

Country and climate: Journeys toward the decolonial option among non-indigenous climate activists

Abstract

Climate and environmental activism have long grappled with concerns of First Nations' land, rights, and sovereignty in the Australian settler-colonial context. However, analyses of environmental campaigns indicate that there are tensions with the realities of decolonial praxis in the intersubjective exchange among Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. We aimed to respond to and work alongside First Nations' agendas in this space in by making visible the role of coloniality, interrogating complicity and colonial narcissism, and exploring ways in which non-Indigenous climate activists understand and traverse the decolonial option in order to disrupt hegemonic systems of colonial violence. From the thematic analysis of interviews with five non-Indigenous climate activists from around Australia, four major themes emerged: development of positionality awareness, negotiation of positionality, decolonial imaginings, and a shared journey of (un)learning. These findings illustrate the shifts in subjectivities, the imaginings of decolonial futures, the dilemmas of navigating competing discourses, and the fundamental importance of ongoing learning and unlearning with one another in authentic dialogue. Considerations for future research and decolonial climate activism actions are explored.

Introduction

The decolonial turn has been a growing focus within climate change movements and environmental protection due to increasing recognition of coloniality as the root cause of climate change and environmental harm (Lakanen, 2019; Stein, 2019; Whyte, 2017). Colonial

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violence, with its extractivist and exploitative logics and processes, with its divide between humans and nature, and with its ceaseless drive to expand and conquer, has been conceptualised as an “ethically harmful and ecologically unsustainable” (Stein, 2019: 198) modern-colonial “habit-of-being” (Shotwell, 2016: 38) rather than a problem of ignorance (Shotwell, 2016; Stein, 2019). In the Australian context, long-standing First Nations’ agendas of indigenisation are recognised alongside non-Indigenous responses to these agendas as parallel processes seeking to disrupt hegemonic systems of coloniality and explore the decolonial option (Birch, 2016; Land, 2015; van Neerven, 2015; Vincent & Neale, 2017).

Whilst decoloniality is an “ongoing serpentine movement toward possibilities of other modes of being, thinking, knowing, sensing and living” (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018: 81), the decolonial turn has been used to refer to the shift in orientation toward decolonial praxis, that is, the active process of interrogating and de-linking from coloniality and its harms, of developing a critical consciousness, and of engaging and re-engaging in alternative concepts and ways of being for the “re-existence of different lifeworlds” (Barnwell, Makaulule, Stroud, Watson, & Dima, 2021: 50; Fernández et al., 2021; Maldonado-Torres, 2011, 2017). In this praxis, the “habit-of-being” is disrupted and transformed, an ongoing process toward pluralistic possibilities beyond the Eurocentric modernity that imagines itself as universal (Decolonial Psychology Editorial Collective, 2021; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Quijano, 2000).

Central to this shift towards the decolonial option is identifying, interrogating, and challenging systems of coloniality in all its forms, described as the *colonial matrix of power* (CMP; Quijano, 2000). The colonial matrix of power is a framework that illustrates four domains of economy, authority, gender/sexuality, and subjectivity/knowledge, which are interlinked through oppressive colonial logics (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Three pillars are described as upholding this matrix: racism, sexism, and the “fictional ontology” of nature (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018: 159).

Positionality and subjectivity in the decolonial turn

Central to the decolonial turn is the engagement in identifying, interrogating, challenging and disrupting these circuits of power and oppression, moving towards liberation and pluralism in the decolonial option. A core aspect of this process is locating oneself as active agents in and of these systems, termed *positionality*, and subsequently understanding and shifting our ways of relating to the world, termed *subjectivity* (Land, 2016; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). For non-Indigenous Australians, this has been expressed as the need to examine complicity in coloniality, to identify positionality pertaining to the colonial matrix of power through “interrogating who we are in terms of identity, culture, and history, and the shape of our lives” (Land, 2016: 29).

Though justice movements aim to disrupt the circuits of the CMP in various forms, Tuck and Yang (2012) warn against metaphorisation of decoloniality, highlighting a quintessential element: recentring the repatriation of Indigenous land and life. In the *climate justice* movement, systems of power, oppression, and inequities are acknowledged and challenged with particular emphasis on preventing the disproportional consequences of climate change and perpetuation of structural violence on communities who have been and continue to be marginalised and excluded (Klein, 2015; Lakanen, 2019; Porter, Rickards, Moloney, & Anguelovski, 2020). Whilst the climate justice movement champions social justice and transformation of violent systems, critical scholars have highlighted the need to critically engage with justice-oriented, environmentally-protective concepts and actions to ensure they do not reify, reproduce, or rationalise colonial violence (Birch, 2016; Lakanen, 2019; Stein, 2019; Whyte, 2016, 2017), aligned with calls to critically engage with decolonial efforts to ensure they do not seek to assuage settler guilt and complicity through evasions that ensure settler futurity (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

(De)coloniality and climate justice in the Australian context

Australia is a settler-colonial nation inextricably linked with the ongoing ripples of colonisation. Within this context, it is essential that climate justice and the decolonial turn works from the foundation of unceded First Nations' country (Birch, 2016). The ongoing legacies of coloniality/modernity are broad, yet the separation of humans from nature serves as disproportionate violence toward First Nations peoples due to inextricable links between First Nations' country, wellbeing, and identity (Birch, 2016; van Neerven, 2015). Rak Mak Mak Marranunggu woman Linda Ford states: "Country gives us our identity. We are created, live, die and exist in the spirit of all the natural elements. Our lives are formed in knowing our country..." (Ford, in Rose, 2002: 61). This is a way of being that is steadily devalued and delegitimised by the modern-colonial habit-of-being, spoken to in the term *slow violence* used to describe "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Birch, 2016; Nixon, 2011: 2).

It is important to recognise that the broad threats posed by climate change are not abstract and future-tense, as it can often seem through the language used; it has occurred and it is occurring, particularly in First Nations communities across Australia (Birch, 2015; Nursey-Bray, Palmer, Smith, & Rist, 2019; van Neerven, 2015). These experiences of the immediacy of climate change effects and the slow violence in institutions and systems have been raised in conversations held with First Nations people about their knowledge and experiences of, and responses to climate change (Nursey-Bray et al., 2019). First Nations people from around Australia

spoke of their observed changes to seasonal patterns and weather events as they relate to traditional sites, knowledge, and culture, and about their demonstration of agency in implementing diverse climate adaptation programs and initiatives. When considering these initiatives, the slow violence of colonial systems is evident in the issues surrounding successful implementation; lack of secure funding (and subsequent lack of continuity), a paucity of First Nations-led initiatives, and an expectation to “fit” within current institutions and governance frames are all significant challenges to First Nations people’s agency in this space (Nursey-Bray & Palmer, 2018; Nursey-Bray et al., 2019).

