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Editorial: Research for social change: Nomadic methodology

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Abstract. *N/A*.

Introduction

Research has long been used as a colonial tool to dispossess and marginalize Indigenous and other oppressed communities—significantly disrupting their connection to land, cultural values, and lived realities (Smith etal, 2019; Torres & Nyaga, 2021). Many Indigenous peoples have been forced off their territories to make way for resource extraction, property development, or conservation projects—often under the guise of scientific or environmental purposes. These lands are not merely economic assets; for Indigenous communities, land is spiritual, relational, and central to identity. Yet, colonial powers continue to legitimize exclusion and erasure through research methodologies that prioritize Western epistemologies and private property regimes (Wane et. Al., 2017). Settler colonialism works by mapping, surveying, and labeling territories as private property—processes that erase Indigenous knowledge and justify dispossession.

To challenge these entrenched structures, scholars advocate for decolonizing research paradigms by centering Indigenous knowledge systems, land-based relationships, and community governance. This shift requires rethinking who can produce knowledge, how land is conceptualized, and which forms of knowledge are deemed valid—steering away from extractive practices towards respectful, reciprocal, and context-sensitive approaches According to Bromley (2003):

> *Traditionally, surveys were conducted by a manorial official or overseer who, at the court of survey, was charged with receiving tenants for the performance of ritualized ceremonies of homage and fealty and reviewing the customary rights that made up a manor, based on the testimony of "true and sworn men." But by the end of the sixteenth century, the surveyor had been redefined as a technical expert whose task it was to measure the land itself (see McRae 1993, 335).p.126*

Surveying, as a research tool, played a pivotal role in colonial history by marking land as private property. The emergence of land tenure coincided with the early mapping and surveying of territory, resulting in the erosion of common rights and the commercialization of land (Bromley 2003). This process operated under the assumption that the land was a blank slate (tabula rasa), justifying the need for official surveys (Offen, 2009). Moreover, surveying extended beyond simple measurement; it involved imposing control over the land, reshaping its practices, language, and meaning to fit the surveyor's worldview (Ingram et al, 2024).

Surveying the land inherently reduces vibrant, relational Indigenous landscapes into discrete, sellable parcels under private property regimes. This colonial practice—rooted in mapping and grid-making—framed land as "empty" or lifeless, legitimizing dispossession and erasure of Indigenous rights and worldviews (Bromley, 2003). Such abstracted surveys ignored

the deep cultural, spiritual, and ecological connections Indigenous peoples hold with their territories.

Despite these violent efforts, Indigenous communities have demonstrated extraordinary resilience. Through counter-mapping and ongoing cultural practices, they resist colonial encroachment and preserve their spiritual and historical ties to the land. The enduring spirit of land sovereignty continues to challenge and transform imposed colonial geographies.

To own or to be owned: spatial management of the other as a property

transformation of land into private property created stark power imbalances between landowners and the landless. In the same colonial vein, enslaved people were reduced to property owned like chattel. Plantation slavery epitomized this process, where Black individuals were legally treated as assets for labor under the absolute control of their owners. Mapping and survey practices underpinned both land privatization and human commodification: land surveys established control over territory, and similarly, colonial laws defined Black bodies as transferable property (Walcott, 2021). This interlinked property regime racialized space—dismissing Black lives as non-living entities reducible to assets, echoing the violence of slavery and land dispossession throughout colonial history.

Note also that those who lived on the land—neither landowners nor truly landless—were often labeled as vagabonds, and their movements were strictly regulated by law (Davis ,1966). In many cases, these individuals were enslaved, expected to remain on their master's land as property. To enforce this, colonial authorities implemented laws such as the Colonial Vagrancy Acts, designed explicitly to restrict mobility and criminalize aimless movement—all to protect property owners and maintain social order. Sentences under these laws frequently included forced labor and incarceration, enforced through intensive surveillance across both land and people (Daniels & Isaacs, 2023).

