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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sowing seeds in decolonial cracks for pluriversity: reflections from arts–research co-productions on sustainability themes

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This article shares the author's reflections on what decolonial cracks for recreating UK universities as sustainable pluriversities emerge from encounters and engagement in three arts–research co-productions relating to sustainability and justice: a training process led by a professional storyteller on converting political-ecology research into short, spoken ten-minute stories, the co-production of visual summaries and a role-playing game on sustainable value chains, and the collaboration producing an immersive audiovisual exhibition on 'Can we fly-less?'.

This article makes an empirically based case that engaging in co-production on arts–research knowledge translation can help identify decolonial cracks to sow the seeds of pluriversity, that is, epistemically diverse institutions for public good that recognise present patterns of colonially rooted injustices and unsustainability, in UK academia. Drawing on relational, deep-listening conversations with six collaborators on the projects, three artists and three researchers, the article highlights benefits arising from the creative collaborations, such as social, transformative learning and critical introspection, and research acquiring a life beyond the page and becoming accessible to a broader audience. However, they also emphasised institutional barriers such as perverse incentives in current academic conventions, such as little or no recognition for knowledge translation, unequal starting points among permanent/precarious or salaried/non-salaried staff, and uncooperative monitoring and application systems, which render identifying these decolonial cracks and seeds necessary. With a methodology rooted in its conceptual, relational approach, the article highlights decolonial cracks in current academia, and transformative seeds to reimagine it in a more decolonial and sustainable image befitting of a pluriversity.

Keywords pluriversity • arts–research co-production • decolonial cracks • sustainability

Key messages

- Sowing seeds of pluriversity – i.e. epistemically diverse institutions for public good - is vital.
- Arts–research co-productions on sustainability themes are beneficial, but also challenging.
- They can facilitate pluriversity thinking: critical introspection, transformative learning.
- They foster critical engagement with colonially rooted, unjust and unsustainable academic conventions.

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Introduction

This article addresses the question of how arts–research co-production on sustainability and justice themes can help identify decolonial cracks to sow the seeds of pluriversity in UK academia. Given an intensifying polycrisis in social, economic and environmental terms and universities' struggle to address it effectively, as well as universities' complicity in race-based and gender-based dehumanisation, there is a need for different ways of thinking, governing and knowing in higher education (Boidin et al, 2012; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). Radical decolonial thinking such as the pluriversity idea – higher education that respects and welcomes epistemic diversity alongside an outlook prioritising public good – can help overcome the priorities of the neoliberal, market-driven and colonially rooted university (Mbembe, 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). Acknowledging both arts and research as creative co-production (MacGregor et al, 2022), that is, work producing outputs involving different stakeholders (Wyborn et al, 2019), this study focuses on ways that translating knowledges on sustainability and justice for broader audiences can facilitate transformative social learning (Hauk and Kippen, 2017) and sow seeds of a just and sustainable pluriversity for public good. Through a conceptual lens of decolonial cracks (Walsh, 2023), that is, what fissures can be found in the dominant walls of both knowledge and universities to rehumanise the world and overcome hierarchies of difference (Maldonado-Torres, 2016), the study uses a methodology of humble, deep listening (Vázquez, 2012; Koch, 2020; Staddon et al, 2023), which incidentally is also a prerequisite for arts–research co-production.

Through subject matter, conceptual lens and methodology, this study, and the arts–research co-productions underlying it, is deliberately marginal following Linda Tuhiwai Smith: institutionally, it will be in the margins, while the work, and the questions raised about institutions and the powers that be within them, is likely to relegate those engaging in it further to the margins, including by defying pressures to prioritise certain metric-friendly outputs (Smith, 2012). This study is thus at the margins of institutions, of what institutions value (Koch, 2020; Staddon et al, 2023), but also the margins of dominant knowledge systems (Dabashi, 2015). However, as Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) or bell hooks (2014) have emphasised, the margins are also rich sites of possibility and arguably offer the very cracks in which and through which seeds of pluriversity can be sown. Nevertheless, as with any 'pluri-versal' or 'mosaic epistemologies' (Connell, 2018), there is a risk of leaving the 'centre' or indeed dominant knowledge systems intact by studying margins (Anzaldúa, 1987; Shilliam, 2021). There is also a broader question of whether such cracks, and seeds to plant in them, may be a deliberate safety valve. However, in reflecting on universities as a whole in the final section, I also explicitly critique neoliberal and colonial university structures through the lens of arts-based projects (Pfoser and de Jong, 2020). Recognising how UK academia has been built through and on modernity–coloniality not only allows identifying colonial and neoliberal legacies leading to contemporary social and environmental injustices in and through higher

education, but also offers an opportunity to work towards a critical academic praxis (Sultana, 2022), which plants seeds wherever possible while pushing for structural changes to the core.

Drawing on conversations with six collaborators, three artists and three researchers, the article highlights benefits from arts–research co-production such as collective learning and introspection, research acquiring a life beyond the page and becoming accessible to a broader audience, but also downsides such as perverse incentives, unequal starting points and uncooperative systems. It does so using these arts–research co-productions at the margins as vantage points for critique, but also as inspiration for how to leverage the relationality of arts–research co-productions, building bridges with non-standard, performance-based, visual and audio knowledges, to construct more opportunities for epistemic diversity and transformative change. On this basis, the article concludes by formulating some seeds to be sown to encourage different ways of creating, knowing and being in academia to fulfil Corinne Kumar's call to tell different stories as the world needs them (Kumar, 2011; Walsh, 2023). The article thus links a methodological contribution of implementing a deep-listening approach rooted in its decolonial, relational rationale with innovative, collective reflections on equitable arts–research co-productions for public-facing knowledge translation, while offering practical recommendations on planting transformative seeds in decolonial cracks in higher education.

The next section highlights the conceptual underpinning of finding decolonial cracks and sowing alternatives towards pluriversity within them through arts–research co-productions. The third section then highlights the methodological choices, building on relationality, deep listening and humility (Koch, 2020; Staddon et al, 2023). The fourth section introduces the co-productions, followed by joint reflections on them and a conclusion which articulates seeds for pluriversity to be planted.