These challenges pertaining to dominant colonial systems, of recognition and self-determination, also pervade the broader environmental movement in Australia. Recent analyses of environmental campaign case studies on First Nations land indicate key areas in which “competing political narratives” (Pickerill, 2018: 1131) perpetuate injustice, including in areas of economic development and autonomy for First Nations peoples (particularly within conservation efforts), and in dominant narratives that erase and negate the importance of First Nations custodianship and connection to country, and their sovereignty over these landscapes (Paasonen, 2007; Pickerill, 2018; Vincent & Neale, 2017). Paasonen (2007: 265) analysed the campaign against the proposed development of the Jabiluka uranium mine in Kakadu National Park in which there were turbulent internal campaign dynamics among the Mirarr people and other First Nations allies who led the campaign and external environmental activists who came to “support” the movement, positing that a “gulf of incomprehension” arises between different *logics of action*. These logics are put forth as the *logic of crisis* which is based in necessity, and the *logic of affluence* which is based in choice, without risk of harm or violence in the event of failure. This underscores the importance of recognising that which occurs within internal dynamics, of knowing movements not as homogenous but as underpinned by the varying values, beliefs, and worldviews of individuals and institutions who comprise it and the social, political, cultural, and historical contexts in which they are situated – that is, by their *positionality* (Lakanen, 2019; O’Brien, 2017, in Roberts & Pelling, 2019).

Acting in solidarity for decolonial climate justice

In considering the role of individual people within broader movements, it is essential to recognise the influence of positionality and subjectivity, of why and how people engage with these issues of climate change and decoloniality and the standpoints that they adopt in the process (Lakanen, 2019; Land, 2011, 2015). In the decolonial framework, circuits of modern-colonial power are central in these explorations, drawing on Foucault’s theory that power is a complex set of omnipresent forces which both enable and constrain our perspectives and possibilities for action (Heyes, 2014).

Ways of embracing the decolonial turn and the decolonial option differ depending on positionality within these circuits of power and our *locus of enunciation*, that is, “the geopolitical and body-political location of the subject that speaks” (Decolonial Psychology Editorial Collective, 2021; Grosfoguel, 2016: 213). In this sense, work by First Nations’ people to resist coloniality and to indigenise as process of reclaiming and resurging works alongside the efforts of non-Indigenous allies to respond to indigenous agendas and de-link from reproductions and perpetuations of systems of oppression. These efforts converge in points of coalition and shared goal, as in work by Land (2011, 2015), which has focused on working in dialogue with First Nations people in south-east Australia to analyse and explore “sticking points” in the ways non-Indigenous peoples engage with efforts of solidarity and activism in the decolonial turn. Though not specific to climate movements, through this process emerged some key principles for solidarity that are applicable in the climate activist space, including: decentring white people, supporting First Nations-led initiatives, understanding and positioning within culture and history, and engaging with “humility” and “letting go of knowing” (Land, 2011: 60; Margaret, 2010).

Kessarlis (2006: 350) also described the process of “making, unmaking, and remaking the Mununga [white] self”, speaking to the process of interrogation and challenge of normalised racialised oppression within self and society that is undertaken by white Australians who counter these dominant narratives, as part of identifying positionality and shifting subjectivities.

This process is aligned with calls for deep engagement with not just white privilege, but the larger interwoven systems of settler-colonialism and white supremacy (Bonds & Inwood, 2016). In this vein, Tuck and Yang (2012) caution against the co-opting of decolonial language under broad banners of social justice, to maintain focus on Indigenous peoples’ sovereignty, experiences of misrecognition, and contributions to decolonising theories and practice in order to enact true transformative change. It has been put forth that sensitivity to positionality and subjectivity in these intersections of power, oppression, and privilege is essential for avoiding oversimplification and essentialisms in conversations and analyses of climate movements, and are crucial for generating solidarities among activists (Lakanen, 2019).

Rationale, aims, and research questions

The climate justice movement and decolonial efforts have points of convergence, and in some respects run parallel in efforts to disrupt dominant systems of coloniality. For First Nations peoples and activists in Australia, climate justice has always encompassed concerns of land rights, First Nations sovereignty, and custodianship and connectedness to the lands and waters of Country. Non-Indigenous climate activists

are also motivated by concerns of land use and protection; hegemonic coloniality and these understandings and motivations have presented points of tension and contention in environmental campaigns in Australia, with challenges persisting in realities of First Nations sovereignty. We aim to explore the journeys of non-Indigenous climate activists to make visible the role of coloniality, and to better know how to respond to First Nations' agendas in carving out ways of disrupting coloniality and exploring the decolonial option. We pose the research question "how do non-Indigenous climate activists understand and traverse the decolonial option?"

Method

Research design overview

This research project works through an interpretivist paradigm, which asserts that there is not a singular or objective truth but that reality is complex with multiple potential interpretations (Willig, 2013). This entails seeking to understand how people make sense of their realities and experiences in their social-historical contexts, whilst recognising that this is also applicable for the researchers' positions and interpretations (Bhattacharya, 2017; Reyes Cruz & Sonn, 2011). This aligns with calls for community psychology to challenge dominant positivist paradigms that presume a neutral and objective researcher and a single truth (Reyes Cruz & Sonn, 2011). In the interest of critically engaging with social, historical, and political systems of power, oppression, and exploitation, we approached the research from the decolonial standpoint. The research design was developed at the intersection of personal narratives, power, and society that underpins much of the work in the fields of critical and community psychologies.

Researcher positionality

The first author, Elise Bryant, is a 7th generation white Australian woman who was born on Yidinjdji land in Far North Queensland, Australia. She is negotiating the topic of Indigenous sovereignty and decolonisation including the privileges of whiteness and challenges in identifying, interrogating, and transforming ingrained coloniality. These experiences throughout the research process, particularly of dilemmas of action (with inaction serving to perpetuate hegemonic systems of oppression, whereas action in research risks serving as a settler "move to innocence", Coultas, 2021; Mawhinney, 1998; Tuck & Yang, 2012: 3), were explored in regular discussion with the second author Christopher Sonn, who grew up during the Apartheid regime in South Africa before immigrating to Australia, and with others within and alongside the community research collective. Christopher Sonn has put forward the need for a decolonising standpoint for community psychology praxis (Reyes Cruz & Sonn, 2011), drawing on his community- and liberation-oriented psychology focus which has been developed and informed by his own experiences and social and cultural locations. Both authors acknowledge the

Boonwurrung and Wurundjeri peoples of the Kulin nation, on whose unceded land this project was created.

