

# Reimagining Geography for a Sustainable Future

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## Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i> .....	2
<b>1. The importance of geography in the 21st century</b> .....	2
<b>2. The creation of oppressive (unsustainable) geographies</b> .....	3
<b>3. Conflicting epistemologies and the challenge for sustainability</b> .....	5
<b>4. Reimagining geography for a sustainable future</b> .....	7
<b>4.1 Reimagining aspects of the geography curriculum for a sustainable future</b> .....	8
<i>i. Rethinking the concepts home and place</i> .....	8
<i>ii. Rethinking the concepts country and society–environment relations</i> .....	8
<b>4.2 Reimagining geographical research methodology for a sustainable future</b> .....	9
<i>i. Variants of participatory action research (PAR)</i> .....	11
<i>ii. Inventive representations research (IRR)</i> .....	12
<b>5. Conclusion</b> .....	13
<i>Works Cited</i> .....	14

## *Abstract*

In this paper, the author explains how important it is to reimagine geography in the 21st century to ensure that it will contribute to the achievement of a more sustainable future. The author places the discipline into its historical context by describing how it has been influenced by the Enlightenment, the colonial period and western science epistemologies. The paper calls for geographers to align themselves closely with the epistemologies of indigenous science, and in this way to invigorate and stimulate geographical theories and scholarship that will not only strengthen the identity of most of the South African population but also efforts to achieve intellectual self-determination. The paper makes specific suggestions about curricula aimed at achieving a balance between *objectivity* and *universalism* on the one hand, and the *interrelationship between humanity and nature*, *experience* and *wisdom* on the other hand. The paper also makes some suggestions about relevant research methodologies to be employed when working with indigenous communities to encourage South African geographers to reimagine the discipline for a more sustainable future.

Vice-Principal: Teaching, Learning, Community Engagement and Student Support, Prof G Moche; Executive Dean, Prof Maggi Linington; Director of School, Prof Magano; Chair of the Department of Geography, Prof Simphiwe Mini; Colleagues; invited guests; students; friends; ladies and gentlemen, it is my distinct privilege to present my inaugural lecture titled:

### *“Reimagining Geography for a Sustainable Future”*

My lecture is grounded in my experience of over 30 years as an academic at Unisa and includes my community engagement collaboration with the GRCE, my experience as an undergraduate lecturer and post graduate supervisor as well as my research within three specific research areas.

In short, my lecture can be divided into four parts:

- The importance of geography in the 21st century
- The creation of oppressive (unsustainable) geographies
- Conflicting epistemologies and the challenge for sustainability
- Reimagining geography for a sustainable future.

#### **1. The importance of geography in the 21st century**

Geography – as both a discipline and a phenomenon – shapes how people imagine themselves. Geography has always played an important role in the development of a civic imagination that can deal with future challenges. The discipline does this by guiding its students to understand where we have come from; where we are and why we are here; and what we might become.

With the time–space compression of globalisation, the need for civic literacy in geography has never been more urgent. The neoliberal rationalisation of governments and the replacement of the level playing fields of free trade and formal equality pose a threat to the phenomenon of geography despite it shaping every aspect of political, economic and social experiences in the world. In the political and economic life of a nation - time and money are invested to solve many issues that have geographical currency, such as regional inequality, poverty, rural and social issues, natural hazards, border protection, environmental conservation and climate change, to name but a few. Geographical illiteracy in “political and bureaucratic circles, and civic leaders’ failure of geographical imagination impose a significant burden on the nation, its communities, environments and neighbours” (Howitt, 2002, p. 7).

Geography as an academic discipline in the 21st century provides students with the opportunity to engage critically with important values, such as social justice, economic equity, cultural diversity and ecological sustainability. However, if geographers are to contribute effectively to a sustainable future, they should create opportunities for themselves and their students to engage critically and effectively in justice building wherever they are.

In addition, we should never forget that geography as a modern scientific discipline has its roots in a period of humankind’s history that was oppressive and hugely unsustainable for the largest part of the world’s population and regions. Reimagining geography for more a sustainable future beyond the 21st century cannot happen unless we understand the impact that the last two centuries have had on the geographical knowledge of today.