These vagrancy laws functioned as tools of ongoing colonial control, surveilling and disciplining bodies that were deemed unruly or threatening to colonial property norms. The enforcement of vagrancy statutes blurred the line between legal and social judgment, marking travel without authorization as deviant behavior. Such laws not only maintained colonial property rights on land but also branded nomadic, Black, and Indigenous peoples as pathological threats—often justifying their confinement to asylums or plantations in a form of social control and racial subjugation (Daniels & Isaacs, 2023).

Nomadic life and the making of property

Part of the process of limiting movement involved incarcerating people or reducing them to property through systemic training. In Discipline and Punish, Michel Foucault explains how the law apprehends

individuals and uses institutional surveillance to normalize and discipline them into "docile bodies" that are more productive and compliant (Foucault, 1995).

Another method of containment was the displacement of nomadic groups into areas deemed lawless—spaces portrayed as "states of nature" or war zones—to justify the application of colonial control through mapping, surveying, and legal intervention (Kingston, 2019). Colonial regimes used these processes to expand imperial control and enforce spatial order.

In contemporary contexts, certain groups labeled as "nomadic" are similarly surveilled and spatially regulated, often under the guise of public safety or development. This ordering of "nowhere lands" frequently leads to violence and even genocidal outcomes, all while being framed as humanitarian efforts to "civilize" these populations (Weiss-Wendt & Anton, 2013).

Converting land into property generates stark power inequalities between property owners and those without land. In the same colonial tradition, Black individuals were dehumanized and reduced to property under slavery. Plantation slavery exemplified this commodification, turning Black bodies into labor assets controlled by owners. Likewise, land survey and mapping legitimized both land privatization and the ownership of Black bodies, embedding colonial ideologies in legal and scientific practices (Walcott, 2021).

Property creation is deeply intertwined with racialized space, where the land is treated as empty and rational, while Black and Indigenous bodies are classified as non-living entities or property (Grubbstroem, 2011). This transformation is supported by Western research and scientific discourse, which validate privatization and spatial control through legal frameworks and empirical knowledge production.

Erasing and displacing memories in land appropriation

Surveying transforms land into property by projecting a new history onto it while erasing Indigenous memories (Hall, 2010). It treats the land as if it has no voice or past, replacing its story with a constructed spatial memory. Through surveying, land is made "proper"—delineated into private parcels bounded by borders. Those who own property are seen as citizens of the state, entitled to human rights, while those without are rendered outsiders (Pellissery & Lødemel, 2020). Borders symbolize ownership, define territorial rights, and delineate freedoms—marking where one's liberty begins and ends.

Once property is claimed, law empowers owners to defend their borders. Property rights are legally protected, creating a framework for peaceful coexistence. The law oversees both property and its owners, enforcing adherence to its boundaries. In this way, property functions as a carceral space, regulating movement and freedom—those within must remain stationary and protect their assets, while those outside are excluded.

Property regimes of truth function to designate landowners as legitimate citizens while simultaneously criminalizing others—labeling them "problems" to the property order, to be subjugated through training and punishment. Surveying, as a research tool, doubles as a mechanism of surveillance and life-or-death control. Crucial to property management is the ongoing mapping and monitoring of borders to prevent encroachment—particularly by nomadic peoples deemed threats to settled land. This spatial control is enforced through legalized violence justified as necessary for order and protection (Aurely, 2023).

Surveying not only converts land into marketable property by demarcating borders; it also enforces sedentarism, creating property-maintaining individuals permanently tied to an address or postal code. Scholars argue that cadastral surveys abstract land into economic value—transforming territory into money-making assets and erasing Indigenous land relationships (. In North America, colonial surveying produced grids and borders that institutionalized capitalist territoriality, disciplining both land and people (Blomley, 2003).

Through these processes, land becomes a carceral space: legally bounded, socially surveilled, and economically exploited. Those inside are expected to guard their territory; those outside are excluded or criminalized. Surveillance through surveying is thus foundational to colonial property regimes—ensuring control over space, bodies, and movement.

To own is to live

Creating property serves as a way to manage and secure life by transforming land into something owned. This framing positions life as a function of property, with death as its contradiction. Such a dual logic determines who is deemed "alive" and who can be erased to maintain property regimes. Managing populations through property-making is inherently violent and complex—property ownership is thus a form of population control.