Through the interviewer and interviewees' shared experiences of whiteness – of negotiating white privilege and confronting and challenging complicity in oppression – rapport, vulnerability, and honesty were generated throughout the dialogue of interviews, facilitating the data collection process. Whilst the CHE principles of Connectivity, Humanness, and Empathy (Brown & Danaher, 2019) underpinned the interviews for authentic and two-way conversations at parts, the first author remained conscious of the potential for unnecessary collusion or undue influence through responses, so used these as far as possible for rapport and to explore experiences introduced by interviewees.

Participants

Participants were required to be over the age of 18 and to identify as non-Indigenous climate activists. Five activists responded to a call for participation that was circulated widely and via social networks, as outlined in Table 1 on the following page. This sample was within the bounds of expected and required recruitment for this research project. No further participants were sought due to pragmatic considerations of the project timeline and the rich and viable data collected through in-depth dialogues with participants, each of which provided substantial information relating to the aims of the study from a range of standpoints. In recognition of participants' ownership of their experiences and their decision to share their narratives in a research context, the option was provided to have any information published and disseminated using their true first name, or to remain anonymous. Two participants elected to use their true first name in the research project and any subsequent dissemination, and three elected to remain anonymous by use of a pseudonym (denoted throughout by an asterisk).

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews allowed for in-depth data collection from key informants (i.e. non-Indigenous climate activists in Australia) and was flexible enough to allow room to explore key details and nuances in participants' journeys and understandings. These interviews were approached with the intent of being authentic and dialogical, in which the interviewer could facilitate a reciprocal relationship whilst maintaining the primary focus on the participants' experiences. These dialogues followed areas of interest to interviewee and interviewer, and were driven by both prompts from the interview schedule and questions of interest emerging from the topic at hand. Examples of items used throughout include: *what does the term 'climate justice' mean to you?*; *what does 'decolonisation' mean to you in relation to environmental activism?*; *in your work, what might be examples of how these ideas are put into action?*; and *what*

Table 1: Participant Information Summary

NAME ^a	AGE	GENDER	SELF-DESCRIBED ETHNICITY ^b	LOCATION ^c	BRIEF SUMMARY OF ACTIVISM
Anna*	62	Female	Anglo/Celtic	Regional centre in Queensland <i>Yidinji Country</i>	Activist for 20+ years at the international level, aiming to prevent land-clearing, preserve biodiversity, and avoid climate change, though in recent years is reducing activist involvement. Currently not involved in coalitions with First Nations activists.
Connor*	39	Male	Caucasian (Irish)	Small rural town in Victoria <i>Woiwuring Country</i>	Activist for past 1-2 years at local level, aiming to protect place and create a new regenerative culture that values and promotes perspectives and ways of being that challenge dominant narratives. Is participating in coalition with a First Nations co-developer of the regenerative culture group.
Natalie*	35	Female	Jewish Australian	Large rural town in Western Australia <i>Minang Country</i>	Activist for past 3 years, initially at national level with recent move to local level, initially aiming to reduce waste and recently moving towards an aim to avoid climate change with a justice-oriented approach. Currently transitioning towards coalitions and groups more aligned with her social justice values.
Rosalie	50	Female	White Anglo/Irish/Jewish	Remote community in Northern Territory <i>Warumungu Country</i>	Long term activist at local, state, and national level, aiming to mitigate the impacts of climate change and to create new systems in society that value and promote alternative knowledges and ways of being. Has ongoing involvement with national groups and campaigns led by First Nations activists, primarily offering material support and responding to calls to action.
Zane	37	Male	Caucasian	Regional centre in Queensland <i>Yidinji Country</i>	Activist for past 10 years at local level, aiming to do justice to his responsibility to the land and the local custodians and to follow his sense of purpose in his community. Works in coalition with local groups of First Nations activists for place-based environmental protection and regeneration.

^aAn asterisk beside a name denotes that, as elected by participants, a pseudonym has been used.

^bEthnicities of participants were documented using an open-ended question that allowed respondents to use their own words and terminology, however we believe that use of the term “Caucasian” was not intended to validate an outdated and disproven term, though reflects its problematic entrenchment in society (Moses, 2017).

^cLocation information was determined using postcodes provided by participants, the Modified Monash Model classification (Department of Health, n.d.), and the Map of Indigenous Australia (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, n.d.).

do you think are the things that non-Indigenous people need to do to work effectively in this space?. The dialogical and authentic approach taken relates to a framework put forward aiming to maximise ethical and methodological benefits stemming from semi-structured interviews by following CHE principles – Connectivity, Humanness, and Empathy (Brown & Danaher, 2019) whilst acknowledging that the experience of participating in an interview can generate new knowledge and understanding for both the interviewer and the interviewee (Curtis & Curtis, 2011).

All interviews were conducted using video-conferencing technology. In part, this was in response to the need to adhere to social distancing requirements at the time of the interviews, and also acted to increase accessibility for participation due to reducing the burden of time and distance generally involved in interview participation. Research has found that use of video-conference technology for interviews does not result in differences of rapport or of disclosure, when compared with interviews conducted face-to-face (Jenner & Myers, 2019), as substantiated by reflections of researchers who have used both video-conferencing and face-to-face interviews for qualitative data collection (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Lakanen, 2019). It is worth noting that maintaining a good quality audio-visual connection requires reliable high-speed internet. As participants were joining from a range of locations, this could not always be guaranteed. Resulting connection issues did have minor impacts on some interviews and transcripts, however concepts could be retained through these issues as only single words or small sections of conversation were affected, with clarification sought when needed.

The length of each interview was approximately one hour. Interviews were conducted in a single session where possible, though in some interviews interruptions or internet failures resulted in some disruption to this process. In discussion with interviewees, this was determined not to have had detrimental impacts. One interviewee had another commitment arise after around 30 minutes, and the remainder of the interview was conducted a few days later. In this case, the delay was noted by the interviewee to be beneficial, as they had been able to further reflect and then participate more fully with minimal distractions.