## **2. The creation of oppressive (unsustainable) geographies**

In 1784, German philosopher and physical geographer Immanuel Kant described the Enlightenment in his work *Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment?* as a period when conditions were met for emancipation in terms of *liberty, progress, equality, reason and dignity* (Clement, 2017). It was during this time in humankind’s history that the ancient Greek philosophers’ focus on reason was reaffirmed. It was understood that *knowledge* was the only way to escape a *state of ignorance* and enter an *age of reason* to bring about universal emancipation and social benefits to the whole of humankind (Withers, 2007).

The intent of this lecture is not to describe the positive impact of Enlightenment on many Europeans, but rather to uncover its negative effect on the indigenous populations of the world – that is, those who were not the beneficiaries of emancipation and did not reap any social benefits. Contemporary indigenous academics claim that the Enlightenment had an extremely destructive effect on indigenous knowledges:

We have been pathologized by Western research methods that have found us deficient either as genetically inferior or culturally deviant for generations. We have been dismembered, objectified and problematised via Western scientific rationality and reason. We have been politically, socially, and economically dominated by colonial forces and marginalised through armed struggle, biased legislation and educational initiatives and policies that promote Western knowledge systems at the expense of our own (Louis, 2007, p. 131).

It was during this period that the *views of the other* were “formalised through science, philosophy and imperialism” (Clement, 2017, p. 5), into explicit systems of classification and regimes of truth (Smith, 2012, p. 33). Modern philosophers used the superiority of enlightened reason to create

conditions for the rejection of *other ways of knowing* (Pulido, 2016; Kovach, 2012; Smith, 2012). This led to the creation of a radical division between two humanities and the zones of *being* and *not being* (Santos, 2014). The former was associated with positive descriptors such as *scientific; civilised; developed; productive; global; and universal*, while the latter was associated with more inferior descriptors such as *ignorant; backward; developing; local; and marginal*. Ironically, scientific Enlightenment thought was used to explain and rationalise European imperialism and colonisation in the 19th century.

During the late 19th century, geography had to fight for academic legitimacy and independence as a discipline (Clement, 2017, p. 7; Mayhew, 2001, p. 390). Geographers did this by making themselves useful for imperial projects by producing knowledge for European nations that aided colonisation and colonial governance. The rise of modern geography can thus not be separated from imperialism and colonisation. The Sorbonne University (France) created a chair in Colonial Geography in 1895 that was held by Marcel Dubois. At his inaugural lecture, Dubois (as quoted by (Clement, 2017, p. 7) claimed a “close solidarity between geographical science and colonial concerns” and further claimed that geographers “had their glorious part in the conquest of colonies”.

In the context of spatial, temporal and political differences in Europe, and because of the close link to colonialism and imperial projects, two main kinds of geographies developed in the 19th century, namely *geographies of the plentiful world* and the *geographies of the empty worlds*, and both were very oppressive in nature.

During the European discovery of spaces in the *plentiful world*, the efforts of geographers included compiling maps, provision of exploration reports, undertaking surveys in order to create an inventory of the *discovered* territories, to improve the geographical knowledge of the world and to dominate it (Howitt & Jackson, 1998). As such, these geographies served the interests of the European powers, academics and science. While geographers often described the conquered world as “delightful countries with gorgeous landscapes that resembled earthly paradises” (Clement, 2017, p. 7), their descriptions of indigenous people were often based on physical anthropology. It was during this time that physical features were used as a scientific basis for the categorisation of indigenous peoples around the world (Staum, 2003, p. 89).

The geographies of the *empty worlds* were associated with the doctrine of *terra nullis* or *empty land* or *nobody’s land*, which was applied to the territories that were colonised by the European powers. This doctrine extended from the legal and divine moral base that were used to dispossess non-Christians of their lands during the Crusades to the global and cultural motivation to conquer the *uncivilised* world during the period of colonisation in the 19th and 20th centuries. During this period, geographers exemplified the widespread conception of *other* by describing indigenous people of the *empty world* as unsophisticated, savage and ignorant. The production and diffusion of knowledge on and about indigenous peoples were grounded in relationships of dominance supported by imperial structures of power such as universities, scientific societies, scholarly networks and other institutions transplanted from European powers (Smith, 2012).

