

Decolonial Research Methods: Resisting Coloniality in Academic Knowledge Production (Webinar 6)

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SPEAKERS

Jeong-Eun Rhee

Jeong-Eun Rhee 00:05

So I think this is the cue for me to start. And firstly, thank you, Dr Leon Moosavi and University of Liverpool for inviting me to be part of this wonderful series of conversations. I'm very grateful to have this opportunity to converse with our audience from all different geographical regions of the globe. And well, this may sound minor but for someone who has been surrounded by US-centric thinking and practice, how this webinar schedule is announced, using different geographical locations, was such a refreshing decentering practice, I couldn't help noticing. And so, I just kind of wanted to comment that I appreciate it a lot. And, partly due to my own personal trajectory, as a migrant intellectual and knowledge worker in the United States, I try to consider a geo-cultural and historical context of where I do and share my work. So in this regard, I want to acknowledge the continuing history of settler colonialism in the territory of the US before my talk. And land acknowledgement is not without controversy, as there are debates on how this practice may remain as a mere lip service, especially when it is not accompanied with political and material actions. So taking such a political engagement seriously, and also, following one of our previous speakers, Professor Walter Mignolo's argument about how our onto-epistemological level of engagement still matters in activating decolonial work, I put out my acknowledgement that I reside in unseeded indigenous land, especially the homeland of Lenape peoples. I also acknowledge the genocide and continuing displacement of indigenous peoples since the colonial era and beyond. Today's Lenape communities include Lenape people who belong to the Delaware Nation and Delaware Tribe of Indians in Oklahoma, the Stockbridge–Munsee Community in Wisconsin, and the Munsee-Delaware Nation, Moravian of the Thames First Nation and the Delaware of Six Nations in Ontario. This acknowledgement is to express my solidarity with both local and global indigenous communities for their continuing fights for sovereignty. So, in this particular location, my talk today will draw mostly from my recently published book *Decolonial Feminist Research: Haunting, Rememory and Mothers*, so that I can actually advocate for research that works with and for healing knowledge, both in process and as a product.

And so if I give a short introduction of my book. My book documents my own transnational, intergenerational and very personal inquiry, which actually was demanded by my dead mother, so haunting rememory, across time, geographies, languages, and ways of knowing and being, and I assume that some of the audience may wonder what I meant by rememory and haunting, as we're talking about research. And these are the concepts that I'll explicate further soon, so please bear with me until I get there. But at this point, I want to bring your attention to a language play that I engage you with to challenge our presumed notions about mother. As you can see on the slide, I blur and integrate to somewhat-conflicting concepts of motherness and otherness. While it may be assumed that mother is a figure that has given birth to self, so the certain intimate connectivity is expected and presumed, otherness is what distinguishes self through differentiation, distance from the other. However, in working through my own inquiry, I discussed how my own mother had otherness that I couldn't have access to or understand. So I put a slash between mother to highlight that otherness of mother and then I also discuss how my others became my mother's rendering and helping nurturing hands for me, so putting letter M inside a parenthesis to reveal my otherness of others. Eventually, I have recognised, accepted all these figures as my many mothers and these shifting fragmentations and connectivities become important elements of my discussion. So whenever you hear me invoking mothers in today's talk, I hope you can consider the shifting relations of mother and other. Through this inquiry, I dared to present a quite messy entanglement of my personal, academic, structural, theoretical and spiritual relations and selves as educational research and shared my multi-layered process of conceptualising researching and writing my mother's transnational rememory is a collective knowledge project of intergenerational decolonial, feminist of colour. So with this overview of the my book, obviously, we're not going to be able to talk everything about you know, like, what I discussed in the book, but I want to open up today's talk by positioning myself as a researcher, who commits yourself to doing decolonial work, but who is also continuously bound by colonial ways of being in doing, which disconnects me from various possibilities of different words, experiences, connections and knowledge. So from this positionality, I pose the question, if researchers themselves are not the colonised, is it possible for us to do decolonial work?