Data analysis

Audio recordings of the transcriptions were used to create verbatim transcriptions, in which filler words, repetitions, and grammatical errors were omitted to allow for transcription to focus on the content that was shared by the participant. Thematic analysis has been noted to be particularly well-suited to research questions about “people’s conceptualisations or ways of thinking about particular social phenomena” (Willig, 2013: 60), facilitating interpretation of rich detail through an interpretivist

paradigm (Gray, 2014). For the thematic analysis of this project, a categorical-content analytic approach was drawn upon, in which extensive immersion of the data allows for clusters of meaning to be generated (Hiles & Čermák, 2011, Langridge, 2007). These clusters of meaning, in addition to decolonial frameworks and dialogue with other researchers in the community research collective, were used to develop and refine a template used as an organisational tool to ensure that major relevant decolonial themes would be centred throughout the analytic process (see Figure 1 for the final iteration of this template).

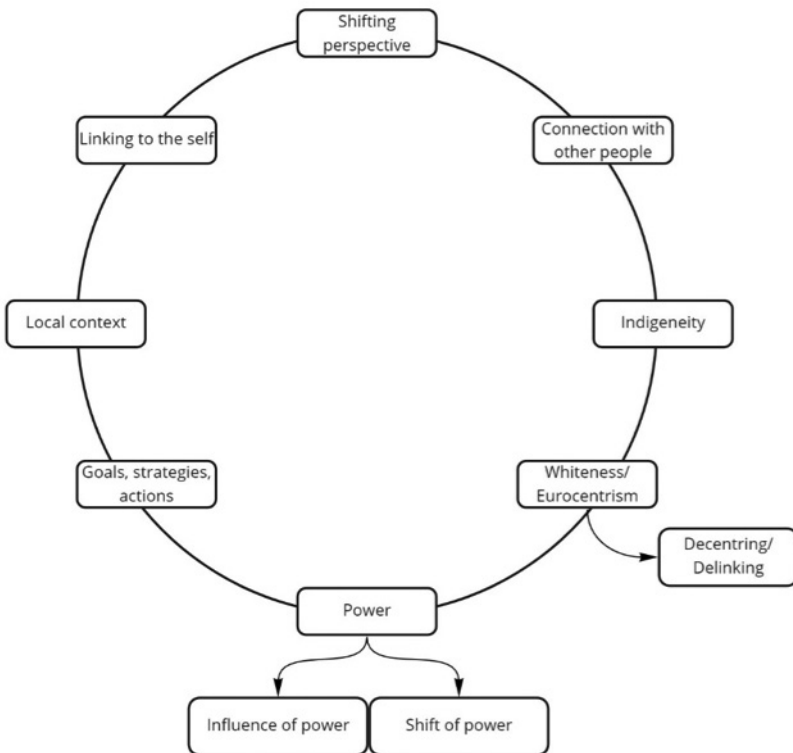


Figure 1. Data organisational tool derived from decolonial theory and project data

Full transcripts were then imported to NVIVO 12, a qualitative data analysis software, and coded for units of meaning that were then further analysed for preliminary themes. This further analysis was conducted in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, to allow for

examination of codes and emergence of themes by research question, by interview, and across the project as a whole. For this recursive analysis, themes were generated through their *keyness* to the project's aims and research questions as guided by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Findings

This study aimed to serve as a scoping study for exploring how non-Indigenous climate activists navigate their subjectivities to engage in solidarity with Indigenous sovereignty as it intersects with the climate movement. Analysis of data from key informants in relation to these aims produced major themes and subthemes as outlined in Table 2 on the following page, comprised of: *development of positionality awareness* (as coloniser; in whiteness; in connection to place); *negotiation of positionality* (with the self; with community; with activist organisations); *decolonial imaginings* (possibilities and potentials for a better culture; dilemmas of competing discourses); and *a shared journey of (un)learning*.

Development of positionality awareness

A growing awareness of positionality was evident for participants, in identifying and interrogating social, political, cultural, and historical aspects of the systems that they participate in and the relevance to their geographic location. This development stemmed through engagement in the climate justice movement, which created space for learning and being within a growing awareness of systemic issues throughout society and the historical resistance to these systemic issues, alongside a questioning of deeply-rooted ideas and assumptions.

As coloniser

In growing awareness of (de)coloniality, some participants developed a strong awareness and understanding of themselves and their ancestors as colonisers. This positionality was understood as both being a current reality that holds responsibility, and as an inherited position that is unchosen.

Zane: *“My family was colonialists... I was starting to change my attitude because. ...I thought it's like paying back my own debt. And that's what some of the elders have told me from different groups, they're like, I'm healing my own bloodline. That's their theory. They're like, 'You're making up your bloodlines' mistakes”.*

Positionality as coloniser was also linked with systems of climate change and enactment of these, with consideration of the entrenched nature of these systems and of one's position within them.

Table 2: Themes and Subthemes

MAJOR THEMES	SUBTHEMES	DESCRIPTION
Development of positional awareness		Participants' awareness of their varying positionality changed and developed as a result of learning in activist spaces.
	As coloniser	Participants developed understandings of their own and their ancestors' positionality as coloniser.
	In whiteness	Participants developed awareness of their positionality as white and within whiteness.
	In connection to place	Participants developed understandings of their positionality in relation to their geographic place and its natural aspects.
Negotiation of positionality		In developing awareness of positionality, participants negotiated new understandings with existing processes, systems, and structures.
	With the self	Participants negotiated their changing understandings of their positionality with themselves, in reflective and critically reflexive processes.
	With community	Participants sought out or chanced upon connections in their communities that affirmed or challenged their understandings of their positionality.
	With activist organisations	Participants negotiated their changing understandings of their positionality with the systems and structures of their associated activist organisations.
Decolonial imaginings		Participants constructed and conceptualised decolonial imaginings as 'a great unknown', with substantial promise though also with barriers and hesitations.
	Possibilities and potentials for a better culture	Participants considered possibilities and potentials in creating a new culture that is rejuvenative and values pluralities.
	Dilemmas of competing discourses	Competing discourses were prominent in participants' conceptualisations of decolonial futures. These presented dilemmas that were experienced as unsettling for participants.
A shared journey of (un)learning		A shared journey of learning and unlearning enabled understanding and negotiation of positionality and was established as an essential foundation for the ongoing processes of being within the decolonial standpoint in the climate movement.