Finding and sowing in decolonial cracks towards pluriversity

There is a need to acknowledge first the coloniality of conventional knowledge production, and my role within it (see the methods section for reflections on positionality and reflexivity). Knowledge is part and parcel of a colonised and recolonising world (Noxolo, 2017). Coloniality – abiding and dehumanising hierarchies of power and difference – is distinct from colonisation, that is, the violence, force and coercion exerted by colonisers on the colonised in certain places and periods (Maldonado-Torres, 2016). As Europe and North America inflicted the Atlantic slave trade and dismantled civilisations in Mesoamerica and the Andes and beyond, the brute force was accompanied by controlling knowledges which supposedly justified demonising and dehumanising certain people and civilisations (Dabashi, 2015). This epistemic racism also involves dominant parts of the world being seen as the exclusive purveyors of science and philosophy (Mignolo, 2015), while universalising their particularities, particularising other people's universalities and elevating certain – particular – knowledges to normativity (Connell, 2007; Bhambra, 2014; Dabashi, 2019). What is more, this also complicates, and inherently risks to delegitimise, theorisation from any other context (Mbembe, 2015). These pervasive ideas are predicated on value judgements on (racially coded) ideas of who is, or is not, (fully) human, and who needs to, or is not able to, improve (Smith, 2012; Dabashi, 2015; Shilliam, 2021).

Importantly, these matrices of power and knowledge, as diversely manifest as they are across different geographies, races, genders, classes and so on (Jimenez et al, 2022; Walsh, 2023), have continued long after decolonisation and are pervasive as modernity–coloniality (Quijano, 2007). These structures shape and cement flawed, often binary, ideas of race, gender or sexuality and inherently build a social classification based on Othering (Salleh, 2016; Walsh, 2023). In these dominant epistemic systems, classification and categorisation are endemic (Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1983). Generally, those doing the classifying will frame categorisations in such a way that they themselves come out as superior (Dabashi, 2015). In contemporary higher education, these structures continue to lead to disadvantage, exclusion and erasures for minoritised students, staff and knowledge holders, for instance through how students are assessed and how staff performance is evaluated (Mbembe, 2016; Bhopal, 2023). Even as institutions in UK higher education are engaging variously with decolonising the curriculum or the university, diverging understandings of 'decolonising' including diluting the radical message of decolonising or co-optation, and institutional barriers to actualising justice such as flawed recruitment priorities can frustrate genuine change (Ackah, 2021; Shahjahan et al, 2022; Shain et al, 2023). As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020: 81) highlights, European and North American self-positioning as the sole teachers of the world not only invites accusations of cognitive and cultural imperialism, but also risks subverting the possibilities of emerging pluriversity.

In recognition of intersecting crises affecting Western universities, the pluriversity has been proposed as an alternative to promote epistemic diversity and public good. Beyond crises related to funding streams and neoliberalisation, universities are also facing the realisation that the universalism of the Enlightenment has been complicit in processes of class exploitation and racial, gender or other dehumanisation (Boidin et al, 2012). These abiding logics contravene more relational ways of knowing and valuing the world, such as Indigenous knowledges, or pluriversal knowledges drawing on the Zapatistas' idea of a pluriverse: a world in which many worlds fit, a world that acknowledges interdependence and can accommodate different ways of being and knowing (in) the world (Escobar, 2018; Kothari et al, 2019). Building on Dussel, Mbembe (2015) argues that knowledge can only be understood to be universal if it is, in fact, pluriversal. The decolonising process, Mbembe argues, will thus promote pluriversity:

> By pluriversity, many understand a process of knowledge production that is open to epistemic diversity. It is a process that does not necessarily abandon the notion of universal knowledge for humanity, but which embraces it via a *horizontal strategy of openness to dialogue among different epistemic traditions*. To decolonize the university is therefore to reform it with the aim of creating a less provincial and more open critical cosmopolitan pluriversalism – a task that involves the radical *re-founding* of our ways of thinking and a transcendence of our disciplinary divisions. The problem of course is whether the university is reformable or whether it is too late (Mbembe, 2015: 19, emphasis in original)

This quote resonates with Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2020) emphasis on a pluriversal higher education freed from market-informed imperatives such as commercialisation, profit and commodification. The emphasis on commercial or commodifiable applications of knowledge in service of capital and neoliberal thinking (Mbembe, 2015; Khoo et al,

2016; Pfoser and de Jong, 2020), and on certain research and teaching metrics also excludes other uses and applications of knowledge and time, much as all framings will preclude other ways of understanding concepts (Hall, 2018). These capitalist logics and metrics, rooted in colonial knowledge production prioritising categories and quantification, will also often be weaponised, for example in recruiting international students and their higher fees, and hiring or evaluating increasingly precarious staff. What is more, seeking to educate the few – whether it be through academic papers tucked behind paywalls or through degree programmes only available to those who can afford them – rather than democratising access (Fanon, 2001 [1961]; Mbembe, 2016), equally speaks of a (colonial) mindset fixated on narrow, flawed metrics and being heard by the 'right' people. Justifiably, Mbembe (2015; 2016) asks whether that model of university, largely unaffected recently by many rounds of industrial action in the UK, is reformable. Another key recognition in Mbembe's quote is the need to go beyond disciplines, which are also rooted in colonial knowledge production (compare Bhambra, 2014). These shape not just institutional structures, including academic departments and the formats and outlets for publication that are deemed worthwhile. Disciplinary mindsets also predetermine what themes, units of analysis and metrics are deemed the purview and/or priority of certain disciplines, which will affect research and outputs. To address this shortcoming, Nyamnjoh encourages us to embrace incompleteness to ward off delusions of grandeur that ambitions of completeness entail, but also to recognise that by bridging divides and facilitating interconnections, we can attain conviviality, that is, being part of a whole in a spirit of good-fellowship, togetherness and interdependence (Nyamnjoh, 2017: 262–3).

