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Culturally disruptive qualitative research: troubling whiteness in research cultures

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ABSTRACT

Culturally responsive research (CRR) posits that culture is always present and should thus be a fundamental organizing principle in all facets of inquiry. However, within whitestream research cultures this work can be assimilated into the white, colonial logics it seeks to resist. In this paper, I offer a loving critique and critical reimagining of CRR by tracing its genealogy, situating contemporary research within whiteness and coloniality, and identifying three contraindications for researching while white—*defining cultures*, *engaging in reflexivity*, and *employing cultural competence*. Building on these critiques, I explore the potential of shifting from cultural responsivity to cultural disruption. Drawing from my experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand and Cambodia, I discuss culturally disruptive research as one method to dismantle the cultural foundations of research that perpetuate white supremacy. Cultural disruption invites researchers into spaces of *desire*, *dynamic dissonance*, and *relational negotiations* to foreground creative, critical, and capacious knowledge generation.

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Early in my career, with good intentions and lofty ideals for social justice, I trusted that my research was culturally responsive. Over time, I grew weary and leery of the meaning and modes of responsivity for researchers, who like me, research while white. Since then, I have come across countless examples of the ways that racialized ignorance and white, colonialist onto-epistemologies (Scheurich, 2025) continue to infiltrate and ground culturally responsive research (CRR), persistently reproducing hegemonic knowledge (Chouinard & Cram, 2020). In contemplating the contraindications of CRR conducted in the whitestream (Grande, 2003), I question why we seek to “fix” an Othered culture before turning the gaze inward.

In 2018 San Pedro called for a shift from culturally responsive pedagogies toward pedagogies that disrupt the culture of whiteness. His provocation resonated with the nagging feeling that I, as a culturally responsive researcher, had it wrong. This paper is a product of this contemplative troubling, wherein I offer a critical reimagining of CRR aimed at disrupting the culture of whiteness driving the academy, our teaching, and our research. I begin by tracing a brief genealogy of CRR, outlining its underlying

intentions and practical enactments. I then situate the contemporary research culture within the dominant logics of whiteness and coloniality. Drawing these strands together, I argue that CRR risks assimilation into dominant cultural norms through three contraindications, cultural description, cultural competence, and self-reflexivity, which simultaneously operate as tools of responsiveness and replicators of whitemain research. I then consider areas of disruptions, exploring how we might cultivate disruptive desire, dynamic dissonance, and relational negotiation as strategies to confront the risk of the reproduction of whiteness in our research.

Problematizing “the noble goal” of cultural responsiveness

Culturally responsive inquiry comprises a heterogeneity of meanings and purposes; however, across typologies, there is a shared value that culture, writ large, is always present and therefore should be a central organizing factor of all aspects of research (Chouinard & Cram, 2020). Trainor and Bal (2014) described CRR as a “noble goal” that pushes inquirers to “go beyond culture-blind and cultural deterministic approaches,” attending to the “complex interactions of individual, institutional, and interpersonal factors in a given context of conducting research” (p. 204). Culturally situated researchers are encouraged to privilege multiple ways of knowing, elevating decentered voices and flattening researcher power (Seponski et al., 2013). Though rooted in “culture,” responsive research is difficult to define, making it essential to trace its genealogy to clarify its foundational intent and manifestations.

A brief genealogy

While many fields inform CRR, its clearest roots lie in education, healthcare, and program evaluation. In education, Ladson-Billings (1995) concept of culturally relevant pedagogy challenged deficit models by promoting a justice-oriented approach that draws on students’ cultural strengths and sustains their cultural competence. Gay (2000) extended this with culturally responsive teaching, offering pedagogical strategies that align with students’ cultural lives. Building on these foundations, scholars have deepened and critiqued culturally attuned approaches. Hammond (2014), for example, linked cultural responsiveness with neuroscience to cultivate students’ “fluid intelligence” (p. 16). Others, such as Paris and Alim (2014) issued a “loving critique forward” (p. 85), urging ongoing refinement of culturally situated practices. These pedagogical evolutions, and their catalysts, paralleled educational researchers’ concerns that inquiry can either reinforce or resist deficit perspectives, leading to the emergence of CRR (Berryman et al., 2013).

In the health sciences, cultural responsiveness arose from efforts to improve care for “marginalized” communities (Seponski et al., 2013). Frameworks such as cultural competence and cultural humility (Tascón & Gatwiri, 2020) aimed to enhance providers’ awareness of both their own and their patients’ cultures, reduce disparities, and prioritize patients’ experiences. These approaches laid the groundwork for health researchers committed to culturally grounded knowledge and resisting pathologization (Seponski et al., 2013).

The roots of culturally responsive evaluation trace to the 1930s, as African American evaluators in the United States centered Black experience as a foundation for developing democratic approaches to educational inquiry and evaluation (Hood & Hopson, 2008/2017). This early work challenged the presumed neutrality of evaluation by attending to how educational programs, policies, and institutions were shaped by racialized inequities. Culturally responsive evaluation has since evolved across evaluation contexts, extending beyond its roots in educational evaluation to examine how evaluators can design and conduct studies that are culturally responsive across diverse communities, programs, policies, and institutions (e.g. Hall, 2020) utilizing culturally situated approaches and orientations specific to the communities of study (see Chilisa, 2020 for example). Across these evolutions, evaluators share a commitment to “bring ‘culture’ back into our sociological and methodological theories and practice... and our considerations of ethics and values (axiologies)” (Chouinard & Cram, 2020, p. 11).