Rosalie: “[Conceptualising] climate change as end-stage colonisation... [Shows] our great difficulty in doing anything about it, because the coloniser is us, and the climate change is us, and we can’t not be ourselves... It’s actually very hard to do anything about it. And just because you want to do something about it, doesn’t mean you do something about it.”

In whiteness

Central to developing positionality awareness was a changing relationship with whiteness. This entailed unlearning assumed positions of whiteness as default and dominant, subsequently moving from perceived moral judgements of whiteness and associated negative emotions (such as guilt and shame), and connotations with other aspects of positionality, to a macro view of whiteness within systems of racialised power and oppression. This process was prompted and facilitated by conversations, events, and education within the climate justice movement, notably those by First Nations activists and organisations. Seed Mob, a nation-wide climate network of First Nations youth was mentioned by multiple participants as particularly influential in this space.

Awareness of the implications of whiteness contributed to deeper understanding of other racialised positions, leading to the intentional challenging of default white dominance and the promotion of First Nations self-determination.

Zane: “Being a whitefella you always got to be careful because you don’t want to push them [First Nations people], in a way, like that. You know, it’s got to be done their way...”

In one case, engagement with whiteness did not translate to increased positionality awareness, instead becoming a standpoint from which to justify increased distance and decreased responsibility to engage with issues of race and power.

Anna*: “I studied. I did three subjects on Indigenous people and it was pretty fascinating. But I always come from my background and so I think it’s up to them [Indigenous people]”.

In connection to place

A growing connection to place was cyclically linked with developing positionality awareness. A growing understanding of cultural, historical, and socio-political context was typically applied to participants’ geographic locations, which could then prompt further interest in untold histories and narratives of their place. This was facilitated by connection to the natural aspects of their environment and landscapes and the motivation to protect their place.

Connor*: “[I] only just learned the names of the Indigenous places where I was born. ...You’ve got to know the names... It’s really just about seeing where you are and acknowledging where you are, and seeing that what you’re doing as an activist, is really, has to be in extents, is about protecting your place.”

Connection to place was also negotiated through developing positionality awareness as it relates to First Nations connection with country. In one case, connection to place was paralleled with connection with country through its role in sustaining feelings of belonging and associated mental and physical wellbeing, as experienced through caring for and protecting place, and through the knowing of natural systems and ecology whilst incorporating these into diet.

Zane: “When I go out jogging in the community, I pick up rubbish in the creeks, if I’m having a mental health day I’m like ‘I’m going to the bush and just walk along the creek, listen to the birds and connect’. You know, working with country, it’s the same thing for me.”

In another case, connection to country was seen as an experience outside of non-Indigenous positionality due to the significant role of culture and history, and was considered for how non-Indigenous climate activists could learn and benefit from deepening this connection to place.

Negotiation of positionality

As positionality awareness developed, participants engaged in a process of contextualising an increased understanding of social, political, cultural, and historical systems as these systems related to themselves. This required a negotiation of unlearnings and new understandings against existing processes, systems and structures, which was undertaken in different ways among participants depending on preferred approaches to processing and learning, with all participating in both internal reflexive negotiation and external relational negotiation to varying degrees. One participant negotiated these predominantly with the self, as summarised by a reflection at the conclusion of the interview:

Connor*: “Just thank you for letting me talk about it, I don’t get an opportunity to talk about this stuff much”.

Others discussed community connections that affirmed or challenged their positionality awareness, with all participants considering how their positionality and how broader systemic patterns were negotiated with their associated activist organisations.

With the self

Negotiating these changing understandings with the self was a dominant aspect of contextualising and integrating positionality awareness, summarised by one participant as “*the need to do inner work*” (**Natalie***). Apparently spontaneous realisations were experienced as a prompt for beginning these processes of negotiations, termed “*light bulb moments*” by one participant (**Rosalie**). These were then built upon through critical self-reflection and reflexivity. The significant shifts in subjectivity and perspective were found to be difficult to negotiate at times, though also rewarding and worthwhile.

Connor*: *“It’s been a lot of big shifts in perspective now, in the last few months and years, and it’s a bit overwhelming sometimes. I’m still kind of grappling with it all.”*

With community

Developing awareness of positionality was negotiated with participants’ communities, with some participants explicitly choosing to turn to local communities to relationally process changing understandings. Communities worked to challenge pre-existing notions of systemic influences and personal positions, often through formal events intended for education on these issues. Working with local communities and shared geographies, particularly working with local First Nations communities, was found to present opportunities to learn and apply learnings of positionality both for the self and for others, with networks and events as a platform for dialogue.

Zane: *“We’ll probably have events where people come along and have a barbecue and talk culture and then get out and clean up rubbish and have a barbecue afterwards, and everyone chat, and get to know each other. So that bridges those connections, and we’re cleaning up the land of the country.”*

Fundamental differences in motivation and approach of white activist communities and First Nations communities were also considered for how this affects intercultural connection through activism, with First Nations community activism described as being interlinked with the land and with their families and communities, contrasted with the ability of white activists to disengage from activism as a “*hobby*” (**Anna***).

In processing challenges to prior understandings of positionality, communities with a shared identity (such as in professional identities and in racial and cultural identities) were important in finding safe spaces in which to be vulnerable to process changing awareness of positionalities.

With activist organisations

Systems and structures of activist organisations were central to negotiating positionality. The international nature of activist organisations were considered for their limitations of applicability in settler-colonial settings, whereas national organisations were considered for their limitations in addressing localised issues and developing place-based protective actions. This was felt particularly keenly for those with a strong connection to place, who joined or created local groups to address community-relevant initiatives.

Activist organisations that had very hierarchical structures were examined and critiqued by participants for how these hierarchies paralleled societal systems of power and oppression.

Natalie*: *“[The activist organisation] was a bit white patriarchal, rather than grassroots. ...All the people at the top are white, not necessarily all men, but a more masculine style of leadership as opposed to a collaborative or a flat structure. There wasn’t much room... There was, kind of, room for feedback, but not really much room for grassroots or asking the community.”*

These parallels were also identified in the agenda and strategies of prominent organisations, who were seen to “*manipulate*” (**Anna***) Indigenous peoples and issues from a pragmatic standpoint to maintain their own power in the realm of climate activism.

Anna*: *“[The CEO and the Campaign Manager of a prominent activist organisation, they] said to me, ‘We’ve got to talk to Indigenous people, because they’ll end up with the land. If we want to have a say, we’re going to have to make relationships with them.’”*

Decolonial imaginings

Decolonial imaginings were considered and constructed as possibilities within ‘a great unknown’, with hopes for a promising future filtered through a keen awareness of barriers and hesitations.

