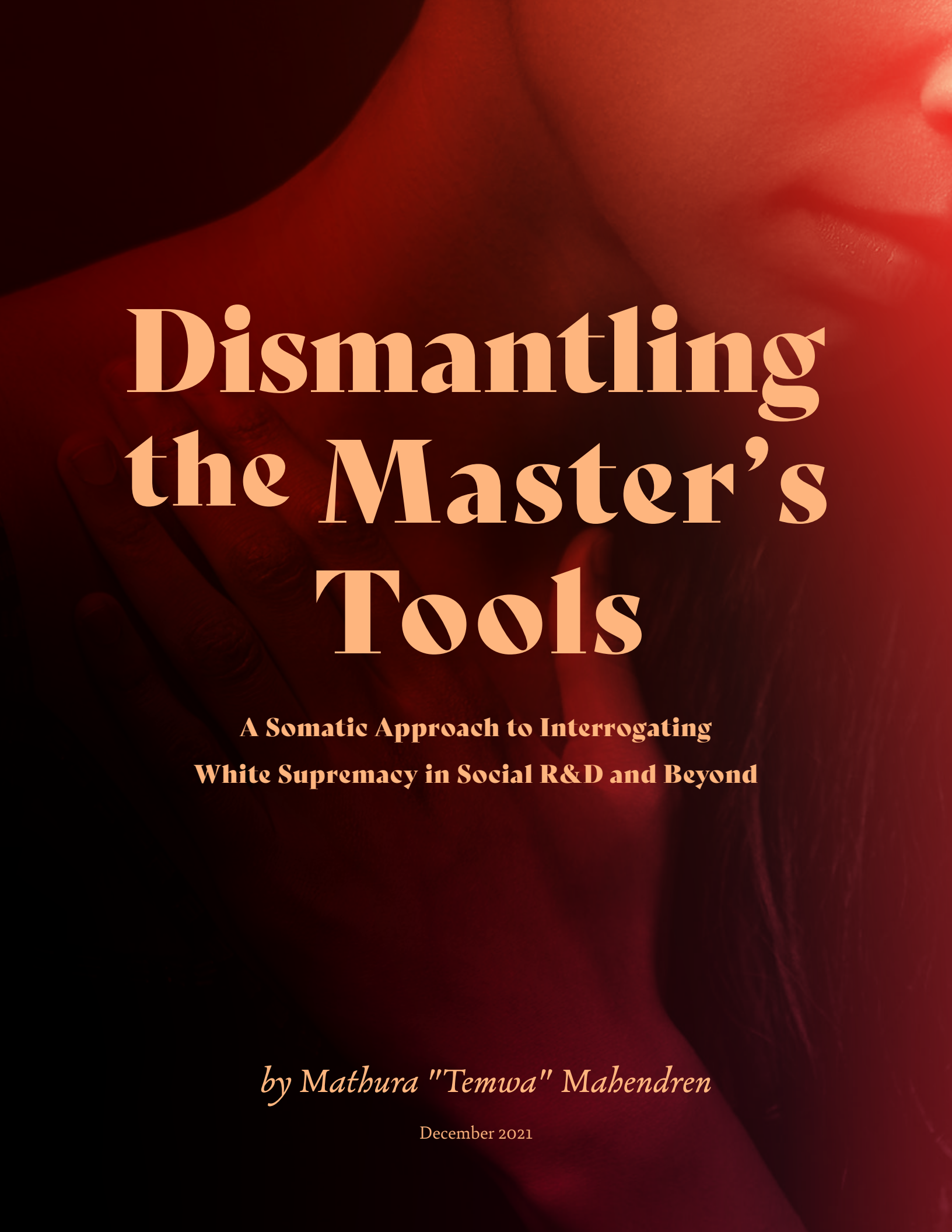




Dismantling the Master's Tools

**A Somatic Approach to Interrogating
White Supremacy in Social R&D and Beyond**

by Mathura "Temwa" Mahendren

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A Note on the Title

The title of this toolkit, *Dismantling the Master's Tools*, is a reference to Audre Lorde's quote,

“For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.”

It underscores that many of the dominant beliefs and practices which inform and have informed our approach to research and knowledge-gathering are rooted in oppressive systems like white supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism. In this sense, many of the prevailing “best practices” within the field of research can be considered “the master’s tools,” ultimately working to uphold harmful systems. This toolkit aims to guide us in interrogating these widely accepted tools, and in imagining and embodying alternative, life-affirming ways of doing the work of research.

*“Your writing is like a rumbling earthquake.
It’s seismic.
It moves you.
It’s coming from beneath the ground.
It’s the tectonic plates shifting.
It has the capacity for destruction, but it’s also gentle.*

*You’re in the spaces between the words.
The pauses between the words.
That’s how I recognize your writing.
The spaces and the pauses.”*

Fatima Kamenge

Abstract

Dismantling the Master's Tools is a toolkit that can guide users through a brave and critical exploration of their identities, narratives, and practices as people living and working within systems steeped in white supremacy.

A researcher is anyone who participates in an ongoing process of inquiry in order to arrive at deeper, more clarified understandings of whatever it is they are investigating, in order to be of better service to it (i.e. by this definition, most of us are researchers!)

A NOTE ON SCOPE

This toolkit was initially funded as a part of an initiative to build the capacity of social R&D practitioners within the social innovation sector. However, its scope broadened significantly in the development process, and early adopters of the toolkit have underscored **its utility and relevance on a much broader scale**. Many of the harmful practices I name within social R&D also manifest in other sectors, as they are rooted in similar systems of oppression (i.e. white supremacy, colonialism, patriarchy, etc.) and the individual and collective traumas they precipitate. As such, the tools and alternative practices shared in this toolkit hold value for researchers, designers, facilitators, educators, students, consultants, and policy makers working across the nonprofit, public and private sectors alike. Some have even found this toolkit helpful in working through difference and conflict within intimate and interpersonal relationships!

This toolkit is designed to prompt and hold difficult and perhaps uncomfortable conversations with yourself (and possibly with others), while being mindful of the impact of this work on our bodies and senses of safety. It includes:

- Invitations to explore your own lineage (i.e. who/what/where you come from), the stories you hold (about yourself, the people you are engaging, research, and the world at large), and how these beliefs impact your approach to research.
- Analyses that unpack the ways in which persisting beliefs and “best practices” within the fields of research and knowledge-gathering can and do contribute to harm.
- Reflection questions that prompt you to critically examine your relationship to, and your embodiment of, these beliefs and practices.
- Activities that facilitate a structured and compassionate exploration of the ways in which we are predisposed to cause harm as people operating within systems designed to cause harm.
- Proposals on how we might begin to practice and embody alternative ways of doing the work of research and knowledge-gathering, through approaches that center reciprocity over extraction.

Key words: knowledge-gathering, research; somatics; trauma-informed; harm; toolkit; white supremacy



THE AUDIO COMPANION

Dismantling the Master's Tools has an audio companion that is available on [Spotify](#) and [Apple Podcasts](#). In this audio series of sorts, the author Mathura "Temwa" Mahendren narrates the toolkit aloud, section by section, with the exception of the activities, whose templates are only available in this PDF.

Acknowledgements

**It takes a village to birth a resource like this,
and here is a window into mine.**

Jennifer Chan Thank you for putting the funding opportunity for this work in front of me despite my vehement resistance to engaging with anything tied to the social innovation sector. The combination of that well-timed nudge and our call in December 2020 with the intention of "let's just rage about all that is broken and see what comes of it", were the catalysts I needed to conceive the proposal for this toolkit with surprising ease and speed.

Youth Climate Lab and the students in McMaster University's Bachelor of Health Sciences Program Thank you for being the eager guinea pigs with whom I piloted some of the tools in this toolkit. Your courage in venturing into uncomfortable territories within yourselves while holding compassion and accountability for what you find, gives me faith in the impact of this work. You are the social innovators I most believe in, care for, and want to protect. In sharing this toolkit more broadly, my hope is that the worlds of research, social innovation, and work more broadly are ready to meet and match your courage and conviction that another world is both possible and necessary.

Building this toolkit while experiencing and surviving harm in real-time is the kind of irony that doesn't feel worth the story or the synchronicity. Thank you to these humans (in no particular order), for consciously and unconsciously mobilizing around me to create the safety and cultivate the care I needed to survive, acknowledge, process, grieve, and rebuild **Muskaan, Shilbee, Adil, Raja, Anne, Jenn, Hima, Ciarán, Harneel, Amitt, Jess, Stan, Safiyyah, Rushil, Maryam, Khairunnisa, Julia, Jasmine, Fatima, Negin, Mandy, Craig, Michelle, Nico, Magdi, Marina, Marc, Karine, Étienne, Wanda, Jen, Dylan, Rick, Joyce, Darius, Denise, Vanessa, Anushka, Megan, Shazia, Thiviya, Ananya, Mebs, Sneha, Banu, Amma, Appa, Acca, and Appapa.**

Tieni Meninato Thank you for being the first to read this toolkit from cover to cover, for believing in it and affirming its worth when I was convinced it was already obsolete, and for dragging me across the finish line in the most loving way. Beyond bringing my vision of Ancestral Autumn to life with your beautiful graphic design, I see your knack for strategy and the time you spent thinking through what this content could become - its potential for broader, deeper, and self-sustaining impact - especially in a moment when I was too spent to vision beyond the finish line.

Darius Bashar Thank you for capturing metemwaphasis in a way that I didn't even know was possible, that I didn't even know I needed. This toolkit is one of the by-products of metemwaphasis and what a gift it is to be able to infuse your photos into this work in such an intimate way. (All of the images in this toolkit are artistic cuts and interpretations of photos taken by Darius Bashar)

Christie Pits, the Concord houses, the Talla house, the Mahomed cottage, the Coombs cottage, Balsam Lake, Willow Beach, Sunnyside Beach, 306, and the Reflection Room Thank you for holding the physical space for the series of births, deaths, and reflections that directly or indirectly contributed to the process and/or product of this toolkit.

My body Thank you for ringing alarm bells every time you sensed harm happening in the name of research (or otherwise) and did not have the tools or feel the sense of safety to say something. Thank you for showing up day after day as my trusted partner as I built the capacity and spine to say something.



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**This toolkit was conceived of and created
on Treaty 13 territory known as Tkaronto.**

Tkaronto is the traditional and unceded territories of the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, Chippewa, Wendat, and the Mississaugas of the Credit. I would not have access to this land that has held, nurtured, and provided for me and mine if not for the stewardship of these and many other unrecorded, distinct Indigenous communities. They have modelled for centuries how to treat land as kin, as family - caring for it, defending it, and living in communion with it - and have done so despite ongoing state-sanctioned violence, cultural genocide, and forced assimilation.

I am a commitment to following their leadership and honouring their sovereignty through action.

Dedication

To sisters and ancestors.

Sisters a historically gendered term which I use here to refer to Black, Indigenous, People of Colour who are also Women or Gender-Diverse - who have and continue to do the vast and disproportionate majority of the labour of dismantling harmful systems and reimagining healing alternatives. I see you. I see you not only surviving harm, which is plenty enough, but also summoning the words and courage to articulate it, and (because you are magic) holding those who have caused harm through the process of repair and transformation. I have learned so much from your survival, your testimonies, and your capacity for healing and transformation in a world that adamantly resists it. I hope this work amplifies and resources the struggle in a way that allows you to rest and/or resist with more ease.

Ancestors if my writing is a rumbling earthquake, you are the roots that connect this tree to the whispers deep within the earth and within our collective lineages that demand to be heard. I will forever be indebted to you for dreaming my liberation into existence and for surviving long enough to breathe life into that dream.

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Ways To Move Through This Toolkit

The decision to include this section of wayfinding was inspired by adrienne maree brown's Author's Note in her book Holding Change: The Way of Emergent Strategy Facilitation and Mediation.

NON-NEGOTIABLES, I THINK.

As a researcher, Chapter 1 (i.e. informed consent) feels non-negotiable. I want you to know what you're getting yourself into. It'll save you a lot of time if you decide not to read further, and it'll help manage your expectations if you do end up reading further. I also highly recommend not skipping over the *My Declarations & How They Shape This Toolkit* section in Chapter 2. There's some riveting history in there that orients us to the moment we find ourselves in today. (Spoiler alert: White supremacy culture is a trauma response.)

Otherwise, I've shared some ways of moving through this toolkit below, based on where you might be at and what you might be looking for:

“I’m here for all of it.”

The method of this toolkit is built around the quote you read by writer and coach Fatima Kamenge on page 2, describing my writing. She refers to it as “a rumbling earthquake” that has the capacity for destruction, but is also gentle. She says that she recognizes my writing in the spaces and pauses between the words. The pauses in this toolkit take the form of reflection questions, somatic practices, and reminders to ground in how your body is experiencing the content in real-time. The content of this toolkit has the potential to shift you, and realizing its full capacity in a sustained and healthy way requires engaging with the pauses between the words, in addition to the words themselves. So, if the time is available to you, **I would suggest reading and/or listening to the toolkit as it’s currently sequenced, pausing when prompted to dig deeper, and making the exploration personal.** Not everything may resonate - which is fair - and ultimately the choice to engage with each invitation is yours.

“I read the abstract, I’m good re: informed consent, I don’t have time for fluff, just give me the meat.”

Head to Chapter 4. If you feel activated and/or overwhelmed as you move through it, I suggest coming back to Chapter 2 and 3 to ground and contextualize what might be happening in your body.

“I’m clear on why I want to do this work, I want to dive right in!”

If you are someone who likes to orient yourself before diving in, start with Chapter 3 and head to Chapter 4 afterwards. If you prefer to dive into the deep end and orient as you surface, start with Chapter 4 and come back to Chapter 3 if you need some help with naming what’s coming up for you.

**“This feels like a lot right now. I don’t know
if I have the capacity for this.”**

Start with Chapter 3, orient to your body, and discern whether it has the capacity to move through this work right now. If no, pause and come back to it when you do. If yes, head to Chapter 2 to ground in a deeper purpose for engaging with this work (which can help keep you rooted in moments of overwhelm) and then move to and through Chapter 4 as you feel ready.

**“I’m aware of the harm I/we/the sector have caused and why
I/we/the sector caused it. I just want to know how to fix it.”**

Read through the reflection questions in each of the sections. If you feel that you’ve adequately interrogated your experiences of causing and/or experiencing harm within the social R&D sector, head over to Chapter 5 for resources on repairing harm.

Somatic Practice

On Arriving

The following is a body practice that author and trauma specialist Resmaa Menakem shares in his book, My Grandmother's Hands. This is a practice I recommend revisiting before each instance of engaging with this toolkit, as a way of starting each engagement with a level of presence and somatic awareness.

If you benefit from this practice and/or share it with others, please make sure to credit and amplify the lineage of this practice and shift your resources in the direction of Menakem's offerings. Refer to the modules on Lineage and Extraction in Chapter 4 to understand why these conditions are non-negotiable.

 [Click here](#) to listen to the practice on Spotify

“Find a quiet, private spot.

Plan to spend three to four minutes there, alone.

Sit comfortably. Take a few breaths.

Turn your head and slowly look around in all directions, especially behind you. Orient yourself in the surrounding space.

If you're indoors, notice the height of the ceiling, the height and color of each wall, any doors or windows, and any other details that stand out.

If you are outside, take note of any boundaries, such as a footpath, a fence, the edge of a clearing, or the shore of a pond. Notice any plant or animal life nearby. Note what sounds you hear, any smells that fill the air, any warmth or coolness, and any colors that stand out.

When you are done scanning your environment, face forward once again and return your attention to your body. Sense how your feet rest on the ground and how your butt rests on the seat.

Now notice any other sensations in your body: the bend in your knees; your spine, straight or curved; a breeze in your hair; your belly and any tension you hold there; and your chest, expanding and shrinking with each breath.

Notice what your body experiences inside your clothing. Pay attention to where your body touches your underwear, your socks or stockings, your shirt or blouse, your pants or skirt or dress.

Starting at the top of the head, bring your attention slowly down through your body. Notice each sensation as your attention passes through it: warmth, coolness, relaxation, tightness, softness, pressure, energy, numbness.”

Chapter One

What Exactly Am I Getting Myself Into (aka Informed Consent)?

For this learning experience and process to be truly consensual, you will need to know what you are getting yourself into with this toolkit. I commit to doing my best now and in each chapter to signpost what's ahead and what it will require to be present with it, so you can decide if, when, and for how long you would like to engage with it. I offer this context with respect for your time as well as my own.

In this chapter, we will:

- Describe what this toolkit is, why there is a need for this work, and who it's for, so that you can determine whether or not it's for you.
- Define key terms (e.g. harm) that will be referenced throughout the toolkit so that we move forward with a shared understanding of them.
- Share my own relationship to this work, my approach to this toolkit, how I would like to be held accountable, as well as the boundaries I hold around it.

What Exactly Am I Getting Myself Into (aka Informed Consent)?

What is This Toolkit?

In the world of research, we are, for the most part, in the business of uncovering, acknowledging, critically examining, synthesizing, and sharing about “the other”. This toolkit is an invitation to direct this critical inquiry inwards, to become intimate with our internal infrastructure, so that we might better understand the lens through which we are perceiving “the other”. Whether we acknowledge it or not, we are the reference point through which we locate “the other” and part of conducting robust, responsible, and compassionate research is knowing where we stand, why, and how that has and continues to shift as we accumulate lived experience. The more compassion, complexity, and nuance we are able to afford ourselves in this self-inquiry, the better equipped we will be to offer the same grace to “the other”. After all, we can only guide others as far as we’ve travelled ourselves.

In this sense, **this toolkit can be a companion, a mirror, and/or a provoker in your process of examining your identity and practices as a researcher.** It can hold the space for you to explore the ways in which you are predisposed to cause harm as a researcher operating within systems designed to cause harm. It can be the container in which you not only start to imagine but also practice and embody alternative ways of doing the work of research.

Why is There a Need For This Work?

Simply put, social research and development (social R&D for short) has caused harm in the past and has the potential to cause harm in the future. This is particularly true when there are differences in gender, class, race, ability, ethnicity, culture, political views, religious views, and ultimately, power and privilege, between the researchers and those participating in the research. This is also true when social R&D is viewed as a process by which researchers extract knowledge from research participants, process it in isolation, and develop interventions or recommendations that may or may not have any meaningful value for the participants. What's more, participants are expected to feel grateful to have been consulted or "be given a voice." This extractive approach to R&D has resulted in broken trust between employees and employers, communities and research institutions, and a generalized mistrust toward R&D efforts as a whole. Rebuilding this trust requires an acknowledgement of previous harms and a proactive examination of how we as researchers may be unconsciously programmed to cause harm. Re-engaging also requires a brave space in which researchers and participants have the tools to protect themselves while working toward a mutually beneficial relationship that prioritizes genuine reciprocity over token honoraria. This toolkit aims to satisfy both of these needs.