This study intends to be an expression of such conviviality, recognising the importance, and reality, of never learning alone, but always interdependent and interconnected across boundaries, including the boundaries of 'disciplines' (Nyamnjoh, 2017; Mignolo and Walsh, 2018; Walsh, 2023). Although universities may have been conceptualised as convivial spaces par excellence, conviviality's absence in practice underscores that the production, positioning and consumption of knowledges are not neutral or objective processes (Nyamnjoh, 2017: 267). As highlighted earlier, there are processes of inclusion and exclusion in knowledge production and dissemination that have disadvantaged under-represented knowledges and knowledge holders (Mabele et al, 2022; 2023), perpetuating and exacerbating historical inequalities across geographies, genders and so forth (Rakotonarivo and Andriamihaja, 2023). Finally, in recognising the differences inherent in diverging ontologies and epistemologies, I draw inspiration from a solidarity-based epistemology (Connell, 2015; 2018) that allows mutual learning between knowledge formations which enter into respectful educational relations with each other and acknowledge the connections between difference (Bhambra, 2014). This approach appreciates various axes of difference, but also accepts that solidarity, like education, implies prioritising the interests of the least advantaged (Connell, 2015).

I understand this epistemic, convivial diversity in a 'pluriversity' also to encompass different creative knowledges manifest through arts–research co-production. There are clear parallels between decolonial emphases on relationality and building bridges with grassroots knowledges to facilitate change, social learning and critical introspection, and the arts space that equally can encourage transformative learning and resistance. In pursuing impact, universities and academics have begun engaging with artists (Koobak, 2013; Luka et al, 2016; Pfoser and de Jong, 2020). Artistic collaborations,

among other objectives, are to reduce the knowledge–action gap (Archibald et al, 2014). They are seen as challenging and addressing the knowledge/power axis inherent in knowledge production (O'Neill, 2008) while being regarded as fostering deeper knowledge through artistic stimulation (Gullion and Schäfer, 2018). While focusing predominantly on these collaborations' potentials for opening decolonial cracks in universities, this study adds to recent literature exploring how to ensure more collaborative and less unequal arts–research collaborations (McCabe et al, 2021) and safeguard generative creative collaborations (Sherriff et al, 2019). However, a lot of the existing literature focuses on arts-based research (Cahnmann-Taylor and Siegesmund, 2017; Gullion and Schäfer, 2018), whereas this study fills a gap by prioritising arts-based knowledge translation: the dissemination and communication of knowledge to wider publics through artistic means (Parsons and Boydell, 2012).

The study emphasises the potentials and pitfalls of co-production between research and arts in the process of translating knowledge (MacGregor et al, 2022) with an emphasis on sustainability and justice themes. As Bill McKibben, climate activist, has emphasised regarding climate change, the 'scientists have done their job – they've issued every possible warning, flashed every red light. Now it's time for the rest of us – for the economists, the psychologists, the theologians. And the artists, whose role is to help us understand what things *feel* like' (McKibben, 2011: 3, emphasis in original). This both emphasises the importance of co-production (producing knowledges and outputs across stakeholder and knowledge holder groups especially around sustainability; Wyborn et al, 2019), but also that arts-based knowledge translation is not linear, but recognises knowledges' social situatedness and the need to engage learners within their contexts (Rieger and Schultz, 2014). As spaces for debate appear to be shrinking, but action for sustainability and justice is more necessary than ever, the study adds to the literature viewing creative co-production on sustainability and justice themes as means to promote integrative, transformative and transgressive social learning (Hauk and Kippen, 2017; Bentz et al, 2022). Consequently, I understand pluriversity to mean epistemically diverse institutions for public good which recognise present patterns of colonially rooted injustices and unsustainability in academia and seek to overcome these hierarchies of difference across all intersectional dimensions such as race, gender and sexuality, dis/ability and so on. This vision of pluriversity also involves promoting accessible knowledge, such as arts–research co-production outputs. Recognising that UK higher education settings do not yet fulfil this definition (Ackah, 2021; Bhopal, 2023; Shain et al, 2023), it is therefore important to identify decolonial cracks in university structures to sow the seeds of transformative, more just and sustainable ways of knowing, being and creating together.

Methods

It is important to recognise that I myself am based in Western academia and thus have benefited from modernity–coloniality in different ways (Vázquez, 2012; Garcia-Arias and Schöneberg, 2021; Allen and Girei, 2023). As a White middle-class woman who has spent most of her life in Europe, I do not claim an equivalence of lived experience or struggle with the scholars and activists whom I cite, while acknowledging that I carry colonial violence physically, mentally and emotionally, by inheritance and birth, and by obliviousness and ignorance (Walsh, 2023). However, from my own limited vantage point, I seek to share reflections and experiences on how arts–research co-productions

can help 'disrupt, transgress, and break apart – to crack – coloniality's permanence' (Walsh, 2023: 4), acknowledging both the risks of decolonial bandwagoning and the magnitude of the daunting struggle decolonising entails (Moosavi, 2020). The collective, interdependent, relational learning through these co-productions has been a vital part of my journey of asking and encouraging critical questions of myself and the structures, institutions and practices in higher education not as ends in themselves, but as opportunities to seed, sow and grow (Walsh, 2023). While I have consistently prioritised open-access publication and accompanying academic publications with more accessible outputs such as blog posts or indeed art, I also acknowledge that choosing academic writing in this case will limit access and accessibility, though I will aim to accompany this publication with a blog post.