Central to this control is surveillance: individuals are tracked via postal codes and other identifiers, turning them into state assets ("state-coded property") and restricting collective movement. Mobility becomes pathologized and criminalized through constant mapping and boundary enforcement—a tactic rooted in colonial and modern state practices. Once individuals are codified in this system, they must conform to both legal and spatial disciplines, becoming "citizens" only insofar as they occupy regulated space and maintain order.

This process can be understood through Michel Foucault's ideas of 1) Biopolitics, where the state governs life by organizing the population through statistics, surveillance, and spatial management—the population becomes the object of governance and optimized for productivity (Scheel, 2020), 2) Governmentality, where managing territories and populations

requires practices like house numbering, urban planning, and postal code systems—these let the state make people and property "legible" and controllable, and 3) Disciplinary power, where surveillance systems (akin to Bentham's panopticon) create internalized self-regulation, ensuring individuals conform to societal norms and property ownership roles (definition source)

Overall, property creation and spatial surveillance represent a form of biopolitical control—defining who counts as alive, where they belong, and how they move. Only those integrated into the property/state system—both legally and numerically—are recognized as citizens with rights.

Research and spatial movement. The role of the nomad in transformative research

These are major ethical concerns when examining research's role in social control and population management. "Research for change" challenges these colonial power dynamics by acknowledging and promoting nomadic cultures founded on movement. Movement itself becomes a form of spatial reclamation—rupturing the rigid knowledge systems of neoliberal, numerical truth-making.

This transformative approach to research seeks to transcend the life/death binary, fostering a social reality situated between those extremes. It invites us to recognize how conventional research practices can serve as mechanisms of colonial control—silencing marginalized voices and codifying domination as "normal."

By questioning these dualities, "research for transformative change" demands critical reflection on how knowledge production may inadvertently legitimize oppressive structures. Ultimately, it calls for a reimagining of research as an act of liberation—not surveillance—honoring the fluid and resistant ways communities inhabit and experience land.

The space between life and death is where many marginalized populations reside—realities often labeled as "death alleys." In conventional research, such spaces are treated as "gaps" needing to be filled to bring them into alignment with dominant narratives of life and progress. However, research for social change recognizes these so-called gaps as sacred—embodied spiritual and cultural experiences that must be respected, not erased.

For many marginalized communities, these gaps are not voids but homes—places of resistance, tradition, and alternative ways of being. To fill them without understanding their meaning risks turning research into a tool of erasure, burying lives and worldviews that do not conform to linear, progress-driven models of modernity.

This is not to dismiss the value of identifying gaps in research, but rather to ask: whose gaps are we identifying, and to what end? Often, efforts to "close" these gaps serve to advance academic careers while unintentionally silencing or overwriting the very communities we claim to support.

By bringing the suffering to the center, we risk re-inscribing colonial violence—pulling people into systems that invalidate their ways of knowing and being. Research for transformative change must therefore move beyond simply identifying gaps, and instead learn to sit with them—to honor them as spaces of meaning, not absence.

Conclusion

These are profound ethical challenges when discussing research's role in social control and population management. "Research for social change" seeks to confront these issues rooted in colonial violence by honoring nomadic cultures that embrace movement as a form of spatial reclamation.

Movement defies the static categories imposed by neoliberal, numeric forms of truth. This transformative research agenda aims to dissolve the rigid divide between life and death—not to eradicate this tension, but to dwell within it—and to question how conventional research may function as a tool of erasure in marginalized communities.

Rather than viewing research "gaps" as voids to be filled, we must acknowledge them as spaces of spiritual and cultural significance. Filling these gaps without critical reflection risks subsuming marginalized knowledge into linear, progress-driven frameworks, effectively burying alternative ways of life and perpetuating colonial dominance.

Research for social change thus calls for deeper self-inquiry: What knowledge are we assuming is missing or important? Whose voices are we elevating—and at what cost to others? If our work brings marginalized lives to the center, is it also inadvertently displacing them from their own epistemic spaces?

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