Conceptualizing culturally responsive qualitative research

Building on these lineages, qualitative researchers concerned with Othering and epistemic marginalization have adapted CRR into their inquiries. However, “given the diffuse and capacious boundaries of culturally responsive research, it is evident that the conduct of responsive projects hinges on the researchers’ primary objectives and ontological, epistemological, paradigmatic, and axiological perspectives” (Jordan & Hall, 2025, p. 397), making CRR resistant to fixed definitions or standardized practices. The terminology itself continually shifts, and terms such as culturally situated, sensitive, appropriate, congruent, and grounded reflect distinct methods to—and purposes for—centering culture in inquiry. For example, Berryman et al. (2013) framed cultural responsiveness as a tool to deconstruct academic imperialism, resist essentialism, challenge power, and embrace pluralism. Others, by contrast, adopt an instrumental approach, engaging communities through “cultural markers” like food or prayer (Lahman, 2018).

The diversity of CRR’s conceptualization was highlighted in a recent scoping review, which identified three primary typologies as described by authors (Jordan, Whitehead-Adams et al., 2024). First, studies suggested that qualitative methods—like interviews or focus groups—were inherently in response to participants’ cultural differences, thus culturally responsive (see for example, Petchauer, 2014). Second, some framed CRR as relational practice, grounded in the researcher’s ability to build trust and adapt to culturally diverse communities (see for example, Burnette et al., 2014). Third, others positioned CRR as an ethical stance, grounded in pluralism and a commitment to interrogating power and inequality (see for example, Roegman et al., 2016).

Reflexive grounding in a “loving critique”

As a researcher engaged in interrogating the complexities of culture, I find the inconsistent definitions and operationalizations of CRR troubling, in that watered down versions risk the depoliticization of the foundational liberatory aims (Pasque & Alexander, 2023). I am a white, cis woman from the United States, an English monolingual speaker, whose early research unfolded in international settler and extractive

colonial contexts. My interest in cultural responsiveness began during my previous career as a family therapist and carried into my academic work. Now, as a methodologist teaching doctoral students in a college of education, I am increasingly unsettled by how CRR is invoked, frequently reduced to a buzzword (Boyce & Chouinard, 2017). At the same time, CRR is under political attack in the U.S. (Connelly, 2025), targeted by federal and state ideologues who weaponize “diversity” and “culture” to stoke fear of liberal indoctrination in higher education, suppressing justice-oriented scholarship (Wolgemuth & Jordan, 2024).

In this context, I write with both urgency and unease. I recognize my own fears in taking on this work, but I draw strength from Paris and Alim’s call for “loving critique” (2014). From this stance I aim to push CRR and its researchers, including myself, toward deeper accountability, confronting internal contradictions and blind spots. My hope is that CRR will be embraced as a living, evolving framework capable of resisting co-optation. In this paper, of the many possible components of CRR, I problematize three, based on my understanding of the literature, a scoping review of how culturally responsive researchers frame their work, and my engagement in CRR. I examine these three components—cultural description, critical reflexivity, and cultural competence—as potential contraindications of CRR rooted in the cultural whiteness that permeates the contemporary academy.

Whiteness, White being, and the whitestream

Throughout this paper, I emphasize this risk as one grounded in whiteness. As a white scholar, I find myself teaching, researching, and living in spaces and times where omnipresent whiteness is inescapable and urgently in need of disruption. Whiteness refers to the violent means by which white people have established themselves, their customs, cultures, and beliefs as the standard by which all other groups are compared (Jupp et al., 2023). The ideologies and institutionalizing practices of whiteness stem from, flow through, and reproduce white supremacy (Scheurich, 2025). Whiteness is a location yielding structural advantages to people deemed white, a standpoint providing the lens for white people to see their own and Others’ places in society, and a property securing the benefits of the unnamed social and cultural practices that maintain whiteness as the norm (Matias & Boucher, 2023). Consequently, what is commonly termed “mainstream” culture is, as Grande (2003) wrote, more aptly termed “whitestream” culture—a discourse of culture that white people are dominant because it is built on “white, middle-class experience; a discourse that serves their ethno-political interests and capital investments” (p. 330).

I study whiteness as a method for making visible the colonial infrastructures that have shaped—and continue to shape—my worldview. However, it was not until I moved to Aotearoa New Zealand that the veil of unknowing began to fray. As I pulled at its threads the permanence of colonial white supremacy took shape in my understanding. There I worked alongside and learned from Māori and Pasifika scholars, clinicians, and elders who invited me into spaces where decolonizing persistence was not theoretical but embodied, grounded in Indigenous resistance and cultural vitality. This realization pushed me centripetally inward, prompting a deeper examination of my own complicity and positionality. I began to consider how my (white) humanity

is constructed through the dehumanization of those marked as Other. Internalizing these realizations also moved me centrifugally, theorizing outward seeking to disrupt the white supremacist mechanisms embedded in research through my teaching, advocacy, and inquiry. Studying whiteness is not an act of congratulatory self-flagellation, but of accountability to name and dismantle the structures that uphold racialized dominance, especially the norms, habits, and institutional arrangements that feel most natural to the people who benefit from them.

Throughout this article, I switch between naming the whitestream, surfacing whiteness, and problematizing white scholars while simultaneously recognizing that any scholar working in today's academic industry can uphold—or be forced into—the values of white colonial modernity. However, since the goal of whiteness is always to favor and benefit whoever qualifies as white at the time, I cannot be vague about also calling out white people, including myself, while calling out whiteness. Therefore, following Macoun (2016), I write “we/our” to directly implicate my racialized standpoint, and the racialized positionalities of white researchers. While this is consistent with my political-academic accountabilities, I do not mean to imply that all readers will hold positionalities or beliefs like my own. At the same time, I invite all culturally attuned scholars to consider how CRR can be subtly reproductive of the logics of whiteness and other hegemonic positionalities thus risking complicity in scientific Othering and academic imperialism.