Following ethical approval from the University of York's Economics, Law, Management, Politics and Social Sciences (ELMPS) ethics committee (98 22 23), I contacted the diverse group of artists and researchers with whom I had collaborated on the arts–research co-productions on sustainability and justice themes discussed later. While knowledge translation can take visual, performative, literary or multimedia forms (Kukkonen and Cooper, 2019), the three examples discussed here represent visual, audiovisual and performative forms of expression. Six collaborators, three artists (rendered here as Andy, Angel and Casey, gender-neutral pseudonyms at the start of the alphabet) and three researchers (rendered here as Logan, Nicky and Sam, gender-neutral pseudonyms at the end of the alphabet), kindly consented to reflect with me for up to one hour on our collaborations through a methodology encouraging deep listening and co-production also of the interviews. I suggested beforehand themes to explore and offered some prompts, but gave interviewees space to suggest their own lines of thinking.

As Staddon et al (2023) highlight, listening itself can be construed as a normative act as opposed to 'hearing' or 'speaking', with 'deep' listening reflective of relational principles related to cultivating empathy and giving voice to others. Vázquez suggests listening being an ethical orientation towards knowledge as relationality, with listening bridging the colonial difference, the visible and invisible (2012: 248). Koch (2020) highlights humility not being an act of subordination, but being modest about one's ideas and personal importance as the starting point of doing research, requiring an openness to changing one's mind, but also listening closely. These emphases on relationality, humility as well as openness to other voices link to Nyamnjoh's (2017) emphasis on incompleteness, thus continuously challenging one's own position in the research process. In the spirit of decolonial traditions of relationality, listening and building connections between all those involved in research (Smith, 2012; Vázquez, 2012), it became clear that using a relational methodology, rooted in incompleteness, humility and listening as is also essential to arts–research co-productions, would be important. This ethic of humility and deep, relational listening, for instance through co-producing questions and themes and giving partners and interviewees an opportunity to read through this study's write-up, proved an important complement to formal ethics approval processes, which have been problematised as suboptimal (Brear and Tsotetsi, 2022) and part of institutional structures which need changing in a decolonial spirit.

With Staddon et al (2023), it is also important to explore the positionality of me as researcher-as-listener. I was part of the arts–research co-productions that I was now asking my collaborators about, but made clear that I was after open, critical

reflections. However, it would be naive not to recognise that, despite my best efforts, there will have been abiding power asymmetries. As I explore later, funding structures mean that future arts–research collaborations will generally be predicated on myself applying for funding. However, the talent, standing and body of work of my artist and researcher collaborators also means that they are not dependent on me. What is more, conducting this research was intended to further the continual exchange and caring relationship which is vital in research (Staddon et al, 2023), but particularly in arts–research collaborations which are predicated on listening and openness.

Engaging in arts–research collaborations on sustainability themes

Sustainable value chains

My PhD research involving cocoa communities in Latin America (Krauss and Krishnan, 2022) as well as subsequent joint work on baobab and charcoal in Mozambique (Krauss et al, 2022a; 2023) have led to two different arts–research co-productions linked to sustainable value chains, in addition to feeding back to research participants in multilanguage reports and presentations. The motivation underlying the 'Cocoa Sustainability Challenge' was my background as a volunteer facilitator for two role-playing games: the 'Sustainability Challenge' for all 8,000 first-year undergraduate students at the University of Manchester, and for a German programme promoting learning about Africa, Latin America and Asia, the 'Banana Split game', originally developed by Christian Aid and Banana Link (CAFOD, 2005). The enthusiasm among groups I had facilitated inspired me to convert my PhD into the role-playing game 'Cocoa Sustainability Challenge' supported by Eine Welt Netzwerk Bayern eV / Bildung trifft Entwicklung [One World Network Bavaria / Education meets development] which brings together groups to learn about and negotiate as different stakeholders in the cocoa value chain. Based on these positive experiences, for the 2020 research project 'Livelihood impacts of coping with Covid in rural Mozambique' co-led by the Universities of Edinburgh and Sheffield (both UK), Eduardo Mondlane (Mozambique) and the Micaia Foundation (Mozambique/UK), I obtained additional impact funding for visual summaries in 2023 via the University of York's Impact Acceleration Account from the Economic and Social Research Council. Throughout the research project funded by the University of Edinburgh's Global Challenge Research Funding, we had sought to work together as equally and equitably as possible. This had meant, in terms of project communication, weekly Skype calls involving all collaborators (principal investigators, co-investigators, research assistants), and translating written drafts into Portuguese to safeguard equitable participation and co-authorship. To make our insights accessible to a broader audience, we had continuously published team-written blogs both in English and Portuguese (University of Edinburgh, 2020) as well as a Portuguese and English report summarising key findings, for example for partner governments, meaning that we had had some practice translating our academic work for different audiences. On academic outputs, we had worked from the assumption that all collaborators should be part of conference submissions (three conference abstracts with all authors in alphabetical order) or articles, with one published involving all colleagues and one involving those wishing to delve deeper into value chains. To publicise the latter

paper by Eduardo Castro Jr, Andrew Kingman, Milagre Nuvunga, Casey Ryan and myself, Eduardo Castro Jr and I developed another co-written blog in English and Portuguese (Krauss and Castro, 2023).

The visual summaries were centred on the latter paper and COVID-19 livelihood impacts related to two key commodities: charcoal and baobab, and implications for related local livelihoods arising from travel, transport and livelihood restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Krauss et al, 2023). In 270 phone interviews (May to July 2020), respondents shared that COVID-19 trading and transport restrictions considerably reshaped baobab and charcoal, but in different ways. Thanks to a civic-minded coalition led by a Mozambican social enterprise, operational accommodations were made to ensure the female baobab collectors could continue to obtain income from the global baobab value chain as other income sources were disappearing. By contrast, in the domestic charcoal value chain, given the fragmentation of mostly small-scale charcoal producers, both volumes and prices decreased significantly due to train circulation being stopped under COVID-19.

