014, p. 108). Questioning patterns of power such as race, sex, gender, class, and ethnicity, which hierarchically organise societies, decolonial feminism shows the multiple facets that systems of oppression exert in our bodies, territories, and everyday life (Espinosa-Miñoso, 2014). Taking up the knowledge, practices, and organisational forms of original peoples, decolonial feminism seeks to give a pluricultural, epistemological, and ontological recognition of the diverse identities, struggles, and resistances that make up the territory of Abya Yala (Cumes, 2009). Under threat from oppressive or colonial power structures, listening to common sense, recognising knowledge production in daily practices, and embracing plural dialogues and imaginaries, are the vehicles and tools that nourish a political project for change. Nowadays, the constant struggle against femicides, sexual and gender violence, inequalities, and the disciplining of bodies unite the cuir, trans, lesbian, anti-colonial, and decolonial feminisms of the region.

The Body

Decolonial feminism explores how violence is inscribed in bodies as a colonial legacy. Decolonial feminists work to make visible bodies fleeing from the heterosexual regime, gender inequalities, white hierarchies, body consumption, and coloniality (Espinosa-Miñoso, 2014) in a world where the body is a container of systems of oppression and hierarchies, besieged by multiple violences. Understanding the modern body as a colonial legacy allows us to understand it in relation to a territory which was also colonised. The body, from a decolonial and feminist decolonial perspective, is a microscale of the colonised territory of Abya Yala and globalised hierarchies of race and phenotype (Quijano, 2009; Segato, 2004). The global imposition of modernity introduced a binary understanding of life within societies ruled under the complementary of dualities (Lander, 1997; Segato, 2004). This reconfigured the relationships between subjects and nature, bringing the Cartesian model as the legitimate method to understand and engage with life. Through the body, it is possible to inhabit the colonisation of lands and nature that provokes displacements and the introduction of external ways of life that create conflict and violence.

However, with the body we take the streets, we defend lands from mining, we resist the Other, and we practise care for and with others. This is possible because the body is built through reciprocal practices among humans and material and immaterial components of life that are orally and corporally defended. We can see this in intergenerational practices that protect collective histories and in social imaginaries that inhabit and practice ways of life that resist subsumption to colonisation, such as cultural identities and political projects like the *sentipensar*, *Buen Vivir*, or *Sumak Kawsay*. This is not far from thinking that the body is permeable (Marcos, 2008) meaning it is open; created and recreated by a constant contagion and complementarity with other bodies. Following this, we can assert that the body is in constant historical and political production, through which it can resist and become one of the material vehicles for social transformation. Through our body we show our story and negotiate how we inhabit space and resist invisibilisations. Through feelings, discomfort, and hierarchies, the body is intersected by patterns of power that are historically related to our territory; patterns which trigger a systematic increase of violence. This informs how the history of communities is inscribed in the bodies of the people who inhabit them: we see this in the

thick hands of a care worker washing other people's clothes, in the rough hands of a peasant, or in the hands of a woman who daily carries water in long distances. Through the expansion of colonisation, the body continuously becomes a territory of conquest, but also a territory of resistance, where patterns of power and systems of oppression are daily inhabited, perceived, and experienced but also negotiated through skin colour, daily habits, diets, language/accents, among others.

Territory-Territoriality

The analysis of the territory in decolonial theories questions the traditional understanding of territory as a place delimited by borders that contains a fixed and neutral nation-state. Critiques of this understanding argue that the nation-state is a political force based on modern practices that homogenise subjects and territories, masked as citizenship and acculturation (Yuval-Davis, 1993). Decolonial feminism is situated in this critical strand and, influenced by Indigenous, peasant, and other diverse movements, considers the territory to be a living place that obtains meaning through the bodies that wander, defend, and resist with it. For this notion, the territory is a tool of power and not a fixed container of it, regulated only by institutional norms and legal frameworks. To the contrary, the territory is a place of contingencies, contradictions, and antagonisms that allow for transformations, joy, and convivialities that construct the meaning of the nation-state. Although the territory is the space that can be conquered, it is also the place that witnesses resistance and negotiation. This is possible because the territory is part of the social fabric, along with the rest of the components of life—water, plants, and everything that composes the socio-natural network. For such a conception of the territory, the notion of community plays an important role, meaning that life is built in a co-constitutional and relational way among humans and among humans and nature.