The geographies of the plentiful and empty worlds form the basis of the colonial meta-geography of dispossession, growing capitalism and the spatial imageries of *progress, civilisation and development*. The process of barbarising indigenous peoples and developing a legal fiction of *terra nullis* allowed colonisers to dispossess people in the name of progress (Ryan, 2012, p. 44; Nash, 2002, p. 224).

Closer to home in time and space, the South African geography of the 1960s and early 1970s focused on legitimising apartheid either by pursuing purposeless descriptive meanderings or, more dangerously, through the implicit or explicit endorsement of the language and praxis of apartheid (Crush, 1984). Various geographers bolstered the South African state either explicitly by providing intellectual justification for racist practices or implicitly by failing to challenge aspects of the apartheid state (Morris, 1986). The 1970s saw the birth and strengthening of geographical literature that was highly critical of apartheid. The critique of the praxis of apartheid deepened in the 1980s, and the formative stages in the struggle for evolving *peoples geography* gathered momentum despite the worsening climate of political repression and states of emergencies (Rogerson & Parnell, 1989, p. 13). However, for the last two decades the efforts of South African geographers have focused on the democratic vision of a post-apartheid South Africa (Nicolau & Davis, 2003) and not necessarily on the decolonisation of the curriculum.

The last 200 years of humankind's history were essentially a contradiction of definitions of sustainability. The commodification of the people and resources of the conquered world by the colonisers of the Global North will have a lasting negative impact on regions in the Global South. Geographers across the globe are increasingly challenging present unsustainable practices that compromise the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This means that we need to rethink the way we conduct our business to be more equitable across the globe and for future generations.

### **3. Conflicting epistemologies and the challenge for sustainability**

Modern geography has developed both as a product and a tool of the colonial period, and the influence of apartheid on geography in South Africa cannot be ignored. For over two centuries the Western notions of *space*, *time* and *human-environment relations* were imposed on the world and scholars of geography. The “hegemonic power of the resulting modernist worldview continues to perpetuate in part through its intimate relationship with global capitalism” (Herman, 2008, p. 73). What we now consider to be a *rational worldview* or *common sense* is embodied in a distinct ideology that enabled the colonisation of the world, and the commodification of indigenous people and their knowledges, of resources and of nature. In any attempt to reimagine geography for a sustainable future, we need to focus on the decolonisation of geography, but to do this we need to understand the fundamentals that ground Western epistemology.

The first fundamental that needs to be considered is *rationality*, which features as *logic* and *reason* in western science. *Rationality* can be described as the “disenchantment of the world”, which means that superstitions and magical elements of human actions, behaviour and thought have been separated from science. The impact of *rationality* is threefold:

- The separation of the superstitious from religion has resulted in the removal of spiritual aspects related to the world, and in this way has reduced the world to pure mechanistic materiality on the one hand and the mental realm of the human consciousness on the other.
- It has rendered nature with very little intrinsic value.
- It has led to the separation of humanity and nature, which has resulted in the commodification of the material world, that is essential for capitalism.

The separation of *spiritual* issues from science had a profound impact on geography, “which into the 18th century included a range of esoteric traditions including astrology, numerology, alchemy and natural magic” (Herman, 2008, p. 74).

While *rationality* is important to consider, the two pillars of positivistic epistemology that are so well known to the scientists attending this lecture tonight, namely *objectivity* and *universalism*, must also be considered when describing western science (Clement, 2017). Both are legacies of the Enlightenment, both were strengthened during the period of colonialism and both are pillars on which western science (and geography) rests.