The culture of (whitestream) research

Humans are culturally constituted beings surrounded by, informed through, performative, and reproductive of the complex and dynamic “webs of significance” that symbolize culture (Geertz, 1973, p. 5). As Geertz (1973) suggested, since we are animals suspended in the webs we have spun, it is perhaps unsurprising that culture, as a substrate of human experience, being, and belonging, has fascinated scholars from various disciplines and schools of thought for centuries. However, the early scientific demarcation of cultures became a tool to articulate and justify the criteria of membership in specific cultural groups, providing scientific justification for the privileging of some through the subjugation of Others (Almeida, 2015). Scientific racism, for example, created methods such as craniometry to “prove” the supposed biological superiority of people of Western European descent, thereby “justifying” enslavement and genocide (Willoughby, 2022). Other strategies, such as intelligence testing, were used to pathologize people as intellectually inferior, and therefore in need of, yet incapable of “civilizing.” Scientists also invented diagnoses to rationalize slavers’ brutal treatment of the enslaved. “Drapetomania,” for example, framed the desire to escape slavery as a mental illness, while “dysaesthesia aethiopica,” claimed the enslaved were psychologically unfit for freedom (Willoughby, 2022). In these examples, it becomes clear that research functioned as a handmaiden to colonial power, instrumental in the creation and marking of cultural difference. Through acts of scientific “discovery,” those who deemed themselves “civil” also assumed the authority to define and inscribe the Other (Smith, 2021).

In turn, the accumulation of such scientific knowledge, foundationally grounded in white, imperial onto-epistemologies, has essentialized, exoticized, neutralized, and

decimated the cultures of the *known* subjects while privileging the cultural supremacy of the *knower* (Alatas, 2003). Concurrently, the academy has vaunted the epistemological activities as *the way* to do research, thus positioning any knowledge or knowledge making outside this system as subaltern (Kolawole, 2019). Therefore, what academia perpetually promotes as “universal” inquiry is steeped in the whitestream (Grande, 2003), representative of concerns about finding, replicating, or mirroring truth and reality stemming from the ideals of the European Enlightenment (Scheurich, 2025), connecting directly to the imperialist ideologies (Smith, 2021). The subsequent privileged epistemologies and methodologies within the whitestream mirror what and how white culture knows, favoring white scholars, because these perspectives and processes reflect and correspond with white social histories (Scheurich & Young, 1997). In a reciprocal process, white scholars re/produce these onto-epistemologies and, through socialization, are simultaneously their products (Scheurich, 2025).

The term *whitestream*, when attached to research, intentionally calls out the accepted whiteness-dominated discourses of neutrality and objectivity structured on white, anglicized epistemologies (Grande, 2003). Whitestream research enacts processes of biopolitical ascendancy through the onto-epistemological naturalization of whiteness, centering white societies’ interests, norms, and practices (Leonardo, 2009). The terms *whiteness* and *whitestream* do not refer solely to individual white scholars. Whiteness impacts all people working within a white-dominated culture, including those in forced racialized groupings, who are “required to navigate the white space as a condition of their existence” (Anderson, 2015, p. 11). To succeed in the current state of academia, researchers are coerced to operate within the whitestream, socialized into onto-epistemological whiteness, and are encouraged to declare that this science is apolitical and culturally neutral (Boveda & Bhattacharya, 2019).

The extension of imposed Anglo-whiteness in research to non-white dominant cultures is evident in the reality that 98% of published scientific articles are in English, the imposed “language of science, culture, and the global economy” (Ramírez-Castañeda, 2020, p. 2). Within these whitestreamed practices, the expectation is for racialized and globally Othered scholars to operate and extend the privileged language, epistemologies, and methodologies tailored to a white social history that is “profoundly hostile to their race” (Scheurich & Young, 1997, p. 9) and nations. These scholars are socialized into the borderlands where they are asked to dispossess ways of knowing seen as discordant with the accepted canon (Anzaldúa, 2021). This cognitive injustice, or *epistemicide*, devalues, silences, and eradicates Othered epistemologies, creating epistemological subalterns (Spivak, 1988). In this process of self-perpetuation, academic imperialism continually privileges Globally Northed knowing (Alatas, 2003; Boveda & Bhattacharya, 2019), encouraging imperial, white monoculturalism as the universal ideal (Almeida, 2015).

Thus, within the social sciences, the whitestream determines what research is, whom it is for, who benefits from it, who can conduct it, and how they conduct it (Almeida, 2015). These practices have normed and invisibilized hegemonies of gender, race, language, relational orientations, sexuality, and ability, leading to research that describes culturally Othered communities as deficits: *at risk*, *vulnerable*, and *hard to*

reach. Insidiously, whitestream researchers focused on issues of social justice and inequity reaffirm cultural supremacy by describing their work as “giving voice” and “liberating.”

This broader critique of research as a whitestreamed, imperial enterprise forms the epistemological and institutional genealogy in which culturally responsive qualitative researchers are often embedded. As Huddleston (2022) wrote, “Qualitative research is not immune to the process of cultivating whiteness; if anything, its development has opened it up to being highly susceptible to it” (p. 651). Culturally responsive researchers are not exempt from reproducing the power dynamics we seek to challenge. The culture of whitestream science often shapes and constrains conceptualizations of responsiveness, particularly in the ways we treat culture as something marginal, something the Other has. Positioning culture in this way, CRR becomes a reaction, “a secondary phenomenon, as something executed or occurring in the aftermath of something else, and in this sense temporally, or at least logically subordinated to it” (Leistle, 2016, p. 49). The implications are that CRR is a response to an external stimulus, constructing ourselves as the primary entity—researchers with the agency to react to a subordinated Other’s otherness. Such a response often overlooks what precedes these interactions—a critical appraisal of ourselves and the culture of research we are embedded in.

As I consider these ideas, the metaphor of antidotes comes to life when researchers cast culturally responsive inquiry as an antidote for culturally negating and pathologizing research. However, the provision of an antidote follows a person’s exposure to toxins. This leads me to question what the contraindications of this particular antidote are when culturally responsive researchers represent the toxin: researching while white.