By thinking of the territory as a living space, we must acknowledge its capacity for mobility, a characteristic called territoriality. The experiences of communality, a political project of peasants and Indigenous peoples in Oaxaca, Mexico demonstrates this notion: these communities understand territoriality by the four pillars that compose the community: the assembly, the territory, the festivities, and the *tequio* or community work (Luna, 2003), practices that are inhabited by the bodies and social fabric

of the community members. What gives the idea of mobility to territoriality is the fact that these practices can be brought along wherever the community members go by their orality, behaviour, imaginaries, and ways to relate to the territory. In this comprehension, territoriality is never neutral; by its mobility, it is intersected by patterns of power, systems of oppression, and violence that bodies experience in conditions of race, class, gender, ethnicity, among others. Thus, the body and the territory are co-constitutional of a reciprocal life and are travellers through our territoriality; so is the way we relate to the place where we are.

Caring for and with

Within decolonial feminism, the debate on care work is a central axis composed of different strands. Some understand care from a feminist economic perspective and highlight the role of productive and reproductive work within a patriarchal framework (Díaz, 2009; Henrich, 2016). The dialogue with Black feminism nurtures decolonial feminism through intersectionality, emphasising patterns of power and colonial legacies that keep care work dynamics unequal. Decolonial feminism notes that care needs to be critically rethought from a communitarian perspective (Millán, 2019) and through using critical pedagogy (Walsh, 2015) where the environment plays a central role. In this debate, domestic economic units, solidarity economy, reciprocity, and *Sumak Kawsay/Suma Qamaña*, and *Vivir Bien* practices, question the relationships, dynamics, and ethics of care through which we relate as humans and to the components of life. Here, the subject is one that feels and that claims the right to live in dignity among other subjects and nature in a relational manner. However, these practices have undergone a strong critique from decolonial feminism since they are in most cases subsistence work carried out through unequal dynamics and by diverse subjects. Here, just as in households, gender identities and working roles are constructed, reinforced, and configured that make care relations unequal and problematic. The proposal for this is to reassess and rearticulate care dynamics from a collective perspective where care is not unidirectional but multi-directional (Gómez-Becerra & Muneri-Wangari, 2021) in connection to body and territory needs.

Situating struggles historically and geographically allows us to illuminate how care practices are negotiated through the politics of everyday life, the body, and the territory. Decolonial feminists make the call to

think about care relations from reciprocity and solidarity through which we can consolidate collective caring practices. Questioning who is able to enter into the dynamics of care, how care is exercised, and why it is needed must be a daily practice, wherein a collective manner of relating to subjects and nature sets the pace for these relationships. Care cannot be seen anymore as a human-centred relation, but as an expanded relational practice nurtured and contested by diverse bodies, territories, and territorialities. Once we collectivise care practices, they can act as one of the vehicles to decolonise our everyday experience of colonial legacies, immersed in modern, Eurocentrist, capitalist, and patriarchal relations, bodies, territories, and institutions.

DIAN EKOWATI: ON CARE IN THE INDONESIAN OIL PALM COMMUNITY

My Understanding of Decoloniality

I was first exposed to the idea of decoloniality when I started my PhD in feminist political ecology in 2019. I remembered that one of the first articles I read on decolonial ideas was from Chandra Talpade Mohanty: in her article *Under Western Eyes* (Mohanty, 1988), she eloquently argues against the monolithic categorisation of “Third World Women” and the othering, colonial assumption behind this categorisation. Later on, when I read Edward Said’s work of post-colonial theory, “Introduction to Orientalism” (Said, 1978), and Linda Tuhiwai Smith “Decolonising Methodologies” (Smith, 2012), I was exposed to similar conceptions of “otherness”.

Throughout my Ph.D. I read works from other scholars who also work on the Indonesian oil palm industry, had a similar organisational background in development and who shared the spirit of decoloniality. I found this excerpt to sum up what I feel at this stage of my life and career/study as a fourth-year Ph.D. student about being a decolonial feminist researcher.

The commitment to change and attention to the relationships with research subjects are key to feminist research. Practices of **reflexivity** – **researchers** reflecting on their **positionality**, **critically examining the research process**, and the **commitment to change** (Hesse-Biber, 2014), and attention to the **relationships between the researcher and**

the research subjects (Stacey, 1988; Nagar, 2003; Craven & Davis, 2013)—stand out as the defining characteristics of feminist research. (Resurrección & Elmhirst, 2020, p. 151, emphasis added)

I use the excerpt as a reminder of how significant positionality and reflexivity are in looking at the research process and commitment to change, something that I find resonant with the commitments behind decolonial ideas; despite the fact that none of the above authors mention the term “decolonial” in their chapter.