What Constitutes a Researcher? Are You a Researcher?

Oxford Dictionary defines research as, "*the systematic investigation into and study of materials and sources in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions.*" While this is a broader definition than I had originally expected to find, we do often perceive research quite narrowly. We see it as something done in labs, by people with multiple letters behind their names. We perceive it as an investigation done on "the other," whether that's other people, other beings, or other inanimate objects. We also tend to have very rigid ideas of what qualifies as "systematic." In this toolkit, I use the words "research" and "researcher" very broadly.

A researcher is anyone who participates in an ongoing process of inquiry in order to arrive at deeper, more clarified understandings of whatever it is they are investigating, in order to be of better service to it.

This includes inquiry about the self, the other, the environment, the systems we inhabit, or the relationships and processes that connect them all.

What do You Mean by “Harm”?

In this toolkit, the term “harm” is used deliberately. Given how much weight language holds, it feels important to distinguish what I mean by this term as compared to related terms like abuse, conflict, critique, contradiction, etc. Author and social justice facilitator adrienne maree brown provides definitions for these terms in her book [We Will Not Cancel Us](#), which I’ve included below:

Term	What it Looks Like	What it Needs
Abuse	Behaviours (physical, emotional, economic, sexual, and many more) intended to gain, exert, and maintain power over another person or in a group.	When abuse is present, professional support, space, and boundaries are needed.
Conflict	Disagreement, difference, or argument between two or more people. Can be personal, political, structural. There may be power differences, and there will most likely be dynamics of privilege and oppression at play. Conflicts can be direct and named, or indirect and felt.	Conflicts rooted in genuine difference are rarely resolved quickly and easily. Conflicts can be held in relationship and/or group through naming both the differences and the impact of the differences, facing the roots of the issues, and honest conversation, especially supported conversation such as mediation.
Harm	The suffering, loss, pain, and impact that can occur both in conflict and in instances of abuse, as well as in misunderstandings steeped in differences of life experience, opinion, or needs.	Harm is what needs healing - working with individual healers, therapists, and in community to understand where the hurt is and what it would look like to not be ruled by it.
Critique	An analysis or assessment of someone's work or practices. Critique ideally helps us grow collectively by detailed engagement with what comes into the public sphere as writing, creation, and behaviour. Critiques can help us grow and transform that which can be shaped (though I am not interested in critiques centered on aspects of people that they do not control and can't change).	Critique doesn't need resolution, but acceptance and discernment - you won't please everyone, take what can grow you and keep it moving. Critiques are part of how we sharpen each other.
Contradictions	The presence of ideas, beliefs, or aspects of a situation that are opposed to one another. Movements are often tense with the contradiction between what we believe and are fighting for and what we feel we must practice to navigate current conditions (e.g. to be an abolitionist but call for the arrest of those who hurt us.)	Contradictions can be handled by widening our perspective, acknowledging that these oppositional truths co-exist. ^[1]
Mis-understandings	Incorrectly interpreting or not understanding what is being communicated.	Can be resolved through a clarifying conversation, and if not addressed, can fester into conflict.
Mistakes	When someone straight up messes up. Says something offensive or triggering, mishandles a situation, is dishonest, has a negative impact in spite of positive intentions, or doesn't think something through.	Mistakes can be resolved with an authentic, informed apology. ^[2]

The definitions and footnotes in this table are direct quotes from adrienne maree brown's [We Will Not Cancel Us](#).

[1] A lot of my learning around contradictions is rooted in a somatic understanding of the constant presence of contradictions as a human condition. I learned this with generative somatics and Black Organizing for Leadership and Dignity.

[2] I highly recommend checking out Mia Mingus's "The Four Parts of Accountability: How to Give a Good Apology," available on her blog: leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2019/12/18how-to-give-a-good-apology-part-1-the-four-parts-of-accountability.

On the Difference Between Harm vs. Failure

This distinction emerges directly from first- and second-hand experiences of identifying harm within social innovation spaces, and having them heard and articulated back as “failures” that will be learned from. The key distinction, for me, is this:

While it may be enough to learn from failure, in the context of researchers and the communities being engaged in research, it’s not enough to just learn from harm.

Harm demands accountability and efforts toward reparation in a way that failure may not. Accountability and reparation include recognizing the lineage of that harm - i.e. the mindsets, values, privileges, and approaches that contributed to that harm - and taking steps to avoid the repetition of those harms in the future. In other words, with harm, the difference is in acknowledging that this learning came at a cost to others.

It is important to be mindful of this distinction especially within the social innovation space where the “fail fast, fail forward” ethos is widespread. Within this space, failure is celebrated and listing failures is encouraged and even held up as “innovative” and “forward-thinking” in a way that addressing and talking about the harms we’ve caused are not. The latter is also harder and takes longer as it’s not just about packaging something that happened into a case study and sharing it at a conference or in a blogpost. Rather, it’s about making consensual, consistent, and informed efforts to reconcile with the people and communities that were directly harmed.

I too have caused harm in my work and know that part of moving through that reality is in confronting the uncomfortable feelings (i.e. shame, guilt, etc.) it surfaces, sitting with our fragilities instead of projecting them, creating space and building our capacity to be accountable, and putting in checks and balances both within ourselves and the approaches we take to make sure the harm is not replicated. We are all in process and accountability is part of that process.

On Causing Harm: The Stories Of Us



From September 2018 to June 2021, I worked as the Program Manager of The Stories of Us (SoU) program at a national nonprofit called the Department of Imaginary Affairs. The program offers a curriculum and a workshop series to support newcomers to Canada through the process of constructing or reconstructing their story after the life-altering event that is immigration. With their consent, the completed stories are published in The Stories of Us library, the first-ever ESL library of stories for newcomers, by newcomers.

On Causing Harm is an audiovisual artifact that recounts an instance of harm that I caused during my time in this role. It was created and shared publicly in June 2021 as a part of a time capsule of artifacts intended to capture and archive the impact of The Stories of Us project. Certain details, which have been documented extensively internally, have intentionally been left out of this publicly shared artifact for the sake of 1) protecting the identities of those involved and 2) brevity. I share this artifact not as the perfect example of acknowledging and repairing harm - there is none - but rather to illustrate an example of the complex set of experiences and feelings that can come with engaging in this process and the potential for doing better that it can open up.

Pause. Process. Integrate.

Reflection Prompts

On Causing Harm

1. *How do you experience the statements “I failed” vs. “I caused harm” differently in your body? What distinct thoughts, feelings, and/or sensations do you associate with each statement?*
2. *What are the barriers, internal or external, you experience to acknowledging that you’ve caused harm?*
3. *Can you think of instances where experiences you/your organization have labelled as “failures” may have also caused harm to others? How did framing it as a failure rather than as harm serve you or your organization in that moment? What did it cost you?*
4. *If you were in an interview and someone asked you the following question with respect to your work, how would you answer it earnestly? “In what ways has your work/approach caused harm to the people/communities you've engaged, and what steps have you taken to be accountable, repair, and prevent these harms from reoccurring?”*

Who Am I [Mathura] to Facilitate This Work?

For the sake of this toolkit, I am from the in-between, the both/and. I am and have been the harmed and the person causing harm. My people, from present-day Sri Lanka, were colonized by the Portuguese (1505-1658), the Dutch (1658-1796), the British (1796-1948) and Trincomalee Harbour was under French rule for a few months in 1796. In the words of author and psychologist Dr. Eduardo Duran, “*when you are colonized that means your identity is taken away from you.*” Following independence from the British empire, my people fled civil war, cultural genocide, and state-sanctioned violence, only to become settlers in yet another colonial project called Canada. Canada offered them safety and the promise of a better life in exchange for complicity in its own colonial project and state-sanctioned genocide.

I am from a complex ancestral lineage of both oppressor and oppressed, of the harmed and those inflicting harm.

This means that I am intimately familiar with the guilt, shame, cognitive dissonance, fractured sense of self, desperation for forgiveness and redemption, desperation to explain oneself, and the fear of oneself and one's own power that comes with causing harm.

And, I am deeply acquainted with the rage, guilt, shame, fear, hypervigilance, mistrust, desire for justice, accountability, and/or punishment that comes with being harmed.

Both sets of experiences inhabit my body and being.

In all honesty, the impetus for this toolkit was initially born out of resentment for those causing harm and as a way of protecting those being harmed in the name of research. In retrospect, this was a binary that offered simplicity at the cost of nuance. The premise was seemingly simple: *Social R&D can and does cause harm. So, how might we mitigate that harm with a deeper awareness of ourselves as the vessels through which the research process unfolds?*

Somewhere along the way, I got frustrated with the base assumption that harm would happen, that harm was inevitable. So I did

what I do. I took the assumption apart into its bare bones. *How does harm show up in research? What are the “best practices” it hides behind? What are the underlying beliefs that justify and legitimize these practices? How are all of these beliefs and practices interconnected and mutually reinforcing in ways that build a culture and norms that feel robust and above critical examination?* You see, there are consequences to taking things apart to their bare bones. There is no flesh or padding left to absorb the impact of what they reveal. The skeletons in the closet revealed themselves and I was left contending with how deeply I embodied some of these harmful beliefs and practices. They weren’t the obvious ones. I only found them after peeling away several layers of the onion that is “best practice”. And something about that, about it being buried deeper, felt worse. These harmful beliefs weren’t superficial or cosmetic, they were closer to my core. I was realizing just how deep my conditioning ran. I combed through my entire career with these new lenses. *Had I caused harm in the name of trying to mitigate harm? And if this is how I felt discovering the insidiousness of these practices, was it responsible to put these uncoverings into the world for others to experience an equivalent disorientation?*

I was back to where I started. Maybe harm is inevitable and trying to mitigate it is futile. I couldn’t find my feet. It felt like there was no ground to stand on or to build from. I reached out for help, and artist and healer [Jen Maramba](#) reminded me that,

“Harm will happen. We live in harmful systems. What’s important is that we have the ability to repair it. To heal from it.”

She helped me realize that my intense fear of causing harm is an inherited and embodied trauma response from having sat with both the weight of having caused harm alongside the weight of having been harmed. She reflected back that the work I was doing lay in “*Response-ability*”. In other words, I was building the ability in myself and in others to respond to harm and harmful systems, to repair and heal from it, and ideally build better alternatives in

the process. Having experienced firsthand the kind of disorientation that comes with realizing how complicit I am, I know that it's not something I can or should protect you from, but rather share tools and vocabulary to guide you through. I see it as my responsibility - with your consent - to help you build your *response-ability*, or your ability to respond. And in order to do that, we start from our bodies. Our bodies are the site of our survival strategies, our fight, flight, freeze, appease, or dissociate reactions. So, if we are to shift our ability to respond, it needs to start with the vessel where these survival responses are stored.

My Approach

1. SHOW, DON'T TELL

This toolkit is less about me coming back from an expedition and recounting what I discovered, and more about me taking you on the journey with me. You'll notice that reflective exercises and somatic practices are integrated throughout the toolkit, rather than concentrated at the end. This is intentional and is reflective of the pauses I have needed to take to discern how something applies to me, and process and integrate the pieces of my understanding that come undone with each discovery. I invite you to pause with me. I ask you the same questions I've asked and continue to ask myself. I am in process and the design of this toolkit is a reflection of that.

2. BODY AS GENERATOR, HOLDER, AND CONVEYOR OF KNOWLEDGE

I believe that this is work that must be done in partnership with our bodies, if it is to be sustainable and transformative. Much of the training around unconscious biases is focused on the mind, and ignores the body as a generator, holder, and conveyor of knowledge.

In the words of trauma specialist Resmaa Menakem, "*Our bodies have a form of knowledge that is different from our cognitive brains. This knowledge is typically experienced as a felt sense of constriction or expansion, pain or ease, energy or numbness. Often this knowledge*

is stored in our bodies as wordless stories about what is safe and what is dangerous. The body is where we fear, hope, and react; where we constrict and release; and where we reflexively fight, flee, or freeze. If we are to upend the status quo of white-body supremacy, we must begin with our bodies.” While Menakem talks about working with the body specifically in the context of unlearning white-body supremacy, our bodies also carry the embodied strategies that help us uphold other systems of oppression.

Somatic practitioner Staci K. Haines explains that,

“Our habits and survival strategies live within our tissues. Our automatic ways of reacting, relating, and thinking are driven from much deeper in our brains, hearts, and muscles than our ideas about them. These embodied strategies are also protective and taking care of previous hurts. Somatic opening allows what has been stored in the body to come forward and be felt. It allows what has been left incomplete, to complete, holistically. This aspect of transformation can feel disorganizing, unsettling, and often means we are touching our pain. Without it however, we are placing new practices on top of old embodied strategies. Under enough pressure the old strategies will win out. Thus, we need to allow the roots to come up and to give them their respects. On the positive side, this can feel like setting down weights that you’ve been carrying for years.”

As Haines alludes to in this passage, what we may think of as best practices or standard ways of working may actually be serving a protective function in safeguarding previous hurts. In my view, many of the harmful practices we engage in within the field of research are informed at least in part by individual and collective trauma responses. And because trauma lives in and is a tool of the body, it must also be worked with and healed through the body.

In talking about trauma and taking a trauma-informed approach to this toolkit, I think it's important to define and contextualize what I mean when I use the word "trauma". What follows are a series of excerpts from Resmaa Menakem's book, My Grandmother's Hands, that clarify what is meant by this increasingly used term:

"Contrary to what many people believe, trauma is not primarily an emotional response. Trauma always happens in the body. It is a spontaneous protective mechanism used by the body to stop or thwart further (or future) potential damage.

Trauma is not a flaw or a weakness. It is a highly effective tool of safety and survival. Trauma is also not an event. Trauma is the body's protective response to an event - or a series of events - that it perceives as potentially dangerous. This perception may be accurate, inaccurate, or entirely imaginary. In the aftermath of highly stressful or traumatic situations, our soul nerve and lizard brain may embed a reflexive trauma response in our bodies. This happens at lightning speed.

An embedded trauma response can manifest as fight, flee, or freeze - or as some combination of constriction, pain, fear, dread, anxiety, unpleasant, (and/or sometimes pleasant) thoughts, reactive behaviours, or other sensations and experiences. This trauma then gets stuck in the body - and stays stuck there until it is addressed.

We can have a trauma response to anything we perceive as a threat, not only to our physical safety, but to what we do, say, think, care about, believe in, or yearn for. This is why people get murdered for disrespecting other folks' relatives or their favorite sports teams. It's also why people get murdered when other folks imagine a relative or favorite team was disrespected. From the body's viewpoint, safety and danger are neither situational nor based on cognitive

feelings. Rather, they are physical, visceral sensations. The body either has a sense of safety or it doesn't. If it doesn't it will do almost anything to establish or recover that sense of safety...

...A traumatic response usually sets in quickly - too quickly to involve the rational brain. Indeed, a traumatic response temporarily overrides the rational brain. It's like when a computer senses a virus and responds by shutting down some or all of its functions. (This is also why, when mending trauma, we need to proceed slowly, so that we can uncover the body's functions without triggering yet another trauma response)."

In this sense, incorporating an awareness of and an engagement with our bodies is an essential part of ensuring that this work is both sustainable and trauma-informed. You will see somatic practices incorporated into various modules, including a module which interrogates the mind-body split and disembodiment as they show up within research and academic practices.

A Note on the Use of Somatics in this Toolkit

"More and more teachers are coming out about their practice [of somatics] and what it means inside of their own identities and their culture. There are more places to look than those folks that have written the 'official' books on somatics. It's important for us to keep looking in our own lives and our own histories, for the route of embodiment." - Prentis Hemphill Finding Our Way Podcast, S1E5

Much of the theory and references to somatics in this toolkit are informed by the book *The Politics of Trauma*, by Staci K. Haines. I would consider this resource, in Hemphill's words, one of "the 'official' books on somatics." Haines also identifies as a white woman and I believe this is important to name as it is in direct contradiction with my intention to center BIPOC practitioners and leaders

in this toolkit. As someone who is relatively early in my study of somatics, drawing on Haines's book as a reference point helped me learn the lay of the land within the field, including key vocabulary, principles, and practices.

It felt like the lesser evil among all the other 'official' books given how consistently Haines incorporates a political analysis, uplifts the work of BIPOC practitioners working within the field, and credits BIPOC-led organizations like Black Organizing for Leadership and Dignity (BOLD) and National Domestic Workers Alliance for her learnings around somatics. Still, there is room to do better. Prentis Hemphill and Resmaa Menakem are both Black leaders within the field of somatics and have recently been sharing more of their practice through resources like My Grandmother's Hands, Finding Our Way podcast, and The Embodiment Institute. There are many others and I commit to sharing and amplifying their work as I discover and learn from them. I invite you to do the same.

To begin, below are a few quotes from Prentis Hemphill that invite a more critical exploration of the lineage and white washing of somatics. These quotes were originally transcribed and shared in a social media post by Daria of Accountability Mapping.

"The Western world puts a name on things, oftentimes a white guy's name on things, and pretends it's new. But all of our cultures have practices. Most cultures ARE practices around embodiment. Our dancing, our singing, our relationship to land, the places where we make contact, the stories we create to make meaning of our lives, all of that to me is somatics."

"The word somatics exists in a Western context to point out the break that happened between our minds and our bodies. Somatics doesn't make sense in some ways, without that break having happened, it's a term and a field of

study that emerges from that break of colonization. But before that, we still practiced embodiment. Before that there were still practices across the world that helped us feel ourselves and feel our internal worlds.”

“There’s absolutely a white washing of the field, but it’s also because we have not been taught to look at our own practices as knowledge. We’re not always trained to look at the little morsels of truth that have been passed down through the subtlest of movements and motions. So to me, that’s what somatics is really about.”

3. HONOURING LINEAGE

Lineage is a lens that can be summarized in a single question: *Who, what, or where does this come from?* where “this” could be a belief, a conviction, a best practice, a framework, a definition, a behaviour, a trait, a norm, a habit, a construct, or a rule.

One of the resistances to revisiting history or exploring where something comes from is the idea that the “past is past” and that no change can come from dwelling on it. It is the notion that revisiting the past is irrelevant and regressive. The dominant culture separates the past, present, and future, as though they are not connected. It also assumes that our current understanding of the past and our present is the only understanding of it, and that it is accurate. The practice of tracing lineage necessarily questions these assumptions. Author Yuval Noah Harari offers an alternate perspective on the importance of studying history and lineage in his book Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow:

“Historians study the past not in order to repeat it, but in order to be liberated from it...The cold hand of the past emerges from the grave of our ancestors, grips us by the neck and directs our gaze towards a single future. We have felt that grip from the moment we were born, so we assume that it is a natural and inescapable part of who we are. Therefore we seldom try to shake ourselves free,

and envision alternative futures...Studying history aims to loosen the grip of the past. It enables us to turn our head this way and that, and begin to notice possibilities that our ancestors could not imagine, or didn't want us to imagine...Movements seeking to change the world often begin by rewriting history, thereby enabling people to re-imagine the future...The new history will explain that 'our present situation is neither natural nor eternal. Things were different once. Only a string of chance events created the unjust world we know today. If we act wisely, we can change that world, and create a much better one.' This is why Marxists recount the history of capitalism; why feminists study the formation of patriarchal societies; and why African Americans commemorate the horrors of the slave trade. They aim not to perpetuate the past, but rather to be liberated from it. This is the best reason to learn history: not in order to predict the future, but to free yourself of the past and imagine alternative destinies."