Possibilities and potentials for a better culture

Decolonial futures were conceptualised as an opportunity to create a new culture in pluriversality – that is, multiple ways of knowing, doing, and being – and which acts as a rejuvenating force in the community.

The valuing of pluralities was central in these conceptualisations of decolonial futures, in amplifying voices and leadership of First Nations people and other

marginalised groups and in acknowledgement and celebration of different knowledges and ways of being.

Rosalie: *“I think Indigenous people have got so much to teach us about caring for the earth, caring for the world, thinking about seven generations [ahead]! ... It’s just a different mindset [to the ontologies of white Australians].”*

Possibilities for a rejuvenative culture were considered for how these could benefit communities of people and places, as well as broader planetary health. Fostering connections among people, across cultures, and with their local natural environment was a prominent aspect of these possibilities for rejuvenation. These intercultural and ecological connections and learnings were considered as an essential foundation for mitigating climate change through sustainable living and promotion of healthy, thriving ecosystems.

Dilemmas of competing discourses

In looking toward decolonial imaginings, participants navigated the complexities of competing discourses. The entrenched nature of coloniality as the hegemonic discourse was understood as a major barrier to decolonial imaginings. This was noted in many settings and on many levels, including legislative, economic, and policy levels within society, and within the self. Decentering the dominant colonial discourse was experienced as unsettling, both in respects to challenging one’s own “colonised mind” (**Natalie***) and in the broader climate movement.

Anna*: *“It’s changed a whole lot now, the emphasis in those international negotiations have changed. ...They started talking about local people, and then they started talking about Indigenous people... They don’t talk about mitigation so much, but they will talk about the right of Indigenous people. Gender’s in there as well. All those things have come into these UN treaties that... That’s a big change. There’s all this rights language and... [It] kind of feels strange to me.”*

Dilemmas of competing discourses raised questions and uncertainty of potentially diverging goals in the climate movement. Participants raised questions of which voices would be heard or prioritised and drew attention to the challenges in decentering the dominant and carving out spaces for those that have been and continue to be marginalised and silenced, particularly those of First Nations peoples.

Rosalie: *“I’m just so aware of the way that I and many other non-Aboriginal people are. We just take over from them! We just can’t wait for them to stand up and speak, so we speak for them. It’s actually very hard to have a fair Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal group because the non-Aboriginal people just take over.”*

The navigation of competing discourses, in part, related to the perception that Indigenous sovereignty and First Nations' activism is more aligned with place-based protective actions rather than reducing global carbon emissions, and thus may diverge from the goals of many non-Indigenous climate activists.

Connor*: *"I think [activist organisation's] concern is that if we tie it too much to sovereignty, we're going to start to say that we're just concerned with making sure that logging stops in the highlands, whereas we need to be about lowering carbon emissions. I think that it's going to be an internal... A few identity crises, but there's no reason why the two things couldn't be happening simultaneously. They already are."*

This also related to concerns that First Nations peoples were being homogenised or stereotyped in discussions of decoloniality within climate activism, with uncertainty about what ideas and actions would be at the forefront of Indigenous-led campaigns and movements.

A shared journey of (un)learning

A shared journey of (un)learning enabled understanding and negotiation of positionality and was established as an essential foundation for shifting toward the decolonial option. Key aspects of shared (un)learning through dialogue were established as flexibility of one's own standpoint and a shared goal or intention, acknowledging the need to be prepared to let go of deeply-held assumptions and preconceptions. *"[Ideas have] to be met in the conversation. Listening is really about being prepared to change the structure of how you approach something, potentially quite radically."* (Connor*).

Rosalie: *"Two-way learning... I realised there's two completely separate things. One is, this is my way of learning, this is your way of learning, and we're needing to cross over and work together like that [pointing fingers in opposing directions, overlapping]. But the other way of two-way learning is, we're in parallel, in two different lanes, and we should be moving together in two lanes [pointing fingers in same direction, parallel]. That's what we should be doing in two-way learning. In different lanes going ahead, to the same aim, the same goal."*

A shared journey of (un)learning was also underpinned by building knowledge of and relationships with local First Nations peoples, to engage humbly and in good faith for solidarity. This offered opportunities for dialogue and collaboration in activist actions that prioritises First Nations' self-determination.

Zane: *"I'd say reach out. Find out who your local mob are, firstly. Reach out to them if you're going to plan an event. If you're going to put something on in the town, or*

you're going to, even protesters, reach out, and get permission to do these things. We're on [First Nations] land. Give them the opportunity to have their say. ...Reach out, and always offer them the opportunity, give them the power to say yes and no. 'Is there anything we're doing that break the laws[/lores], is there anything you can give us guidance or support for what could we do right or wrong?'"

Discussion

In dialogue with non-Indigenous climate activists, we explored journeys of the decolonial turn and the decolonial option in climate activism across Australia. Non-Indigenous climate activists from a range of standpoints were interviewed, with information subsequently analysed in relation to the research question “how do non-Indigenous climate activists understand and traverse the decolonial option?”

Participants were found to actively develop awareness of their positionality *as coloniser, in whiteness, and in connection to place*, negotiating these developing understandings *with the self, with community, and with activist organisations*. Developing awareness and negotiating positionality understandings contributed to knowledge of decolonial praxis for the self and imaginings for the climate movement and broader society, encompassed in *possibilities and potentials for a better culture and dilemmas of competing discourses*. Underlying these processes and imaginings was a *shared journey of (un)learning*.

Positionality for the decolonial turn

Positionality was central in embracing the decolonial turn and situating the self for decolonial praxis. Findings show that developing awareness of positionality as coloniser and in whiteness situated the self within broad systems of settler-colonialism and white supremacy, which is central to shifting perceptions from individualised experiences of power, oppression, and privilege to the interrogation of societal conditions and power structures which act to perpetuate these experiences and the modern-colonial habit-of-being (Bonds & Inwood, 2016; Shotwell, 2016). These processes of resituating the self in whiteness for anti-racist praxis has been described as “making, unmaking, and remaking the Mununga [white] self” (Kessar, 2006: 350). This describes the ways in which hegemonic systems of coloniality in Australia draws white people into racialised oppression and the systematic dehumanisation, exploitation, and domination of racialised others, especially of First Nations peoples. This exists alongside *colonial narcissism* or delusions of superiority, in which those born into whiteness understand unearned abundance and possibility as “just (and) natural” (Decolonial Psychology Editorial Collective, 2021: 5). In acknowledging “unmaking” and “remaking”, Kessar refers to the process of challenging and working against these normalised acts of unfolding colonial violence as seen in the findings of this study.