Below is my attempt to be reflexive towards my own positionality as an attempt to decolonise my research on the topic of care in the Indonesian oil palm community. I explain this by looking back and looking forward at my life stage, work, and research journey, hopefully to ease the reader in understanding which is my reflective and reflexive attempt (looking back), and which is my decolonial attempt (looking forward).

Looking Back: Reflecting on My Positionality

My positionality affects the way I make sense of the topic of my research on care, and engaging reflectively with my positionality and realising the power relations between researcher and subjects are the first steps towards thinking decolonially.

I remember proposing beyond human care at the start of my Ph.D. Later on, when I was in Indonesia, I decided to change my focus to care in everyday life, as I found the meaning of care in the oil palm context as imagined by Global North consumers did not travel well to the actual communities of oil palm producers in the Global South. My position as an “insider” to the experience of everyday care in the communities I worked with drove me to that change. I was born and raised in a small village without electricity until I was 11 years old. This experience is essential in my research practice since not having access to electricity is often the most notable aspect mentioned by local communities when they speak about the feeling of being “backward” or in the dark (Elmhirst et al., 2017). My parent’s home did not have household appliances (e.g., fridge, washing machine, cooker) until I was 23 years old. I helped my mother (my father did little care work for his children) to care for my two younger siblings (with a three- and twelve years age gap). I find the experience of caring for young children and not having access to appliances is essential

in my understanding of care. Domestic work is mundane, exhausting, and mainly undervalued; despite it being vital to care for and maintain life.

Later on, I got married and had two young children. Today, I have both the experiences of living every day with care support and the experience of lacking support, due to COVID, finances, and life circumstances. During COVID, my husband and I worked full-time from home while taking care of our 1.5- and 7-year-old children. Schools and childcare were closed, and we could not ask our caretaker to come to our place in order to avoid risks (for our caretaker and for us). It was hard, physically and emotionally, especially since the four of us were living in our two-bedroom house with little outdoor space.

This embodied experience as a daughter, sibling, wife, and mother with and without care support, shaped my understanding as “insider” to my own research on everyday care realities and challenges.

Throughout my life, I have had the privilege to travel and learn from agricultural, forest, and oil palm communities, mostly in Indonesia. My position is not always the same and my relationship with oil palm communities has been different from what I have now, i.e., as a Ph.D. researcher trying to understand various oil palm community’s care discourses using online videos/documents. I had been working as a junior researcher and research assistant in national and international universities and NGOs for almost 15 years before starting my Ph.D. I did fieldwork and during my work planning⁶ I often had an awkward mixed feeling of desire to help the community while recognising that our institution’s worldview and methods were undermining the community’s worldview. Sometimes this was not something we intended, but pressure from the donor and project budget and timelines often left us no room to think or do otherwise. Later, when we would visit the community, there was often another awkwardness—the community called us all from “Jakarta ” or the “centre”, while they are in the “margin”, they are “the other”; implying that we are different, worlds apart. Jakarta is Indonesia’s capital, where power, information, and facilities are centred. Carol J. Pierce Colfer, a researcher focused on gender and development, describes a similar feeling of awkwardness and power differentials in the context of her work with forest communities (Resurrección & Elmhirst, 2020).

⁶ Where I mostly did not have a voice in the work objectives and approach—I saw myself as in the margin due to my Indonesian education/work background, as a young woman and in my position as assistant/junior.

Other than this, I am of the Javanese ethnicity—Javanese are seen as the “whites” of Indonesia, in the sense of occupying the majority and living where power is centred, but also as one ethnicity that is often seen as most patriarchal in Indonesia. On top of that, I am a Moslem (the majority faith in Indonesia). There are long colonial historical instances of oppression and discrimination from Javanese ethnicity (the centre) towards **other**⁷ ethnicities and Moslem (the centre) towards **other**⁸ faiths.