Understanding scientific objectivity is central to understanding the nature of science and the role it plays in society. However, there are two sides to scientific objectivity. *Firstly*, the products of science, namely theories, laws, experimental results and observations, are considered by scientists to be accurate representations of the external world. These products are not influenced by human desires, goals, capabilities or experience. *Secondly*, science is objective as the processes and methods used to generate the knowledge neither depend on contingent social and ethical values, nor on the individual bias of a scientist. In the same vein scientific universalism is considered to have valid universal application or applicability as it is free of social or political status and personal attributes of the participants used to generate the knowledge.

In the current debate to decolonise geography, the voices of academics calling for indigenous geographies are becoming louder. At this point, it is necessary to address the term *indigenous* that has been used so liberally in this lecture. This is an umbrella term to encompass a huge variety of people across the globe, and the term is not without its problems. The word refers to all people who are born in a place; however, in the context of explaining the epistemology of indigenous geographies, *indigenous* refers to groups “with ancestral and often spiritual ties to particular land, and whose ancestors held that land prior to colonisation by outside powers, and whose nations remain submerged within the states created by those powers” (Shaw, Herman, & Dobbs, 2006, p. 268).

There are two very important components that underpin indigenous science that are in direct contradiction to western science, namely the *interrelationship between humanity and nature*, and the value placed on *experience and wisdom* as opposed to objective knowledge. Unlike western science, indigenous science considers humanity and nature to be interrelated to a greater or lesser degree. Indigenous science is about “a give-and-take relationship with the natural world, and which presupposes a responsibility to care for, sustain, and respect the rights of other living things, plants, animals, and the place in which one lives” (Cajete, 2000, p. 25). Indigenous science can also be described as the “realisation that the world, and all its possible experiences, constitute a social reality, a fabric of life in which everything has the possibility of intimate knowing relationships because, ultimately, everything is related”. Geography is often traced back to the ancient Greeks. The quest for wisdom would not have been foreign to them, yet in the 21st century we are still grappling with the concept that experience occurs in places and as such landscapes, stories and place names can be used to encode social and cultural knowledge. Indigenous scientists explain that wisdom *sits in places*, they further affirm that wisdom is a result of social and cultural knowledge and guidance based on experience. Wisdom can be described as “decision making based on deep and abiding knowledge and understanding of long-term processes and aimed at maintaining balance and harmony in the world – bearing in mind both smaller and larger scales, both the present and the future”. This is aligned with the American Indian philosophy that all major decisions of a nation must be based on a mindfulness of seven generations. Wisdom in indigenous science extends to a collective level, where it is understood that collective wisdom has amassed over generations from empirical observations and insights and teaches us how to live effectively in the world and in our own societies. Traditional wisdom pays very close attention to the

environment, and at the same time it advises on social order and personal development. Such wisdom develops because of a dialogue with earth, as its ultimate purpose is based on the physical survival of humankind.

In summary, it is acknowledged that the distinction between approaches loosely identified as *western* and *indigenous* is simplistic. Besides the mere cultural differences, *western* science is based on the Cartesian split between mind and body, and therefore between consciousness and matter. We should consider that this split is neither characteristic of the pre-modern thinking of the west nor of indigenous cultures (Shaw, Herman, & Dobbs, 2006).

We are often unable or unwilling to recognise that the present dominant worldview characterised by *objectivity* and *universalism* is a product of specific historical and cultural forces and not the product of *rationality*. This inability or unwillingness often prevents us from looking beyond the severe limits that this worldview prescribes. It is these blinders that border on ideology and pose an enormous obstacle to our quest to reimagine geography for a more sustainable future. Western science often indirectly promotes capitalism; the result is that its associated social and political formations foster decision-making that focuses on individual short-term gain that benefits one generation, and thus we live in a world that is hugely unsustainable. We need to make a mind shift and incorporate more aspects of indigenous science in geography curricula and research. This will greatly enhance our ability to deal with environmental issues such as climate change and to ensure a more sustainable future for humankind.