Another source of resistance to revisiting history is linked to what author and educator Ron Scapp identifies as "*the profound belief in the legitimacy of all that has come before.*" The longer something has been around or the more something is repeated, the more strongly we accept it as the norm and the less we question it. We may also fear that if we start to question what we thought was true, then everything that is linked to it will crumble, leaving us with no ground to stand on. This is a legitimate fear given how many of our systems are held up by precedent and legacy, and there will be spaces and moments in this process to name and evaluate those fears.

Ultimately, I center lineage in this toolkit because it is a practice that can help us construct a critical understanding of the status quo and how we got here, which is intimately linked to the kinds of alternatives we are able to imagine in its place.

4. QUOTING THE SOURCE, A LOT

I am fairly confident that most of what I share in this toolkit has already been said, thought, or written before. I see my role in putting together this toolkit as that of a curator. Over the years, my learning and unlearning has been guided by such a range of teachers and practitioners. This toolkit allows me to bring their perspectives together in conversation in a way that I think allows for a richer and more varied discussion than just one perspective alone. I choose to quote them rather than paraphrase them because I want to honour not just what they said, but how they said it as much as possible. I'm striving not for novelty, but rather robustness. I encourage all users of this toolkit who have the means to honour these practitioners by investing directly in their offerings, so that they are well-resourced to continue doing the important work they are doing in the world.

5. REPETITION

If you stick around for long enough, you will notice that while each module speaks to a different topic, there are underlying themes and questions that are repeated throughout the toolkit. While repetition is looked down upon among most editors who assume that the readers will get bored, I use it intentionally here as an opportunity to invite progressively deeper explorations of the topics at hand and the connections between them. Given that you as a vessel may be shifting as you move through this toolkit, I invite you to notice how a particular statement or question lands each time you hear or read it.

How does it land in your body? Does your receptivity to it change over time? Does your response to it shift over time?

The beliefs and practices that this process calls into question have been reinforced over many, many years and my sense is that this kind of unravelling will take more than just one attempt. Hence, the repetition.

6. GENERATIVE REFUSAL

This toolkit strives to embody the principle and practice of generative refusal. I first encountered this concept through the writings of Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. In her words, *“generative refusal not only refuses colonialism, but it affirms a different present by generating different worlds – worlds that centre the material and spiritual needs of the community.”*

This toolkit is intentionally not just an exposé of all that is problematic in the world of social R&D. It is not meant to be a finger-wagging “shame on you” to all of us who have caused harm in the name of research. I want more for us than getting stuck in cycles of debilitating shame and guilt that ultimately re-entrench us in the status quo. Generative refusal recognizes that settler colonialism will always define the issues with a solution that re-entrenches its own power. It refuses colonial recognition as a starting point. It prioritizes self-recognition and reciprocal recognition instead, which Simpson defines as *“the act of making it a practice to see another’s light and to reflect that light back to them.”*

In this vein, this toolkit is intended to give us:

- language to name the harmful practices we’ve embodied in the name of research,
- questions to provoke inquiry into the internal beliefs and external systems that have afforded supremacy to these practices,
- structure to scaffold and hold the series of thoughts and feelings that may be unearthed in this inquiry, and
- somatic practices to compassionately hold our bodies as we come to understand that much of the harm we have and continue to cause are rooted in trauma responses - on both the individual and collective level.

That said, it is important to caution that colonialism is insidious. It is in the water we drink and the air we breathe. As much as the

intention behind this work is to refuse colonial recognition, I want us to be critical and consistent in examining how we might be seeking this recognition in more covert, less obvious ways. With respect to designing this toolkit, these are some of the critical questions I'm sitting with for myself:

- What am I saying, not saying, or saying differently because I am cautious of how it will be received by the predominantly white funders of this work, who have most definitely contributed to and enabled the harm named in this toolkit?
- How would I have designed this toolkit differently if I knew it was only for practitioners of colour, women and gender-diverse folks of colour, or children of immigrants? What would I have been more forthcoming about? What would I have spent more time unpacking? What would I have spent less time explaining?
- How much of the motivation to build a somatic caretaking container around some of the more provocative parts of this toolkit was about trauma-informed design vs. soothing the white fragility that is bound to be activated by engaging in this work? What does it look like to design with care, design to mitigate harm, and design to hold accountable?
- How much of my investing a disproportionate amount of time on this toolkit (more than triple what was allocated in the budget) was about wanting to be thorough vs. being acutely aware of being the sole person of colour funded through a call specifically intended to increase accessibility and equity within social R&D? In other words, how much of my investment was rooted in the awareness that I was a super token representing much more than myself through this work?

For me, a commitment to generative refusal means sitting with these questions even and especially when the answers aren't clear.

Is This Toolkit For You?

In the words of author Mia Birdsong, “while it’s open to everyone, it’s not *for* everyone.” My hope is that by the end of this section, you will be able to discern and choose whether or not this toolkit is for you. You should know that:

- This process can leave you with more questions than answers. I believe one of the ways in which we build alternative practices is through asking different questions.
- This process can stir up dissonance and/or discomfort in your being, which includes your mind, emotions, body, and spirit. In the world of somatics, this dissonance is known as a somatic opening. In the words of somatic practitioner Staci K. Haines, *“I know this may sound strange, but so often what we are reacting to is not being able to tolerate what is happening in our own sensations, emotions, and experience. We react to get rid of the feeling, to push away the sensations, because they are associated with something intolerable, painful, and uneasy. Increasing our ability to “allow for” sensations and emotions gives us more choice and decreases our reactivity. Somatic awareness and ongoing embodiment - living inside our own body and aliveness - give us more choice. They grow our ability to be present in more and more situations. They help us act connected to what matters to us rather than react to get away from something.”* This toolkit includes invitations, tools, and vocabulary to notice, engage with, contextualize, and move through this discomfort with compassion for oneself.
- This process can make you aware of harms you have caused or harms you are currently causing. It can also give you the tools to acknowledge, process, and move through the disorientation that might come with this revelation, toward accountability.
- This process can bleed into other parts of your life. While research is an entry point to this work, these questions, these tools, and these tensions apply more broadly, just as the

dominant approaches to research are shaped by the broader systems we live and work within.

- This process will ask you to expend energy that you may not have been expending previously and you will need to prepare and manage your reserves accordingly.
- In the words of Staci K. Haines, *“This can be a process by which the way [you] are, relate, and act become more aligned with [your] visions and values.”*

Notice that I say “this process *can*” rather than “this process *will*”. This is intentional. The “can”, the possibility of change, only becomes a reality, a will, when you choose it to. **You choose** whether you want to engage, and how present you are when you engage. **You choose** whether and to what extent you engage with the feelings that this process stirs up in you. **You choose** how much time you spend with this and for how long. **You choose** whether to accept, deny, or question what I share in this process. **You choose** whether and how much you want to invest in shifting your thinking, feelings, and actions based on what this process reveals to you. **You have agency** in this process, and that agency affords you both the freedom to choose and the responsibility for the consequences of those choices. How much agency, freedom, and responsibility you hold is dependent on your positionality and the systemic power it affords you.

I can only share with you what I know to be the potential of this work. Realizing it is up to you.

On Boundaries: Mine, the Toolkit's & Possibly Yours

ON CHANGING MY MIND

I will probably change my mind as new information comes to light. Instead of receiving a disproved theory or assertion as a failure, I hope we can see it as a step toward better understanding whatever it is we're trying to understand.

In the words of bell hooks, *"The engaged voice must never be fixed and absolute but always changing, always evolving in dialogue with a world beyond itself."*

ON BEING ACCOUNTABLE

The more I read, the more I learned. And the more I learned, the more I realized just how much I didn't know and still needed to learn. This toolkit and all that it contains are artifacts from a moment in time, a synthesis of my learnings to date. I kept pushing the day I'd start scripting and recording. I was sure that if I could just read one more book or integrate one more framework, the toolkit would be more robust. That I could get closer to doing this monumental task, justice. Then I noticed myself falling into perfectionism and the ways in which it was delaying action. I have learned that after a certain amount of consideration, clarity can only come from action and that clarity will shape my next action and so on. So, this is one of many actions, and my only hope is that the clarity that will inevitably come from putting this toolkit out into the world doesn't come at the cost of unintentional harm to others. And in the cases that it does, I understand that harm is a part of the human experience and I commit to being accountable to acknowledging and repairing the harm I cause.

In an [episode of Irresistible podcast](#), ex-host Kate Werning references a question that cultural organizer Eroc Arroyo-Montano once asked her: *"How do you like to be held accountable?"* I love the way in which this question both implies the inevitability of being accountable and a level of choice and agency in how that process happens. "Being held accountable" often carries the connotation

of punishment and something being done to us. This question, “*How do you like to be held accountable?*” invites us into that process. It suggests that accountability is not something that happens to us, but rather something we actively participate in co-creating. On that note, based on what I understand about myself now, this is how I like to be held accountable:

- I am able to better receive calls to accountability from people I am in relationship with. It’s easier for me to believe that they are sharing critical feedback with me because they are invested in me and my work, and know who and how I am outside of this one artifact I’ve created. It is easier for me to receive their feedback as an act of care rooted in knowledge and experience of who I am, rather than as an accusation that assumes my intentions were malicious, careless, or not examined and re-examined multiple times over. This is not at all to say that I do not welcome or intend to be receptive to feedback from people with whom I do not have an existing relationship. I do. And, if we are to engage with each other in any meaningful way, I anticipate that part of that accountability process will be to get to know each other a little bit. This is a choice that we will both have to make and keep making as we engage in this process.
- I also believe that I can be accountable and boundaried at the same time. In fact, I imagine there will be situations in which I will need to set boundaries in order to engage authentically and sustainably in an accountability process that doesn’t cause additional harm to myself or others. I think writer and cultural worker Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha articulates this more effectively than I can in her book, Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice:

“A common idea in social justice culture is that if someone calls you out on being oppressive, you need to shut up, listen, put aside your automatic defensive reaction,

and accept what they're saying, learn from it, and thank them. This is a useful ground rule, and it works for a lot of situations. We've all seen White Nonsense people clutch their pearls and deny they have privilege. Or cis people or abled people or non-sex workers or whatever. And also, people with all kinds of oppressions fuck up too and need to get told we're fucking up.

But there's also a line between setting aside defensiveness and being open to hearing how you've fucked up or hurt someone without knee-jerking to "You're wrong! I'm perfect! Fuck you!" and letting someone walk all over you and emotionally abuse and gaslight you.

And, sometimes, when you're some combination of survivor, femme, and a mix of oppressions, you can have been raised to automatically be accountable for every single thing. It rained? I'm sorry. You're stressed? It's my fault. Let me fix it. You didn't like the show? You're right, I'm totally fucked up.

And you can end up in a place where people are "coming for you" in ways that cross the line from justifiably angry to abusive and can have a lot of consequences. Consequences that have landed many femme of color leaders I know with PTSD, anxiety, trauma, suicidality, and more. Have set us up to be abused or landed us in situations of abuse we didn't know how to call abuse. Have made us move away from leadership or activism because it hurt too much and one day our hearts just gave up."

With that said, one example of a boundary I might set is needing to take space to process and understand my own reactions to the critical feedback that has been articulated, before responding. While there will be a part of me that is conditioned to feel a sense of urgency to respond right away, and a part of you that is conditioned to equate the expediency of my response to how seriously I am taking your feedback, taking the space to process and integrate

will be important for me. Otherwise, my response risks being in service of soothing (both the harm that I caused you and the guilt I feel within myself) rather than actually transforming and healing the harm caused and addressing the internal and external factors that led to it happening in the first place. The latter takes time and, for me, space to find my own bearings before engaging with you. In the same way, I invite you to respond with your own boundaries to engaging.

- In the same podcast I referenced earlier, Eroc Arroyo-Montano shared that he likes to be invited to his accountability party rather than surprised by it. I would say the same. Being invited to my accountability party means that I can create space in my schedule, my psyche, and my soma to try and be as present and receptive as possible to what you're sharing. There's less of a chance that my body will go into fight, flight, freeze, appease, and/or dissociate mode when it has a sense of what to expect.
- I am open to sharing learnings publicly where it is consensual among all parties involved and would be useful for others to know. That said, my preference is for the accountability process itself to be more intimate, with only the people directly impacted as well as any mediators to help facilitate and community members to support each party. I find that public accountability processes, particularly around interpersonal conflict and/or harm, run the risk of becoming performative and dehumanizing rather than genuinely responsive and relational. The farther we are from the people directly involved, the easier it is to dehumanize them. Additionally, the process, our actions, and our reactions are at risk of becoming more about what we think "the audience" wants, rather than about what we each need and what our relationship needs to repair and heal.

Somatic Practice

On Discerning Boundaries

The following is a body practice that author and trauma specialist Resmaa Menakem shares in his book, My Grandmother's Hands.

If you benefit from this practice and/or share it with others, please make sure to credit and amplify the lineage of this practice and shift your resources in the direction of Menakem's offerings. Refer to the modules on Lineage and Extraction in Chapter 4 to understand why these conditions are non-negotiable.



[Click here](#) to listen to the practice on Spotify

“Find a quiet, comfortable place where you can be alone for a few minutes. Bring with you a piece of string (or rope or yarn) at least ten to twelve feet long.

Stand in an open area. Take a few deep, slow breaths.

Using the string, create a circle on the ground. Adjust its size so that when you stand in its center and you imagine someone else standing on the circle's edge, you are a comfortable distance from them.

Once the circle is the right size, take your place at its center. Breathe in and out a few more times.

Think of someone you know who is caring and supportive. This can be a friend, a relative, a neighbour, a partner, or a friendly acquaintance. Visualize this person walking slowly in your direction toward the circle.

As he or she crosses the circle's edge, pay attention to what your body experiences. Does it relax or constrict? Does it want to move forward or backward? Does it want to reach out, or protect itself, or move in some other way?

Now clear your mind. Take three or four more slow breaths.

Now visualize someone else you know, someone who is not particularly caring and supportive. This shouldn't be someone who is outright violent or dangerous, who has threatened you, or who is your sworn enemy. Instead, it might be a boss or coworker with whom you have some friction, or a slightly standoffish neighbour, or perhaps a relative who disagrees with you on several political or social issues.

Visualize this person walking slowly in your direction toward the circle. As he or she crosses the circle's edge, again pay attention to what your body experiences. Does it relax or constrict? Does it want to move forward or backward? Does it want to reach out, or protect itself, or move in some other way?

Notice what images, sensations, emotions, impulses, and thoughts arise in you. Don't do anything about those images - simply take note of them."

Pause. Process. Integrate.

Reflection Prompts

On Boundaries

1. *What thoughts came up for you as I shared my boundaries?*
2. *What feelings came up for you as I shared my boundaries?*
3. *What sensations did you experience in your body as I shared my boundaries?*
4. *What is your relationship to hearing “no”? Is it conscious?*
5. *What is your relationship to saying “no”? Is it conscious?*
6. *What are your boundaries with respect to engaging in this work?*
7. *Do you have a felt sense of what you experience in your body when your boundaries are respected? What happens?*
8. *Do you have a felt sense of what you experience in your body when your boundaries are crossed or violated? What happens?*

Chapter Two

Why Am I (You) Doing This Work?

This section of the toolkit is intended to ground us. It is intended to equip us with the tools we need - a strong purpose, an understanding of the broader context we are operating within, and frameworks to explore and name the sources of our discomfort - to remain grounded on this journey.

In this chapter, we will:

- Develop declarations and articulate commitments that will help guide our work with this toolkit.
- Learn about how my own declarations - around love and healing trauma - have shaped my approach to this toolkit.
- Unpack the ways in which we each embody white supremacy culture, which in itself is a trauma response.
- Unpack the ways in which our ability to respond has been shaped by our exposures to trauma.

Why Am I (You) Doing This Work?

Grounding In Purpose: Declarations

“Somatic opening helps to deconstruct embodied shapes and habits that no longer serve us. This means disorganizing habitual ideas and beliefs, emotional patterns or avoidance, and reactive ways of being. While this all sounds good, somatic opening can be...well, disorganizing of what’s familiar. We tend to gravitate toward homeostasis. Somatic opening places us in unbounded terrain, where we can find ourselves between known self-concepts. Between known ways of being. Between known ways of interacting or coordinating. **We need a strong purpose and vision for change during somatic opening.** In this disorganized place, we - as people or as groups - can feel unmoored. People can often grab onto the familiar, the habitual, and revert to what no longer works.”
- Staci K. Haines

According to Staci K. Haines, “*The body learns on “Yes.” That means we organize ourselves, our somas toward something. We think, act, and practice toward a possibility.*” As we embark on this journey of learning and unlearning, it can be helpful to ground in a broader purpose and intention for our exploration, especially as we move through uncharted, uncomfortable territory. In somatics, this artic-

ulation of purpose is called a **declaration**. Former Chilean finance minister and political prisoner Fernando Flores distinguishes declarations as a “speech act.” In Haines’s words, “*when we declare, we are intending and calling forth a future. We are mobilizing ourselves, and often others, into action to build it.*” In somatics, declarations are an embodied capacity, meaning that we can develop the ability and skill to declare. That said, while everyone has the capacity to declare, inequitable social conditions have resulted in certain groups of people being encouraged to want and declare while others have been systematically denied opportunities to imagine futures. Developing a declaration involves exploring what we care about, want, and long for and crafting these “yes’s” into an imagined future that is compelling to us.

Declarations are phrased as: “***I am a commitment to...***” According to Haines, we use this language so that when we speak our declarations to ourselves, we are identifying with them, becoming them, and embodying them. Our declarations not only guide us, but are who we become.

It’s important to note that trauma and oppression often leave us disconnected from our longings and desires. They reinforce that what we want and care about don’t matter, and as a way of protecting ourselves from further harm, we tend to hide away what we care deeply about. This comes from an instinct to protect what is most important to us from potential danger, from being used against us.

What follows is an invitation to explore your own longings and desires and have them inform a declaration or set of declarations to guide your work with this toolkit.

Developing Guiding Declarations

This activity guides you through a series of steps to help you locate and name your own longings and desires. These insights will then help inform a declaration or set of declarations to guide your work with this toolkit.

