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Decolonizing Decoloniality: Considering the (Mis)use of Decolonial Frameworks in TPC Scholarship

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ABSTRACT

As the field of technical and professional communication (TPC) has moved toward more inclusive perspectives, the use of decolonial frameworks has increased rapidly. However, TPC scholarship designed using decolonial frameworks lacks a clear, centralized definition and may overgeneralize and/or marginalize Indigenous concerns. Using a corpus analysis of TPC texts, we assess the ways that the field uses "decolonial" and propose a centralized definition of "decolonial" that focuses on rematriation of Indigenous land and knowledges. Further, we offer a heuristic that aids scholars in communication design appropriate for decolonial research and teaching strategies.

CCS Concepts

CCS → Social and professional topics → User characteristics → Cultural characteristics

Keywords

Decolonial Methodologies, Social Justice, Corpus Analysis, Case Studies, Heuristic

INTRODUCTION

As the field of technical and professional communication (TPC) has moved through the social justice turn, the use of frameworks that prioritize marginalized identities and perspectives have grown rapidly. We argue that the uses of decolonial frameworks as a way to push back against capitalist ideology are on the rise in TPC, noting that "while there have been 42 scholarly works since 2010 … published that actively engage with decolonial methodologies [in TPC]…22 of those have been published since 2018" (Itchuaqiyaq & Matheson, 2020, n.p.). However, as TPC scholars have long understood, rapid, efficient, and effective communication practices do not always equal ethical communication practices (Katz, 1992). Because there has been such a large and rapid uptick in TPC scholars using a decolonial frame, it is important to trouble the field's *working* definition of "decolonial" as it relates to TPC research practices. We do this work not to condemn the very work that makes our own possible, but rather to equip our field to use decolonial methodologies respectfully as we work together towards equity, inclusion, and social justice in the future. We take a data-driven approach to uncover the generalizations made about decolonial methodologies in TPC scholarship.

This article examines how decolonial frameworks are being used in the field of TPC and to establish a heuristic for scholars using decolonial frameworks. This article directly informs the design of communication and research related to decoloniality. It outlines our methodology for conducting a corpus analysis of the TPC texts that include decolonial frameworks and establishes the positionality of the scholars. Next, it introduces a definition of "decolonial" based on the publications of international Indigenous scholars (Itchuaqiyaq, 2021; Smith, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wilson, 2008). Then it presents the findings of our corpus analysis with context and provides a heuristic for evaluating work that may be considered "decolonial." We then apply our heuristic to two case studies (one journal article and one TPC course) to model how our heuristic might be implemented by scholars seeking to use decolonial frameworks in responsible ways. Finally, we present the significant limitations we recognized in this study and our

conclusions. This article does not contain a traditional literature review, given that the methods themselves robustly engage with the body TPC literature relevant to decolonial frameworks.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In this article, we work to answer the following research questions:

1. How has the field of TPC used decolonial frameworks to describe ideas or events in the field?

2. How might TPC researchers move toward defining and using decolonial frameworks in ways that do not contribute to the marginalization of Indigenous peoples?

For our research, we used corpus analysis techniques to investigate the field's working definition of "decolonial" as it relates to methods and methodologies. To do this, we conducted a search using online databases (Scopus, Google Scholar, and university library) and Itchuaqiyaq's digital research corpus[1] to find the body of TPC scholarship[2] using the terms "decolonial" and "technical and professional communication" in the body of the text (i.e., not just in the references section) since 2010. Our sample originally included 40 texts, which included scholarly monographs, chapters from edited collections, journal articles, and conference proceedings. To be clear, though we are examining the use of decolonial methodologies in TPC scholarship, we are not using decolonial methods to do so. We acknowledge that our particular research design, specifically using a counting method that assumes decoloniality must be explicit to be present, may run contrary to decolonial methodology. While we make no claims that this work is decolonial in nature, we do assert that this work is *in the service of* respecting the sovereignty of decolonial methodologies.

To do our analysis, we searched the texts for terms directly related to "decolonial" (e.g., decolonize, decolonization, decoloniality)[3] using the corpus analysis tool AntConc (Anthony, 2019). We did this by pulling all instances of "decoloni*" in each text, outside of its references, and inserting the associated passage and any related frameworks listed in that passage into a spreadsheet. Through analyzing each quote from our sample, we discovered that a high frequency of texts cited Haas (2012a) and/or Agboka (2014) as their primary source for discussions of decolonial methodologies. We pulled those two texts from the sample and analyzed them separately. We then worked together to write a "working" definition of decolonial methods, approaches, and methodologies for each text (n=38) in our sample.

In this process, we already suspected that many of the texts would use decolonial as a euphemism for social justice or humanitarian work because of our previous exposure to this particular critique coming from scholars Tuck and Yang (2012). Because of this exposure, we may have gravitated toward sample quotes (if there were multiple passages using "decolonial") that highlighted social justice and/or humanitarian work as decolonial work. However, we used a grounded theory approach, generating categories from data based on textual evidence (Portewig, 2011), in order to categorize and synthesize working definitions of "decolonial" found in our sample. A grounded theory approach allowed the texts to guide us in our categorization and analysis. We used a collaborative coding design (Clegg et al., 2020; Saldaña, 2016) that allowed us to develop and refine our three codes together, which we called themes, through discussions informed by our personal and professional experience as well as our initial impressions of the

working definitions of "decolonial" from each individual text. Each author coded the sample's working definitions separately using the three themes (*Indigenous Concerns; Social Justice; and, Agency and Emancipation*) we developed, but also remaining open to new themes emerging from the data. It is important to note that some texts (we encountered four texts in particular) were difficult to categorize because they fit easily into more than one theme. To resolve this issue, we reanalyzed the sample passage(s) together and decided which theme was a stronger fit. After our initial coding process, we recognized that one theme, *Social Justice*, had far greater numbers than the others. We revisited the coded texts to uncover secondary themes, or sub-themes, within *Social Justice* to better understand that theme's nuances. Finally, we worked together to synthesize each theme's combined working definition of "decolonial."