#### **4. Reimagining geography for a sustainable future**

The unsustainable domination of western science over indigenous science is not a thing of the past. Several scholars have tried to decolonise geography, but it would be premature to state that the tide has turned, and decolonisation has been accomplished. To open spaces for indigenous knowledges, scholars must still struggle to overcome many obstacles in the academy. Indigenous science remains to a large degree illegitimate to academics as it does not conform to the pre-established mode of enquiry of western science. To be viewed as legitimate, indigenous geographical scientists are expected to adopt western epistemologies, concepts, categorisations, worldviews and mainstream disciplinary codes (Clement, 2017).

As an academic and a non-indigenous scholar, I must continuously ask how best to situate my voice and what dangers I should navigate around in the debate about decolonisation and Africanisation. My effort must be understood in the context of my personal journey, which I am undertaking with humility and respect for indigenous knowledges, values and customs. I have concerns that my efforts could unintentionally reproduce aspects of coloniality, and for this I sincerely apologise. I can also not maintain that I speak on behalf of indigenous peoples or scientists, but rather, in this lecture, I wish to nourish and align my own reflections with indigenous voices and epistemologies. Mine is not an artificial or rhetorical position but is grounded in my experience as an academic at Unisa for over three decades, which has taught me to ask *how to write and teach the difference differently*. By saying this, I acknowledge the risk of categorising and thus marginalising indigenous geographies, and this is not my intention. Instead, in this lecture I seek to contribute to the re-centring of indigenous epistemologies as part of the theoretical corpus of geographical knowledge. This lecture does not call for the rejection of current western theories in geography, but is rather a call to change focus, approaches and priority. In addition, I see the decolonisation of geography as a process that requires the integration of indigenous knowledges

into our discipline – and not ghettoising indigenous geographic knowledge as *other* or a curiosity (Hunt, 2014).

#### **4.1 Reimagining aspects of the geography curriculum for a sustainable future**

If geography as an academic discipline in the 21st century strives to provide its students with the opportunity to engage critically with important values such as social justice, economic equity, cultural diversity and ecological sustainability, then geographers should take the opportunity to situate western knowledge alongside indigenous knowledge. As academics we need to afford ourselves time and space for other forms of encounters and dialogue by exposing ourselves to different traditions and elements of knowledge production and geographical meaning. Based on my experience as a lecturer and supervisor of geography students at Unisa, I can highlight four immediate areas in which geographers can try to bridge the gaps between western knowledge and indigenous knowledge in their drive to contribute to a more sustainable world. These areas are related to the concepts of *home* and *place*; and *country* and *society-environment relations*.

##### *i. Rethinking the concepts home and place*

The concepts *home* and *place* form an important theme in the indigenous geographies debate. The delimitation of boundaries and the construction of home places are important parts of this body of knowledge. Indigenous geographies record the significance of *home* as a form of place that lies beyond current geographical conceptualisation of the term. The indigenous meaning of *home* draws on both the historical and contemporary senses through which place–people relationships (viewed as *territory* or *site* in Western knowledge) function to support a social group, its way of life and the relations it holds as important. Home spaces therefore constitute socio-spatial connections over time and between people and entities, and these connections are topical for wider debates about time, memory and posthuman relationships and processes (Larsen, 2006).

By incorporating more diverse understandings of *home* into the geography curriculum, our students would be able to describe *home* as a social phenomenon that is constituted of diverse meanings, from the arrangement of a single room to specific dwellings to building projects, including streets, neighbourhoods and an overall city-wide construction of belonging. In this way, our graduates could contribute to the development of more sustainable cities in which people from diverse populations could develop a comfortable singular and collective *sense of place* that would be formed on the basis of the “safety, support, expression of identity and sustenance of lifestyle that each population values” (Panelli, 2008, p. 803).

The struggles of indigenous communities to maintain important environmental relations is intensely place-specific. In such cases, customs and protocols often underpin the human/non-human relations with *place*. These include environmental, ancestral, economic, spiritual and legal dimensions, and provide a basis for rethinking the concepts of *country* and *society–environmental relations* in geography.