The aim was to translate our research findings into accessible visual summaries designed by artist Luke Scoffield, with whom I had previously worked on a project relating to reducing academic flying. The process of clarifying what was to be visualised involved blogs, research paper and visual resources as well as emails and online meetings between Luke and myself, but also iterating sketches to facilitate useful and clear visual summaries in what was an unfamiliar landscape to the artist. This entailed shifting from static images for both value chains, towards a succession of brief images juxtaposing the 'before COVID-19' and 'during COVID-19' situations to highlight what had (not) changed between the two, with some explanatory captions. While this proved instructive in highlighting the need for different types of visual knowledge, it also reaffirmed the time and attention required for co-producing knowledge translation and visualisation, and the lacking institutional space for both as the funding only covered the artist's time. Once drafts had been developed, I shared them with co-authors with the artist's permission, with the feedback proving vital. The final cartoons are to be shared with an accompanying blog post in both English and Portuguese, and with research partners for further use.

Reflecting on the process, available funding was very limited and required applying to three different funding pots, with the requisite paperwork and time investment and a need to feed back to funders on their own metrics and timescale. The iterative, dialogue-based co-production was inspired by the principles of pluriversity, recognising the importance and need for translation between different (visual and written) knowledges and proving instructive beyond this engagement. At the same time, a careful balance was important to ensure that, while producing a useful final product and facilitating communication and dialogue, the work and time commitments required were not excessive for anyone involved. The funding obtained did not cover any of the academics' time for the project, a particularly precarious constellation vis-à-vis international colleagues. I thus struggled to balance the desire and need for Mozambican colleagues' input on the project, and a real risk of perpetuating and exacerbating exploitative and extractive structures between UK and overseas collaborators (Noxolo, 2017; Rakotonarivo and Andriamihaja, 2023). The funding thus allowed finding some 'cracks' to communicate with the wider public through the visual summaries and also offered additional feedback mechanisms to respondents, but highlighted abiding equity challenges.

Research storytelling

Twelve researchers from the University of Sheffield engaged in a three-month training process led by professional storyteller Tim Ralphs and organised by Professor Frances Cleaver in 2019, as explored in more detail in a collective reflection by five of the researchers focusing on the lessons from utilising research storytelling for public engagement (Krauss et al, 2022c). Through the training process, we learned how to communicate our research on different nature–society dynamics in different locations through ten-minute, spoken stories to a non-academic audience (see Krauss, 2020 for a blog summary). This culminated in a storytelling evening at a Sheffield café as part of the Economic and Social Research Council's Festival of Social Science. The performances, which were also shared as public videos by most storytellers, had been preceded by multiple workshops and rehearsal sessions in which researchers had had an opportunity to question and unlearn academic communication conventions with support from the professional storyteller and with practical and ethical guidance from peers. Through an iterative process of rehearsal and feedback, researchers narrowed in on what stories would be most evocative and carry their message best. The process was made possible by applying for funding creatively from different pots within the university and related research projects, which variously supported the storytelling training itself or the videography.

My own story (Krauss, 2019) encompassed three mini-stories focusing on hidden interconnections. At the start, I referenced a Ceiba tree I had encountered on fieldwork in Nicaragua, highlighting the Mayan belief that Ceiba trees connected Heaven, Earth and World Below which came to symbolise for me that everything indeed is connected. This connection rooted in Indigenous cosmology is the dominant theme. In the first mini-story, I highlighted the links to cocoa producers that most chocolate consumers will not be aware of as they are systematically hidden from view by systems of commodification and fetishisation (Carrier, 2010). In the second mini-story, I underscored the lack of attention to the economic and physical displacement of people for the Ugandan national park we had been visiting, and to communities' limited economic benefits (Brockington et al, 2008; Brockington and Wilkie, 2015; Kashwan et al, 2021) – again, these connections are hidden to the untrained eye. The final mini-story on the Sustainable Development Goals equally emphasised that hidden trade-offs and unacknowledged connections between the intention of increasing economic growth, and the ecological footprint this would entail, threatened the very transformation they claimed to aspire to (Gupta and Vegelin, 2016; Pradhan et al, 2017; Krauss et al, 2022b). It ended on the notion of interconnectedness rooted in Illich's (1973) conviviality, that is, living well together by focusing on grassroots, democratic decision-making and justice, and *ubuntu*, the Southern African ethic of care for humans and non-humans (Ewuoso and Hall, 2019; Mabele et al, 2022).

Reflecting on the process, again, university and research funding had to be acquired creatively. A lot of unlearning of academic communication conventions around the use of jargon was needed and encouraged by Tim Ralphs to make the ten-minute stories more audience-friendly. This also required critical reflection among us storytellers on where jargon could be removed without compromising on complexity, which proved beneficial beyond this process and was welcomed by audience members (Krauss et al, 2022c). The feedback from Tim Ralphs, and the peer feedback from fellow diverse storytellers, proved vital in shaping our stories and the wider learning

process, with the group-based, dialogue-based approach aligning with relational and decolonial principles. A key concern shared among us as storytellers was the ethics of what to say and what not to say, such as phrasing certain statements as questions so as not to overstep any licence given by interviewees and collaborators to share their stories. This equally encompassed not speaking for our research participants and contexts, complicated by the university's decision to name the storytelling evening 'Tales from the Global South', but facilitated by the permission given by Tim Ralphs to be 'in the story' – to tell it in the first person and share one's own feelings and reflections, which can be discouraged in academic training. 'Being in the story', and the positionality and reflexivity implicit in it, meshes well with decolonial and feminist emphases on acknowledging one's own part in the story of research (Smith, 2012; Rocheleau, 2015), which humanises research and the researched, and removes suggestions of 'objective' 'science', though this also contravenes some disciplines' and scientists' self-perception. In crafting my story, I was careful to forefront, at the beginning and end of the story, two different Indigenous cosmologies, the Ceiba tree and its relevance to Mayan understandings of the interconnected Heaven, Earth and World Below, and the *ubuntu* idea of 'I am because you are'. The intention was to break the dominance of colonial knowledges and highlight what listeners in the UK and beyond could learn from Indigenous knowledges; however, I was also concerned as to whether me using these Indigenous knowledges might fail to do them justice and be gratuitous, leading to more academic engagement with them (Collins et al, 2021; Mabele et al, 2022).