Whilst these broad structures were crucial in developing awareness of positionality, local contexts also proved to play a key role.

In connection to place, awareness of broader systems were applied, contextualised, and localised. The connection to place seen in this study could be understood as a form of *place attachment*, involving an emotional investment and active relationship with the geographic place, incorporating natural and socio-cultural aspects (Trentelman, 2009). This draws upon work by Land (2011) in dialogue with First Nations people of south-east Australia, which foregrounds the local context as aligned with Indigenous epistemologies. Personal experiences of connection to place were understood through the developing and shifting awareness of white subjectivity, in comparison and contrast to First Nations' experiences of connection to Country. Connection to place, in conjunction with developing awareness of broader systems, provided a prompt for consideration of one's local place as intertwined with indigeneity and First Nations peoples, such as in questioning and working against colonial place names. In acknowledging colonial place names, the settler-colonial impacts of the Frontier Wars of 1788 onwards – that is, the attempted genocide of First Nations peoples in Australia and associated acts of resistance – were alluded to (Booth, 2021). In the Australian context, colonial place names reflect dispossession of First Nations people from their sovereign land through profound acts of violence, resulting in *place severing* (Barnwell, Stroud & Watson, 2020; Barnwell et al. 2021). Place severing refers to “the psychological process associated with harms done to place attachment, including to ancestral land, the unsettling of traditional knowledge systems, intergenerational identity processes and ancestral relationships, stemming from historical land and ecological injustices” (Barnwell et al., 2020: 89), and was coined in the South African context to reflect experiences that are mirrored, in many respects, for First Nations peoples in Australia. It is with this acknowledgement that we hold connection to place for non-Indigenous people as both a legacy of coloniality and barrier to land restitution and as a major influence in the raising of critical consciousness.

Shifting subjectivities

This growing awareness of positionality had effects beyond those of “knowing”; positionality was actively negotiated with existing processes and structures in the self and society to contribute to a shift in subjectivity, also termed the construction of a *critical consciousness* (Zamudio, Bridgeman, Russell, & Rios, 2009: 455). These processes are essential for those from the “oppressor camp” to work in solidarity with Indigenous peoples, described as “the ability of members of dominant groups to move from one place to another within their white, or colonizer, or other dominant subjectivity” (Land, 2015: 159). The ways in which these shifts occur have often been explored as processes of critical self-reflection and relational reflexivity through dialogue (Kohl & McCutcheon,

2015; Lakanen, 2019; Land, 2015; Zamudio et al., 2009). The relational aspect is essential, due to the reinforcing effects of interpreting one's own experiences through one's own perspective or "master narrative" (Zamudio et al., 2009: 460).

Within this study, critical self-reflection was a central component of negotiating positionality and played a fundamental role in shifting subjectivities. This process appeared to encompass an aspect of *emergent reflexivity* (McDonald, 2005; Rapley, 2017; Teramachi, 2014), with seemingly unprompted epiphanies of positionality contributing to a transformation of perspective. The processing of these shifts benefited from relational reflexivity through communities and activist organisations. These spaces, respectively, primarily offered opportunity for dialogue, and for examination and consideration of microcosms of societal structures. The processes of negotiation were evidently difficult and unsettling at times, drawing on Tuck and Yang's (2012) commentary of the joining in solidarity, which "cannot be too easy, too open, too settled" (Tuck & Yang, 2012: 3), however, were ultimately found to be valuable and rewarding as the shifts in subjectivity became integrated. This integration challenged the modern-colonial habit-of-being, to allow for new and intentional ways of thinking, doing, and being to emerge in the contingent and elusive collaborations of solidarity (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Approaching decolonial futures

Decolonial imaginings were broadly underpinned by an unentangling from ways of thinking and being rooted in coloniality, imperialism, Eurocentrism, racism, patriarchy, and disconnection from and exploitation of the natural world. This encompasses the three pillars that uphold the colonial matrix of power: racism, sexism, and nature (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018), showing multifaceted ways of approaching the decolonial option. Decolonial futures were imagined for their possibilities in pluralities, in which multiple ways of being, knowing, and doing are legitimised and celebrated. De-linking from colonial circuits and engaging and re-engaging with alternative ways is central in decolonial praxis (Barnwell et al., 2021; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, Quijano, 2000), and was found to be particularly evident in intentionally legitimising and promoting First Nations peoples' knowledges, cultures, and ways of being whilst challenging white, Eurocentric dominance. Rose (2004) speaks to this in the Australian context as involving "countermodern" (49) processes of resilience and reconciliation, "twisting violence back into flourishing and life" (49). This was also evident in participants' decolonial imaginings, in which rejuvenative cultures were considered as possible outcomes of these processes of de- and re-linking, as an aspect of the shift away from the individualism and exploitative processes of modern-coloniality. These rejuvenative cultures were understood largely through a place-based lens, as how these could be built through local initiatives and community connections in order to protect place.

Tensions within a decolonial climate movement

Competing discourses presented dilemmas that were experienced as unsettling, with disruption and delinking of the hegemonic discourse creating uncertainties of decolonial futures, particularly pertaining to barriers and hesitations within the climate movement. This parallels research suggesting that frameworks of decolonisation and recognition of First Nations' sovereignty are difficult, for some, to reconcile with practical implications in climate campaigns and actions due to competing logics of action and ingrained colonial narcissism (Birch, 2016; Paasonen, 2007; Pickerill, 2018; Vincent & Neale, 2017).

The uncertainty of what may come from First Nations-led campaigns, or of how diverging goals may be navigated, speak to the different standpoints of non-Indigenous climate activists and First Nations activists in Australia – that is, of the current dominance of coloniality and whiteness which were not fully relinquished in some imaginings. Fearing what may come from giving up power acts as a powerful and destructive undercurrent in attempts to join in solidarity (Land, 2015; Tuck & Yang, 2012), summarised by Peter Lewis as follows: “Solidarity is fraught with mis-steps because of subconscious desire to take power back” (Lewis, in Land, 2011: 58).