##### *ii. Rethinking the concepts country and society–environment relations*

The concept of *country* is closely related to the concept of nation-building, and as such is sustained and contested at many levels – from individual families, specific streets, neighbourhoods and city-wide formations of identity to a national policy of multiculturalism. The concept is also a strategic one that can be used to invoke strategies for decolonisation. In South Africa, the present land debate can be used to frame the conflict between western and indigenous worldviews of *country* in our curriculum. Central to the western debate is the notion of land possession and private property. The indigenous notion is that *country* depicts the indigenous relationship between people



and their environment, and involves kinship, ancestry and responsibility to manage, maintain and nurture land to make sure that it remains sustainable for future generations. By allowing our students to debate the conflicting notions of *country*, we will produce graduates who are more sensitive to diversity of thought and different worldviews.

The final area that can assist in bridging the gap between western and indigenous knowledge is a sensitivity to the *society–environmental relations*. This lecture has explained the impact on geography of the reduction of the world to a pure mechanistic materiality and the mental realm of the human consciousness. The split of humanity and nature resulted in huge divides in our discipline, as can be seen in human and physical geography. Indigenous knowledge maintains a very close relationship between society and the environment. The Department of Geography at Unisa implemented a curriculum in 2000 that paved the way for closing the gap between humanity and nature as advocated by indigenous epistemologies (Nicolau & Pretorius, 2016). I was privileged to play a leading role in this pioneering move, and thankful that some of my fellow pioneers and graduates from this curriculum are in the audience tonight. While the implementation of an integrated approach in the geography curriculum at Unisa was (and still is) questioned by geographers from other universities in South Africa, the integration of human and physical geography is one of the key components of achieving a truly Africanised curriculum that will help achieve a sustainable future (Pretorius, 2017).

If we could succeed in including more interaction between western and indigenous knowledge in a geography curriculum, our graduates would benefit in four ways: *Firstly*, they would get the opportunity to recognise diverse ontologies. Our students will also be exposed to different worldviews and realise that such views are equal. *Secondly*, by reimagining geography in an integrated fashion, our students would develop the skills required to identify complex intersections between what might previously have been considered the separate environmental, social, economic, political and cultural geographies of an issue or a place. *Thirdly*, if we could change what we teach, we could also change how we facilitate teaching and learning and embrace more innovative and interactive pedagogies relevant to the Fourth Industrial Revolution. *Finally*, academics and graduates would expand their understanding of and thinking about the practice of geography as it would provide them with an opportunity to imagine different communications and ways of doing geography that would be more applicable to the African continent and more relevant to achieving a sustainable future.

#### ***4.2 Reimagining geographical research methodology for a sustainable future***

While geography in South Africa has already made significant strides towards transcending colonial legacies, remnants of the discipline's heritage continue to pervade the present. The intellectual heritage of the discipline gives preference to the natural sciences and quantification, and certain institutional settings and research practices still constrain qualitative research practices.

From my experience in working with several rural communities, I can highlight several differences between the research methodologies used by western researchers and those used by indigenous researchers. The *first* difference focuses on the general acceptance of indigenous knowledge systems in the generation of new knowledge. Indigenous knowledge systems are rooted in a specific place and time. For many indigenous communities their oral histories, narratives and spiritual practices and rituals are important avenues of knowledge transmission. Indigenous knowledge systems contain nuances that often only community members understand and requires researchers at the very least to incorporate the indigenous voice in their research outputs. On the

other hand, western research methodologies disregard indigenous knowledge because the process to obtain the knowledge and the knowledge itself do not meet western scientific standards.

The *second* difference relates to the way researchers position themselves and the indigenous community in their research. Western research methodologies often give indigenous people labels such as *subjects* or *informants*, while researchers using indigenous research methodologies refer to community members as *collaborators* or *partners in theorising*. The idea that participants should be provided co-authorship in academic outputs is becoming increasingly the norm in collaborations with indigenous communities.

*Thirdly*, and aligned with the fundamental principle of *objectivity*, research undertaken under the umbrella of western science accepts that research is done from the perspective of an outsider looking in and is objective and devoid of any bias. This differs from the indigenous research methodology that accepts a certain degree of bias as each researcher's lifetime has been shaped by events that have formed their perceptions and their ability to relate to and interact with indigenous communities, as well as the representation of the research they are conducting.