In order to equip TPC researchers in their designing appropriate decolonial methods, we then developed a heuristic to help scholars determine if the use of a decolonial framework is appropriate for their situation, research, and communication design. We acknowledge that attempts to "institutionalize" or standardize complex concepts such as decoloniality can limit the nuance of such frameworks (refer to Edenfield, 2019b). Therefore, we have chosen to use self-reflection as a part of our research design and point to our own work as a case study upon which to test our heuristic, in part, because it offers us the chance to explore that nuance and be transparent about both our process and about our positions as researchers and scholars. We believe that by talking about and modeling transparency regarding the complexities we've faced as scholars attempting to do decolonial work, we provide space for other scholars to acknowledge and, where necessary, rectify the messiness involved in their own work. In addition, we see it as vital to our work to acknowledge and state our positionalities as scholars engaged in work concerning Indigenous communities.

As we stated earlier, these methods are distinctly not decolonial. We have used a conventional method of conducting research about decolonial research because we believe that a corpus analysis is the most effective way to understand this particular issue as it relates to the scholarship in the field.

Itchuaqiyaq is a tribal member of the Noorvik Native Community in NW Alaska and Assistant Professor at Virginia Tech. She uses big data techniques to investigate the intersections of identity, technology, colonialism, and culture in order to effectively reveal how mainstream academic practice often perpetuates the marginalization of underrepresented scholars and communities. She uses theory and data to develop effective methods that equip others to do respectful research and social justice work in TPC, especially with regards to Indigenous communities. Itchuaqiyaq was also the managing editor of *Technical Communication Quarterly* for two years and analyzed scholarly publication practices in TPC scholarship for her dissertation research. Because of these experiences, she is sympathetic to the real pressure authors face to cite certain scholarship or to use certain frameworks. For example, authors who ignore the suggestions of peer reviewers—especially "easy" fixes such as "you should incorporate framework A" or "you should cite authors XYZ"— risk rejection because it is often their original reviewers who will reevaluate their "revise and resubmits." Itchuaqiyaq recognizes that citation and the (mis)use of particular frameworks are not solely an author issue; they are also related to issues tied to the publication process that are beyond the scope of this current project. Further, as we will discuss in subsequent

sections, reviewer input can pressure authors to *retroactively* reframe their work to increase their chance at publication. It is well known that publication success is an important metric of obtaining and retaining academic employment (Chakravartty et al., 2018; Chang, 2009), so the pressure to yield to reviewer input is tangible.

Matheson is a white woman working as an Assistant Professor at Utah Valley University in the United States. She has long standing research ties with communities in the Global South, and as such, has spent much of her early career wrestling with the complexities of working in TPC beyond the social justice turn. In her efforts to center communities that have been historically overlooked in TPC, she has also often found herself wrestling with the significant and troubling problems her white gaze (and presence) brings to her work among racially marginalized communities. She approaches this work tentatively and with an awareness that her privilege is woven throughout her work. As such, she seeks to model openness and accountability about the limitations of her perspective and analysis in social justice work, knowing that her relative position of power makes such a move less risky for her than for multiply marginalized and underrepresented scholars (Walton et al., 2019).

DEFINING "DECOLONIAL" IN TPC

In our initial analysis, we found that the major point of overlap in decolonial TPC scholarship is a reference to the definitions of "decolonial" provided by Indigenous technical communication scholars Angela Haas (2012a) and Godwin Agboka (2014).[4] Although these works were written prior to TPC's growing practice of actively considering and stating one's personal connection and positionality regarding subject matter and method of research, their international Indigenous perspectives coupled with their scholarly dedication to knowledge legitimation of Indigenous communities and social justice in TPC provide them with credibility to discuss and define decolonial methodologies in our field. In our sample, upwards of 90% of the 37 texts referenced either one or both of these authors' articles (Agboka, 2014; Haas, 2012a), demonstrating their influence on the field's understanding of decolonial methodologies. Snippets from Haas's (2012a) discussion of decolonial and/or Agboka's (2014) discussion appeared as direct quotes or were paraphrased in a majority of texts.