So, today's talk, I like to bring our attention to our researcher self, or we can frame it as our onto-epistemological engagement, rather than method per se. Since we as academics are trained in reason, logic, science-centric thinking, we desire and seek out various levels of analysis that can explain. With this person of explanation, we often fail to consider that we simply cannot understand or grasp the weight, depth and complexity of the reality, exactly because of our arrogant desire for explanation for everything, because explanation is possible, if we think about it, only within the boundary and limit of what we can understand, think and imagine. Such a pursuit is in academia, more than often accompanied by choosing trendy, popular or classic theories that celebrated scholars in our discipline use, and we find assurance and comfort, even of our existence and agency, in our explanation through our less-than-perfect, less-than-complete and less-than-successful attempts that may even perpetuate violence we want to stop. Yet, what if not all are explainable? In other words, my argument is that we do need to delink from this onto-epistemological assurance and clarity before we seek for decolonial methodological directives, especially if our purpose is to produce healing knowledge in process and as a product. Unless we can confront our own demons and our own colonial habitual ways of being and doing, and this is Gloria Anzaldúa's words, unless we look them in the face and live to write about

them, any technical assurance will always find a way to bring us back to the ever expanding design of coloniality.

So, before I dig further into my recent work, and dig further into how my recent work has opened up ways for me to address this question, I'm going to actually start with my personal context, which maybe considered somewhat inappropriate in certain academic disciplines. But as I shared as the overview of the my book, my transnational feminist knowledge project began with my mother who died in Korea, and then has kept showing up in my life in the United States. So I need to start from here. Since I'm not going to discuss her actual stories in today's talk, the biographies of me and my mother that I share today are mostly to provide historical context, which probably allows the audience to also see different connections from where you are located. My mother was born during the time when Korea was colonised by the Japanese Empire, which lasted until 1945, which was also the End of World War Two. While it is not often discussed, Japanese colonisation of Korea was coordinated with the expansion of the US Empire to the Asia Pacific region at the time, through which the United States and Japan negotiated about which part of the Pacific Asian region each Empire would annex. And after 1945, my mother had lived through three years of the US military government from 1945 to 1948. And then another three years of the Korean War from 1950 to 1953, so quite volatile life experiences there. I was born about 15 years after the Armistice of the Korean War, so I didn't experience Korean War, but I'm considered the second generation of the Korean War. I grew up in Korea until 1992 and came to the United States in my early 20s, as an international student, and have resided here over the last 30 years. And my mother, who had lived her entire life in Korea, passed away in 2015. So we're one of those millions of transnational families who have lived across different continents and countries and regions, which is also a symptom of the continuing legacy of coloniality. And with my mother's somewhat unexpected death, I started to be effectively drawn into what I would call a feeling place, that is the intersection of time and space where dead mothers stay to share their memories, partly because their wronged experiences, pains and fights couldn't have been said during their lifetime, to reproduce what can be marked as a history, whether it's a world history, national history, or even family history. And this feeling place with where I started to pause and work through my methodological questions. So it's important for me to emphasise that these questions, these methodological questions emerged from the feeling place, which was quite unexplainable.

So I have the three questions on the slide that are going to guide today's talk, although not in a linear way. So number one: what methodologies are available to notice and study of reality that exceeds and defies modern scientific ontology and intelligibility? Number two: how can researchers write in the name and practice of research what can never be known or narrated with logic and reason? Number three: what methodologies can be used to work through and with both personal and collective losses, wounds and connections that have become your questions? And here again, you can probably notice that I'm also highlighting different kinds of fragmentations and connectivity we can imagine as I put slash, like in you are as this slash blurs the differentiation between your an our and again, every moment such utilisation of shifting relations and fragmentations become important for me to, kind of, really work through some of the new possibilities. So to work with these questions, we tend to listen to a question of researchers own colonised self, but that I opened up in the beginning of my presentation. I'm coming back to the concept of memory finally, because that concept is how I could start to work with a feeling place. And I borrowed this concept of memory from African American writer Toni Morrison's novel,

Beloved, which was published in 1987. It is a fictional story that loosely engages with a historical figure, an actual historical figure, Margaret Garner, a young mother, who, having escaped slavery, was arrested for killing one of her children, and actually trying to kill the rest of all her children, rather than letting her children be returned to the owners of the plantation. So, with this historical background, the fiction Beloved narrates the house 124 in Ohio, where a main character is set, an ex-slave mother who killed her own baby when her slave master came to reclaim her children, and said this older daughter, Denver, were visited by this baby ghost. After my mother said, I was almost hopelessly drawn to this fiction, Beloved, since Toni Morrison was explicitly putting out ghost and hunting in the foreground without any explanation. And as I have already noted, explanation can work only within the limit of what we know. So how can we face not withstanding a reality that defies modern scientific ontology and intelligibility? Since I was reading, Beloved, I could accept ghostly visitations from my mother. The possibility Morrison wrote, really mattered, as I was experiencing haunting in a more than metaphorical sense. Re-reading Beloved during this time was almost like reading someone else's manual on how to navigate your haunted reality. Someone else's manual at the time... I say someone else's manual because at the time, I mistakenly felt that this book was not necessarily written for me. This was an African American history of a slave. But this fragmented, disconnected way of thinking is a reminder and symptom of our own ways of remembering, and dismembering, through origins rather than destinations. The question is not about how do others become your mother, but how do you notice others who are already your mother's rendering helping in nurturing hands? So it was as close as I could get at the time and not to look for an equivalence but to be instructed on how to know things behind things, like how to be in touch with a particular yet shared historicity. Both Beloved and I were in that feeling place of her mother had secrets, things she wouldn't tell things she halfway told. That was the place that we were connected. And that particular yet shared, the historicity demanded my daughterly responsibility, my ability to respond in our interconnected relations. If such a historicity can be recognised only through fiction, I had to figure out as a researcher, what restricts my access to such such knowledge in the field of research, which I considered as my field of knowledge.