The content of this activity, including the definitions of key terms, the guiding questions, and the sequencing of the steps was shared by Staci K. Haines, in her book The Politics of Trauma.

Once again, if you benefit from these prompts and/or share it with others, please make sure to credit and amplify the lineage of this work and shift your resources in the direction of her offerings. (Refer to the modules on Lineage and Extraction in Chapter 4 to understand why these conditions are non-negotiable).

Note: The prompts in this activity may feel like they reach beyond the realm of research, beyond what you anticipate the work of this toolkit to be, and possibly even transgress into areas of your life that feel unrelated to this work. In these moments, it's important to remember that we are still bodies showing up to do this work and our bodies don't stop longing or wanting just because we're working. In a world where we do not acknowledge our longings and desires, they end up making themselves known to us in more covert ways, including as resistance to change. This is our time to pay attention to them and design our approach to this work as one that also aligns with and serves our deepest longings. This is why we start with declarations.

STEP 01 Take inventory of the declarations you have inherited and discern which ones are worth keeping.

Inherited Declarations

These are the declarations we inherited from our families, communities, and social contexts that tell us what we want or should want, and what we care about or should care about. These can range from prioritizing money, cars, shoes, wealth, and more stuff, or an individualized “happily ever after” of monogamous heterosexual marriage, having kids, or finding a soulmate. Religious beliefs and norms also tell us what to long for and what not to want, who is righteous and who is a sinner. Culture also comes with values, meaning, and priorities. Some of these inheritances are powerful, meaningful, and align with who we want to be, and others do not.

GUIDING PROMPTS:

01. *If you had “turned out” to be just the person, and to have just the life, that your family or community wanted you to be, who would you be? What would you be doing? What role would you be playing?*
02. *If you had “turned out” to be just the person, and to have just the life, that society wanted you to be, who would you be? What would you be doing? What would you be fighting for? Whom would you be against?*
03. *What did you learn to care about because of the dynamics in your family, or those that raised you?*
04. *What of the values and ways of being and seeing the world do you want to preserve from your family and community? Which ones do you want to change?*

STEP 02 Add declarations that you've arrived at and articulated for yourself.

Self-Defined Declarations

A self-defined declaration is one we discover, cull from our life experiences, or maybe have always “known” but turned away from for various reasons. It is a declaration that invites us to become more of ourselves, bring our essential gifts, and risk loss and being predefined. Often, self-defined declarations ask us to risk who we “should” be and discover and claim more of ourselves.

GUIDING PROMPTS:

- 01. What do you want?*
- 02. What do you long for?*
- 03. If you had permission or encouragement to long, want, and desire, what would you want?*
- 04. Imagine you had the life that deeply aligned with your longings. What would that life be like?*
- 05. What difference do you want to make for others or for the environment?*
- 06. What feels like authentic expression for you?*
- 07. Who and what do you want to impact?*
- 08. How do you want to love, and be loved?*
- 09. What have you always known about yourself?*
- 10. What are you made for?*
- 11. What's calling you now?*

STEP 03 List any declarations that speak to what, if anything, you want to heal through this work.

Healing Declarations

A healing declaration speaks specifically to what you want to heal, and/or the outcome or vision of what's possible through that healing.

GUIDING PROMPTS:

- 01. What wants to heal?*
- 02. What is possible in my life (love, leadership, etc.) if I heal?*
- 03. What wants to be more whole? What does more wholeness bring to my life?*
- 04. What is possible if I face what I need to face to heal?*
- 05. What do I want to leverage my courage for?*
- 06. What do I want that is requiring me to heal?*
- 07. What am I repeatedly struggling with that is asking me to heal?*
- 08. Why heal? Why feel?*

STEP 04 (OPTIONAL) If you are working through this toolkit with one or more others, add any declarations you're committing to as a group.

Co-Created Declarations (For Groups)

Co-created declarations are those we create with others. This happens within our friendships, partnerships, families, communities, organizations and movements.

GUIDING PROMPTS:

- 01. What do we care about?*
- 02. What do we want to create together? With what quality(ies) do we want to do that?*
- 03. What do we want to change or develop in our family? What qualities do we want to embody? Is there healing needed?*
- 04. What do we want to see in our community and in our region / country / world?*
- 05. What difference and change do we want to make?*
- 06. What do we want to change or end? What do we want to see instead?*
- 07. If we were successful, what would we have made possible? What would we have accomplished?*
- 08. How do we want to be as a group, and what growth does that require?*
- 09. Who do we need to be, how do we need to engage, to align with our values and vision?*
- 10. How do we want to work with conflict and our differences?*

STEP 05 If you notice that your declarations are mostly process-oriented, try to envision what outcomes would be possible if you succeeded in that process.

Shifting Process-Based Declarations into Outcome-Based Declarations

People tend to first develop process declarations. These are declarations that focus on a process rather than an outcome. An example is: I am a commitment to healing my shame and internalized oppression. This is a powerful intention, and it leaves us to fill in what the intended outcome will be. With a process declaration, we want to ask: If you were successful at that, what would be possible? (e.g. Question: If you healed your shame and internalized oppression, what would be possible? Possible answers: loving and authentic relationships, bold and visionary leadership, taking up more space in my life, etc.). Imagining the possible future is essential for crafting declarations and learning to embody them.

GUIDING PROMPTS:

01. *Imagine you already had that (the declaration / desire); how would your life, loves, leadership, family, etc. be different than they are now? Be as specific as you can.*
02. *Pretend you already had that; what would it give you? How would you be changed?*
03. *Imagine your process declaration was successful; what would it make possible for you?*
04. *What would you have that you don't have now?*

STEP 06 Articulate how you'll know and measure the ways in which you are changing toward your declaration.

Conditions Of Satisfaction

Conditions of Satisfaction (COS) are experiences and measures that let us know we are changing. They let us know that we are arriving at our declaration. They also act as markers along the path toward where we want to go. COS are specific, as measurable as we can make them, and have a timeline.

E.G. DECLARATION

I am a commitment to being satisfiable

COS #1

I will notice what is working 60% of the time,
before I notice what is wrong.
(within six months)

COS #2:

I will easily acknowledge others, appreciating what they give
and bring, even when they, too, are complicated people.
(within one year)

GUIDING PROMPTS:

- 01. What actions will you regularly be able to take that you don't take now?*
- 02. What conversations will you be able to have that you don't have now?*
- 03. How will you feel about you, or your life, that is different from how you feel now?*
- 04. What is different about you now?*
- 05. What is possible now that was not before?*

06. *What have you accomplished?*

07. *What quality of relationships will you be in? How is that different from what you have now?*

08. *How will people's assessments of you change? What do they say or think now?*

For example, below are two of my declarations which have and continue to guide my actions:

DECLARATION #1

I am a commitment to healing my/our traumatic retentions^[1], so that I/we may respond in current time, accounting for our current skills, power, and competencies.

DECLARATION #2

I am a commitment to practicing a love that is deep and fierce, but not unconditional or without discernment, a commitment to loving powerfully while demanding accountability and respect.^[2]

In the following section, I will share how these declarations have shaped my approach to this work and this toolkit specifically.

[1] A traumatic retention is a trauma-related behavior that gets passed down through the generations until it loses its original context and begins to look like culture (Resmaa Menakem, [My Grandmother's Hands](#))

[2] This declaration is inspired by this quote from Mia Birdsong's book, [How We Show Up](#): "Harriet Tubman / Audre Lorde / Toni Cade Bambara-type of love...deep and fierce, but not unconditional or without discernment. They 'love powerfully while demanding accountability and respect.'" The second set of quotes is attributed to Savannah Shange.

My Declarations & How They Shape This Toolkit

DECLARATION #1

I am a commitment to healing my/our traumatic retentions,^[3] so that I/we may respond in current time, accounting for my current skills, power, and competencies.

This toolkit places such a heavy emphasis on trauma and the ways in which it can show up in our bodies because I believe that white supremacy culture - and many of the oppressive systems that create and reinforce harmful research mindsets and practices - is shaped by and upheld through trauma responses.

White supremacy culture is a trauma response. And for me, embodying an alternative to white supremacy involves healing the trauma we have inherited as individuals, communities, and systems, so that we are able to respond in a way that is rooted in our current reality.

Part of creating a co-created and collective declaration around this work, both within and outside the field of research, is in understanding how the status quo is harming all of us, albeit in different ways and to different extents. In the words of Chicago public school teacher Dwayne Reed,

“White supremacy culture won’t die until white people see it as a White issue they need to solve rather than a Black issue they need to empathize with.”

White supremacy culture takes a toll on white bodies, but before we examine its impact on white people today, it’s important to understand its lineage. In his book, My Grandmother’s Hands, trauma specialist Resmaa Menakem takes us back in time before colonization of the lands currently known as America, to the origins of white supremacy culture. While the following are relevant excerpts shared in an attempt to summarize key points, one would

[3] A traumatic retention is a trauma-related behavior that gets passed down through the generations until it loses its original context and begins to look like culture (Resmaa Menakem, My Grandmother’s Hands)

greatly benefit from reading the book in full:

- Trauma was not invented in 1619 [the widely shared timeline for the beginning of slavery in the U.S.]. For thousands of years before that, human beings murdered, butchered, tortured, oppressed, abused, conquered, enslaved, and colonized one another.
- By the late 1600s the English controlled nearly all the colonized territory in what would become the United States. In England, the 1500s and 1600s were not gentle times. People were routinely burned at the stake, tortured, hung, and otherwise brutalized.
- Many of the English who fled to America were victims or first-hand observers of this brutality. Others were desperately trying to get away from poverty, starvation, overcrowding, and the Great Plague.
- For all their talk of the new Jerusalem, the Pilgrims and Puritans were not explorers. They were refugees fleeing imprisonment, torture and mutilation....Isn't it likely that many of them [the English colonists who made their way to America] were traumatized by the time they arrived here? Did over ten centuries of medieval brutality, which was inflicted on white bodies by other white bodies, begin to look like culture? Did this intergenerational trauma and its effects end with European immigrants' arrival in the New World?
- It seems likely that many of the English colonists who made their way to America were deeply traumatized - and brought their trauma with them.
- Throughout America's history, white bodies have colonized, oppressed, and murdered Black ones. But well before the United States was founded, powerful white bodies colonized, oppressed, and murdered other white ones.

- Our concepts of whiteness, blackness, and race were invented in the seventeenth century. The terms white person, white woman, white man did not appear until the 1680s.
- It was only in the late seventeenth century that white Americans began in earnest to formalize a culture of white-body supremacy.
- This culture was designed to blow centuries of trauma through millions of Black bodies and to attempt to colonize the minds of people of all colors.

Menakem references a quote by Janice Barbee to summarize,

“What white bodies did to Black bodies they did to other white bodies first.”

Understanding this lineage fundamentally changes how we look at the roots of racialized trauma and the origins of white supremacy culture. Race is not a BIPOC issue - as it's so often claimed - that we need white people to support us with. Rather, it is a harmful byproduct of centuries-old, unresolved white-on-white trauma that was spread to the rest of the world through colonization.

White supremacy and white supremacy culture are a trauma response. Colonists built entire empires based on a trauma response.

And because trauma responses are designed to protect and shield us from the impact of the original trauma, they mutate as needed to maintain that protection in a changing context. In the following excerpt from *My Grandmother's Hands*, Menakem explains how white supremacy culture has mutated over the years in America to maintain its hold:

- In the late 1600s and early 1700s, white and Black immigrants worked and lived together on plantations and repeatedly rose up together against plantation owners. In response, landowners gave white workers small parcels of land and said, “You’re like us; you’re white and you own land.” In other cases, they appointed poor white people to quasi-leadership positions that gave them authority over Black bodies and lives.

- Over the years, the power divide shifted from landowners versus workers to white folks versus Black folks.
- The colonization of minds and bodies soothed some of the long-held pain that had been passed down from generation to generation in white bodies. Poor white Americans were increasingly able to believe they had a claim to power and privilege that had eluded their ancestors.
- There was now an easily identifiable group that white people - whether poor or rich - could blow their unmetabolized trauma through.
- This dirty pain became institutionalized as white-body supremacy - in governance, courts, policing, education, employment, housing, and so on.
- Dividing working-class Black and white people from each other was repeated with later waves of immigrants. Italians, Irish, Eastern European Jews, and other European immigrant groups were initially regarded as stupid, barbaric, dangerous, and most of all, non-white. Within a generation or two, however, each group was colonized, socialized, and absorbed into the false community of whiteness.

So, not only do white bodies still carry the impact of that original unresolved trauma, but in the process of trying to protect themselves from the impact of experiencing it fully, they have caused immense harm to other bodies. White supremacy culture as it manifests today not only protects white descendants from feeling the impact of the original trauma, but also protects them from feeling the impact of the immense harm they've caused to others in the process of trying to "protect" themselves. In her book, [How We Show Up](#), Mia Birdsong does an excellent job of unpacking what author and activist Lama Rod Owens refers to as the "trauma of whiteness," while still centering those who have and continue to be oppressed as a result of this unresolved white-on-white trauma:

“Being on the receiving end of harmful oppression is decidedly and specifically horrible. But wielding them has its own corrupting and denigrating impact on the imposer. This is important to understand, not because it makes those who hold privilege and power “victims” or somehow as equally harmed as those who experience racism, sexism, and classism. It’s important to understand because the work of dismantling systems of oppression that you benefit from isn’t altruistic work that just helps others; it is about your own liberation as well.

American capitalism extracts from poor and middle-class people and from our planet, and builds detachment and greed in the hearts of the wealthy. Patriarchy hurts women and gender-nonconforming people, and it also deeply limits men. White supremacy harms people of colour, and it also diminishes white people. I’m going to repeat this, because I want to be irrefutably clear, the harm experienced by the oppressors is not equivalent to the harm experienced by the oppressed. Capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy are not good for anyone, but the work that needs to be done by those who exert oppression and those who are the targets are markedly different.

While the corrupting power of capitalism on rich people and the restrictive nature of patriarchy on men is fairly apparent, white supremacy’s negative impact on white people is underexplored and warrants some unpacking. Even pointing that out makes me uncomfortable because white people exploring the harm of white supremacy on themselves should not prioritize that over the work they must do to end the way it harms people of color. But I also agree that what Lama Rod Owens calls “the trauma of whiteness” is not going to be wholly healed without white people recognizing that they have work to do on themselves that includes understanding how their own liberation is impeded by white supremacy.

When we hear “white supremacy,” we tend to think of the blatant, visible racism of the Klansman, the N-word, or the modern-day Nazis. I’m focused on the more mundane and insidious white supremacy that is embedded in American cultures, systems, institutions, the dynamics of relationships, and our own psyches. As Tema Okun points out in her piece “White Supremacy Culture,” *“Culture is powerful precisely because it is so present and at the same time so very difficult to name or identify.”* It’s the pervasiveness, and sometimes near-invisibility, of white supremacy that makes it both hard to pull apart and toxic.

There are a variety of downsides to white supremacy for white people. There’s the proximate harm of having people of color you may love be harmed by white supremacy. There are also contributions from people of color we are collectively missing out on because white supremacy creates barriers for people of color’s brilliance. There’s the soul-deadening impact of having an identity that is predicated on the oppression of other people. My friend Courtney (who is white) told me, *“I think of it as a festering wound at the center of our lives - this deep knowing that the country and by extension our own lives have been built on the backs of others.”*

The American Dream is white supremacy culture bound up with capitalism and patriarchy. In addition to espousing a belief that white people are superior to people of color, white supremacy is also a culture of rigidity, efficiency, more-is-better, ignorance-is-bliss, scarcity hoarding, binaries, and toxic individualism. My friend Matt (also white) spoke to how it limits his ability to connect with others. *“White supremacy makes it harder for white folks to connect authentically, understand others, and accurately empathize. Since oppression is definitionally a form of dehumanization, since it denies the full subjecthood of those being oppressed, I think there’s a deep level in which it limits human connection.”*

It keeps white people from being deeply known - to others and themselves. It casts what is human about white people as weakness.”

Echoing Mia’s analysis, it’s crucial that we are able to connect our declarations, our whys, back to what we want for ourselves and what we care about. We need to be able to recognize and root in an understanding of the unique ways in which the status quo of white supremacy culture is harming “me”, no matter our positionality. This is important for the sustainability of this work, because at the end of the day, when the pressure builds up (as it does), “me” is the person that our bodies are designed to protect first and foremost.

Pause. Process. Integrate.

Reflection Prompts

On Your “Why”

1. *Why are you doing this work?*
2. *How much of it is because you see inherent value in it for you? How much of it is about checking a box? How much of it is about “doing good” for others?*
3. *What do you as an individual stand to gain from doing this work?*
4. *What are the personal costs to you, of not doing this work?*

Somatic Practice

On Connecting to Ancestry

The following is a body practice that author and trauma specialist Resmaa Menakem shares in his book, My Grandmother's Hands.

If you benefit from this practice and/or share it with others, please make sure to credit and amplify the lineage of this practice and shift your resources in the direction of Menakem's offerings. Refer to the modules on Lineage and Extraction in Chapter 4 to understand why these conditions are non-negotiable.

▶ [Click here](#) to listen to the practice on Spotify

“For now, find a quiet, comfortable place where you can be alone for ten to fifteen minutes. Once you’re settled, take a deep breath. Then consider the following questions:

01. *When were your ancestors first declared Black or white (or Asian, or American Indian, or something else)? Who determined this? How was that determination communicated to your ancestors?*
02. *Where did this happen? What were the surrounding circumstances?*
03. *How did this categorization change your ancestors’ immediate situation? How did it change their future?*
04. *How is your body responding to these questions? Where do you experience resistance or constriction? Where do you sense a recognition or affirmation?*
05. *Do these questions seem insightful and important, or stupid and pointless? Do you want to laugh, or cry, or cuss, or run away?”*

My Declarations & How They Shape This Toolkit

DECLARATION #2

I am a commitment to practicing a love that is deep and fierce, but not unconditional or without discernment, a commitment to loving powerfully while demanding accountability and respect.

My second commitment is rooted in critical thinking, being, and doing. As with all powerful constructs, the concept of love has been co-opted many times over and wielded in service of upholding oppressive systems like white supremacy, capitalism, and colonialism. It has been used as a shield to protect the status quo, under the narratives of multicultural societies that co-exist peacefully, “all lives matter”, and “love and light” spirituality, among others. The binary thinking that comes part and parcel with white supremacy culture tells us that if we don’t love white people, then we hate them. And because there’s supposedly no room for hate, we must, ironically, destroy all the ways in which resistance to whiteness manifests. In actuality, loving whiteness in this moment is, by default, loving white supremacy given how entangled whiteness and supremacy continue to be. So, it’s not about hating whiteness, but rather being able to love it with discernment, while demanding accountability for the harm it has caused. There is a world in which we have done the work of separating whiteness from supremacy, but until we get there, loving whiteness and all of its manifestations unconditionally means continuing to uphold supremacy. With respect to this toolkit, I try to hold this balance, as best as I know how in this moment. I aim to explicitly name the harm caused and its sources, while also holding compassion for how we got here and offering probes and potential pathways for how we move through this.