Rather than provide a totalizing definition of decolonial, Haas (2012a) provides relevant contours that are specific to TPC research and pedagogy. She states that decolonial methodologies and pedagogies "(a) redress colonial influences on perceptions of people, literacy, language, culture, and community and the relationships therein, and (b) support the coexistence of cultures, languages, literacies, memories, histories, places, and spaces—and encourage respectful and reciprocal dialogue between and across them" (p. 297). Haas offers decolonial methodologies as a means to equip our field with tools that help create spaces for long-ignored marginalized knowledges and community perspectives to arise as expertise. In this sense, Haas describes decolonial methodology as a relational, collaborative, and iterative practice that actively challenges the colonial underpinnings of knowledge production in academia. Haas (2012a) states,

> My definitions are dynamic, rather than static, because they are open to revision as I continue to learn from the overlaps with and divergences from other definitions to which colleagues in the field may subscribe. Therefore, in the spirit of rhetoric, I offer these definitions as openings

to future conversations in our field, not definitive answers, so that our uniquely situated field might further contribute to disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and everyday understandings of race, rhetoric, and technology. (p. 282)

Her approach to decolonial methodologies is reflexive and acknowledges decoloniality as a process that may shift and slip as the field undertakes this challenging work and learns together.

Agboka (2014) provides important Indigenous cultural context to his definition of decolonial. He states that the term "decolonial" is used by scholars "to capture the process of rupturing and challenging the political economy of knowledge production that accords certain privileges and legitimacy to certain forms of knowing while invalidating indigenous knowledges or viewpoints of research participants" (p. 302). In this definition, Agboka extends Haas's (2012a) discussion of decolonial to specifically include and amplify Indigenous communities and knowledges. While neither Agboka nor Haas use the term 'sovereignty' in their respective discussions, Agboka's (2014) treatment of decoloniality prioritizes the rights, concerns, and experiences of Indigenous populations in a way that points to Indigenous peoples as sovereign. He continues, "Decolonial approaches also seek to produce new knowledge about how colonialism has worked and continues to work to subjugate, commoditize, and otherwise exploit culture, knowledge, and other resources of unenfranchised people, groups, and nations'' (p. 302). In his discussion of decolonial methodologies, Agboka both pans in and pulls away from the Indigenous contexts related to decolonial work. In doing so, he creates an inroad to apply decolonial methodologies to a wide variety of marginalized experiences and needs.

While both Haas (2012a) and Agboka (2014) center their discussion on the relationship of decolonial methodologies to knowledge legitimation, they both refrain from any detailed discussion of decolonial approaches' relationship to land rematriation. However, the growing body of TPC scholarship regarding environmental justice presents an area of opportunity for discussions of Indigenous stewardship of land in future research (see Ross, 1994). Further, Indigenous concepts of land can be extended to stories and histories, as Legg and Sullivan (2018) call "stories as monuments" (p. 37), which position narrative as a powerful method to connect knowledge legitimation efforts with Indigenous bodily experience in time and space. While we recognize the work of Haas (2012a) and Agboka (2014) as vital to laying the groundwork for decolonial practice inside the field, we call for an extension of the definition of decolonial inside the field that demands that such work have more robust implications for the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples.

CORPUS ANALYSIS OF "DECOLONIAL" IN TPC RESEARCH

Keeping the above definition of decolonial methodologies in mind, we now discuss the findings of our corpus analysis. We collected 42 different texts, such as scholarly monographs, chapters from edited collections, journal articles, and conference proceedings, that used a variation of the word "decolonial" within the body of the text. As we discussed in our Research Design section, we removed Agboka (2014) and Haas (2012a) for separate analysis (above). In Table 1 we present the results of our corpus analysis of the use of "decolonial" in TPC scholarship.

Table 1: Decolonial working definitions in TPC publications 2010–2020

Decolonial Definitional Fragment	Citations	Working Definition	Related Frameworks
Indigenous Concerns (7 texts)	Cox (2018); Eichberger (2019); Frost & Haas (2017); Legg & Sullivan (2018); Moore & Richards (2018); Savage & Matveeva (2011); St. Amant & Graham (2019).	Decolonization means the recovery of traditional Indigenous values, land, and cultural identity through a resistance to dominant colonial culture. Decolonial rhetorics are related to Indigenous rhetorics. They complicate the boundaries between personal/professional, public/civic, and private/individual. Decolonial methodologies expose underlying colonial structures, work to rid culture of colonial influences, and refocus upon place (land, stories-as-monuments). Decolonial frameworks are useful for discussing the connection between humans, land, and animals. Decoloniality is related to Indigenous identity, land, and language unconstrained by Western institutions.	Amerindian perspectivism, antenarrative, anthropology, critical contrastive rhetoric, critical race theory, cultural rhetoric, feminism, human subjectivity, Indigenous rhetorics, intercultural theory, Native American frameworks, postcolonial theories of translation and economics, post-development studies, risk communication
Social Justice (28 texts)	Agboka (2012); Agboka (2013); Agboka (2021); Agboka & Matveeva (2018); Cheung (2017); Cobos, Raquel Ríos, Johnson Sackey, Sano-Franchini, & Haas (2018); Del Hierro (2018); Ding & Savage (2013); Edenfield (2019a); Edenfield & Ledbetter (2019); Haas (2012b); Haas & Eble (2018); Jones, Savage, & Yu (2014); Frost (2016); Frost & Haas (2017); Jones (2016); Jones, Moore, & Walton (2016); Moore (2018); Petersen & Walton (2018); Rose (2016); Rose & Walton (2015, 2018); Salvo, Breuch, Larson, & Cassell (2012); Shelton (2020); Shivers-McNair, Gonzales, & Zhyvotovska, (2019); Small (2017); Verzosa Hurley (2018); Walton, Moore, & Jones (2019).	Decolonial methods support social justice action though prioritizing marginalized cultural perspectives and histories. Decolonial methods require researchers to be respectful, responsive to participant's needs, self-aware, to work with local partners to co-construct knowledge, and to act humbly. Decolonial methods include reciprocity, knowledge sharing, knowledge legitimation, cooperation, inclusivity, and respectful partnerships. Decolonial methods resist and change oppressive structures with a particular sensitivity to colonialist and capitalist structures, prioritizing the use of stories. Decolonial approaches are politically-oriented and attempt to account for the power dynamics at play in research contexts. Decolonial methods involve stakeholders in the development of solutions that are context-specific, rather than taking a one-solution-fits-all approach. Decolonial approaches center, legitimize, and prioritize "insider" marginalized perspectives, narratives, and knowledges to respectfully support community aspirations, and work to make hegemonic colonial practices, hegemonic practices, and globalization visible. They challenge the field to broaden its perspectives via introducing cultural contexts. Decolonial perspectives broaden perceptions of communities, workplaces, technologies, and development.	Action research, antenarrative, anti-racism, apparent feminism, Black feminism, community research, critical race theory, cultural rhetorics, cultural studies, digital an visual rhetoric, embodiment theories, ethical action, ethics, ethnography, feminist theory, gender theory, globalization, historical and archival research, intersectional social justice, localization, medical rhetoric, narrative, narrative inquiry, participatory approaches, pedagogy, politically-oriented research, postcolonial theory, postmodern theory, poststructuralism, progressive approaches, regulatory writing, rhetorical silence theory, risk communication, scientific rhetoric, social justice approaches, user advocacy, user-centered design, user-centered research, visual culture, workplace writing