From contraindication to disruption: Reframing culturally responsive research

A *contraindication* refers to the conditions that make a particular treatment risky. As a white scholar, I still have much to learn about the transgressions and contraindications of researching while white—challenges that vastly exceed one manuscript. However, in this article, I explore the specific conditions of risk that arise in three core components of culturally responsive research, each functioning as a contraindication that can reinscribe, rather than resist, whiteness. These components and their subsequent risks include epistemological violence as the contraindication of circumscribing a culture, epistemological ignorance as a contraindication of our reflexivity, and ontological expansiveness as a contraindication of cultural competence.

In thinking with San Pedro (2018) culturally disruptive pedagogy, I consider how we can purposefully disrupt these contraindications to create “zones of contact for new knowledge and new identities to take hold” (p. 1221). Throughout this section, I make visible my own reproductions of cultural whiteness, revisiting my research experience in Aotearoa and Cambodia on different projects linked by my research interests. I highlight how disrupting my cultural socialization might have created opportunities to challenge the white supremacist and colonial hegemonic roots of research. More than a confessional or an attempt to prove my arrival as anticolonialist

and antiracist, I use this space as one of contemplative invitation for those of us perpetually trapped in the inverted epistemology of white supremacy.

Moving from critique to intervention, I interweave each contraindication with a disruptive practice that works against the normative cultural whiteness of whitemainstream research. I aim to open space where we might instigate a culturally disruptive approach mostly to disrupt ourselves along with the multiple cultural markers of whiteness that we embody. While the discussion unfolds linearly, the ideas that follow are deeply interconnected, offering disruptions to damage-centered thinking, digestible reflexivity, and sanitized notions of competence.

From epistemological violence as a contraindication of circumscribing culture toward the possibility of disruptive desire

The first contraindication is the desire to circumscribe culture. CRR is implicitly guided by the researchers' framing that we are engaging with a distinct culture—one that can be bounded, interpreted, and navigated. However, rarely is it clear what is meant by "culture" in these accounts. For example, a hypothetical study on first-generation, international students in predominantly white institutions (PWIs) may claim to use culturally responsive methods, but never define which culture is addressed or engaged. Is it the culture of international students? First-generation student culture? The students' home cultures? The institutional culture of PWIs? Or some intersection among them? While I am not suggesting that any of these complex identities carry a singular or unified culture, the lack of specificity implies otherwise, leaving it to the imagination of readers to understand the culture as static, homogenous, and inherently different. This framing risks reinforcing inclusionary logics that seek to "diversify" existing structures without interrogating who defines cultural diversity, who desires inclusion, and on whose terms (Ahmed, 2012). While, as Chouinard and Cram (2020) note, there are no culture-free people or spaces, researchers are "prone to assume that these approaches are most appropriate only when a people's culture is evident because it is somehow marginal to what is considered 'normal' within a society" (p. 119).

These "tired notions of culture" (San Pedro, 2018, p. 1220) are, as Tuck wrote "saturated in the fantasies of outsiders" (p. 412), pigeonholing communities as inherently oppressed and in need of salvation through research, we are uniquely poised to conduct. For example, a comprehensive study conducted by a white researcher with Indigenous women in the southeastern U.S. examined violence within service systems. The author framed Indigenous women as a distinct cultural group marked by historical oppression, and bound to structural, physical, and interpersonal violence—ultimately portraying it as a culture immobilized by subjugation (Burnette et al., 2014). When CRR centers culture through lenses of oppression, even as it aims for justice, it risks enacting epistemological violence that contraindicates our goals.

Epistemological violence occurs when "theoretical interpretations of empirical results implicitly or explicitly construct the Other as inferior or problematic" (Teo, 2010, p. 298). In the context of culturally responsive research, this form of violence can have far-reaching consequences. Problematically, foregrounding our studies in the language of oppression to justify our entitlement to research within a particular

community, we risk participating in “damage-centered research” (Tuck, 2009, p. 409). Centering damage is often a strategic maneuver to highlight the significance of how societies have “failed” communities, to establish the need for research “in order to achieve reparation” (Tuck, 2009, p. 413). Yet even when framed empathetically, this type of research situates as inherently broken or diminished, reinscribing that they are, in fact, “failed” as a culture, and in the process, creating an intangible construct of culture as both the problem and the cure (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

In 2015, I received an invitation to Cambodia to study the needs and challenges of the budding mental health profession in the country. As a culturally responsive researcher largely unfamiliar with Cambodia and its centuries-old views on wellbeing and healing, I went with an “open mind,” ready to adapt to the culture as I experienced it. Moreover, I situated my work in the already overly and firmly established notion of “need,” well-evidenced by previous research painting the country as one in dire straits, experiencing rampant rates of trauma, depression, and anxiety stemming from the legacies of colonization and the Khmer Rouge. Consequently, I not only fell into the epistemologically violent and ontologically expansive trap of the story of a struggling country but also re/created a culture that required my presence. I was there to study the stigmatization of mental health and challenges in integrating Westernized healing methods, and I was operating from a damage-centered lens that obscured Cambodia and justified my presence there.

The notions of culture that San Pedro (2018) warns us against also include the ways that we might treat culture as a noun—something one has instead of something one does. Critically, such static notions of culture inspire “culturally compatible” practices that “trick” (San Pedro, 2018, p. 1220) participants into maintaining our social norms. When researchers use assumed cultural markers and customs to inscribe a group’s culture, they do so in the name of inclusion and engagement in research, often relying on simplistic and linear visions of an Other’s culture as a product, expressed in writing suggesting that we adopt culturally specific “food, dialogue, comfortable chairs, décor, and understandings of natural speech patterns” (Lahman, 2018, p. 37). Among the consequences of applying “toolkit” (Burnette et al., 2014) approaches to research, we treat culture as fixed rather than ongoing negotiation. This reduction flattens culture into something that can be operationalized, through adopting assumed cultural markers and customs to engage communities marked as the cultural Other. It is a cultural essentialism that risks minimizing Othered cultures as “local,” “traditional,” “folk,” or “lay,” in contrast to the presumed universality and superiority of whitestream knowing.