Pause. Process. Integrate.

Reflection Prompts

On Love

1. *Do you believe in loving unconditionally? If so, what does this look like for you? If not, what conditions do you believe are important when it comes to love?*
2. *How have your understandings - inherited or self-defined - of what it means to love shaped your approach to accountability?*
3. *Can you envision a world in which whiteness is separated from supremacy? What would it mean / look like / sound like / feel like to you to live in that world?*
4. ***For white people only:*** *What does it mean / look like / sound like / feel like to separate your whiteness from supremacy? Do you believe that to be possible? Why or why not?*

Unpacking The Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture

One of the reasons why white supremacy has gone underrecognized by the vast majority of us for so long is its insidiousness - it's in the water we drink and the air we breathe. It is pervasive to the extent that it has started to feel like culture, like the norm, like “just the way things are.” Being able to distinguish the parts of our culture that originate from, reinforce, and/or are reinforced by white supremacy is essential in developing our muscles around discernment.

In 2001, Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun published a series of 15 Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture, the ways in which they manifest within organizations, and antidotes to practice in their place. Two decades have since passed and this work is just as relevant to today's context. Some of the characteristics of white supremacy culture that Jones & Okun identify include: perfectionism, sense of urgency, paternalism, and either/or thinking among others.

Rather than approach these characteristics as inherently good or bad, we are asked to develop the muscles to be able to discern when they are deployed to maintain oppression and in which contexts they can facilitate health, healing, and liberation. Furthermore, we need to extend ourselves beyond being able to name these characteristics and dig deeper to see the ways in which we embody them in our day-to-day. Only then can we arrive at a level of awareness that allows us to consciously choose when we embody them, rather than embody them by default, as a result of an inherited trauma response.

In the following exercise, you will be asked to read through the **Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture** and their symptoms, as articulated by Jones & Okun. From there, I share the **Culture Audit Canvas**. This is a framework I developed which provides the structure for you to deconstruct the ways in which you embody each characteristic and why, as well as discern whether this embodiment continues to serve your highest self in present time. Many of these characteristics will be referenced in Chapter 4 in the context of how they reinforce harmful beliefs and practices within the world of research. Working through your personal embodiment of these characteristics now will likely leave you in a more receptive position to hear and process those modules.

The Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture

If you benefit from the Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture framework and/or share it with others, please make sure to credit and amplify Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun as its original sources, and shift your resources in the direction of their offerings.

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Perfectionism	Power Hoarding
Sense of Urgency	I'm The Only One
Defensiveness	Fear of Open Conflict
Quantity Over Quality	Individualism
Worship of the Written Word	Progress Is Bigger, More
Only One Right Way	Objectivity
Paternalism	Right To Comfort
Either / Or Thinking	

The Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture (Jones & Okun, 2001)

Perfectionism

- little appreciation expressed among people for the work that others are doing; appreciation that is expressed usually directed to those who get most of the credit anyway
- more common is to point out either how the person or work is inadequate or even more common, to talk to others about the inadequacies of a person or their work without ever talking directly to them
- mistakes are seen as personal, i.e. they reflect badly on the person making them as opposed to being seen for what they are – mistakes
- making a mistake is confused with being a mistake, doing wrong with being wrong
- little time, energy, or money put into reflection or identifying lessons learned that can improve practice, in other words little or no learning from mistakes
- tendency to identify what's wrong; little ability to identify, name, and appreciate what's right
- often internally felt, in other words the perfectionist fails to appreciate her own good work, more often pointing out his faults or 'failures,' focusing on inadequacies and mistakes rather than learning from them; the person works with a harsh and constant inner critic

Sense of Urgency

- continued sense of urgency that makes it difficult to take time to be inclusive, encourage democratic and/or thoughtful decision-making, to think long-term, to consider consequences
- frequently results in sacrificing potential allies for quick or highly visible results, for example sacrificing interests of communities of color in order to win victories for white people (seen as default or norm community)
- reinforced by funding proposals which promise too much work for too little money and by funders who expect too much for too little

Defensiveness

- the organizational structure is set up and much energy spent trying to prevent abuse and protect power as it exists rather than to facilitate the best out of each person or to clarify who has power and how they are expected to use it
- because of either/or thinking (see below), criticism of those with power is viewed as threatening and inappropriate (or rude)
- people respond to new or challenging ideas with defensiveness, making it very difficult to raise these ideas
- a lot of energy in the organization is spent trying to make sure that people's feelings aren't getting hurt or working around defensive people
- white people spend energy defending against charges of racism instead of examining how racism might actually be happening
- the defensiveness of people in power creates an oppressive culture

Quantity Over Quality

- all resources of organization are directed toward producing measurable goals
- things that can be measured are more highly valued than things that cannot, for example numbers of people attending a meeting, newsletter circulation, money spent are valued more than quality of relationships, democratic decision-making, ability to constructively deal with conflict
- little or no value attached to process; if it can't be measured, it has no value
- discomfort with emotion and feelings
- no understanding that when there is a conflict between content (the agenda of the meeting) and process (people's need to be heard or engaged), process will prevail (for example, you may get through the agenda, but if you haven't paid attention to people's need to be heard, the decisions made at the meeting are undermined and/or disregarded)

The Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture (Jones & Okun, 2001)

Worship of the Written Word

- if it's not in a memo, it doesn't exist
- the organization does not take into account or value other ways in which information gets shared
- those with strong documentation and writing skills are more highly valued, even in organizations where ability to relate to others is key to the mission

Only One Right Way

- the belief there is one right way to do things and once people are introduced to the right way, they will see the light and adopt it
- when they do not adapt or change, then something is wrong with them (the other, those not changing), not with us (those who 'know' the right way)
- similar to the missionary who does not see value in the culture of other communities, sees only value in their beliefs about what is good

Paternalism

- decision-making is clear to those with power and unclear to those without it
- those with power think they are capable of making decisions for and in the interests of those without power
- those with power often don't think it is important or necessary to understand the viewpoint or experience of those for whom they are making decisions
- those without power understand they do not have it and understand who does
- those without power do not really know how decisions get made and who makes what decisions, and yet they are completely familiar with the impact of those decisions on them

Either / Or Thinking

- things are either/or — good/bad, right/wrong, with us/against us
- closely linked to perfectionism in making it difficult to learn from mistakes or accommodate conflict
- no sense that things can be both/and
- results in trying to simplify complex things, for example believing that poverty is simply a result of lack of education
- creates conflict and increases sense of urgency, as people feel they have to make decisions to do either this or that, with no time or encouragement to consider alternatives, particularly those which may require more time or resources
- often used by those with a clear agenda or goal to push those who are still thinking or reflecting to make a choice between 'a' or 'b' without acknowledging a need for time and creativity to come up with more options

Power Hoarding

- little, if any, value around sharing power
- power seen as limited, only so much to go around
- those with power feel threatened when anyone suggests changes in how things should be done in the organization, feel suggestions for change are a reflection on their leadership
- those with power don't see themselves as hoarding power or as feeling threatened
- those with power assume they have the best interests of the organization at heart and assume those wanting change are illinformed (stupid), emotional, inexperienced

The Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture (Jones & Okun, 2001)

I'm The Only One

- connected to individualism, the belief that if something is going to get done right, 'I' have to do it
- little or no ability to delegate work to others

Fear of Open Conflict

- people in power are scared of expressed conflict and try to ignore it or run from it
- when someone raises an issue that causes discomfort, the response is to blame the person for raising the issue rather than to look at the issue which is actually causing the problem
- emphasis on being polite
- equating the raising of difficult issues with being impolite, rude, or out of line

Individualism

- little experience or comfort working as part of a team
- people in organization believe they are responsible for solving problems alone
- accountability, if any, goes up and down, not sideways to peers or to those the organization is set up to serve
- desire for individual recognition and credit
- leads to isolation
- competition more highly valued than cooperation and where cooperation is valued, little time or resources devoted to developing skills in how to cooperate
- creates a lack of accountability, as the organization values those who can get things done on their own without needing supervision or guidance

Progress Is Bigger, More

- observed in how we define success (success is always bigger, more)
- progress is an organization which expands (adds staff, adds projects) or develops the ability to serve more people (regardless of how well they are serving them)
- gives no value, not even negative value, to its cost, for example, increased accountability to funders as the budget grows, ways in which those we serve may be exploited, excluded, or underserved as we focus on how many we are serving instead of quality of service or values created by the ways in which we serve

Objectivity

- the belief that there is such a thing as being objective or 'neutral'
- the belief that emotions are inherently destructive, irrational, and should not play a role in decision-making or group process
- invalidating people who show emotion
- requiring people to think in a linear (logical) fashion and ignoring or invalidating those who think in other ways
- impatience with any thinking that does not appear 'logical'

Right To Comfort

- the belief that those with power have a right to emotional and psychological comfort (another aspect of valuing 'logic' over emotion)
- scapegoating those who cause discomfort
- equating individual acts of unfairness against white people with systemic racism which daily targets people of color

Culture Audit Canvas

CULTURAL NORM 	STRINGS ATTACHED What are the emotions that are associated with abiding by it?	RELATIONAL IMPACT (How) is abiding by this norm affecting my relationships with others?	PAINS By resisting / replacing this norm, I would lose:
CREATION CONTEXT Where / when / from whom did this cultural norm take root (in my life / at my org, etc.)?	What are the thoughts that are associated with abiding by it? What are the identities that I've associated with following this norm?		
REMEMBERING ITS SERVICE How has abiding by this cultural norm served me / us to date? What has it allowed me / us to accomplish?	What are the other behaviours are linked to this norm?	VALUES ALIGNMENT Does abiding by this norm and the consequences of doing so align with my highest values?	GAINS By resisting / replacing this norm, I stand to gain:

Your Task

If you would like to print and/or complete this exercise on a larger version of this template, please find a full-size, printable template on the following page.

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1. Pick the top two Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture that you would like to examine in greater detail. Ideally these are the characteristics that you perceive as impacting you the most.
2. Complete the *Culture Audit Canvas* once for each of the two characteristics. Get specific when you answer each section, dig deeper into how each characteristic has and continues to manifest in your life.
3. Allocate 1-2 hours to complete this exercise, noting that you may want to complete it in parts rather than all in one sitting. Unearthing how white supremacy culture shows up in your behaviours, assumptions, and beliefs can be disorienting, to say the least. Take breaks as needed and allow yourself compassion when hard things surface.

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Culture Audit Canvas

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CULTURAL NORM	STRINGS ATTACHED What are the emotions that are associated with abiding by it?	RELATIONAL IMPACT (How) is abiding by this norm affecting my relationships with others?	PAINS By resisting / replacing this norm, I would lose:
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REMEMBERING ITS SERVICE How has abiding by this cultural norm served me / us to date? What has it allowed me / us to accomplish?	What are the identities that I've associated with following this norm?		
	What are the other behaviours are linked to this norm?		

Unpacking Trauma Exposure Responses

When we are exposed to trauma consistently and over time, we start to change in ways that we may not be consciously aware of, ways that might start to look like personality traits. In their book *Trauma Stewardship*, authors Laura van Dernoot Lipsky and Connie Burk define the term “*trauma exposure response*” as “*the transformation that takes place within us as a result of exposure to the suffering of other living beings or the planet.*” As practitioners working within the social sector, it is not uncommon for our work to bring us face-to-face with the suffering of others or the planet. A trauma exposure response can result from deliberate or inadvertent exposure, formal or informal contact, paid or volunteer work. In a nutshell, it refers to the ways in which the world looks like a different place to you as a result of you doing your work.

It is important to be mindful of our trauma exposure responses because:

- How we are impacted by our work in the present directly affects our work in the future.
- Our relationship with our work influences our inner life as well as our experiences with others.
- The pain around us can actually change our own psychological and physiological responses, altering our worldview.
- We often assume that our very status as “helpers” grants us immunity from the suffering we witness.

In *Trauma Stewardship*, Laura van Dernoot Lipsky and Connie Burk identify 16 trauma exposure responses that we may exhibit as a result of our trauma exposure. These include guilt, cynicism,

inability to embrace complexity, a sense that one can never do enough, and diminished creativity, among others. Similar to the *Culture Audit Canvas*, the **Response Audit Canvas** is a tool I developed to provide a structure within which we can unpack our trauma exposure responses.

In the process of working through this framework with your most dominant trauma exposure responses, you will be prompted to examine:

- the contexts that elicit this response in present time,
- the situations that have triggered this response in the past,
- the ways in which this response has served you,
- the patterns associated with how this response influences your thoughts, feelings, and behaviours,
- its impact on your body,
- its impact on your relationships, and
- how this response influences and/or is influenced by the Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture.

When working through this framework, it is critical to remember that aspects of our trauma exposure response 1) may have served us in some capacity or may continue to serve us in some capacity, and 2) may be socially and institutionally supported.

That said, the goal of this exercise is to explore our trauma exposure responses from the standpoint of the following questions:

- How is this working for my **deepest, most honest self**?
- How is this working for **those I serve**?
- How is this **sustainable**?
- What is a more **functional** way to respond?

Engaging in this exploration at this point in the toolkit will prepare you to 1) notice your trauma exposure responses as they show up in the process of unpacking harmful practices within social R&D, and 2) meet yourself with awareness and compassion as they surface.

Note: You may notice similarities between how the Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture and Trauma Exposure Responses manifest in you. These two frameworks are related in the ways they ask you to examine yourself, and the patterns or common themes you identify between them can be unlocking.

Trauma Exposure Responses

If you benefit from the Trauma Exposure Responses framework and/or share it with others, please make sure to credit and amplify Laura van Dernoot Lipsky and Connie Burk (authors of the book Trauma Stewardship) as its original sources, and shift your resources in the direction of their offerings.

- Feeling Helpless and Hopeless
- Minimizing
- Inability to Embrace Complexity
- A Sense That One Can Never Do Enough
- Diminished Creativity
- Chronic Exhaustion / Physical Ailments
- Inability to Listen / Deliberate Avoidance
- Dissociative Moments
- Sense of Persecution
- Guilt
- Grandiosity: An Inflated Sense of Importance Related to One's Work
- Fear
- Anger and Cynicism
- Inability to Empathize / Numbing
- Hypervigilance
- Addictions

Trauma Exposure Responses (van Derooy Lipsky & Burk, 2007)

Feeling Helpless and Hopeless

- “Why am I even getting out of bed?” / “What’s the point?” feeling
- Finding it hard to see that any progress is being made for positive social or environmental change
- The positive is eclipsed, and the negative exalted
- Successes, markers of improvement, and the opportunities for growth can be hard to keep in focus
- Feeling of overwhelm, as if nothing can remedy the situation
- A feeling of impotence, that any issue I work on, any awareness I raise, is just such an insignificant drop in the massive bucket of impending crisis

Minimizing

- Trivializing a current situation by comparing it with another situation that we regard as more dire
- Minimizing is not triaging or prioritizing, it is the experience of losing compassion and ability to empathize because we are comparing others’ suffering or putting it into a hierarchy
- May begin to minimize when we feel saturated to the point that we can’t possibly let any more information in
- Instead of being able to experience the given situation for what it is, we minimize what we are hearing or seeing. We do so in a desperate attempt to avoid hitting our breaking point.
- May come to a point when you feel as if nothing, ever again, will engage your empathy

Inability to Embrace Complexity

- Craving clear signs of good and bad and right and wrong
- Feel an urgent need to choose sides

A Sense That One Can Never Do Enough

- “I am not doing enough and I should be doing more.”
- The notion of scarcity (i.e. there’s not enough room for everyone) and “not enough-ness” can be viewed from a larger framework of systemic oppression

Diminished Creativity

- “When was the last time I had an original thought?”
- Bored with what you’re doing and can’t remember a time when you felt creative
- As a result >> joy decreases + may be less innovative at work
- Craving more structure and less creativity
- Resist change even when existing structures are out of date and detrimental to us personally and professionally

Chronic Exhaustion / Physical Ailments

- “Bone-tired, soul-tired, heart-tired kind of exhaustion - your body is tired, your mind is tired, your spirit is tired, your people are tired. You can’t remember a time when you weren’t tired.”
- Most likely to emerge among people who feel completely overwhelmed by the urgency of the tasks at hand, but it also affects workers who have a balanced sense of what they can and cannot accomplish. One underrecognized factor that may contribute to our level of fatigue is the belief that we have no choice about the work that we do. When we feel obligated, we very often feel tired.
- We can try so hard to keep from hitting rock bottom that we feel exhausted from the effort.
- A sense of fatigue can become an accepted part of a seasoned worker’s demeanour: “been around the block and seen a few things”, too cool for immature optimism

Trauma Exposure Responses (van Dernoot Lipsky & Burk, 2007)

Inability to Listen / Deliberate Avoidance

- The highlight of your work day is when you don't have to do your job. (e.g. meeting is cancelled)
- You choose not to answer your phone. You go out with people less and less - and if you do, it's with a specific group of folks who "get it," or else it's with people whom you're confident will engage with you only superficially.
- Feeling overwhelmed by our personal lives and losing energy for those things that once brought them joy: friends, family, yoga, sports, dancing, art, going out in general.
- If we let others get close to us, it's often others who are avoidant at the same levels we are, so we feel justified in our behaviour and don't see it as problematic in the least.

Dissociative Moments

- Can happen when a person experiences intrusive or overwhelming feelings.
- The experience of being engaged in your work and, for whatever reason, having something suddenly unhinge within you.
- "You realize that you have not heard the last five sentences of what someone just said, or maybe you failed to track the behaviour in front of you; you're not following the story at all."
- In dissociative moments, we cut ourselves off from our internal experience in order to guard against sensations and emotions that could be overwhelming to our system.

Sense of Persecution

- A state in which individuals, and eventually organizations, begin to thrive on choosing to remain powerless in the face of adversity
- Feeling a profound lack of efficacy in one's life

- Become convinced that others are responsible for our well-being and that we lack the personal agency to transform our circumstances.
- Succumb to a belief that we have no capacity to influence any outcome; consent to suffer and relinquish power over our personal experience to outside forces

Guilt

- Can undermine the possibility for authentic connection between people
- Can block any experience of pleasure, peace, or happiness
- Interrupts both our ability to be in the present moment and our ability to absorb all that is well in our lives
- Grapple with questions like:

How do we live in a world where there is such a disparity of resources?

What do we do to neutralize imbalance?

How do we participate in our own privileges in a responsible manner?

How can I cope with this, enjoy my life, and not be immobilized by guilt?