All these reflections on positionality and my journey with decoloniality remind me of the terrible feeling about how our team did our work before. How we saw the “other” in the communities we worked with, how the “others” were different from us, and how sometimes I witnessed that our team leader did something that they would not do to us, but our leader did to the community anyway. This is something that I am not proud of remembering up to this day. I remembered in one instance, my senior lecturer who led the community visit was welcomed by an Indigenous leader on his porch, where they sat for two hours. When we left, this lecturer said “See, I can already make five journal papers about this *adat* (Indigenous) community from my two-hours talk with him”. I remembered being so puzzled by his comments, although I did not have the vocabulary of ‘extractive’ and ‘colonised’ research to describe them back then.

My position as both an “insider” and a researcher exposed me to other forms of coloniality in research: in 2021, several researchers from the Global North expressed their frustration at not being able to enter Indonesia for research (one asked me personally about possible strategies to enter). This was at a time when COVID was at its peak, and deaths in Indonesia were exorbitant. I was puzzled by these questions, on how these researchers blatantly ignore the health risk they would bring to the community.

⁷ Other is in bold to show that all other ethnicities other than Java in Indonesian is “the other” in the sense of “othering” as in post-colonial and decolonial works.

⁸ Other is in bold to show that all other faith other than Islam in Indonesian is “the other” in the sense of “othering” as in post-colonial and decolonial works.

*Looking Forward: Situating Positionality and Reflexivity
in Decolonialising Research*

I ask myself; how do I perform decolonial research? Which, in line with my journey above, I translate to “How does one do careful research without extracting and colonising the community, bringing marginal voices to the centre; all during the pandemic time?”⁹ In my field-work, this entails visiting remotely located oil palm communities, and in Indonesia, it means very little to no access to health facilities.

In a different context, it reminds me of what Linda Tuhiwai Smith mentioned in her book about how colonisers (who judged their mission as much more important than Indigenous people’s lives) sent infected blankets to Indigenous peoples in the First Nations of Canada (2012, p. 65). Therefore, I decided not to judge my research as so crucial that risking others’ life is acceptable. This ethical stance led me to decide not to do my research face to face even when travel restrictions were relaxed by the Indonesian Government.

With this realisation, I decided on a YouTube ethnography, where I follow some young women oil palm farmers. They regularly post videos on their public channels (with millions of subscribers and hundreds of thousands of views of each video they post) about their everyday life as oil palm farmers in different places in Indonesia. I made a deliberate choice to follow young women who make public YouTube videos and who identify themselves as oil palm farmers. I made these choices as my research is about care and women traditionally carry more care burdens.

In deciding on everyday YouTube ethnography, I made a deliberate decision to only choose the channels that were intentionally setting their YouTube for wide audiences/public settings and to focus on voices that rarely make their way to centre stage in oil palm discourse: those of women and youth. Furthermore, in Indonesia, local YouTube channels are mediums that capture a lot of audiences across Indonesia. Indonesian mobile internet service provides many affordable YouTube packages for its users. However, this voice rarely enters mainstream discourse, either in academics or policy.

⁹ Questions surrounding non-extractive research during pandemic times was also asked by Dupuis in her research with aged people (in Harcourt et al., 2022).

On the flipside, I ask about the ethics of “lurking” these spaces and the border between public and personal space of these persons I watch/observe (Morrow et al., 2015) something that I continue to reflect on now when I write this piece.

CONCLUSION

Through this chapter, we intend to contribute to the growing South–South dialogues which contest colonial and neo-colonial social and political structures in order to create a shared decolonial future. In our different interpretations of this decolonial future, we see a common spirit that links us all to FPE’s attempts to grapple with complex questions of who the subject can be, and how to think about care for a common world. Our aim is to expose our different interpretations as a necessary step to engaging different ways not just of thinking about and engaging with decoloniality, but also of articulating these interpretations. These interpretations are bound within our understanding of the concepts of subjectivity, the body, and the other. Our diverse understandings bring our unique research approaches and our visions of decoloniality, which is why each author speaks in the ‘I’ of the first person. This ‘I’ is also a unique reflection of our *shared* understanding of situatedness, that we understand collectively as our historical and temporal rootedness, and our shared views on power inequalities that were not just inherent to the colonial world but are fundamental to an ongoing struggle in a post-colonial world. Our South–South ‘dialogue’, then, is as much a dialogue within ourselves—our experiences, personal histories, and reflections of our individual colonial realities—as it is between our collective interpretations of them. Our goal is then to be vigilant about our own situated realities and meaning-making processes, as ethical considerations of care engendered by those meanings and shared subjectivities have shaped our past and continue to shape our futures.

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