So I want to actually introduce a very long dialogue from the book be loved. And this is a dialogue between Denver, the daughter, and her mother Sethe, where Sethe brings up her rememory. In this dialogue, rememory is introduced as both forgetting and remembered in both a verb and noun. And this dialogue reveals really profound insight and ways to delink our ontological assurance, from what are colonial ways of knowing, and being. And so, I thought, it's a work for us to spend a little bit of time to actually read this together. And so I'm going to just kind of read the whole thing. And hopefully, you can also feel, like, what's happening in terms of remembering?

What are you praying for mom? Not for anything. I don't pray anymore. I just talk. What are you talking about? You want to understand, baby? Yes, I will. I was talking about time. It is so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go, pass on. Some things just stay. I use thing it was my rememory. You know, some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places. Places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone. But the place, the picture of it, stays, not just in rememory, but out there in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw, is still out there. Right in the place where it happened. Can other people see it? Ask them? Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Yes, yes. Someday you'll be walking the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it's you

thinking, a thought picture. But no, it's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to someone else. Where I was before I came here, that place is really. It's never going away. Even if the whole farm, every tree, grass blade of it dies, the picture is still there. What's more, if you go there, you who never was there, if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again. It'll be there for you, waiting for you. So Denver, you can't. Never go there, never. Because even though it's all over, over and done with, it's going to always be there waiting for you. That's how I come. I had to get all my children out, no matter what. Denver picked at her finger nails. If it's still there, waiting, that must mean that nothing ever dies.

Like, whenever I read, I don't know how many times I read this, but still, it's it's really, really jarring. Because I encountered this dialogue in a feeling place, I want us to pause not to think but to feel, although thinking and building are not disconnected. Feel this particular onto-epistemological tension that rememory generates for most of us. As you can see, rememory simultaneously refers to both forgetting and remembering at the same time. Rememory is both doing and being or non-being. In addition, remember if exists, both inside and outside our individual experience, thinking and knowing. It is the picture of what I did or knew or saw floating around out there outside my head. So then, whose rememory, really, can you understand best? Denver thought she would understand this, but Sethe you Denver couldn't. Still ironically, Sethe still shares what she knows about remembering with Denver. This is where I actually notice a possibility. How about you, will you understand this? Rememory stays in the place where it happened. This rememory is or becomes the place forever transcending the temporality of past, present and future. Because even if the house burns down, the place is still there. Is is the place then a being that rememories. Stay with me here, take a moment to feel this head spinning way of knowing, remembering. Can you notice how rememory generates a different relationship between you, me and place, timespace, that carries our and your ancestors rememories. Morrison suggests that anyone can hear or see someone else's rememory. It will happen again, when you bump into a rememory that belongs to someone else. If you go there, you who never was there, because where I was before I came here, that place is real. Have you bumped into someone else's rememory in the place which is real? Even though it's all over and done with, even if the whole farm every tree, grass blade of it dies? It's going to always be there, waiting for you.

So the concept of rememory challenges and devides our modernistic and colonial ways of knowing the world. If we just summarise the couple of points that we all felt, first, that rememory tells us that sovereign self is not in possession or control of one's own interiority, meaning mind, memory or thinking because my rememory is floating around outside my head. So even if you want to keep it secret, it can be out there. There is no such division between self and her environment. My rememory is in the place where it happened. There's no separation, individuals are not independent because my rememory will happen again to you when you bump into it. Temporality is not linear. My memory will happen again, even after I die. Space and time are intertwined. My rememory will happen again right in the place it happened. And materiality and spirituality are not separate. My rememory even after I die is still out there in the world. If we, who never was there, go there, then this ancestor's rememories will happen again, across time, enter into our rememory and change our consciousness, identity and embodied experiences. So then where does a cell begin and end with rememory? During those separations, in this sense, rememory is a haunting. When you are haunted, it's not your choice.