Agency and Emancipation (5 texts)	Agboka (2018); Dorpenyo (2020); Jones (2016a); Novotny & Hutchinson (2019); Petersen (2014).	Decolonial research is emancipatory and contributes to the social good. Decolonization is an enactment of agency. Decolonial approaches counter hegemonic knowledge systems and give voice to marginalized populations. Decolonial methods are critical frameworks that lead to increased agency and promote human rights and equity through supporting self-determination and liberation. Decolonial methodologies help recover the lost identities of colonized people.	Critical race theory, feminism, grounded theory, human rights, narrative inquiry, postcolonial theory

In our sample, the earliest work was published in 2011 and the most recent was published in early 2020. We encountered three themes of how decolonial was used in our sample: *Indigenous Concerns*, *Social Justice*, and *Agency and Emancipation*.

Indigenous Concerns

Texts coded as *Indigenous Concerns* explicitly discussed Indigenous peoples' concerns at least once. There were seven texts that were given this code, and their combined working definition of decolonial is the closest to the definition we developed. However, three of the seven texts in this sub-sample used the word "decolonial" only once and their subjects were largely unrelated to Indigenous peoples (to be fair, one of these three was an editors' introduction to a special issue). These single-mention instances of decolonial framework suggest an underwhelming engagement with the complexities of a decolonial frame by giving it only a brief nod. Such limited engagement with decolonial issues in these works means that these works cannot fully engage in rematriation work. In addition, because Indigenous concerns are a central feature of decolonial methodologies, having so few texts coded as related to Indigenous concerns was alarming.

Social Justice

Texts coded as *Social Justice* were by far the largest category in our sample, which was no surprise considering our experience applying decolonial studies scholars Tuck and Yang's (2012) critique of decolonization being used as a metaphor onto TPC scholarship practices (Itchuaqiyaq & Matheson, 2021). There were 28 texts given the code *Social Justice*. Because there were so many texts assigned with this code, it was useful to revisit those texts to uncover specific aspects within that larger theme (Clegg et al., 2020). There were eight sub-themes that emerged as related to social justice and decolonial methodologies:

- self-aware/humble
- challenge hegemony/reject colonial structures
- inclusive /cultural perspectives
- respectful
- locally aware and responsive
- amplify marginalized populations, knowledges, and needs
- social justice/addressing inequalities
- politically oriented

It was unsurprising that most of the social-justice themed texts explicitly discussed the term *social justice* alongside decolonial methodologies, or other concepts closely related to social justice such as *addressing inequalities*. Two sub-themes that emerged were focused on the researcher's interaction with the subjects of their research: *self-aware/humble* and *respectful*. Similarly, three other sub-themes focused on respectful and aware research practice: *inclusive/cultural perspectives*, *locally aware and responsive*, and *amplify marginalized populations, knowledges, and needs*. These sub-themes highlight that research influences people and communities and so it needs to be aware and respectful. Finally, two sub-themes that emerged focused on the worldview associated with research: *challenge hegemony/reject colonial structures*, and *politically oriented*. It is important to note however, that none of these articles were focused directly on the concerns of Indigenous peoples.

Agency and Emancipation

Texts coded as *Agency and Emancipation* explicitly focused on empowering individuals to have agency over their bodies and lives. We found five of these texts inside our data set. Such texts aim to emancipate individuals from oppressive structures by countering hegemonic knowledge systems and making space for the voices of marginalized populations. Emancipating marginalized voices also allows them to have an active role in contributing positively to society. Such approaches promote human rights and equity through self-determination and liberation. These approaches provide important tools for highlighting marginalized voices in positive ways that could include the knowledges of Indigenous people. However, this approach also has the potential to be overextended beyond the interests of Indigenous peoples and, in fact, may actively overlook the needs of these populations when used to focus on other populations. Inside of this category, only three of the texts were involved in Indigenous issues; others used a decolonial frame to focus on the agency and emancipation of other marginalized populations.