Grandiosity: An Inflated Sense of Importance Related to One's Work

- "Who else will do it if I'm not there?" or "I can't possibly leave, they're relying on me."
- Often keeps people in their work much longer than is perhaps best for them.
- Work becomes the center of our identity.
- Admittedly, many people feel content with an identity based solely on work, particularly when that work is exclusively focused on others. Work gives us an excuse not to focus on ourselves, our relationships, or our lives, which may be precarious or falling apart.

Trauma Exposure Responses (van Dernoot Lipsky & Burk, 2007)

Fear

- Can manifest in a number of ways: fear of intense feelings, of personal vulnerability, or of potential victimization
- Can squelch our ability to think creatively and well
- Many of us opt to disconnect from our feelings of fear because it hits a nerve of our own fragility in life

Anger and Cynicism

- May feel anger at sources of injustice, at the treatment from one's organization, or at the clients themselves.
- May experience a hot, reactive anger or more of a cold, slow anger.
- While anger is a natural feeling and in and of itself does no harm, cynicism is a sophisticated coping mechanism for dealing with anger and other intense feelings we might not know how to manage.
- Its undercurrent is anger, and yet it is often witty, quick, sharp, easy to laugh at, and incredibly alluring. When cynicism is our main mode of humor, it can warp our sense of the world around us.

Hypervigilance

- Transports us out of the present moment and keeps us anticipating what's next
- Often an attempt to restore safety and prevent any further victimization by anticipating and recognizing everything as a potential threat and acting accordingly
- Feeling like we're always "on"

Inability to Empathize / Numbing

- Often happens as a result of one's system being overwhelmed.
- "It is as if you are a sponge that is completely saturated and has never been wrung out."

- A pattern we often see is that people will get to a state of numbness, and their body and spirit and psyche will naturally try to regain a state of feeling. By now, we may have numbed out such intense feelings that any hint of experiencing them again, or of having any kind of strong emotional response, may be scary or distasteful or leave us feeling out of control.
- We can "numb out" by amping up the production of feelings to the point that one is basically indistinguishable from another, or by shutting down the mechanisms for registering these feelings.
- Alcohol and over-the-counter, prescription, and street drugs are among the best-known tools for turning up the volume or shutting off the system.

Addictions

- An addiction is an attachment so strong that it persists despite our understanding of its potentially destructive nature.
- There are the classic addictions: drug, alcohol, food, sex. But we can also be addicted to the rush of adrenaline - it's so tempting to stay wired when the alternative is to slow down enough to feel what is going on within and around us.
- It can be helpful to ask ourselves:

What am I most attached to?

What do I count on to help me numb out?

What would I be really resistant to giving up in my life?

- Overwork can become an addiction.

Response Audit Canvas

TRAUMA EXPOSURE RESPONSE	REMEMBERING ITS SERVICE How has this response served you to date? What has it allowed you to accomplish?	PATTERNS What thoughts precede and/or accompany this response? What feelings precede and/or accompany this response? What behaviours / actions (or lack thereof) precede and/or accompany this response?
CURRENT CONTEXT What contexts, people, and/or situations elicit this response in you now? CREATION CONTEXT What might have been the initial exposure(s) that elicited this response?		
SOMATIC IMPACT How / where do you experience this response in your body? (location, sensations, constriction, expansion) RELATIONAL IMPACT How does this response impact your relationships with others?		WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURE In your experience, which elements of white supremacy culture, if any, are linked to or contribute to this response?

Your Task

1. Pick the top two trauma exposure responses that you would like to examine in greater detail. Ideally these are the responses that you perceive as impacting you the most.
2. Complete the Response Audit Canvas once for each of the two responses. Get specific when you answer each section, dig deeper into how each response has and continues to manifest in your life.
3. Allocate 1-2 hours to complete this exercise, noting that you may want to complete it in parts rather than all in one sitting. Unearthing how trauma exposure response shows up for/in you can be disorienting, to say the least. Take breaks as needed and allow yourself compassion when hard things surface.

If you would like to print and/or complete this exercise on a larger version of this template, please find full-size, printable templates on the following pages.

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Response Audit Canvas

Part 01

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TRAUMA EXPOSURE RESPONSE	REMEMBERING ITS SERVICE How has this response served you to date? What has it allowed you to accomplish?	PATTERNS What thoughts precede and/or accompany this response? What feelings precede and/or accompany this response? What behaviours / actions (or lack thereof) precede and/or accompany this response?
CURRENT CONTEXT What contexts, people, and/or situations elicit this response in you now? CREATION CONTEXT What might have been the initial exposure(s) that elicited this response?		

Response Audit Canvas

Part 02

SOMATIC IMPACT

How / where do you experience this response in your body?
(location, sensations, constriction, expansion)

RELATIONAL IMPACT

How does this response impact your relationships with others?

WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURE

In your experience, which elements of white supremacy culture, if any, are linked to or contribute to this response?

Chapter Three

Why Does My Body React the Way it Does to this Work?

If we consider our bodies to be the site of our exploration with this work, this section is intended to help us create a brave space for exploration within ourselves. A brave space is one in which we can say: *I/we can have difficult and uncomfortable conversations but I never feel unsafe*. It does not conflate safety with comfort. Rather, it recognizes that bravery is needed because “*learning necessarily involves not merely risk, but the pain of giving up a former condition in favour of a new way of seeing things.*” (Boostrom, 1998).

In this chapter, we will:

- Explore what safety, belonging, and dignity feel like in our bodies, so we can distinguish when those needs are being met vs. denied or violated.
- Explore five categories of survival responses that our bodies may elicit in us when they perceive threat, so that we can better discern the sensations that arise in our bodies and whether they are responding to a threat from the past or the present.
- Learn a somatic practice - blending - that allows us to meet these survival responses with curiosity.
- Learn how we might apply the practice of blending in the context of processing shame.

Why Does My Body React the Way it Does to this Work?

Safety, Belonging & Dignity

The experience of trauma is deeply linked to our inherent needs for safety, belonging and dignity. In fact, the somatic definition of trauma is:

“Trauma is an experience, series of experiences, and/or impacts from social conditions, **that break or betray our inherent need for safety, belonging, and dignity.** They are experiences that result in us having to vie between these inherent needs, often setting one against the other. For example, it might leave us with the impact of “*I can be safe but not connected (isolated),*” or “*I have to give up my dignity to be safe or connected.*” ...**It splits safety, belonging, and dignity from each other, so that they are no longer co-supportive. We are then in an unwinnable internal struggle. We are fighting ourselves, because each of these needs are inherent. None can win out over the others.**”
([Haines, 2019](#))

Healing, on the other hand, is *“the embodied ability to reconnect safety, belonging, and dignity and have them serve one another, rather than be at odds with one another.”* ([Haines, 2019](#))

Need	Definition
------	------------

Safety	a state in which one is able to be both secure and vulnerable, authentic and without fear that this vulnerability will be used against them. Safety can also be described as the the ability to assess one’s environment, other people, and mutual concerns in a relaxed and open way. (Haines, 2019)
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Belonging	the feeling of being accepted and approved by a group or by society as a whole (American Psychological Association, 2020). This includes belonging to people (e.g. family, friends, community, etc.), place, culture, and landscape. (Haines, 2019)
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Dignity	our inherent value and worth as human beings; a sense of worthiness (Haines, 2019)
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Pause. Process. Integrate.

Reflection Prompts

On Embodying Safety, Belonging, and Dignity

In order to work toward healing the ways in which white supremacy culture and its affiliate systems of oppression have ruptured our ability to satisfy our inherent needs, we need to be able to understand what the presence and absence of these needs feel like in our bodies. The following reflection prompts are intended to help you establish that familiarity within yourself.

SAFETY

1. *When, where, and with whom do you feel the **most safe**?*
Where and how do you experience safety in your body?
2. *When, where, and with whom do you feel the **least safe**?*
Where and how do you experience a lack of safety in your body?

BELONGING

1. *When, where, and with whom do you feel the most belonging?*
Where and how do you experience belonging in your body?
2. *When, where, and with whom do you feel the least belonging?* Where and how do you experience a lack of belonging in your body?

DIGNITY

1. *When, where, and with whom do you feel the most dignified or worthy?*
Where and how do you experience dignity or worthiness in your body?
2. *When, where, and with whom do you feel the least dignified or worthy?*
Where and how do you experience a lack of dignity or worthiness in your body?

Pause. Process. Integrate.

Reflection Prompts

On Designing for Safety, Belonging, and Dignity

One way to mitigate harm and the potential of traumatizing or re-traumatizing in the name of research is to consider how your work and interactions may impact the sense of safety, belonging, and dignity of the people and communities with whom you are engaging. The following prompts are intended to help you think through this.

1. *What do safety, belonging, and dignity look like for the people and communities we are engaging?*

Note: Part of taking an equitable approach to designing research engagements means that we don't 1) project our own responses to these questions onto others or 2) assume that these needs manifest in a homogenous way across the populations we are engaging. That said, if you are starting a project without a sense of what safety, belonging, and dignity look like for those you are engaging, it may be a sign that you have not yet built the depth of relationship and trust you need with the community to be able to engage in a non-extractive, reciprocal way (Refer to the modules on Extraction and Reciprocity in Chapter 4 for more information).

2. *How have their senses of safety, belonging, and/or dignity been broken by research engagements in the past?*

Note: Remember that trauma is passed through generations, so it's important to look into historical forces that shaped and continue to shape the lived experiences of the people and communities being engaged in the present-day. How we uncover these histories is also key, as we want to avoid re-traumatizing people and communities in the name of historical research.

3. *How might we ensure that present-day and future research engagements do not re-entrench the same harmful dynamics?*
4. *How might our current way of engaging with a participant or community put their inherent needs for safety, belonging, and dignity at odds with each other? In other words, how might the design of our research engagement potentially cause or reinforce trauma? How might we design experiences in which an individual's safety, belonging, and dignity are co-supportive and serve each other?*

Somatic Practice

On Safety

The following is a body practice that author and trauma specialist Resmaa Menakem shares in his book, My Grandmother's Hands.

If you benefit from this practice and/or share it with others, please make sure to credit and amplify the lineage of this practice and shift your resources in the direction of Menakem's offerings. Refer to the modules on Lineage and Extraction in Chapter 4 to understand why these conditions are non-negotiable.



[Click here](#) to listen to the practice on Spotify

“Sit quietly and comfortably for a minute or two, breathing normally. Notice your breath as it enters your nose, your windpipe, your lungs. For thirty seconds, simply follow as it goes in and out of your body.

Then bring your attention to the bottom of your feet. Sense the ground beneath them, supporting you. Stay focused here for a few breaths.

Move your attention to your back, to the sensation of it pressing lightly against the chair. Feel the chair supporting you, doing what it was designed to do.

Now think of a person or a pet or a place that makes you feel safe and secure. Imagine you're with that person or pet, or in that safe place. Let yourself experience that safety and security for a few seconds.

Now check in with your body. Start with the shoulders. How do they feel? Relaxed or constricted? Closed or open?

What about your neck? Your jaw? Your major joints - your ankles, knees, hips, wrists, elbows, and shoulders? Your back? Your sphincter? Your toes?

Stay with the experience for a couple of breaths. Notice if anything arises or changes, such as a vibration, a sensation, an image, an emotion, an impulse, or a meaning.

Now imagine the comforting person, pet, or place is gone. Instead, there's an angry stranger standing in front of you. The stranger's arms are crossed and he or she is glaring at you silently.

You look into the stranger's eyes, hoping his or her expression will soften, but it remains unchanged.

Check in with your body again. How do your shoulders feel? Your neck? Your jaw? Your back? Your sphincter? Your toes?

Gently, one by one, feel into all the places in your body where you sense constriction. Let your attention rest briefly in each one.

Now send the angry stranger away. Bring back the comforting person, place, or pet. For several breaths, relax in the safety this presence provides.

Now, gently, move your attention through your body, from your head to your toes, one more time. Feel into each spot where you sense softness. Stay with each of these for one to two seconds."

Unpacking Our Survival Strategies and Shaping

When our inherent needs for safety, belonging, and/or dignity are threatened, or when traumatic experiences occur, our bodies respond in automatic, protective, and adaptive ways. This includes five types of survival strategies, including: **fight, flight, freeze, appease, and dissociate.**

The following table defines each response and outlines how each can manifest in one's soma or life, based on definitions and descriptions shared by somatic practitioner Staci K. Haines, in The Politics of Trauma.

If you benefit from this language and/or share it with others, please make sure to credit and amplify the lineage of this practice and shift your resources in the direction of her offerings (Refer to the modules on Lineage and Extraction in Chapter 4 to understand why these conditions are non-negotiable).

Note: In this section, I use the language of “survival strategies”, “survival shaping”, “survival response”, “protective response”, and “protective patterning” all interchangeably.

Types of Survival Strategies

Flight

Definition Flight, fleeing or running away, is the impulse and action of getting out or away from a threatening person, experience, or situation. This can happen at a subtle level (increased attention and a slight turning away), or at a gross level (literally running away, moving away, leaving someone or some situation).

It can show up in your soma or life like:

- Leaning away from contact or engagement in your somatic shape. A backing up, or angling away from, that feels “normal” to you.
- Leaving, ending a conversation, relationship, not hanging in - is a relief. May feel “safer” even though it does not take care of your life and your commitments.
- A repeated internal dialogue that is about leaving, escaping, planning for how to and when to leave uncomfortable, but not threatening situations.
- An identity built around the above. *“I am not a person who hangs on,” “I don’t like staying around for the end,” “I am better alone,”* etc.

All survival strategy definitions and manifestations are from [The Politics of Trauma](#), by Staci K. Haines.

Fight

Definition Fighting is the protective mobilization to threaten, get bigger than, position and defend, and intimidate to ward off or dissipate threat.

Fight as a survival response is this: the best defense is a good offense. If I threaten, perhaps you will not harm me. Or, because you are harming me, I will fight you off.

It can show up in your soma or life like:

- A defensive or positioned, immovable shape - jaw and/or chest stuck out slightly, making yourself bigger, clenching your fists.
- A hardening or thickening of the body - organizing to be impermeable.
- Making yourself bigger and louder. Taking up space physically, relationally, with your voice or presence. This may feel “normal” to you.
- An automatic “no.” Having automatic avoidance and boundaries that don’t take care of you or those you care about.
- A lack of feeling or access to your self and body. Or, a tension, pressure, and pushing outward, feeling “normal” to you. A pressure internally to act externally.
- Engaging or creating conversation and situations that have conflict, or are difficult. These may feel like “safer” ways to relate, even when they do not take care of your life and commitments.
- Distrusting people “getting along” or agreeing. Only trusting people who can fight with you.
- Separating, critiquing, hardening as an automatic way of being. The critiquing or separating feeling “safer” than connecting or softening.

All survival strategy definitions and manifestations are from [The Politics of Trauma](#), by Staci K. Haines.

Freeze

Definition Fight and flight are mobilizing us into action. Freeze is mobilizing us into nonaction.

Often people will be frustrated with themselves, wondering, “*Why didn’t I scream, why didn’t I fight back, why didn’t I run?*” It is so important to know that, during a freeze response, you can’t do any of those things. You are temporarily immobilized - cannot speak or move, so as to survive.

Freezing is not passive consent. It is a sign of intense threat and danger.

It can show up in your soma or life like:

- A general numbness, not feeling, or a stillness in your body and emotions. Sensation or emotions may feel overwhelming, and numbing may feel “normal” to you.
- Conversations that have conflict, too many choices, or even pleasure may have you go “blank,” when you can’t think of what to do or say next.
- Being away from stimulation, even positive situations, may feel “safer,” even though it does not take care of your life and your commitments.
- An internal dialogue that is about numbing, not feeling, or shame of inaction.
- An identity built around thinking, “*I am self-contained,*” “*I don’t have many needs,*” “*I am detached,*” or “*I can’t act.*”
- Allowing for little stimulation or aliveness somatically (including pleasure), even when it does not take care of you or your life. This can be read as a lack of authenticity because you cannot come out to allow for contact and connection.

All survival strategy definitions and manifestations are from [The Politics of Trauma](#), by Staci K. Haines.

Appease

Definition Appeasing is the protective mobilization to pacify, placate, become smaller than and less threatening, so as to ward off threat or dissipate it.

The basic communication of appeasing is, *“I won’t hurt you, don’t hurt me.” “I’m not threatening, don’t hurt me.”*

It can show up in your soma or life like:

- A shape of apology - a more collapsed chest, automatically nodding in agreement and conceding space to others. Apologizing often.
- Making oneself small, not taking up space physically, relationally, with one’s voice or presence. This may feel “normal” to you.
- Not having direct boundaries based on your own needs and concerns. Shaping yourself to fit others’ needs and desires, while often abandoning your own.
- A lack of feeling or access to your self and body. Or, a pressure and collapse in the chest, stomach, and tissues feel “normal” to you.
- Avoiding conversations and situations that have conflict and difficult decisions with others. Finding yourself trying to “keep the peace.”
- Appeasing, apologizing, and letting others have their way may feel “safer” even though it does not take care of your life and your desires.

All survival strategy definitions and manifestations are from [The Politics of Trauma](#), by Staci K. Haines.

Dissociate

Definition Dissociation is the protective mobilization to get away without physically leaving, to numb awareness and feeling, to check out so as not to be there for whatever is happening. It is a way of fleeing without leaving the room. Dissociation can happen at a subtle level like leaving your eyes, spacing out briefly, shrinking inside of yourself, thinking of someplace else while someone is talking to you, or just not quite remembering the interaction. Or, it can happen at a gross level, such as leaving your body or present time to “come back” later, numbing yourself to an experience by removing some vital part of your awareness, disappearing outside or inside yourself where no one can get to you. It can often be combined with feeling foggy, and not clearheaded, and not remembering short or long periods of time.

It can show up in your soma or life like:

- A shape that is more floaty, otherworldly, not quite there. A dispersed energy up (toward the head) and out.
- Not very present in the eyes, or to the touch. Pulled out of the eyes and away from the surface of the skin.
- Very sensitive to others’ moods, emotions, and shifts in energy and movements, but not present to your own, or not feeling yourself or others deeply.
- Physically, emotionally, and/or relationally checked out, or numb feeling more “normal.”
- A somatic organization of being tucked deep inside the guts and body - where no one can reach or find you.
- Avoiding or at times not remembering conversations and situations that have emotional intensity - from conflict, to difficult decisions with others, to love.

All survival strategy definitions and manifestations are from [The Politics of Trauma](#), by Staci K. Haines.