Centering desire

Epistemological violence, thus, renders even well-intentioned cultural description as a potential act of harm. In response, Tuck’s (2009) appealed to researchers to move beyond these damage-centered impulses and center desire instead—that is, to paint multifaceted and tentative portraits of people and cultures, acknowledging the internal complexities and contraindications therein. Centering desire does not mean ignoring inequity, loss, or hardship: damage is, has been, and will continue to be done and must be repaired. However, centering desire affirms that communities and cultures are more than the outcomes of damage; they are also complicated amalgamations

of hope, wisdom, experience, and relations. Documenting desire means daring to document “the not yet and, at times, the not anymore” (Tuck, 2009, p. 417).

A desire-centered framework rejects the reasoning of inquiry based on linearity and the colonialism-inspired urges to claim and categorize. It disavows our training to search the literature for “gaps” in knowledge. Unlike the winnowing approach to knowledge and experience, a desire focus evokes a prism, a perspective-taking that showcases complexity and leads our gaze through multiple angles. The prism of desire redirects us from checklists and markers of culture to understanding cultures as complex and complicated, comprised of people with intersecting and divergent interests and hopes. These patterns of desire are discursively formed. They create capacious storylines that shift counter to and beyond discourses of oppression and pain (Golden & Pandya, 2019) into the realm of new possibilities and “what ifs.”

What if, instead of positioning my research in Cambodia through the prism of precarity and need, I had opened my report by describing the beauty and joy I witnessed? What if I had documented the ingenuity of the Cambodian mental health workers who were re/envisioning mental health and adapting it for their needs? What if I had described participants’ creation of peer mentoring groups and development of mobile therapy via tuk-tuks, utilizing what was helpful about Westernized healthcare (often in the form of funding) and abandoning what did not fit? Instead of describing the conflicts between cultures, what if I had written with the research participants describing their re/imagining of healing from uniquely Cambodian onto-epistemologies connected to land and ancestors, past, present, and future?

Most of all, I wonder, how might approaching this research through a prism of desire have led me to consider my scholarly justifications in the field? What if, through these problematizations of my work, I was provoked to question if I had a role in the research at all? What if, through these problematizations of my work, I had been provoked to question whether I had a role in the research at all? Such questioning would have required more than an individualized acknowledgment of positionality; it would have called for a relationally reflexive process of considering whether my participation was invited, useful, accountable, and disruptive of—or complicit in—the extractive relations that structure colonial research. I might have asked who benefited from the study, whose knowledge was being legitimized, whether Cambodian scholars and practitioners were already doing this work, and whether my role should have been to collaborate, support, redistribute resources, or step aside. Rather than producing a tidy resolution, these questions could have opened a troubling tension between my desire to conduct justice-oriented research and the whitestream conditions that made my participation thinkable, necessary, and justifiable.

And yet, to sit with the question of whether I had a role in the research at all would have required me to confront a discomfort that runs counter to one of the most naturalized assumptions of the academic whitestream—that inquiry is inherently valuable, and that researchers, by virtue of training and good intentions, are entitled to pursue it. The question of whether I belonged in that space would inherently lend itself to others: What systems of knowledge production had convinced me that my presence was warranted? What would it have meant—practically, professionally, relationally—to arrive at the answer that I did not? These questions do not resolve tidily

and perhaps are purposefully the questions that culturally disruptive research asks us to refuse to answer quickly (or, maybe ever). A troubling that would have prompted a growing sense of dissonance within.

From epistemological ignorance as a contraindication of reflexivity to the generative disruption of dynamic dissonance

The second contraindication concerns researcher reflexivity, a commitment to self-interrogate how researchers' "culture and multiple identities influence the way they seek to undertake research with any community" (Berryman et al., 2013, p. 25). While reflexivity is arguably a core construct across many modalities of qualitative research, responsive researchers are called to engage in ongoing critical examinations of the pervasiveness their own cultural standpoints, biases, and the power dynamics of research (Pasque & Alexander, 2023). These cultural phenomena inform the researcher's presumed authority in knowledge production. Such authority is also shaped by institutional positionalities, including disciplinary affiliations, theoretical frameworks, and methodological commitments, that often center whiteness as the normative way of knowing, being, and doing. Problematically, lodged deep within this omnipresent whiteness, the inverted logic of epistemological ignorance contraindicates the work of culturally responsive self-reflexivity (Mills, 1997).

Pairing the terms *ignorance*—a state of not knowing—and *epistemology*—the study of how one knows—illustrates how we produce and sustain different ignorances and how they reciprocally feed into our knowledge-making practices (Sullivan, 2006). In Mills (1997) critique of whiteness, epistemological white ignorance demonstrates how white people actively remain "unable to understand the world they themselves have made" (p. 18), sheltered by the inverted epistemology that teaches them "to see the world wrongly, but with the assurance that this set of mistaken perceptions will be validated by white epistemic authority" (p. 18). The conditions of active ignorance allow for evading white supremacy and racism through consciously and unconsciously cultivated misinterpretations of the world.