An audiovisual exhibition on flying-less

In 2022, four researchers – Stephen Allen (lead), Renee Timmers, Matt Watson and myself – and two artists, visual artist Gina Allen and digital producer and musician Kitty Turner, developed an audiovisual exhibition both in-person and online entitled 'Can we fly-less?' for the University of Sheffield's Festival of the Mind (Festival of the Mind, 2022). This work built on prior collaborations among the researchers involved, most notably a prior symposium on reducing academic flying organised by Stephen Allen and Matt Watson (University of Sheffield, 2019), and a workshop focusing on incorporating environmental considerations into research ethics (for a blog summary, see Krauss et al, 2020; this workshop had also yielded a visual summary produced by Luke Scoffield, financed by the University of Sheffield's Research Ethics Committee after the COVID-19 pandemic had necessitated cancelling an in-person workshop).

The audiovisual exhibition sought to highlight four different attitudes towards flying or flying-less which we subsequently discussed in a blog post (Allen et al, 2023): the disparate perspective that sees flying as an indicator of economic and social success, the intertwined attitude that understands flying as a human right, the interdependent viewpoint that recognises that flying should be avoided, but often cannot be due to familial or professional connections, and the embedded understanding that sees flying as violence. The exhibition built on research identifying the significant carbon footprint of aviation (Overton, 2022 [2019]), the recognition that academics play a significant part in commercial aviation to the detriment of justice and sustainability (Nevins et al, 2022), and the emergence of alternatives such as through remote or multi-hub conferencing solutions (Parncutt et al, 2021).

The collaboration for the audiovisual exhibition involved multiple meetings to co-articulate the academic rationale for the collaborative project, and develop a joint vision for what an exhibition could entail. More mundanely, it also necessitated completing a grant application to the University of Sheffield, to funding ringfenced for the Festival of the Mind, a festival open to the public hosted every other year to showcase university research. This meant formulating aims and objectives, intended deliverables, and budgets that could fund the artists' time. After the project had been funded, multiple meetings between the creative and academic collaborators followed, with both written and verbal inputs to the creative team, and the creative team offering the academic collaborators an opportunity to feed into the production process on the visual and audio elements of the exhibition. The final audiovisual exhibition, free to access in Sheffield's Millennium Gallery, encompassed visual engagement with four canvases representing the four different attitudes to flying and flying-less, and audio stimuli facilitating engagement with the four different viewpoints. At the university's behest, it also offered some opportunity for the audience to feed back on their experience and learning (Allen et al, 2023). The audiovisual exhibition was also made available permanently in an online format for a larger, non-Sheffield audience, and was accompanied by a publicly available podcast in which Steve Allen as academic lead and Gina Allen and Kitty Turner as the creative forces comment on the co-production process (Festival of the Mind, 2022).

Reflecting on the process, the collaboration was again only made possible by university funding, in this instance for a dedicated public-facing festival showcasing research. Despite the limited funds available, this nevertheless emphasises that some knowledge exchange is seen as important. This funding, however, also came with strings attached not only in terms of requiring work – unpaid for the artists – to finalise objectives and deliverables, but also requiring steps to make measurable the 'impact' that this work would have. The emphasis was more on a metric for how people perceived the exhibition, rather than a more substantive reflection on what they had learned and how much this would change behaviour, which we added independently (and which was more in keeping with ideas of epistemic diversity and relational transformative learning). The funding provided notwithstanding, collaborating with and witnessing this type of a creative process yet again involved learning on all sides, highlighting that these collaborations, however beneficial, are not seen as a required part of, for example, PhD training or programmes to train new academics. A final positive concerned the opportunity to bring different kinds of knowledges together, including drawing on the Indigenous seven-generation principle (Whyte, 2018) to illustrate the violence inherent in flying, but also producing different kinds of knowledges and immersion for the public.

Joint reflections on arts–research co-production

The reflections shared by collaborators encompassed reasons for engaging in arts and research co-productions and the wider benefits of doing so, and conversely the challenges inherent in it. Among the benefits, they formulated research being communicable to the wider world as well as an opportunity for introspection and learning through the needed processes of translation, and conversely perverse incentives, unequal starting points and uncooperative systems as challenges.

A first reason for engaging with arts–research co-productions particularly on themes related to sustainability and justice is that the co-productions, and the knowledges inherent in them, acquire a 'life beyond the page' (Andy) and leave more of an impression than a journal article. Due to issues with access both in terms of who gets published (Mabele et al, 2023) and who has subscriptions to for-profit journal articles (Pia et al, 2020), as well as the abiding problem of difficult-to-digest academic writing (Nicky called academic papers 'overdecorated Christmas trees'), much published research will not be used by the public. What is more, arts–research co-productions facilitate emotional connections (McKibben, 2011), and allow building bridges with unfamiliar worlds or knowledges, which may also be more easily conveyed through arts (Logan). Together with sharing visual or audio stimuli or researcher reflections that ordinarily are deemed unsuitable for academic papers, there are thus benefits in opening up additional spaces through arts–research co-production (Logan), which also have the added benefit of humanising researchers and doing research (Nicky). Our arts–research co-production also facilitated critical discussion with academic colleagues about the need for flying-less, creating an additional, needed opportunity for critical introspection (Sam). This thus supports the suggestion that these embodied creative experiences encourage critical reflection on one's own values and blind spots (Bentz et al, 2022). As such, they require an openness, which will vary enormously across different research–art collaborations (Andy, Sam), but resembles the critical questions that decolonial mindsets encourage. These encounters will thus change those involved by challenging values, but also encouraging new individual and social learning on sustainability and justice (Angel, Casey, Nicky) (Hauk and Kippen, 2017).