While the specific response might look different in each person depending on their particular context and social conditions, all five protective responses share some common characteristics across all people:

- They are **inherent** (i.e. we did not have to learn them).
- They are **automatic** (i.e. we do not consciously control them).
- They are **influenced by nature** (i.e. inherited through evolution and the biologies of those who birthed us) **and nurture** (i.e. shaped by the interpersonal, cultural, and social context in which we live).
- They are **wise and intelligent** (i.e. there is no one response that is better than the other. Our body makes an assessment based on what it knows in the moment - through sensations, impressions, reading of others and the environment - and issues the response it deems as most effective in preserving safety, belonging, and/or dignity in that moment. This is the case even if you feel like another option may have worked better.)
- Each of us is born with the **innate capacity** to fight, flee, freeze, appease, and dissociate as protective responses to threat and violence. Most of us are using a combination of these as our key survival strategies. Our primary survival strategy may also be different based on the context (e.g. public vs. intimate settings, home vs. work, etc.)
- They are **holistic impulses** that engage our musculature, chemistry, brain, emotional state, relational state, and energy.
- When a protective response is mobilized and is able to **enact and express successfully**, all of the mobilization is spent, the breath and body relax, and we don't have symptoms of PTSD, ongoing contraction, and trapped energy from the escape.
- When a protective response is mobilized in the body but **does not get to be fully expressed or completed** because the circumstances don't allow it, the chemicals, emotions, and

physiological responses that were mobilized are still there. These unprocessed impulses then get stuck and become stored in tissues, musculature, and nervous systems. They become embodied.

- In addition to being stored unprocessed in our bodies, **these protective impulses often generalize once we have been hurt or endangered.** They assume the harm will happen again and as a result can't "put down the defenses." The generalization is adaptive, on some level, because being able to anticipate stresses means we are better able to survive. That said, the downside is that these generalized survival responses can take a toll on our bodies when stress increases, and on our relationships when mistrust increases. This can in turn end up compromising the very needs - safety, belonging, and dignity - that the survival responses were intended to protect, instead creating disconnection and suffering.
- When these survival responses are generalized as a consistent strategy, **they can "take over" under threat,** even though the context may have changed and you may have more choices and power now. The response shows up in our automatic and unconscious actions, nonactions, beliefs, ways of being, and ways of relating.
- **Social and cultural conditions** tend to accept and encourage certain survival responses in certain peoples, genders, and groups, and discourage them in others. For example, immigrant women of colour who work as domestic workers in North America have been socialized towards appeasing, and away from fight (which would likely elicit more violence). On the other hand, gender training in a U.S. context encourages men to fight and looks down upon them when they flee. This social shaping is not only integrated into our survival responses, but it also influences how we feel about our responses afterwards (e.g. men who flee may experience shame).

- Given how deeply this safety shaping is embodied within us, **trying to talk someone out of it, “fix” it, or override it will not work.** Instead, the process of healing requires that we “*get to know them [the survival impulses] on their terms, honor how they have protected us, and through somatic processes, free up the contractions and withheld energy so that these survival responses are not “over-applied.”*” The goal is to get to a place where our survival responses don’t “*become who we are; rather, they are there in times of danger, and can relax and let go again once the acute danger has passed. We want to be able to make choices, based on current time and situation, accounting for our current skills, power, and competencies today. To take actions and build relationships centered in our values and what is important to us instead of reactions based in trauma calling the shots.*” (Haines, 2019)

Pause. Process. Integrate.

Reflection Prompts

On Survival Strategies

1. *At first glance, which strategies in the Types of Survival Strategies table feel most familiar to you with respect to how you tend to respond?*
2. *Do the ways in which your dominant strategies show up in your soma and life, as they are listed in the Types of Survival Strategies table, resonate? If so, which somatic manifestations feel the most familiar to your experience? Are there any somatic symptoms that you associate with your dominant strategies that aren't listed in the table?*
3. *Are there certain survival strategies that you perceive as more favourable or desirable compared to others? How does your social and cultural conditioning either reinforce or challenge these perceptions?*

Unpacking Survival Shaping Canvas

“I have had to learn to invite my broken heart to dine with me at the table. It is meaningless to run now. My broken heart is not a judgment or a crime. It is a detailed record of how I have tried to meet the violence of the world with as much openness as possible.” - Lama Rod Owens, Love and Rage: The Path of Liberation through Anger

The following activity, called the *Unpacking Survival Strategies Canvas*, facilitates a deeper awareness and nuanced assessment of how your dominant survival strategies manifest in your life.

Unpacking Survival Strategies Canvas

SURVIVAL STRATEGY 	PATTERNS What thoughts precede and/or accompany this survival strategy?	JUDGEMENTS What judgements do you have about this survival strategy?
CONTEXT What people / contexts / settings / situations elicit this survival strategy in you?	What feelings precede and/or accompany this survival strategy?	WHO ELSE Who else in your life displays this survival strategy? How do you experience it?
SOMATIC IMPACT How does this strategy manifest in / for you somatically?	REMEMBERING ITS SERVICE How has this survival strategy served you to date / in the past?	REMEMBERING ITS COST How has this survival strategy cost you to date / in the past?
RELATIONAL IMPACT What has been the relational impact of you employing this survival strategy?		

Your Task

1. Pick your top 2-3 survival strategies from the table above and move through the Canvas once with each strategy. If you are unsure as to which ones are your dominant strategies, share the Types of Survival Strategies table with a trusted friend(s) who knows you well and ask them to identify which ones they perceive you embodying the most.
2. Allocate 1-3 hours to complete this exercise, noting that you may want to complete it in parts rather than all in one sitting. Becoming conscious of our survival strategies can be disorienting, to say the least. Take breaks as needed and allow yourself compassion when hard things surface.

If you would like to print and/or complete this exercise on a larger version of this template, please find full-size, printable templates on the following pages.

The *Unpacking Survival Strategies Canvas* was developed by Mathura Mahendren, and is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) 2.5 Canada License. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/> If you would like to use the *Unpacking Survival Strategies Canvas* in a commercial way (e.g. using it in your coaching, consulting, facilitation, teaching, workshops etc. where you are charging clients, attendees, and/or students for your offering) please get in touch at hello@dismantlingthemasterstools.com to purchase a license to use the tool. (Refer to the modules on Lineage and Extraction in Chapter 4 to understand why these conditions are non-negotiable).

Unpacking Survival Strategies Canvas Part 01

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SURVIVAL STRATEGY	PATTERNS What thoughts precede and/or accompany this survival strategy? What feelings precede and/or accompany this survival strategy? What other survival strategies, if any, tend to precede and/or accompany this one?	JUDGEMENTS What judgements do you have about this survival strategy?
CONTEXT What people / contexts / settings / situations elicit this survival strategy in you?		WHO ELSE Who else in your life displays this survival strategy? How do you experience it?

Unpacking Survival Strategies Canvas

Part 02

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SOMATIC IMPACT

How does this strategy manifest in / for you somatically?

REMEMBERING ITS SERVICE

How has this survival strategy served you to date / in the past?

REMEMBERING ITS COST

How has this survival strategy cost you to date / in the past?

RELATIONAL IMPACT

What has been the relational impact of you employing this survival strategy?

Blending: Joining with the Contraction

Acknowledging harm, whether we have experienced it or caused it, can bring up a series of uncomfortable sensations and emotions within oneself. When this discomfort arises, it is often our tendency to resist it, to want to make it go away, to want to “fix” it, and/or to want to feel something different. Especially if our sense of self, our internal narrative, or our reputations feel threatened by this new information, it makes sense that our instinct is to deny it or want to make it go away. These are our survival strategies in motion.^[1]

Blending is a somatic practice that involves “*joining with a contraction or habituated shaping in the soma, rather than trying to break it up or unlock it.*” (Haines, 2019) Blending asks us to be very curious about what is - even and especially when it’s uncomfortable - and then supporting what is, or moving with it, in the direction it is going. Somatic practitioner Staci K. Haines clarifies that blending is not necessarily agreeing with the protective patterning or saying that whatever you are blending with is true. Instead, “*it is a way to be with a contraction, an emotion, a belief, a conversation, and even an action, that looks for what is at the center of it, where it’s going, and what it is trying to take care of.*” (Haines, 2019) We blend in order to get to know the core impulse inside of something, and to work with it effectively. We blend in order to help release the contractions in the tissues that hold so much unprocessed history.

Blending as a practice is based on the understanding that our protective patterns are intelligent and hold important information about what they are protecting and why. Blending recognizes that,

“...fighting against a survival strategy, or against the way the soma has organized to protect, does not work. It puts us at odds with ourselves and with others. We can stay in this struggle for a very long time, preventing healing, connection, learning, and the regeneration of safety and change.” (Haines, 2019)

[1] In this section, I use the language of “survival shaping”, “survival strategies”, “survival response”, “protective response”, and “protective patterning” all interchangeably.

In practice, blending asks us to be curious in our conversations and touch. When we experience discomfort or a contraction in response to a learning (or generally), blending involves asking:

- What has this somatic contraction been taking care of?
What has it served?
- When did it get established, or how long has it been around?
- How does it work?
- If it had an impulse to act, what is the action?
To hit, to run, to disappear?
- Where is it in the body?
- How does it harden?
- How dense is it? How much space does it take up?
- How much space do you have when it has hardened?

According to Haines, “*In supporting the contraction, slackness, or numbness - physically and verbally - the soma will begin to tell its story.*” Through supporting the contraction, we take on the holding for the soma, which deeply validates these adaptive responses. This support, rather than trying to edit or change the shaping, sees it, hears it, and listens to it on its own terms. This in turn lets us discover its purpose and what it’s taking care of underneath the surface behaviour or contraction. Blending supports the contractions in softening.

It is important that this curiosity is genuine, as the shaping can sense if your intention is to know it to get rid of it versus knowing it to be able to connect with it on its own terms. If it senses the former, it’s likely that it will read your curiosity as dangerous or even life-threatening and strengthen its hold accordingly. Think of going into a conversation with a friend, partner, or colleague with the intention to prove them wrong or change their mind, versus being curious about their motivations and perspective. It’s likely the latter will elicit trust and ease in a way that will result in a more genuine, less defensive exchange.

As the shaping reveals the responses to these questions, blending asks us to support this shaping somatically, emotionally, and verbally in exactly the direction it's going. We want to verbally and physically affirm what it is doing and how it is doing it. We want to acknowledge how long it has been taking care of what it's been taking care of.

Dimension What Blending Looks Like in This Dimension

- Physical**
- Supporting and taking on the pressure of a contraction for the body, supporting it in the direction it's going, rather than trying to "open it up."
 - e.g. We might support the curving in of the shoulders, the contraction of the thighs, the denseness in the chest, or the disappearing of the pelvis.
-

- Emotional**
- Lingering with and making room for the emotions that are there, again not immediately moving to solve, understand, or even express them.
 - Staying with the sensation of the emotion, its location in the body, and making space for its own shape and movement.
 - e.g. Sadness may start as heaviness in the chest, or an aching heart. If we stay with it, it may then be a pressure in the throat, and then come forward as tears or sobbing, and sound. This may be strange to break down, but most of us have gotten so good at over-containing, fixing, or even blurting out our emotions, that the somatic process can get overridden.
-

- Verbal**
- Being present with and affirming the embodied narrative. This does not inherently mean agreeing with the narrative.
 - Matching the language that the contraction uses to describe itself. For example, if you perceive that it feels broken, and you instead use the word "damaged" to describe it, it can resonate differently in the soma. The contraction may feel misunderstood, which may impact its openness to revealing more of itself to you.
-

In summary, blending is a tool that allows us to be curious about our survival shaping, even when some of the consequences of this shaping may be inconvenient or frustrating in present-time. It allows us to be present with the contraction for long enough to get to know its somatic shape and how it lives in our tissues. With this awareness, we can inquire further to understand the purpose it is serving.

Somatic Practice

Somatic Demonstration of Blending: The Fist

While the experience of blending is actually quite visceral, it's natural to be confused about what exactly this looks like in practice. The following is a somatic demonstration that author and somatic practitioner Staci K. Haines shares in her book, The Politics of Trauma.

If you benefit from this practice and/or share it with others, please make sure to credit and amplify the lineage of this practice and shift your resources in the direction of Haines's offerings (Refer to the modules on Lineage and Extraction in Chapter 4 to understand why these conditions are non-negotiable).



[Click here](#) to listen to the practice on Spotify

Take your hand and make a fist. Make it tight like it is taking care of or protecting something important to you. Pay attention to the sensations you feel in your hand and the rest of you as you do this. Then, take your other hand and try to pry your fist open, as if you're trying to get it to change or act differently.

What happens? What do you feel in your fist, and the rest of you? What's the quality of relationship with your other hand? Are there any thoughts or feelings that accompany this interaction? Now, you can let that go.

Next, make a fist again, the same way. Then with the other hand, bring a sense of listening and curiosity, with no agenda for it to change. Wrap your other hand around the fist like you are present with it, and gently support it in the direction it's going. The fist may want more soft or more firm support. Do whatever feels better to the fist.

What happens? What do you feel in your fist, and the rest of you? What is the quality of the relationship with your other hand? Are there any thoughts or feelings that accompany this interaction? How does it compare with the first interaction where the other hand was trying to pry the fist open?

Take a moment to pause and jot down your reflections about the two interactions before continuing with this meditation.

The first interaction was the equivalent of fighting the soma's survival strategy or protective patterning. Many people report that in response to trying to pry the fist open, it gets tighter and resists the opening. They report that they hold their breath, that there's animosity between the hands. For some, the felt sense of the resistance may also give rise to an emotional reaction in addition to physical sensations.

The second interaction was a demonstration of blending. Many people report that in response to supporting their fist, it relaxes more. They report that their breath deepens, and that there is a good feeling between the hands. While blending with the contraction may seem counter-intuitive, especially when we may be struggling with the consequences of this survival shaping, this exercise can help us feel the shifts that quality blending can bring in the soma. When we are curious about what the contraction (whether that's numbness or overactivity) has been

taking care of, and when we support the contraction in the direction it is going, the soma will change. Blending allows the protective impulse to feel safe and supported enough to soften, enliven, and share the story of its origin and purpose so that we may help it process or complete with an awareness of its intelligence, rather than a denial or demeaning of it.

The Fist can be a helpful and embodied example of how you can hold compassion for the discomfort that arises within your soma when unpacking the ways in which your beliefs, narratives, and ways of working may have caused harm, either to yourself or others.

Pause. Process. Integrate.

Reflection Prompts

On Blending

1. *What is/was your first impression of blending as a somatic practice?*
2. *Did you experience any resistance to “going in the direction of the contraction”? If so, what thoughts, feelings, and/or judgements accompanied this resistance?*
3. *Did you do The Fist exercise? If so, what was your experience of it? Was there anything unexpected that happened? Anything that surprised you?*

**“Do the best you can until you know better.
Then when you know better, do better.”**

Maya Angelou

Shame, Blending, and Doing Better

It is not uncommon to experience contractions that protect against shame when working through this toolkit, whether you are someone who was harmed, who caused harm, or both. *“Shame is the generalized sense that we are wrong, bad, tainted, stupid, that it is all our fault. It is a deep and often hidden feeling that something is very wrong with us. Shame is the pervasive sense that we are wrong, not that we did something wrong.”* ([Haines, 2019](#))

Blending with shame in particular can feel extremely counterintuitive. It can feel like we are agreeing with and reinforcing the idea that we are wrong. However, as previously discussed, blending is not necessarily about agreeing with the contraction. Rather, it’s about moving with it in the direction it’s going and connecting with it on its own terms. In *The Politics of Trauma*, Staci K. Haines shares about the somatic role of shame:

“The impulse inside shame is to **hide, disconnect, and make sure no one finds out about who we “really” are**...It often feels like if shame is seen, all will be lost...like other survival shaping, shame has a protective role - it is taking care of us by hiding what is too overwhelming to face, and by giving us a sense of agency in a context where agency may have been taken away from us. **Shame takes care of helplessness**...Underneath...shame-based contractions, are the deeper wounds of trauma. These are the experiences of helplessness, terror, deep grief, agony, abandonment,

and rage. These are very difficult experiences and emotions to face and to feel. **Shame becomes a distraction to these, keeping our attention on what's wrong with us instead. Shame, in this protective way, also allows us some agency. Some sense of still having power by it being "our fault."** Helplessness, abandonment, and even rage can be overwhelmingly vulnerable...Helplessness is one of the most difficult and traumatizing experiences. Whether we were helpless to protect ourselves, or helpless to save or protect another, it can be devastating. At some point in the process of healing shame, our helplessness is met. We take on so many strategies and contractions to avoid helplessness. Meeting it, being able to be with it, with the support of another, is freeing. Eventually we can move from feeling like we won't survive feeling our helplessness, to its being processed and integrated. Once the charge and contractions have moved from the soma, we can arrive into a clearer state of acceptance: *"I was helpless. I had very few choices given the context...I could not make more of a difference then."* From our current state of resourcefulness, resilience, and development, we can be with helplessness of the past. We can also develop the ability to hold the contradiction that now we have power, choice, and volition, while helplessness is also part of our real experience." ([Haines, 2019](#))

Blending with shame involves asking *"What is shameful about me?"* or *"What is bad or wrong about me?"* and is most effective when done with a trusted practitioner or practice partner. It's about acknowledging the answers that come up in response to that question, rather than trying to talk ourselves out of it or get away from it. With enough rounds of asking these questions and affirming the responses that arise, the contraction begins to melt. Deeper experiences of trauma can surface, including potential experiences of helplessness and powerlessness that drove the shame into us in

the first place. Somatically, this “melting” can look different for different people, as we allow what has been stored, compartmentalized, and contracted to be felt, moved, and processed. This may include terror, trembling, crying, heating up, sweating, sobbing, grieving, relaxing of organs, the hips feeling the ground, becoming quiet yet alive. This somatic opening and release are followed by a completion of that particular cycle. This doesn’t necessarily mean that you’ve rid yourself of all the shame, but rather that whatever was stored in that particular contraction that was accessed through this opening was processed and released.

In addition to freeing up somatic space and energy, this processing is crucial in the process of acknowledging and, where it makes sense, repairing harm. While carrying experiences of shame, helplessness, and powerlessness are by no means an excuse for justifying harm caused as a result, uncovering and processing these experiences can help facilitate accountability, healing, and reconciliation in ways that are grounded in our current capacity, power, and skills. It allows us to embody, again and again, Dr. Maya Angelou’s words, *“Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.”*

Chapter Four

How is Social R&D Harmful and How Can We Do Better?

In this section we test the foundations we've built in previous chapters as we dive deep into some predominant beliefs and accompanying practices that have been the source of great harm in the name of social R&D.

In this chapter, we will:

- Unpack each harmful belief or practice, where it comes from, why we may subscribe to it, how it is reinforced, who it benefits, and what it costs us.
- Explore an alternative practice (for each harmful belief or practice), that is rooted in generative refusal*.
- Reflect on the ways in which we may embody these harmful beliefs or practices in our lives, consciously or unconsciously, and question whether they are in alignment with our guiding declarations.

***Remember,** “generative refusal not only refuses colonialism, but it affirms a different present by generating different worlds – worlds that centre the material and spiritual needs of the community.” (Simpson, 2017).