Two recent scoping reviews of CRR (Jordan, Whitehead-Adams et al., 2024) and evaluation (Chouinard & Cram, 2020) illustrated how epistemological ignorance seeps into reflexive practices. Both reviews found that many authors, especially white authors, did not position or trouble their social and racialized identities or chosen research methods. In this process "whiteness avoids being named and thus, keeps itself out of the field of interrogation and therefore off the agenda for change" (Chouinard & Cram, 2020, p. 133). The tendency to evade problematizations of whiteness in favor of a color-blind perspective of the world and self-in-the-world (Bonilla-Silva, 2017) seemingly prevented (from what could be perceived in their articles) researchers from questioning whether they had the right and ability to conduct the study in the first place. For example, in Petchauer's (2014) culturally sensitive study on African American test takers' experiences with teacher licensure exams, the white, male researcher, also a former and current professor of the participants, briefly acknowledged his whiteness. However, he then justified his role writing that "while it is not possible to know precisely how my presence at the testing event affected the quality of the experience for participants, it likely added an additional layer of comfort and support for some

of them” (Petchauer, 2014, p. 15). Later, he concluded that “interviewer bias due to the race of the interviewer was not present” because participants discussed race in each focus group (p. 15).

In this study, the author framed his work as culturally congruent because it used qualitative methods. The tendency to label research as responsive based solely on methodology, reflects how epistemological ignorance obstructs the “second cycle of reflection” (Chouinard & Cram, 2020, p. 125)—a critical appraisal of one’s discipline, including how methods contribute to the marginalization of communities. Assuming a method can be inherently responsive without focused critical methodological reflexivity fosters “complicity within academia’s hegemonic whiteness hook by perpetuating the researcher-as-knowledge producer paradigm” (Kraemer-Holland, 2024, p. 5). This unquestioned reliance on methods labeled as “responsive” sustains the epistemologically ignorant act of racial erasure, a whitewashing that reinforces whitestream academia.

As researchers, we risk eliding feelings of dissonance and conflict between what and how we think about ourselves. In Westernized music theory, dissonance is a device for creating tension and feelings of unease with discordant musical sounds. In contrast, consonance comes from tones and harmonic intervals that complement each other and lead listeners toward pleasing and stable feelings. The latter reminds me of self-reflexivity in CRR—a ubiquitous, if not standard and inherently flawed, practice. It is potentially ineffectual precisely because we tend toward digestible consonance, laboring to convince ourselves and others that in contending with difficult questions we have come to a peaceful resolution (Jordan et al., 2025). We promote these justifications in subjectivity statements exculpating ourselves to act in whatever research spaces we desire. These statements mirror our internalized epistemological ignorance and ontological expansiveness as we suggest that we can decenter our power, as in the following statement, where I “wrestled” with myself in writing about decolonizing research:

I am a White European American, of Scottish and German descent ... I have been thoroughly immersed in the Western academic tradition. I am doubly at risk of being blind to multiple ways of understanding what a family is, as well as multiple pathways of knowing and inquiry. It is through a decolonizing framework that I seek to be aware of my own biases and to challenge the dominant perspectives with which I was raised as I navigate the multiple facets of my work as a therapist, researcher, and scholar. (Bermúdez et al., 2016, p. 194)

Here, I wink at the ways I am at risk of reproducing coloniality even as I justify undertaking decolonizing work. Grippled by epistemological ignorance, my reflexive consonance unreflexively sustains the unintelligibility of whiteness by remaining “limp, passive, at rest” (Danz, 1952, p. 25). For example, by suggesting that I simply seek awareness as opposed to actively disrupting my complicity, I remain passive in the inverted logics of ignorance. This passivity is what enables scholars in the most privileged circumstances (embodied, discursive, material) to relinquish our responsibilities for addressing white supremacy and colonization (Leonardo, 2009). Often unspoken are the questions that confront the consonant ease with which whiteness escapes scrutiny. How might we forgo the (un)reflexive consonance that sneakily justifies our entitlements to spaces and rights as knowledge bearers? How do we divest from the

comforts of digestible reflections about privilege and power and instead face that which is dissonant, discordant, and uncomfortable in what we know and how we know it?

Dynamizing dissonance

Dynamic dissonance, the interplay between dissonance and consonance, denotes the simultaneity that we create when we shift between pleasant and unpleasant, agreeable and disagreeable (Danz, 1952). Whereas consonance can imply a limpness, dynamic dissonance is active, not unlike a rubber band when it is “distended, stretched out... a-symmetric,” contending “with all its latent forces, its tensions and torsions... brought into play” (p. 25). In culturally disruptive research, intentionally centering dynamic dissonance provokes us to confront the contradictions and uncertainties of who we are and what we do. Catalyzing e/motion we recognize that it is often the unanswerable questions that challenge us more urgently than answers that confirm what we already believe.

The reflexivity of dynamic dissonance would generate, rather than alleviate, the discomfort and instability that can arise when we experience a disconnect between the reasonings for our research and the realities of the academic whitestream. Ideas of liberation and justice often ground our desires to produce culturally situated research. What happens when we ask ourselves why we hold the keys to liberation and how we divest ourselves of our power to disrupt the system that gives us that power? The experience of discordance that comes from recognizing that we cannot eliminate the epistemic blindspots of Whiteness is inevitable, as are affectively intense feelings of anxiety, shame, guilt, anger, paralysis, and yearning for the safety and comfort of the familiar embrace of consonance. However, instead of giving up or, worse, retreating to a sense of moral and epistemic superiority, I propose that we follow this uncomfortable, painful strain into action, trusting Ahmed’s (2014) assertion that this discomfort can be “generative, rather than simply constraining or negative” (p. 155).

I have found myself in this state of dynamic dissonance, feeling the lure of retreat into comfort, while stretched into states of anxiety. This began when I first questioned why I was researching the Other, realizing that my existence as a researcher, my chosen livelihood, is built on establishing inequity. During interviews, participants’ words poked at me. I sometimes felt like a voyeur grabbing at their experiences, claiming them as my “data.” Later, sitting with this “discovered” data, I questioned why, as Corces-Zimmerman et al. (2021) suggested I considered myself uniquely positioned to solve issues, without addressing the cause of those issues. These questions arose while I was researching in Aotearoa, and the provocations continue today. While my own research program has shifted to the study and disruption of whiteness within myself and other white researchers and practitioners, I still face anxieties. To embrace these anxieties as generative forces, I attempt to reside in them and explore the messiness of research, denying mastery, or my *right* to be in spaces, and the facile claims I might make when publishing a paper—rubber stamping a phenomenon as a “problem solved.”