Implications of Working Definitions

Despite this critique, the scholarly works we have included in our analysis do important work. We write this critical text not to reduce the vital contributions of these authors but to offer strategies for improving the fidelity of future works. Authors in our sample frequently used decolonial as a tactic to express an inclusive perspective (since decolonial perspectives inherently reference marginalized bodies as Appleton, 2019, discusses), a move that demonstrates concrete action towards using one's own scholarship to make our field more inclusive. Further, because we found no instances of discounting or critiquing decolonial methodologies

within our sample, we can assume that all authors in this sample were attempting to use decolonial methods in good faith, even if their efforts warrant strong critique in our analysis. As Itchuaqiyaq & Matheson (2021) discuss, there seems to exist an "automatic" response to declare anything that highlights non-dominant or marginalized cultures, narratives, experiences, or individuals as "decolonial." For example, cultural studies scholar Nayantara Sheoran Appleton (2019) sharply criticizes scholars who glibly state that they are "decolonizing" their syllabus or their university when they are merely conducting, as the name of her article suggests, a hollow academic rebranding.

The use of decolonial as a metaphor for subverting dominant cultural paradigms or demanding equity or social justice "is one way the settler, disturbed by her own settler status, tries to escape or contain the unbearable searchlight of complicity, of having harmed others just by being one's self" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 9). This anxiety leads to attempts to subsume the struggles faced by Indigenous peoples into a homogenized and sterilized universal struggle, which absolves the settler of their complicity in upholding settler colonialism. Tuck and Yang state that,

> describing all struggles against imperialism as 'decolonizing' creates a convenient ambiguity between decolonization and social justice work, especially among people of color, queer people, and other groups minoritized by the settler nation-state. 'We are all colonized,' may be a true statement but is deceptively embracive and vague, its inference: 'None of us are settlers.' (p.17)

Further, they argue that, "[d]ecolonization is accountable to Indigenous sovereignty and futurity" and cannot be supplanted by definitions that simply use decolonization as a metaphor for using Indigenous knowledges or traditions to improve systems or ideas" (p. 35). Such efforts to define scholarship as decolonial when in fact it does not do decolonial work undermines the real and pressing work of Indigenous sovereignty and reinforces colonial structures.

Because colonial ideals are ever present in Eurowestern cultures, to some extent all bodies— marginalized or not—are colonized. However, viewing all bodies as colonized can lead to an overextension of decolonial frameworks when authors intend to do social justice work. Our data demonstrate that TPC scholarship has done just that: 28 out of 40 texts in our sample used decolonial as a metaphor for social justice in scholarship that does not directly work toward Indigenous issues and concerns. Likewise, five other texts used decolonial as a metaphor for emancipatory actions. Only seven texts were coded as explicitly relating decolonial to Indigenous concerns. Further, 21 out of 40 texts used the term "decolonial" only once outside of its references, which could indicate a lack of deep engagement with the concept. However, as decolonial scholars might note, using a quantitative method, such as the corpus-based approach we used in our study, assumes decoloniality must be explicit to be present, and this runs directly counter to many tactical decolonial practices. While we acknowledge the validity of that critique, we believe that it is through the use of a systematic, analytical approach that we can best demonstrate the concern we have regarding our field's overwhelming mischaracterization of decolonial methodology.

Our grounded theory analysis of our sample of articles illustrates that TPC scholars are using decolonial as a metaphor for social justice or emancipation erases the concerns, knowledges, and

aspirations of Indigenous bodies as central to decoloniality. In essence, treating decolonial as a metonym for social justice or critical-cultural action colonizes decolonization. Although putting all three definitional themes together creates a pretty good definition of decolonial methodologies, picking them apart causes selective cultural erasure. Scholars wishing to use decolonial methodologies should incorporate them into their research and communication design *from the beginning* (Itchuaqiyaq, 2021; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008) rather than retrofitting their work with decolonial frameworks after the research has been conducted. Further, scholars should consider the concepts and needs expressed within decolonial methodologies in their fullness instead of picking and choosing convenient-to-hand fragments to shoehorn into abstracts, introductions, literature reviews, arguments, methods, results, implications, and conclusions—even if the intention is to increase inclusivity. Indigenous peoples' acts of resilience facing historic and continuing genocide deserve more respect and deeper engagement than this type of scholarship provides.

In studying the definitions offered by Haas (2012a) and Agboka (2014), as well as other definitions, critiques, and cautions from Indigenous decolonial scholars concerned with respectful decolonial research (Itchuaqiyaq, 2021; Smith, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wilson, 2008), as well as the texts we have reviewed above, we offer the following definition to guide TPC research and pedagogy: **Decolonial methodologies support, respect, and restore the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples, lands, and knowledges. They also support community-developed aspirations for Indigenous peoples, and support the abatement of unjust conditions related to settler colonialism that affect Indigenous communities.**

HEURISTIC FOR IDENTIFYING DECOLONIAL WORK IN TPC

For TPC and communication design researchers to better determine if the work they are inclined to think of as decolonial is actually decolonial we follow up our above definition with an offering of the following heuristic to inform decolonial communication design. Ask yourself:

1. **From what paradigm does your work arise?** In other words, what are the primary motivating factors behind your project's design? Did you design your research/project to be primarily concerned with supporting, respecting, and restoring the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples, lands, and knowledges? If not, you may want to consider other ways to frame your work.