So I'm going to get into the concept of a haunting here. Sociologist Avery Gordon reminds us that being haunted throws us effectively, sometimes against our will, and always a bit magically into the structure of building of a reality. We come to experience not as a cold knowledge but as transformative recognition. And I argue this offers healing power. According to Gordon, a ghost is simply not a dead or missing person, but a social figure. And investigating can lead to the downside where history and subjectivity makes social life. So let me be a little more concrete about what it means to encounter rememory or being haunted by mother's rememory. In this feeling place, I noticed that making a living and claiming my citizenship on this stolen land represses the memory of a continuing settler colonialism in my flesh born out of my Korean mother's body. This is how we with different origins get linked, connected, haunted through your mother's rememories. When you hear me saying your mothers, again like I like us to kind of get to that slash and practices to kind of really remember that mothers can have both mothering and uttering fragmentations and connections. And these kind of messy relationships and shifting relationships go on with any kind of history. So expecting on equal rights in US democracy that is based on black exclusion, buries in my flesh rememory of black mothers whose children were sold away and whose children's lives still do not matter. Writing my resistance amidst the ongoing brutality of migrant children caged and family separated stores this violence in my body. I am helplessly witnessing this violent act without much ability to stop them, yet I can be responsible. In other words, I commit to my ability to respond. At the same time, the presence of my Korean body brings out the spectres of my ancestors right in this territory, demanding to rememory countless deaths in an aftermath of Cold War, including Korean wars, which became the condition of possibility for American prosperity in the 20th and 21st centuries. Now, my mother's rememories demand your daughterly responsibility in this place. So we, the dead and the living, the past and the present, and what has happened here and what has happened there, all co exist, and are still in our bodies. There's neither subject nor object. There's neither self nor others. There's neither agency nor fate, there are only inexplicable ties to what cannot be experienced or subjectified fully. It is not about origin, but about innumerable vested connectivities.

So with this kind of different understanding towards yourself as and of connectivity or as and of inexplicable ties that I noticed that through rememory, I now want to briefly turn into a Korean-American writer, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*, which was published in 1982, like as another kind of lens that allows me to address those three methodological questions in that feeling place. So *Dictee* is considered an experimental, autobiographical essay that transcends the self as the book kind of shows juxtapositions of fragmented stories of multiple women across several continents in different time periods. But this work became significant only posthumously after her tragic death on the day she received the her author's proof of the book. So what this meant was that none of the readers could ask the author Theresa Hak Kyung Chat any questions about the book. We're left with the book for our own use. And in this work, Cha writes a non-linear, non-unifying, multilingual, Korean migrant-American woman subject by putting together mostly invisible, individual and conflicted collective histories of Korea, as well as invited interactions and biographies of various historical cultural woman subjects. And so I listed you know, some of the kind of figures that she used to write this book. And one example is a Korean anti-colonial student leader Yu Gwan-sun in early 1900s, Joan of Arc from France in early 1400, Demeter and Persephone from Greek myths, Cha's mother Hyung Soon Huo and Cha herself, written in multiple languages of Korean, Chinese, English and French with photos, diagrams and handwritten letters. And so this book, her autobiography that juxtaposes incongruent, grand

multilingual, multi-continental and multi-generational horror stories in a multi-representational modes, demands readers to know differently. In other words, Cha instructs an inevitability of fragmentations and disrupts easily, consumable totalizing common identifications in gendered Korean migrant postcolonial experience. So I actually kind of sampled a couple of pages from the book to kind of really show what I meant by incongruent juxtapositions that kind of reveal the postcolonial fragmented being unknowing. And so the first... The left side, the first picture, is the first piece of the book that shows Korean language scribbled on the wall. And then the second picture, next to it, shows a text, left aside. I don't know if you can actually see the language, but the left side is the French and then the right side is English. And it's a poem that Cha wrote. And the third picture is what looks like persecutions, either during Japanese colonisations or the Korean War. And then the fourth is an illustration of Chinese medical points in Chinese language. And as you can see, what frustrates readers the most with such kinds of multi-modal stories is that, in fact, the book doesn't provide any titles, context or captions of what she includes. So there's no explanation of what, like, this picture, illustrations or figures mean, and where she got it, and like, what is the context? And so these kind of fragmented narratives, images, and sometimes blank pages I read in *Dictee* resemble what I have seen in my mother's rememory. In other words, you can bump into someone else's remember it, but that doesn't guarantee that you're going to understand it. While English is still primary language of *Dictee*, Cha brings in French, Chinese and Korean, along with photos, figures, blank pages, blank spaces and images of handwritten notes.