The *fourth* difference is related the research agenda. Western science often undertakes research because funding is available. Such research has little regard for the needs of the community. The result is western academic knowledge production is imposed on the community, whether they want it or not. An indigenous science research agenda mostly focuses on the specific needs of a community, is known to the community and is undertaken with the community for the community.

The *final* difference lies in the directionality of sharing of the knowledge generated. From the perspective of western sciences, research is about searching for new knowledge or new ways of incorporating existing knowledge. Western researchers rarely think about sharing archival research with the communities they are working with, and even though University Research Ethics Committees require researchers to share the results of their research with those who have taken part in the research process, they do so on their own terms and in a format that might not be relevant to the community. On the other hand, research undertaken under the umbrella of indigenous science ensures that knowledge generated prior to the commencement of the research is shared with their collaborators. In addition, these researchers will go the extra mile to share the results of their research, and in most cases ensure that the research results play a role in the creation of a better life for the respondents.

The challenge to conduct relevant research in the context of indigenous geography is not about the development of indigenous methodologies, but rather about understanding how deeply the colonial history has impacted on the discipline, as it is the history of the discipline that complicates the present endeavours of researchers in indigenous communities. As geographers, we need to be more innovative to confront the possible claims that western research still carries the baggage of imperialism. To date, research in the realm of indigenous geography has included fundamentals related to *collaborative relationships*, *participatory mapping* for community empowerment. It should be noted that collaborative approaches are not immune to claims of neo-colonial or colonial bias and as such need to be subjected to ongoing scrutiny. Indigenous researchers are frank when explaining that indigenous communities involved in research claim the rights of self-definition, the right to tell their own histories, recover their own traditional knowledge and culturally grounded pedagogies, epistemologies and ontologies.

Developing or repackaging research methodologies for indigenous geography is not what we should be doing as researchers. We can use existing methodologies; however, we need to make a fundamental shift in our understanding of expectations when we interact with communities. We need to realise that when research methodologies involve community members, “ethics become method; data becomes life; landscape becomes author; participants become family” (Coombes, Johnson, & Howitt, 2014, p. 850).

Many local communities do not readily allow researchers into their community due to perceived bias and past experiences with researchers who followed a more extractive approach to knowledge generation. To overcome this, two possible research methodologies can be considered when undertaking geographical research in the pursuit of indigenous knowledge (Last, 2012), namely participatory action research (PAR) and inventive representations research (IRR). Both methodologies must constantly address their collaborators objection to research.

*i. Variants of participatory action research (PAR)*

Participatory Action Research is often experienced by many indigenous communities to be an ongoing process of producing cumulative, durable and racialised outcomes (Akom, 2011). For this reason, critical race theory must be combined with a Participatory Action Research to allow participants to focus on structural racialisation, self-determination and equity, while at the same time providing for capacity building and social learning. Using this combination leads to a methodological shift away from racial violence towards reflection on socio-historical processes that restrict community ambitions (Nicolau, 2013).

Action research must also be viewed in the present political economy of academic institutions that proactively seek community partnerships. The danger that action research poses is that an impact agenda and not community needs will drive the research, which could result in the generation of inauthentic and counteractive research results (Nicolau, 2013; Nicolau & Delpont, 2015). However, Participatory Action Research requires the researcher to adopt a subjective viewpoint that is shaped by local understanding rather than disciplinary preferences, and thus it becomes less likely that the researcher will overlook specific problems or potential in the interaction (Coombes, Johnson, & Howitt, 2014).

When undertaking Participatory Action Research, it is critical that the researcher should not only allow for the contemplation of unjust social structures, but also for participants to take collective action against them. When using Participatory Action Research, the researcher must become a local activist – researchers should work intensively with local communities and small groups of people. The co-production of knowledge is seen as an intermediary step towards the democratisation and dissemination of knowledge production.

Participatory Action Research is collaborative in nature, the following is suggested in terms of such collaboration: *Firstly*, collaborative research should not be measured on its immediate outputs, but rather on its capacity to transition theory and methods to host communities so that they can generate a basis for independent research over time. *Secondly*, partnerships should be reconfigured away from the simple 50:50 influence of the insider and outsider towards realising the need for indigenous leadership of cross-cultural teams.