2. **How have you negotiated the paradigms embedded within the materiality of your work?** In other words, do the tools, products, or other material aspects involved in your project actively work towards supporting, respecting, and restoring the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples, lands, and knowledges? If not, have you critically considered and resisted colonial underpinnings that might be found inside those materialities? If neither element is present, you may want to consider other ways to frame your work.

3. **How do Indigenous peoples and communities directly benefit from your work?** Did you design your research/ project to benefit Indigenous communities associated with your research/project? How have you meaningfully incorporated Indigenous knowledges and/or stakeholders in

your design? If possible, are you engaging with Indigenous community partners towards fulfilling their own community-defined goals and providing opportunities for their meaningful input and critique? If you have not designed your project to directly benefit Indigenous communities, then you may want to consider other ways to frame your work.

CASE STUDY: MODELING COURSE DESIGN USING DECOLONIAL HEURISTIC

In this section, we will attempt to provide an example of enacting decolonial communication design, much like Smith (2012) provided in her book, *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples*. In an effort to model critical self-reflection of the course design practice, and to encourage other scholars to do the same, this example stems from Itchuaqiyaq's experience designing course materials.

Designing a Decolonial Methods in Technical Communication Undergraduate Course (Itchuaqiyaq, 2020)

Synopsis

This case study comes from the process of designing an undergraduate "capstone" technical communication course Itchuaqiyaq using the heuristic we developed.

Itchuaqiyaq meta-narrative

I designed this decolonial methods course to focus on rematriation after authoring scholarship that posits a definition of decolonial methodologies for TPC research with consideration to Indigenist paradigms (Itchuaqiyaq, 2021). My goal in designing this course was to bring some of the calls about collaborating with Indigenous communities on issues related to technical communication I made in my manuscript to life. The following is the current course description:

> In this course, you will learn about the value and reality of decolonial work in TPC. Because decolonial work centers on relationships, you will work as a coalition to create documents that are useful for Indigenous tribes in the U.S. for their rematriation efforts. Throughout this course, we will practice decolonial methods for TPC through studying existing documents regarding the rematriation of Indigenous artifacts and remains.

> We will apply that knowledge and create original technical communication documents that will assist tribes in their efforts towards rematriation.

> In this course, you will learn about decoloniality, ethics, audience, research, and technical communication design and techniques, among other things. While this course will center on TPC related to issues facing Indigenous peoples, you will gain a clear understanding of technical communication as a profession and practice in general. Like many "mainstream" TPC courses, you will learn to design and create professional products (policy writing, ethics statements, multimodal information, proposals, and manuals) that are multimodal, accessible, and appropriate for specific and general audiences, but will develop those products considering how issues like

oppressive cultural paradigms and colonialism might contribute to design if left unchallenged. Furthermore, this course will provide a great foundation for working with marginalized populations in a respectful and collaborative manner. (Itchuaqiyaq, 2020, para. 7–9)

This first attempt at decolonial course design represents my effort at applying my own understanding of decolonial methodologies to TPC pedagogy. One way I tried to apply a decolonial lens, beyond the focus on rematriation, was through rejecting the letter-grade standards and instead incorporating a more holistic and collaborative approach to grading. For example, the syllabus contained this "Note on Assessment":

> This is a pass/fail course. The irony of doing decolonial work within the confines of academe is not lost on me. However, the university requires that I grade your efforts, and this is the best grading option available. I want to state that if this course were graded using the typical A - F model, no one—including myself—would be able to receive an A. Decoloniality is a *practice* not a prescription. Decolonial methods require *a change in perspective* that is incredibly hard to do, something hardly achievable in one semester. Instead, I call upon you all to work together to give *our best effort* at practicing decolonial methods in the short period of time we have together. (Itchuaqiyaq, 2020, para. 19)

Applied Heuristic

Because I designed this course specifically working to restore and respect Indigenous sovereignty, it represents a good attempt at applying a decolonial framework to an undergraduate university course. However, applying the heuristic, as we have defined above, helped locate avenues for improvement in this course design as well as locations of critique.

1. From what paradigm does your work arise?

While this course attempts to work from an Indigenist paradigm, it is a university course designed to be taught at a primarily white institution (PWI). This constraint is apparent in how I discuss assessment because I am forced to give grades for how well a student can rapidly adapt to and perform an Indigenist paradigm and do decolonial work. My initial design used the term "repatriation," rather than *rematriation*, which demonstrated an affiliation with the underlying "heteropatriarchal white supremacy" (Tuck, 2011, p. 34) inherent in the term "repatriate." Instead of using the term "repatriate," decolonial scholars such as Eve Tuck, recommend the use of the term "rematriate". She states, "A rematriation ... is concerned with the redistribution of power, knowledge, and place, and the dismantling of settler colonialism" (2011, p. 37), which influenced the revision of my course design when considering issues related to paradigms and power.

During the post-heuristic revision of my course design, I changed all discussion of "repatriate" to "rematriate" and revised course readings and focused class discussion on this topic. While I could not change the reality that courses like this will likely occur in PWIs, I chose to publish my full course design, including theoretical framing, course description/front matter, course readings, assignments, and schedule on my personal scholarly website under an Attribution 4.0 Creative Commons license. This mode of publication assures that the

content of the course design is available to access, use, or even redesign by anyone.