From ontological expansiveness as a contraindication of cultural competence to disruptive negotiations of culture

The third contraindication concerns the expectation that researchers can, or should, achieve cultural competence. As Berryman et al. (2013) stated, “Integrating multiple ways of knowing within research protocols can be achieved by the researcher becoming competent in the culture of the researched group” (p. 3). This framing presumes researchers can acquire sufficient cultural mastery to access and represent others’ ways of knowing. In education, cultural competence originated as one of the three pillars of Ladson-Billings (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy, which emphasized students’ agency in sustaining their cultural integrity while succeeding academically. Over time, however, the term shifted toward the utilitarian principles associated with the health fields, emphasizing practitioners’ attempts to understand, value, and interact with cultural systems different than their own (Tascón & Gatwiri, 2020). This shift repositioned cultural competence as a process of “gaining knowledge of and fluency in cultures” (Pasque & Alexander, 2023, p. 2) to operate ethically within them.

While the terminology of competence varies—for example, from competence, to humility, to sensitivity, to awareness—and some scholars reject it altogether (Tascón & Gatwiri, 2020), the persistent impulse remains in CRR to learn about, embrace, and amplify participant culture as a way of demonstrating that researchers “are ‘dealing’ with cultural diversity” (Tascón & Gatwiri, 2020, p. 1). So, while some scholars stress the need for cultural competence, others leave it unnamed yet imply its necessity. For example, Wardale et al. (2015) write that to do culturally sensitive work, researchers must “use a cultural lens... by adopting the perspective of the research participants, researchers avoid imposing culturally inappropriate frameworks” (p. 40). Ideas such as this suggest that researchers can center (thus know and be competent in) the cultural knowledge, experiences, and meaning making of participants. However, as Berryman et al. (2013) cautioned, “Cultural competency alone can also reinforce and maintain the dominance of the researcher” (p. 5).

Maintaining researcher dominance is the contraindication of cultural competence, theorized here as the enactment of *ontological expansiveness*. Sullivan (2006) described ontological expansiveness as a manifestation of whiteness wherein “white people tend to act and think as if all spaces – whether geographical, psychical, linguistic, economic, spiritual, bodily, or otherwise – are or should be available to them to move in and out of as they wish” (p. 10). Such ontological positioning deems all spaces open to the whitestream falling prey to its “desire for mastery and control over space in all its forms” (Corces-Zimmerman et al., 2021, p. 432).

Within CRR, ontological expansiveness guides researchers in their presumed entitlement, or even a “calling,” to serve culturally Othered communities. As Lahman (2018), quoting Noddings (1984), wrote, a culturally responsive researcher steps “out of one’s own personal frame of reference into the other’s... our attention, our mental engrossment is on the cared-for, not on ourselves” (p. 24; as cited in Lahman, 2018, p. 32). By casting ourselves as altruistic helpers, we risk slipping into white saviorism, imagining ourselves as “uniquely capable and permitted to enter Communities of Color to ‘fix’ issues, many of which were created by White people to begin with” (Corces-Zimmerman et al., 2021, p. 435). For example, in a recent study, when asked

about the goals of CRR, a participant stated, “to be a culturally responsive researcher means my voice is the voice of all [minoritized] people” (Gilbert & Pasque, 2025, p. 12), reflecting the savior mentality emergent in CRR. Problematically, focusing on the participant community (e.g. the cared for) rather than on the system that creates the conditions that cause these problems is akin to treating the symptoms while ignoring the virus.

A further example of ontological expansiveness in CRR, occurs when researchers assume the authority to determine how their culturally privileged methods can be adapted to the target “folk” or “local” culture. Such adaptations often attempt to overlay cultural markers over whitestream approaches in order to provide participants with spaces of safety, comfort, and familiarity. For example, Burnette et al. (2014) emphasized “creating a comfortable environment” (p. 370) for research, while Rodriguez et al. (2011) described building “the safety of the space for the participants” (p. 410) in focus groups. Discussions of building culturally competent safe spaces risk ignoring how prevailing concepts of safety are typically calibrated to white comfort, neglecting the reality that almost no research encounter is inherently, or universally, safe for participants. Operating within the haze of ontological expansiveness, whitestream researchers may sanitize these spaces in ways that obscure how comfort is tethered to hegemonic normativity, quietly sustaining existing systems of oppression in the name of safety (Ahmed, 2014).

Negotiating discomfort

Disrupting cultural competence asks us to focus instead on building research relationships across the intersecting interests and systems of meaning-making between and across cultural systems. These are not safe spaces but spaces of negotiation, complicated and representing diverse and inequitable realities (Smith, 2018). The critically interactive boundaries between these lifeworlds are not delimited or confined but coproduced and expansive; they comprise negotiations of space that recognize differing ways of knowing as “equally valid, and neither system is complete without the other” (Jordan, Seponski et al., 2024, p. 475). The project of disrupting cultural competence and its goals for safety does not mean bulldozing our way through, without considering our cultural self and cultural Other, but that we instead affirm “the value of risk, honoring the fact that we may learn and grow in circumstances where we do not feel safe” (Hooks, 2003, p. 64). Valuing risk means that instead of denying our onto-epistemologies in this interface, we must recognize that we “physically and symbolically embody those various legacies, even if at times unconsciously and unwillingly” (Smith, 2018, p. 48).