With collaboration in mind, many researchers use community-based participatory research (CBPR) to address concerns about the treatment of indigenous communities. In my own experience, successful collaboration requires a multi-layered reflexivity, that anticipates that the

research will commence with a topic that is important to the community and that has been brought to the researchers' attention by the community. While working with the GRCF and various communities for my PhD, I learnt that the close connection between time and trust is vital for any effort to cultivate a deeper understanding and acceptance by communities. It is also important to realise that the investment of time does not necessarily lead to trust. This aspect of Community Based Participatory Research provides a conundrum for funders, as very few will provide funds to researchers to spend the first year to get to know and develop trust with community members. At the same time, the constraints of research agendas, output measures and funding cycles imposed on the researcher by the University are also hurdles in the crucial process of establishing trust in a community over time. The result is that collaboration is often nothing more than consultation, and at times I fear that this is the case for most of the community engagement projects at Unisa.

My own research and affirmed by the research of many of my postgraduate students found that indigenous communities resist research projects labelled as collaborative, as they experience the Community Based Participatory Research process as just as disempowering as more conventional research practices. To offset this reality, I suggest three approaches to be followed. The *first* is the establishment of a university–community partnership that institutionalises the co-management of research, as this will assist institutional ethics committees in understanding what appropriate engagement with communities entails. The *second* suggestion is paid internships for community researchers that allow enough time to develop trust with community leadership. The *final* suggestion is that researchers should realise that communities are complex and the idea of a community as a single collaborator should be revisited.

#### *ii Inventive representations research (IRR)*

As geographers, we must constantly rethink and adapt our research practice, and should we wish to truly reimagine our research practise, we need to consider more inventive representations research. Oral traditions are an integral part of many indigenous cultures, and as researchers we could use these to generate data in a collaborative manner. Oral traditions can unite action research with emotive, affective and narrative practices on a wider scale. Many western scientists discount oral traditions as they are not epistemologically neutral. Oral traditions are fundamentally subjective, but they include references to real facts, spaces, places and landscapes.

As a way forward, I would like to highlight a case study that used participatory videos to devolve narration and capture oral traditions. Mistry et al (2013) used this method to understand the indigenous objections to protected areas in Guyana (South America). When the research team implemented the methodology, their first action was to train the villagers in video production, a skill that would be retained by the villagers after the research had been completed. This action meant the outcome of the research was collective from the start and cumulative over time. The participatory video was readily adopted as the villagers were comfortable with the familiar narrative form of oral and visual communication. The basic rules of engagement were that whoever held the camera directed the narrative. This allowed the villagers the opportunity to create their own films according to their own sense of what was important, and to shape how they would be represented in the final research report. In this case study, the participatory video enabled local communities to project outwards and collectively showcase their values. The result was consensus building and cross-cultural understanding of acceptable conservation methods with contextualised interventions that embrace complexity and support trans-disciplinarity (Mistry, et al., 2013).

In reimagining geographical research to achieve a more sustainable future, we need to be respectful of communities, values, knowledges and customs. We should no longer maintain an extractive attitude or collect information exclusively in interest of the academy. We must ensure that the production of geographical knowledge is to the benefit of communities.

## **5. Conclusion**

Despite its many shortcomings, this lecture does not call for the rejection of current western theories in geography, but is rather a call to change focus, approaches and priorities, and to align ourselves with the current call for the Africanisation of academic pursuits. These are exciting times for South African geographers and an alignment with more indigenous knowledge and knowledge generation can invigorate and stimulate geographical theories and scholarship. This will not only strengthen the identity of most of the South African population, it will also support efforts to achieve intellectual self-determination. Creating a better balance between *objectivity* and *universalism* on the one hand and the *interrelationship between humanity and nature, experience* and *wisdom* in the pursuits of South African geographers on the other hand will go a long way to reimagine the discipline for a more sustainable future.

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