Problems of modern-colonial slow violence at the intersection of climate activism in Australia and First Nations rights and sovereignty have been well-documented, encompassing epistemic violence in the disregard for First Nations' knowledges, a rigid adherence to dominant frames and structures, a lack of practical support for First Nations-led initiatives, and co-option, disruption, or destruction of First Nations peoples' campaigns by non-Indigenous activists (Birch, 2016; Nursey-Bray & Palmer, 2018; Nursey-Bray et al., 2019; Paasonen, 2007). These are examples of what can arise through adherence to the dominant and of continued marginalisation and silencing of alternative ways of knowing, doing, and being. A shared journey of (un)learning was found to be central in processing and moving past fears and uncertainties arising from these dilemmas, with flexibility in authentic dialogue contributing to decolonial praxis.

Learning in dialogue

A shared journey of (un)learning, or *two-way learning*, was key in developing and understanding positionality to embrace the decolonial turn, and was recognised as an essential component of the broader decolonial movement. Liberation theory and Freire's (2017) concept of *co-intentionality* have informed discussions of two-way learning in decolonial praxis, put forth by Huygens (2011) as “the oppressed and the coloniser working towards the same end in different ways according to the unique needs of each group, and with each group taking responsibility for their own work” (Huygens, 2011: 61). The nature of this process requires relational reflexivity and authentic dialogue to occur beyond the limits of the dominant narrative. As Zamudio

et al. (2009) warned against the “master narrative” (460) within ourselves that restricts abilities to shift one’s own subjectivities, Rose (2004) warns against the limitations of societal master narratives:

“The self sets itself within a hall of mirrors; it mistakes its reflection for the world, sees its own reflections endlessly, talks endlessly to itself, and, not surprisingly, finds continual verification of itself and its world view. This is monologue masquerading as conversation, masturbation posing as productive interaction; it is a narcissism so profound that it purports to provide a universal knowledge when in fact its violent erasures are universalising its own singular and powerful isolation. It promotes a nihilism that stifles the knowledge of connection, disables dialogue, and maims the possibilities whereby ‘self’ might be captured by ‘other’” (Rose, 2004: 20).

Intersubjective exchange among Indigenous and non-Indigenous people has been conceptualised as being rooted in *moral reciprocity* (Vincent, 2012), with acknowledgement that Indigenous knowledges cannot be transactionally traded or commodified as they are not isolated pieces of information but are intertwined with ways of being (Birch, 2016; Muller, 2015). These understandings relate to the finding of this study, in which flexibility and humility in one’s own standpoint, being prepared and able to ‘let go’ of ingrained beliefs, authentic dialogue with others, particularly local First Nations communities, and recognition of alternative ways of being created a setting for a shift toward the decolonial turn and exploration of the decolonial option. It is emphasised that these processes of learning and unlearning, of critique and consciousness-raising, are not linear, are not defined, and do not have a single destination. These journeys do not have an end-state, instead creating lifelong opportunities that are multifaceted and plural (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Torres Rivera, 2020).

Limitations

Although this study accomplished a rich and rewarding exploration of positionality and decoloniality for non-Indigenous climate activists and the climate movement, some limitations must be noted. One such limitation was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, as activists were largely unable to safely participate in their activist praxis as they had in the past, with fewer opportunities for in-person actions, conversations, and connections with others. This disruption, to some extent, limited the ways participants could speak to their current and future involvement in this space, particularly in relation to enactments of the decolonial option and work in coalitions. Minor disruption was also experienced during interviews due to poor reception for some participants in regional, rural, and remote areas, though this was mitigated by revisiting topics with interviewees and requesting clarification when needed. It is also

worth noting that given the conceptualisation of activism, advocacy, and solidarity as altruistic and morally-driven pursuits (Carlson, Ralund, & Toubøl, 2020; Farrell, 2011; Passy, 2013), interviewees working within this sphere may be less aware and/or less comfortable discussing ways they personally benefit, as this departs from the common narrative of making “sacrifices” for a “greater good”. This limitation was mitigated primarily by focusing on building rapport and a safe interview space through the CHE principles of Connectivity, Humanness, and Empathy (Brown & Danaher, 2019) to encourage authentic dialogue.

Future directions

Future research in this area could extend discussions to further explore intersections of whiteness, the decolonial option, enactments of solidarity and climate activism to continue carving out ways of responding to and working alongside to First Nations’ agendas of “*indigenizing, intervening, reading, reframing, and restoring*” (Land, 2016: 29; Smith, 2013). The current project did not receive responses from people of colour navigating these pathways and intersections, so future research could also explore the unique experiences of racialised allies in these spaces. In considering practical implications of this work and facilitating a close relationship between theory, research, and practice, future research could also intentionally explore the mechanisms of change in order to create settings for shared learning and dialogue, for developing decolonial praxis and navigating the dilemmas of competing discourses. In this vein, a research project embedded within First Nations-led campaigns would allow for rich information about processes of authentic and effective support from non-Indigenous activists, and ways of preventing or constructively managing the “mis-steps” of solidarity (Lewis, in Land, 2011: 58). These findings reinforce work by prior allies, academics, and activists that centre self-knowing, flexibility and humility in one’s own standpoint, and authentic, vulnerable dialogue in communities (Fernández et al., 2021; Huygens, 2011; Lakanen, 2019; Land, 2011, 2015; Margaret, 2010), conditions which should be evidently be nurtured wherever possible in the realm of climate activism and beyond these bounds. Through the decolonial framework, political action is a vital extension of these understandings (Fernández et al., 2021; Land, 2011, 2015; Paradies, 2020), and ought to be a primary focus of all future research and work in this space.

Conclusions

This project aimed to explore how non-Indigenous climate activists journey through climate justice to understand and traverse the decolonial option. In doing so, we aimed to make visible the role of coloniality, in order to better know ways of disrupting slow violence and colonial harms in Australia on First Nations’ Country. Findings show that participants developed awareness of their positionality as coloniser, in whiteness, and in connection to place, with the climate justice movement acting as a setting for

much of this consciousness-raising. These developing understandings of positionality were negotiated with the self, with community, and with activist organisations. In constructing decolonial imaginings, possibilities and potentials for a better culture were put forth, however complexities arose in dilemmas of competing discourses. This encompassed the strength of coloniality as hegemonic narrative, as well as concerns of differing motivations and ideas of land use and ownership. Central to embracing the decolonial turn and navigating mis-steps of decolonial praxis was an ongoing, shared journey of (un)learning which challenges dominant narratives in the self and in society.

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