In Aotearoa, I received invitations into these spaces of negotiation, which could be symbolic or physical, and at pōwhiri—ceremonies to welcome a manuhiri (guest) into Māori spaces and communities—they were both. In the pōwhiri, the guest and host proceed through several back-and-forth speeches and songs. A significant aspect of the pōwhiri is the wero, a challenge testing the intentions of the manuhiri. During the wero, the hosts lay down a token, and the manuhiri’s willingness to pick it up indicates that they come in peace, with good intentions.

The cultural negotiation of pōwhiri manifested clearly when I received an invitation to a kaupapa Māori agency to interview the mental health practitioners and advocates

working there. My kaikōrero introduced me as the “daughter of Trump.” Although this kaikōrero was speaking for me, I recognized that this was my wero, and while I wanted to refute this introduction, I knew I could not disagree. Māori in this hui (meeting) knew me no differently: Trump’s whiteness, paternalism, supremacy, and populism were as much mine as they were his. When Trump was protecting white supremacy, he was protecting me, and in the process, he also created the conditions where I could point fingers to others and deny the salience of white supremacy in me and my work. As I sat there, I watched myself being watched, and in that moment, I knew this was the token that I had to pick up, to accept this truth about myself and the reality of my positionality. The pōwhiri that day was not a safe space for anyone in attendance, and possibly for the remainder of the day, but it became a productive space—relational and negotiated, and in it, we developed new understandings and commitments.

Ultimately, what we learn in culturally negotiated relationships is “not what we were prepared to know” (Stewart, 2018, p. 770). Communities may deny us entry. We may enter spaces of conflict. Our intentions might be challenged and our findings, means, and methods questioned. The limits of our understanding might create disappointment and frustration. These conflicts ask us to push back on our potential whitestream desire to retreat into cultural authority, and instead embrace the generative tensions developed in accountable relationships between knowledge systems (Ahmed, 2014; Smith, 2018). Dynamically embracing discomfort in research allows relational solidarity to emerge from “an embodied place of connectivity essential to reconciliation” (Regan, 2010, p. 19).

A conclusion of sorts

Recently, my colleague and friend, the person who read many drafts of this article, left a handful of comments in the margins asking how I engaged disruptions and dynamic dissonance. She wrote, “Do you go on walks? Paint? Beat yourself with a belt? Did you write it as usual? Longer? Quicker? Did you journal? Did you beat your head against the wall? :) I would like to know what you did differently this time (if anything)!” These provocations were requests for illustrations that could point readers to solutions for disrupting cultures of whiteness in research. She also commented, “I am asking this because if we say we embody and inhabit whiteness, then we also need to consider how we might embody and inhabit dissonance when we finally recognize and wear it” (A. Gonzalez-Pliss, personal communication). As with many things, there is no answer, and I do not believe she was looking for *the* answer; that would admittedly go against the goal of disrupting tidy, neat texts, which I know she is also game to disrupt.

In this article, I have shared some of the ways I could have disrupted my own whiteness, but I did so with hesitancy. In many ways, I am concerned that through interrogating whiteness and attempting to disrupt it, I might reify it (Morales, 2022). This is one reason why I will not say, “I’ve done it, and this is how you can do it.” Throughout the article, I cite racialized scholars with great trepidation given the whitestream’s tendency for ontological expansiveness and the belief that we “discover” and “master” theories. I am concerned that in so doing, I risk contorting and

depoliticizing the theories (Morales, 2022). At the same time, such work provides, as San Pedro (2018) described, “sacred truth spaces... a dialogic space between one another to share our truths and to listen and learn the truths of others” (p. 1207). In this spirit, I have attempted to learn to see my self as best I can through my relationship with and understandings of capacious scholars’, artists’, and otherwise knowers’ wisdom, experience, and legacies (McKittrick, 2020). My hope is that I do not seek to bend theories to my will but to work with these theories to become accountable for disrupting white supremacy culture (Scheurich, 2025). As Robinson (2011) wrote, “it is a consciousness lived constantly on the borders of others consciousnesses” (para. 16).

Finally, I question what it would mean if we took seriously Tuck’s (2009) provocation that “there are many instances in which research may not be the best socio-political intervention, and it might not even be the best theoretical intervention” (p. 237). This question returns me to the “what ifs” of Cambodia. In asking what it might have meant to center desire rather than damage, I arrived, perhaps inevitably, at the most unsettling (for me) “what if” of all—What if I had not been there at all? I have carried the dissonance of that question through the writing of this article, and it still lingers. It is a dissonance that resists tidy consonant resolution.

What does it mean to be a researcher who does not research? These are especially difficult considerations as many researchers operate within an academic culture where mastery is paramount, leaving little room for us to slow down or question our role. Critically, these demands for mastery are not simply a result of how we conceptualize efficiency or capacity. Rather, they are directly related to “problems of funding (capital), globalization (scale), and quality and focus (method)” (Adams et al., 2014, p. 180); that is, the capitalistic, market-driven ideologies of white supremacy and colonialism underpin them.

Thinking about culturally disruptive interventions led me to reconsider my pedagogy. The classroom is a space where we model and transmit what is important. As a professor of qualitative inquiry, I encourage students to think about the ideas I have discussed in this paper, to consider how and what culture undergirds our methodologies and methods. To disrupt the culture of methodological canonization, I teach criticality and creativity, shifting beyond methodological recipes and embracing embodied and aesthetic knowing. I aim to disrupt the unnatural bifurcation between art and science and instead engage with students creatively, playfully, and artfully. This process is a political engagement in that it troubles the idea of what is valid and rigorous, to push against the foreclosure of Othered ways of knowing. This is just one small intervention in a sea of possible interventions where I attempt to disrupt my self and my culture. Ultimately, the work of cultural disruption is less a methodology and more a process and reminder to embrace cultural disturbance, and to do so with love, a creative spirit, and a deep distrust of our own whiteness.

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Ethical considerations

Not applicable. Ethical review and approval were not required for the content presented in this manuscript. No human subjects were involved.

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