2.   How have you negotiated the paradigms embedded within the materiality of your work?

Although I acknowledge the irony of any PWI course being truly decolonial and actively trying to push back against Eurowestern academic norms of pedagogy, the situatedness of the course within the confines of the PWI academic structure (versus a Tribal College or University) limits the application of an Indigenist paradigm. For example, the course description assures students that they will still learn to effectively create "normal" (read: capitalism-based) technical communication products rather than challenge or attempt to discover what other types of skills and products such a course could produce.

3.   How do Indigenous peoples and communities directly benefit from your work?

The major project in this course centers on working directly with tribal technical communicators to create rematriation manuals for both individuals wanting to rematriate items (such as human remains, sacred items, historical items) as well as for tribes receiving such items. This project is designed as a live model that will create products that are directly beneficial for Indigenous tribes in aiding their rematriation efforts. Although the students at the PWI may or not be Indigenous students, their acculturation to Indigenous concerns as a significant part of their basic technical communicator training may benefit Indigenous peoples and communities in the future.

The application of the heuristic demonstrates that while some of the aspects of this course are closely in line with the aims of decolonial methodologies, other aspects are still rooted in colonial frameworks. However, recognizing and revealing oppressive structures like colonialism are the first parts of the process towards rejecting and replacing them, as described by Walton et al. (2019) in their 4Rs framework. Applying this heuristic while still in the design phase of this project allows me to concretely determine areas that I might be able to improve this course (such as considering alternative products achievable through decolonial TPC) as I redevelop it for future implementation.

LIMITATIONS
Our study design has some limitations built into our scope. For instance, we did not include the terms post-colonial or anti-colonial in this study because we believe these terms have distinct and different purposes. Still, much could be learned by researching the scholarship using these terms that might add complexity and depth to our findings in this study.

As we stated in our Research Design section, our study was greatly influenced by Tuck and Yang's (2012) critique of the ways scholars commonly (mis)used decolonial methodologies. Because of this influence, we already suspected that many of the texts in our sample would use decolonial to describe social justice or humanitarian work. Thus, we may have gravitated toward sample quotes that reflected that assumption. How we attempted to mitigate this bias was to pull every quote that used the term "decoloni*" in our sample and analyze each individually and as a whole before determining a final code. It is worth noting that using the corpus analysis method we chose meant that we did not do a close reading of each of these texts for this analysis, though we had read many of them

previously. Because of this method, we could have missed what we would consider necessary contexts to make a study decolonial in nature. However, considering that a large number of the texts in our sample used the term "decoloni*" only once within the body of the manuscript supports our claim that decolonial methodologies are being used in shallow ways in our field's scholarship.

Relatedly, using a counting method such as we did to understand decolonial methodologies limits our ability to account for nuance. While our own research design is not decolonial, we do not want to suggest that successfully deploying a decolonial communication design requires a set number of mentions of decoloniality, land, or Indigenous people. Instead, we use a counting method to help us understand, describe, and discuss a problematic phenomenon within our field without alienating members of our own community of scholars. Further, we recognize that chattel slavery has complicated issues of "homeland" and a sense of place for Black communities in the United States whose ancestors were stolen from their homelands and brought to the U.S. unwillingly. More work is needed to explore how sovereignty in the Black community and Indigenous community intersect and complement one another, especially in how these communities use narrative to evoke a sense of place, belonging, and identity. Technical communication scholar Natasha N. Jones argues that "Decolonial narrative inquiry... embraces experience, especially the lived experiences of the multiply marginalized that are almost always "both/and" realities, rich and complex" (2020, p. 520). While we assert a particular view of decoloniality in this article, we cannot demand a singular vision as the only way forward. Instead, we ask that this both/and reality connected to decoloniality and its application be explored and considered thoughtfully. We believe social justice work in our field is important and we want to equip our colleagues to do this work respectfully and thoroughly without reinscribing colonial violence.

Although study limitations are often a way of describing limitations in methods or findings, we wish to communicate that there are also limitations built into the way we have written this article. Communication and rhetoric scholar Karma Chávez (2013) argues that it is through radical interactionality, or confronting the roots of oppression in no uncertain (or utopian, status quo protecting) terms, that real change can occur, even if it produces discomfort among the audience for whom it is intended. However, Chávez recognizes that this type of action requires risk—in this case, specifically calling out scholars in the field for misusing decolonial frameworks in ways that further marginalize Indigenous people while being junior scholars embodying various vectors of marginality ourselves—and that not all scholars have the margin of maneuverability (Feenberg, 2010; Walton et al., 2019) to embody that risk. For reasons apparent and not apparent, including our status as early career researchers using radical methods represents risks to our status and progression in the field. This is, in part, because the field has long prioritized decorum as an important practice of critique (Mackiewicz & Riley, 2003). As a result, we have, as junior scholars, made the difficult choice to obey the rules of the genre and engaged in critique that embodies a certain level of careful decorum, to protect both ourselves and other tenuously positioned scholars from the implications of direct critique.