The opportunity to engage with the wider world was equally cited by both artists and researchers as a reason for arts–research co-production especially on sustainability and justice (Hauk and Kippen, 2017). Given environmental and social crises, there was agreement that facilitating conversations on sustainability and justice themes based on evidence is vital. However, researchers who have a lot to say are not always able to communicate their knowledges for various reasons, such as jargon, inaccessible outlets or ignorance as to what will prove relevant to an audience (Casey). Utilising the arts also allows researchers to populate additional spaces with sustainability and justice topics, just as space for debate appears to be shrinking (Logan). This is both out of a conviction that 'art will heal the world' (Andy) especially given climate change and rising intolerance. It also recognises the particular space created between artists, researchers and audiences in arts–research co-productions, and the abiding learning that can be derived from it (Benjamin, 2016). However, communicating with the wider world without the protective buffer of an academic paper can also be scary (Nicky), as it will require thinking even more carefully about how research will be received and perceived by research partners, universities and beyond.

The unique space created between artists, researchers and audience in shaping the co-produced stories to be told was highlighted with a particular emphasis on abstraction and translation (Kukkonen and Cooper, 2019) in conversation with Angel. Outside the generally written word-focused academic space, it became evident that the types of knowledges and information needed for arts–research co-production went beyond what is commonly shared academically – this is because art, and the stories it tells, are for everyone (Casey). This required translation beyond the written and often abstract medium of academic papers (Angel) into visual or audio forms, highlighting that the space created 'in between' listeners and storytellers every time a

story is told (Benjamin, 2016), and the iterative dialogue it entails, can help translate and distil knowledges (Nicky). As Nicky put it, arts–research co-production requires its own vocabulary: artists and researchers think about different things, which require patience and listening to discern and communicate (Andy, Sam). It also requires supporting each other in navigating and mediating between each other's worlds, needs and languages, which can be a balancing act (Angel, Casey). It also requires a willingness to question one's own existing abilities to translate and abstract as well as understand where a collaborator is coming from (Angel).

These processes of translation, by forcing a step back, also offer learning potential particularly to academics as thinking about different expectations, expertises and needs would be vital to incorporate also into purely academic knowledge production (Nicky). The space 'in between' created each time a tale is told (Benjamin, 2016), including the story of evolving co-productions between artists and researchers, may serve as proxies for the wider audience: if this is unintelligible to artists after multiple weeks of engagement, how much more will it be for non-expert audiences? Having gone through these iterative processes, the co-created resources can also be valuable for teaching; they can also encourage students themselves to be more creative in how they communicate their learning (Logan, Nicky), which can also help decolonise the classroom (Mbembe, 2016).

Conversely, collaborators also identified barriers and challenges in the current system. More than once, the pervasiveness of categorisation in Western science and knowledge production became visible (Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1983), coupled with the ever-growing presence of techno-managerial discourse in addressing sustainability and justice concerns (Delabre and von Hellermann, 2023). This is particularly pertinent regarding the need for impact metrics (Andy, Logan, Nicky, Sam), requiring shallow binary measurement such as how many attendees came to an exhibition, as opposed to more in-depth questions of what individuals have learned from the engagement. Relatedly, Sam pointed out that the very process of pre-agreeing and predetermining deliverables for arts–research co-production contravenes both the research and creative processes, tying in with broader questions regarding the ability of particularly creative outputs to fit into boxes such as 'deliverables' (Luka et al, 2016).

This emphasis on categorisation and 'box-compatibility' equally applies to most funding mechanisms and the time and effort required in making multiple attempts to fit a project into the schemes' specifications. All interviewees spoke positively about the existence of funding to facilitate arts–research co-production, but also emphasised the time and effort required in applying to, and reshaping wording and budgets to fit, multiple different funding schemes. Criteria for decision making are not always clear, with only low percentages being funded. Both artists and researchers spoke about the risk of wasted time and effort, which is particularly critical as funding will only pay for someone's time if the application is successful; the time invested by artists in the application is always going to be unpaid (Pfoser and de Jong, 2020). This will require artists to make decisions about what projects they engage with, knowing that their effort will partly be unpaid (Andy, Casey). However, they may derive other value from projects, such as interpersonal connection or self-actualisation, which may be deemed more important particularly for artists who have other income streams – this may, however, preclude more precarious artists from engaging with this type of work (Andy, Casey). What is more, the academics' time will rarely or never be paid by arts-focused funding schemes.

This, however, draws attention to a wider imbalance of unequal starting points and uncooperative systems: generally speaking, unlike artists, the academics will be salaried, meaning that although they may not directly be paid for knowledge-exchange work, they will nevertheless have a regular income (Casey). Artist-in-residence schemes could help address this disparity (Nicky). Nevertheless, acknowledging these different starting points may help recognise some of the wider inequalities built into the current neoliberal, commercialised UK university system also on the academic side: while no academics are directly incentivised to engage in knowledge exchange and arts–research co-productions, engagement is easier for permanent, fully salaried staff. Research-and-teaching staff on fixed-term contracts will be predominantly assessed on their publication output for permanent jobs or promotion, and teaching-and-scholarship staff may not have any formal workload for knowledge-exchange work, while PhD researchers have to abide by strict progression criteria and timescales which are unlikely to be amenable to experimental arts–research co-production. This raises wider questions about how to encourage academic staff to engage with activities non-incentivised by promotion or recruitment panels – similar to artists, this may thus come back to academics deriving other types of value or meaning from such activities (Staddon et al, 2023). As Logan and Nicky pointed out, the lack of acknowledgement from university systems and metrics mean that, on the academic side, only seniority can insulate those concerned from such questions.

Sowing seeds towards pluriversity in decolonial cracks: reconceptualising UK academia in a decolonial, sustainable image

Through a methodological contribution of implementing a deep-listening approach rooted in its decolonial, relational rationale, this article has offered novel, collective reflections on equitable arts–research co-productions for knowledge translation drawing on conversations with artist and researcher collaborators. In this final section, I will concretise to what extent the earlier reflections have facilitated identifying decolonial cracks in UK academia, and what seeds might be sown to reimagine it in a more decolonial and sustainable image befitting of a pluriversity.