And so with her representational choices, I actually want to turn my attention to issues of language. Because I had to ask, what language can I use to speak my mother's rememory that is fragmented? In what language could my mother speak her rememory to me? Our shared language was Korean. My mother and I spoke Korean to each other. But what is the mother tongue for a Korean migrant academic woman of colour, who speaks writes in English as my adapted language with Korean tones? I rarely think in Korean, talk in Korean and write in Korean anymore. I'm also fully aware of the power of English in the political economy of knowledge production, yet still writing my mother in English is such a pain and loss. This is what the outcome of being educated looks like. For many migrants and colonised folks with hyphenated names, this is a work life I'm living shared by numerous migrants and colonised, the forced, the voluntary or in between across the continent over many, many generations. It is just not possible to separate our individual will from a larger historical, cultural and political force, is it? But still personal is not worse to study, especially our mother's personal, right? For worthy, for your attention as your research participants. Who decided such worthiness? However, my initial reluctance about how I could write my mother's rememory stored in my mother tongue with another language that is not my own didn't stop me. Rather, I noticed that my body who speaks with two tongues is the bridge, translation and even poetry. As Vietnamese American writer Ocean Vuong writes, mother, this is also privileged, you made possible for me with what you've lost. I also heed what Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe points out. He said, quote, "So my answer to the question, can an African ever learn English well enough to be able to use it effectively in creative writing? That's a certain yes. If on the other hand, you ask can he ever learn to use it like a native speaker, I should say, I hope not." End quote. At this point, what is my mother tongue and where is my refuge? I want to come back to *Beloved* for this issue of language again.

So *Sethe* is obviously not only mother but also daughter who was born into slavery and didn't speak her mother's language. After her mother was killed, Nan took her in, a nun who use different words, words

Sethe understood but could neither recall nor repeat now. She believed that must be why should remember so middle before sweet home. Sweet home is where she was in slavery. Except singing and dancing and how crowded it was, what non told her she had forgotten, along with the language, she told it in, the same language her mom spoke, and which could never come back. But the message that was and had been there all along. The message is here, the language it carries is broken. I cannot use any language to seamlessly communicate with my mother's fragmented memory. Yet many daughters have fragmented stories, broken languages and disconnected relations. Disconnections and connection may not be the opposite, as much as a rememory contains both the remembrance and forgetting.

So rememory instructs us that a myth of sinless and flowing continuity or unity of self, language, nation and even history it raises, excludes and stigmatises anyone, or any traces that disrupt their presumed unity and continuity and so everything has to sound logical and reasonable without inconsistency or incongruency. Then fragmented, broken and severed discontinuities are disavowed and not said and thus become unnoticed, unthinkable, forgotten, disconnected and eventually unsayable. Remembering my Korean mother's rememory through the rememory of mothers in English, like Morrison's *Beloved*, Cha's *Dictee*, is to write a testimony of woman's love, will and knowledge for my daughters. In this task, borders of languages, nation state, geographies, generations are all interrupted. This is both an addition and loss. Doing mourning and rejoicing together, fortunately or unfortunately for me this is living a feminist life. This is being called my bag, my work, my life. That's both labourious and loving. And then I'm not doing this by myself. Connecting and feeling with *Beloved* and *Dictee* as mothers' rememories, to notice my mother's rememory show how stammering discontinuity and seemingly incongruent juxtapositions are indeed the possibilities and potentials for enacting and narrating connectivity. These ties are what constitute ourselves, ever evolving connections, remembered and forgotten. To be haunted is to notice us linked and the unspoken past of both the here and there always haunts the present. We cannot imagine the future out of what we forget. Rememory is waiting here and there for us. Rememory questions the dangerous closure, completeness and entirety of our understanding of ourselves belonging, temporality and historical progress, as well as our relationship with what can be imagined and done differently in knowledge production. Mothers' haunting rememories teach diverse connectivity as an of ourselves, remembering acts matter, as what has happened in the past is always with us, our present, even if the past is from another geography, another community or another place to which we have never been, the power, knowledge and connectivity we have developed or grounded within our bodies, born out of our mother's bodies, and our body bridges the past and the future. Yet many of us have forgotten those connections to the sources of knowledge stored in our bodies, born out of our mother's body, nurtured and sustained by the earth we all belong to. So then, our question is, how can we rememory our onto-epistemologies to relearn or unline how to do inquiry? Thank you.