We argue that not all scholars have the margin of maneuverability to *incur* risk as well. For example, our choice to synthesize our data about the specific ways each of the 40 texts in our sample use decolonial into one generalized table is an acknowledgement that many of the scholars using decolonial frameworks are

marginalized junior scholars themselves. Although we recognize that a strong and specific critique might make our case more effectively, the risks associated with such an act are too great. Instead, we choose to discuss the effects of the misuse, rather than the instances of the misuse, of decolonial frameworks in no uncertain terms. Overlooking the Indigenous concerns regarding sovereignty and rematriation explicit in decolonial methodologies is cultural erasure, even if that is not the intention of the author. If that cultural erasure is intentional, then it is an element of genocide (MacDonald, 2015). While some may balk at the use of genocide in relation to the misuse of a decolonial framework, we use this term with intention as an act of radical interactionality. Chávez (2013) states that softening or limiting language for the sake of decorum does not reduce oppression; instead, she suggests that strong language can and should be used to combat oppression.

Finally, we acknowledge that the peer review process itself can sometimes shape or limit the extent to which scholars are able to do radical or even truly decolonial work. Reviewers are working from a position of power, amplified by anonymity, which limits dialogue between author and reviewer and can put authors in the position of needing to conform to reviewer feedback or risk rejection from publication. Further, peer reviewers sometimes ask authors to use a specific framework, leaving authors to have to decide if pushing back is worth the risk of a rejected manuscript. These complicated systemic factors related to the publication process add another layer of vulnerability to the work of marginalized scholars attempting to do important work and reaffirms our decision to proceed carefully in our critique.

CONCLUSION

While we agree with Haas (2012a) that decolonial frameworks can be dynamic, we also argue that it should have boundaries in order to assure that decolonial work retains a meaningful benefit to Indigenous people. As a result of this work, we suggest that authors can and should work toward being more intentional about the use of decolonial frameworks in TPC. While we believe such work is well intentioned, we maintain that overly broad uses of decolonial framework have the potential to remarginalize Indigenous peoples. Scholars that aim to use a decolonial framework should build the framework directly into their research and communication design from its beginning. We suggest that when in question, scholars implement our heuristic to evaluate the appropriateness of a decolonial frame for their own work. Work that does not meet the specifications of the heuristic might indeed be more appropriately categorized inside another ideological frame such as feminist, social justice, anti-colonialism, critical race theory, or other related theoretical frames. Finally, we affirm that these many other frameworks are vital to the growth of the field. Scholarship that does not do decolonial work should simply identify itself as such and use a more appropriate frame.

Some takeaways for communication designers in doing decolonial design:

- Engage with Indigenous stakeholders and users from the beginning of your project.

- Consider how your design may be interpreted within Indigenous contexts.

- Recognize the potentially competing interests (such as the underlying capitalistic demands of colonial organizations) at play in your project.

- Allow Indigenous communities to identify both the potential benefits of your project as well as the potential harms.

Some takeaways for scholars using decolonial frameworks in their research design:

- Collaborate with Indigenous stakeholders and communities to identify community needs prior to designing research.

- Treat collaborators as co-designers of knowledge rather than support staff.

- Create tangible benefits to stakeholders that contribute to community-identified aspirations.

- Respect the sovereignty, leadership, and expertise of stakeholders.

In addition, we acknowledge that in many cases, TPC scholars have elected to use decolonial frameworks as a result of the pressure from peer reviewers. As such, we call peer reviewers to use the same discretion in asking authors to use a decolonial frame in situations that fail to meet the specifications of our heuristic. As a result, authors should come up against less outside pressures to undertake a theoretical framework that re-marginalizes an already marginalized community.

As a side effect of our major intention to define and understand the use of decolonial frameworks in TPC, we also acknowledge that work such as ours (and the work of many other junior scholars) comes embedded with significant limitations due to the academic structure in which we are operating. Such limitations should be made visible by acknowledging and naming them, and structural norms around decorum inside the field should be critically reevaluated with an eye for the ways in which these norms limit the depth of our scholarship.

And finally, we argue that an important part of working in TPC after the social justice turn requires doing work that is self-reflective, transparent, and responsible to the communities it aims to serve. As a result, we have aimed here to model reflexivity and self-critique as a mechanism of being accountable to our community for our work. Such a practice allows us to take a radical stance and to be honest about the limitations of our work and accountable to each other and our communities, especially as our perspectives shift and change over time. This reflective strategy is an important part of participating in decolonial methodologies which require scholars to evaluate the harms that researchers bring to the research (Smith, 2012).

ENDNOTES

1. Itchuaqiyaq's digital research corpus includes 427 texts related to technical communication, social justice, intercultural communication, and decolonial research. It also includes all (n=777) journal articles from 2012–2019 in five major TPC journals.

2. We did our best to uncover the body of TPC publications from 2010 until February 2020 that use a form of "decolonial" outside of its references, although it is possible that we may have inadvertently overlooked some.

3. We have specifically chosen not to include the terms "anti-colonial" and "post-colonial" in our study because they each have distinct meanings that differ from "decolonial" (refer to Itchuaqiyaq & Matheson, 2021, for more information about the distinction between anti-coloniality and decoloniality). We acknowledge that there exists TPC scholarship that refer to their work as anti-colonial or post-colonial, but they fall outside of our research's scope because we are specifically interested in how our field frames and uses decolonial methodologies.

4. Haas explicitly discussed her Indigenous identity within her published scholarship (2012a, p. 296) and Agboka gave permission (G. Agboka, personal communication, October 27, 2019) to Itchuaqiyaq to refer to him as an Indigenous scholar.

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