In terms of flaws, the very need for arts–research co-production to make research accessible to the public points to issues with conventional research outputs concerning access and prioritising the few who have access, capacity and time to engage with academic writing. This not only recalls the erasures, exclusions and patterns of violence related to racial, gender, class and dis/ability inequalities which knowledge production (Spivak, 1987; Dabashi, 2015; Mignolo, 2015) and higher education have entailed (Mbembe, 2016; Bhopal, 2018; 2023). It also emphasises that injustices abide in knowledge production and dissemination (Mabele et al, 2023) and in who can access for-profit journals (Pia et al, 2020). It equally underscores Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2020) emphasis on overcoming commodification, commercialisation, profit accumulation and other market imperatives driving universities. Several of the flaws identified by collaborators link to both market imperatives, and colonial knowledge production's pervasive reliance on categorisation and classification (Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1983; Dabashi, 2015). The difficulties in obtaining funding, and the lack of financial support for non-salaried artists in the application/proposal stages and beyond the funding obtained (Pfoser and de Jong, 2020), speak to a wider orientation towards commercialisable knowledge. Similar flaws concern the pressure for metric-friendly

deliverables and monitoring of audience engagement on university timescales, which contravene the unpredictability of research and creative processes, and underestimate the unique space created with audiences (Benjamin, 2016), which may take time to take effect.

Conversely, benefits encompass the very meaningful opportunity to create something that builds bridges with unfamiliar worlds and lived experiences (Walsh, 2023) and translates diverse, non-standard knowledges on vital sustainability and justice themes into meaningful, real-life engagement (Kukkonen and Cooper, 2019; MacGregor et al, 2022). These approaches emphasise the opportunity for a pluriversity as a space for public good welcoming of different ways of knowing and addressing past injustice (Mbembe, 2015; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). Moreover, the opportunity for collective and individual learning in a spirit of conviviality (Nyamnjoh, 2017), and the benefits emerging from arts–research co-production for academic work through critical introspection, were highlighted.

One decolonial crack, however, is that funding does exist – though it may take creativity, time and effort to obtain. The seed to plant is that sharing vital knowledges in a spirit of decoloniality and pluriversity can be beneficial for artists, researchers and audience, and spark needed action for sustainability and justice. Another seed is researchers valuing artists more (Hauk and Kippen, 2017; Staddon et al, 2023), both in terms of the outputs generated, and the learning and introspection that researchers can take away from these opportunities, but also the possibility for researchers to push for artist-in-residence opportunities at universities to overcome the salaried–unsalaried disparity.

Another decolonial crack is a subversive opportunity to turn the need for metrics into seeds: first, the need to measure engagement by the public can become an opportunity for more in-depth engagement with audiences beyond tick-box exercises if this facilitates genuine conversation and critical, transformative learning among all involved (Bentz et al, 2022). Second, the increasing pressure to produce 'impacts' in academia can be a crack to sow seeds allowing more time and institutional valuation of inclusive, public-facing and meaningful knowledge translation (Pfoser and de Jong, 2020). This could equally sow a seed to think more institutionally about how to feed research insights back to the communities who helped generate them. A final, related element could be to use the pressure for metrics to facilitate more non-standard outputs beyond peer-reviewed papers or conferences and their many flaws, requiring greater appreciation for outputs that transcend needs for article-processing charges, conference and travel funds or the carbon emissions these entail. These valuable resources, if made freely available, could also be useful teaching materials and conversation starters across differences in context, race, gender, dis/ability, class or status in a decolonial spirit. In an ideal world, these critical reflections on the suitability of 'metrics' might also open the door to question to what extent more 'care'ful metrics recognising all these and other dimensions of difference would be required.

Finally, a decolonial crack is the desire by researchers and artists to do something meaningful and create 'life beyond the page' to help 'heal the world', and a recognition that current academia, with its ever-increasing workloads and time pressures, does not offer much space for that. Consequently, a seed is the opportunity for meaningful transformative learning and exchange valued by all involved emerging from these collaborations, and the seed this can plant for a spirit of conviviality recognising our

own incompleteness (Nyamnjoh, 2017) and for decolonising and democratising access and the classroom (Mbembe, 2016). A related seed is the opportunity to build alliances and bridges across disciplines – which merit questioning anyway in a pluriversity (Mbembe, 2015; Nyamnjoh, 2017) – around a desire to engage in different ways. Another seed is the space created by arts–research co-production for critical engagement: one example is the degree to which current outputs facilitate inclusive conversations and learning. Another is accountability on what inequalities – historically and currently – along racial, gender, class and other lines affect students, staff and all knowledge holders (Mbembe, 2016; Allen and Girei, 2023; Bhopal, 2023), but also what ecological footprints of flying and other activities academia countenances, despite the Indigenous seven-generation principle (Whyte, 2018). While both could be classed as reasonable ethical obligations for a pluriversity dedicated to public good, they do not feature as much as they arguably should in the current UK academic space. This, and similar thinking, could be part of a wider decolonial, solidarity-based, and more sustainable critical praxis within academia in a time of climate breakdown (Khoo et al, 2016; Garcia-Arias and Schöneberg, 2021; Sultana, 2022).

Fundamentally, although all these seeds may grow and sprout meaningful co-production and knowledge exchange, the risk remains of all cracks and seeds having been left deliberately to function as a safety valve and reduce overall pressure on the core systems for more radical change. This dynamic could mirror the already-mentioned risk of work 'at the margins' leaving the core unchallenged (Anzaldúa, 1987; Shilliam, 2021), as well as a danger of tokenised engagement. I fully acknowledge and recognise that these small-scale projects at the margins, and related actions such as minimising flying, promoting vegan catering and practising equitable collaboration and authorship wherever possible, do not absolve me of seeking to make and promote more fundamental, structural changes for justice and sustainability wherever possible. Nevertheless, as this research has demonstrated, these cracks and seeds can offer opportunities for meaningful learning and arts–research co-productions on sustainability and justice themes. In my view, planting any such transformative seeds will always be worthwhile wherever we are placed. After all, seeds can grow far beyond what we may have thought possible.

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Data availability statement

Data will be made available upon reasonable request.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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