How is Social R&D Harmful and How Can We Do Better?

Predominant Beliefs & Alternative Practices

This chapter is set up as a series of interconnected modules in which we explore a **predominant belief or practice within social R&D that is rooted in systems of oppression**, and follow it up with an **alternative practice that is rooted in generative refusal**. We will do this a few times, with several different beliefs and practices.

- We will interrogate the **Myth Of Objectivity**, and understand how we might resist it by **Unpacking Our Personal Lineages**.
- We will interrogate **The Mind-Body Split & Disembodiment**, and understand how we might resist it by **Honouring Lived Experience**.
- We will interrogate **Extraction**, and understand how we might resist it by **Acknowledging Lineage** and **Embodying Reciprocity**.

PREDOMINANT BELIEF	ALTERNATIVE PRACTICE
The Myth of Objectivity	Unpacking our Personal Lineages
The Mind-Body Split & Disembodiment	Honouring Lived Experience
Extraction	Acknowledging Lineage Embodying Reciprocity

While each predominant belief and/or practice has been “matched” to a particular alternative practice, they are all interconnected. All of the predominant beliefs reinforce each other and all of the alternative practices hold more weight when embodied together.

Furthermore, the fact that these predominant beliefs and/or practices have caused harm doesn’t necessarily mean that they haven’t also been useful to us. The intention with these deep dives is less to pathologize these beliefs, and more to investigate how the ways in which we engage in research might be shaped by systems of oppression. With this understanding, we can weigh their benefits against their costs to make a more informed assessment about their utility to us.

To support this exploration, each module concludes with a set of reflection prompts. While it may be faster or more convenient to skip over them, the pauses and the spaces between the words are where the internalization and integration of new learning happens. Taking the time to interrogate your relationship to each belief or practice, connecting with any dissonance or discomfort that emerges, and moving through it with the tools you now have from previous chapters of this toolkit, is where the real work lies.

The Myth of Objectivity

“We are living in the incarceration of a single way.”

- Bayo Akomolafe

One of the myths that continues to persist in the world of research, and within that, the world of social R&D, is that we as researchers are objective, neutral beings. The myth of objectivity is pervasive not only in social R&D, but more broadly, it is a key characteristic of white supremacy culture. According to this myth, researchers are neutral vessels that collect, process, and interpret information objectively, without influence from their personal feelings or opinions. It is fuelled by the belief that emotions are inherently destructive and irrational and should not play a role in research. It invalidates people who show emotion, requires people to think in a linear fashion, and diminishes any thinking that doesn't appear logical to those in power ([Jones & Okun, 2001](#)). This persistent denial of subjectivity also contributes to harm and abuse in the form of gaslighting, i.e. the act of manipulating a person by forcing them to question their thoughts, memories, and the events occurring around them. It creates a false hierarchy where those who think are placed higher than those who feel, as though we don't all have both of these faculties and as though our thoughts and feelings don't influence each other. It plays into and reinforces that men are thinkers and women are feelers and prioritizes the value of the former over the latter. It is in play when an idea that is initially dismissed when proposed passionately by a woman of colour at the table, is all of a sudden picked up and lauded when the same or similar idea is re-tabled in a “more mea-

sured, matter-of-fact tone” by a white colleague. These are a few of many ways in which the myth of objectivity holds up the historically privileged. It is linked to the belief that there is only one right way, only one way to interpret a situation, and conveniently affords that so-called objective judgement to those in power - or in our case, the researchers over the participants.

The myth of objectivity also invisibilizes the ways in which researchers, participants, and their shared interactions all influence each other and shape not only what is shared, but also what is heard and documented. The researcher’s biases about the communities they are engaging will shape both what they ask and what they hear. Their hypotheses about the research question will influence which insights stand out as relevant. The researcher’s emotional state will determine how they interpret participant responses. And their personal and professional stakes in the project will be weighed when they decide which findings to share and how to share them. On the flip side, participant engagement is shaped by their perception of the researcher, the biases they hold, and what they feel is expected of them. In the words of author and professor Robin Wall Kimmerer, while science may be “*rigorous in separating the observer from the observed, and the observed from the observer*,” the lived experience of a research interaction transcends the arbitrary divides erected by the myth of objectivity (Kimmerer, 2013). Both the researcher and the participant are inevitably affected by the other. In the words of science fiction author Octavia E. Butler,

“All that we touch, we change, all that we change, changes us.”

While we as researchers are often quick to accept that we can affect change on those we touch, we are less attuned to the ways in which the participants we engage with and the biases we hold about them can change us and how we show up. That would mean having to admit that we are at least in part subjective, that knowledge is relational, and that we see others through the lens of our own lived experience and social conditioning.

The myth of objectivity is linked to the erasure of the body and the supremacy of the mind over the body, emotions, and spirit that happens within academia and social R&D. In the words of author and professor bell hooks,

“The erasure of the body encourages us to think that we are listening to neutral, objective facts, facts that are not particular to who is sharing the information. We are invited to teach information as though it does not emerge from bodies.”

bell hooks

She goes on to share, *“The restrictive, repressive classroom ritual insists that emotional responses have no place. Whenever emotional responses erupt, many of us believe our academic purpose has been diminished. To me this is really a distorted notion of intellectual practice, since the underlying assumption is that to be truly intellectual we must be cut off from our emotions.”* (hooks, 1994) Some of the resistance to subjectivity - or the realm of the emotions, the physical, and the spiritual - may also be because we as researchers do not feel equipped to navigate these realms within a research context. We will unpack more of the role of the mind-body split in an upcoming module.

The myth of objectivity is upheld by the people who stand to benefit the most from the credibility it affords them. That said, as with most toxic beliefs and systems, it is harmful to everyone involved. The myth of objectivity is harmful to participants because it removes the responsibility of the researchers to examine and mitigate their biases about the communities they are working with, by assuming they have none. It privileges the assessment of the researcher over the lived experience of the researched. It sets researchers up to re-traumatize and misrepresent the communities

they are engaging with under the guise of “*we’re giving them a voice.*” The myth of objectivity is harmful to researchers because it treats them as information-gathering robots and completely negates that they are impacted and shaped by what they hear. And when we assume researchers aren’t affected by their work, there is no need for them to be supported in working through this impact, which then absolves institutions and organizations of the responsibility of caring for their researchers.

All of that said, there are ways out of the myth of objectivity. As researchers, some of the antidotes to the myth of objectivity include developing an examined and ongoing understanding of our personal lineage, the stories that we hold, and the ways in which we are predisposed by our own lived experiences to make harmful assumptions about those we are engaging in a research interaction. It involves naming these biases and taking steps to mitigate them in ways that push past just shifting mental models and rather unravel the ways in which these biases are embodied in our bodies, relationships, organizations, and systems. It involves acknowledging the ways in which we are affected by the work that we do, and seeing that as natural rather than pathologizing it as “too involved” or “too attached” or “too sensitive.”

Pause. Process. Integrate.

Reflection Prompts

On Objectivity

1. *How do you define objectivity? What experiences have shaped or reinforced this definition for you?*
2. *Do you believe that there are situations in which you can be entirely objective? Why or why not?*
3. *What is your relationship to your emotions vs. your thoughts? Do you experience one as more legitimate than the other? If so, why?*
4. *Who have you typically associated with objectivity or experienced as objective?*
5. *How has the assumption of researchers as objective vessels served you? How has it cost you?*
6. *What other norms, beliefs, or practices within the field of research and academia would be called into question if we questioned the myth of objectivity?*
7. *(How) have you or people around you been pathologized for showing emotion?*

Unpacking Personal Lineage

“History is not the past, it is the present. We carry our history with us. We are our history.” - James Baldwin

In this toolkit and in my work, I define *lineage* as who, what, and/or where something comes from. In that vein, I define *personal lineage* as who, what, and/or where someone comes from. Personal lineage includes the gender norms we grew up with, our racial and ethnic backgrounds, our relationship to sexuality, our class background, the social and cultural norms we were taught to abide by, our family traits, our family and relationship histories, our formal or informal education or training, our fields of study, our formal or informal work experiences, our political views, our religious affiliations, our geographic locations, our relationship to the land we reside on, and more. Essentially, any lived experience that you or your ancestors - “*living or transitioned, familial or societal*”^[1] (Saad, 2019) - have had, can and do make up your personal lineage.

As researchers who are conditioned to examine and interrogate “the other,” it can feel counterintuitive to look inwards - to examine, interrogate, and map ourselves - in the context of our roles as researchers. However, we as researchers are the vessels through which a research process is designed, data is collected, and findings are processed and shared. As a result, the nature of the vessel will inevitably impact how knowledge flows through it.

[1] In her podcast, The Good Ancestor Podcast, best-selling author and anti-racism educator Layla F. Saad opens each guest interview with the following question: “Who are the ancestors, living or transitioned, familial or societal, who have influenced you on your journey?”

We are also not static vessels. We have been and continue to be shaped, moment-to-moment, by our lived experiences, the beliefs we have both inherited and cultivated, and the biases they inform. By investing the time upfront to build this awareness and regularly examine our internal infrastructure, we can design and participate in the research process with a heightened understanding of who we are, why we are, and the potential harms we are at risk of causing or perpetuating as a result. While this may not prevent harm altogether, it will allow us to operate in ways that mitigate it and equip us to repair and recover from it.

Currently, the most common best practice around personal lineage is to state one's positionality, based on the different parts of one's lineage. For example, I might say *"My name is Mathura Mahendren, my pronouns are she/her, I am a second-generation settler on Turtle Island, born to two refugees who immigrated to Canada from Sri Lanka. I currently reside in Tkaronto, the traditional and unceded territories of the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, Wendat, and most recently the Mississaugas of the Credit."* While this is helpful for others in making an informed choice about whether and how they want to engage with us or our work, it doesn't do much for us as the people stating our positionality. This is especially true if/when it becomes a vetted script that we repeat like clockwork. So, as you make your way through this toolkit, I invite you to take it a step further and pay attention to the ways in which your positionality is embodied - how it shows up in your beliefs, your conviction, your resistance, your physical sensations, and your emotions, as you move through these modules. What quotes or stories activate you, and which parts of your identity and lineage do they activate? How does this show up in your body? For example, what are the beliefs and stories that you hold that are tied to your racial identity? Where in your body are they stored? In which physical sensations are they expressed? How does this impact how you show up in spaces? We are complex beings, and we are also a set of patterns. Teasing apart where a reaction is coming from can help us engage with it from its roots.

When we engage in research practices without an intimate understanding of our personal lineage as well as our relationship to the topic and the communities we are engaging, we risk causing harm. Author and scholar bell hooks shares an example of one such harm in her book, *Teaching to Transgress*:

“Curiously, most white women writing feminist theory that looks at “difference” and “diversity” do not make white women’s lives, works, and experiences the subject of their analysis of “race,” but rather focus on black women or women of color. White women who have yet to get a critical handle on the meaning of “whiteness” in their lives, the representation of whiteness in their literature, or the white supremacy that shapes their social status are now explicating blackness without critically questioning whether their work emerges from an aware anti-racist standpoint. Drawing on the work of black women, work that they once dismissed as irrelevant, they now reproduce the servant-served paradigms in their scholarship.” (hooks, 1994)

Understanding our personal lineage can help us identify what we don’t know, because we don’t have the lived experience of it, as well as what we are programmed to not know because of the privileges we hold. This programming shows up in our behaviours, and also rewires our brains. In a study that spanned two years, Dr. Dacher Keltner, a psychology professor at the University of California, Berkeley, found that subjects under the influence of power acted as if they had suffered a traumatic brain injury—becoming more impulsive, less risk-aware, and, crucially, less adept at seeing things from other people’s point of view. (Useem, 2017) In other words, they are more prone to causing harm. Similarly, findings from McMaster University neuroscientist Dr. Sukhvinder Obhi, reveal that power “*impairs a specific neural process, ‘mirroring,’*” that

may be the cornerstone of empathy. ([Useem, 2017](#)) Put differently, in the words of Mia Birdsong,

“privilege in the context of oppression diminishes your experience and understanding of life.”

In this sense, understanding our personal lineage can reveal to us where we are predisposed to have a diminished understanding of life due to our privilege. As a result, we can design with this deficiency in mind, holding the truth that we may not understand all experiences, rather than discounting the experiences of others that we don't share or understand.

What Constitutes Good Research?

In the following exercise, I invite you to ask yourself a series of questions that prompt deeper examination into what you think constitutes robust, credible knowledge. You will notice that the questions start off broad, not necessarily focused on the world of research, but rather exploring where our concepts of knowledge, expertise, and credibility come from.

1. *Where you come from, who around you was believed?*

Whose experience was believed?

Note: “Where you come from” is not confined to geographic location, and rather is in reference to the broad spectrum of experiences that make up your personal lineage. It includes all of the aspects listed in the definition of personal lineage above.

2. *Where you come from, who around you wasn't believed? Whose experience was minimized or ignored?*
3. *Where you come from, who was seen as smart? What about them made them smart in your eyes or in the eyes of your community?*
4. *In your eyes, what makes someone an expert on a particular topic?*
5. *In your eyes, what makes a source or a piece of information or knowledge credible?*
6. *Which sources and/or whose insight do you accept without question?*
7. *Which sources and/or whose insight do you question often?*
8. *Which dimensions of your being do you believe are involved in generating, integrating, and communicating knowledge? (e.g. physical, mental, emotional, spiritual)*

9. *When you encounter dissonance or contradicting information between two sources, how do you reconcile? What factors go into determining how each source is weighted? Do these factors vary across situations or are they consistent? When and for whom do you make exceptions?*
10. *Who created the frameworks you are using to collect, process, and interpret the information you are working with? Why do you trust them?*
11. *What do you believe constitutes quality research? What are the criteria you benchmark it against? Where did you learn these criteria?*
Complete the prompt, “Good research...”
Complete the prompt, “A good researcher...”

As you think through your responses to these questions, I invite you to examine which beliefs, practices, and norms are **normal vs. normative**. As writer and artist Alok Vaid-Menon explains, “**Being normal** means that a numerically significant amount of something is found in a group. For example, if you select a random group of students, chances are a large percentage will be wearing sneakers. This is normal. **Being normative** is about what gets elevated by society to a position of power. Normativity looks like a specific sneaker brand being upheld as the best. Normativity, then, is about value judgement and shouldn’t be used interchangeably with normal.”

12. *Which of the norms around what constitutes good research or a good researcher are normal vs. normative?*
13. *For those that are normative, which bodies, institutions, and systems are elevating them to a position of power?*
14. *What do these bodies, institutions, and systems stand to gain or keep by elevating these particular norms as the best?*

Unlearning Audit

Unlearning refers to the conscious process of **letting go, reframing, and moving away** from once-useful information, mindsets, and acquired behaviors, and **actively adopting alternative mindsets and behaviours** to inform effective decision-making and action.

Change often involves not only the learning of new behaviours, ideas or practices, but also giving up, or abandoning some established ones. It involves recognizing that the ways of doing and being that brought us to where we are today might not be the best way to keep us going optimally to where we want to go, and in fact may actually be limiting us.

In the same way that we may “Marie Kondo”^[1] our closets and our homes to discard the things that no longer spark joy, we must engage in a conscious inventory of our existing knowledge, mindsets, and behaviours and actively work to let go of the ones that are no longer serving our highest selves.

This conscious auditing of our beliefs, ideas, and practices is crucial because:

- We have a limited mental capacity for how much we can hold at once.
- We have been taught to ‘pile-on’ existing knowledge, rather than Marie Kondo-ing to see if existing mental models are still serving us.
- We can be emotionally attached to our mental models in ways that hinder change; what we know can hurt us.
- The current speed of change requires us to adopt an explorer’s mindset, i.e. knowing that our (mental) map is not the territory and is constantly changing.

[1] The Marie Kondo method is a system of simplifying and organizing one’s home by getting rid of physical items that do not bring joy into your life. It was created by organizing consultant Marie Kondo and is described in detail in her book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*

Even with the best of intentions, unlearning can be a tough process to move through. We form habitualized routines around what we know and as a result, they become increasingly easy and demand less conscious attention to carry out. These mindsets, knowledge and behaviours are also known, trusted, familiar, safe, secure, and comforting. When it comes to critically evaluating their utility in our lives, it becomes important to acknowledge all of the accomplishments, emotions, and identities we've come to associate with them. Before we can come to terms with unlearning something, we must engage actively in examining what we stand to lose from keeping it as well as what we stand to gain from letting it go. The *Unlearning Audit* is a tool I developed to facilitate and provide structure to this critical reflection*. You will notice that several of the other tools in this toolkit build on the form and function of this base framework. This is intentional.

***Note:** Critically reflecting on our beliefs, ideas, and practices is **not** the same as pathologizing them. Rather, it involves being able to hold that something that has served us at one point (and/or continues to serve us in some way today) can also be harmful to us or others. It is a matter of both/and, whereas pathologizing a belief as entirely “good” or “bad” reinforces either/or thinking in a way that doesn't leave room for nuance or criticality. Working through a belief using the *Unlearning Audit* doesn't necessarily mean that you have to unlearn it. You could also realize that it serves you quite well, realize that it just requires a bit of tweaking in order to align with your values, or simply finish the exercise with a deepened awareness of how that particular belief shapes you. All are valid outcomes in this activity.

Unlearning Audit

KNOWLEDGE/ MINDSET / BELIEF / BEHAVIOUR	STRINGS ATTACHED What are the emotions that are associated with it?	PAINS By letting this go, I stand to lose:
CREATION CONTEXT Where / when / from whom did I learn this?	What are the identities that I've associated with it?	
REMEMBERING ITS SERVICE How has it served me to date? What has it allowed me to accomplish?	What other knowledge / mindsets / behaviours are linked to this one?	GAINS By letting this go, I stand to gain:

Your Task

If you would like to print and/or complete this exercise on a larger version of this template, please find a full-size, printable template on the following page.

As you work through this toolkit and encounter beliefs, ideas, or practices within yourself that feel worthy of deeper examination, note them down. Set aside some dedicated time to work through the *Unlearning Audit* with each belief, idea, or practice. Take breaks as needed. This work can be unlocking in identifying patterns and context around why you believe and do what you do. It can also surface heavier emotions like shame, guilt, frustration, grief, and/or anger as you contend with what a particular belief or behaviour has cost you or others.

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Unlearning Audit

KNOWLEDGE/ MINDSET / BELIEF / BEHAVIOUR

CREATION CONTEXT
Where / when / from whom did I learn this?

REMEMBERING ITS SERVICE
How has it served me to date?
What has it allowed me to accomplish?

STRINGS ATTACHED
What are the **emotions** that are associated with it?

What are the **identities that I've associated with it?**

What other **knowledge / **mindsets** / **behaviours** are linked to this one?**

PAINS
By letting this go, I stand to lose:

GAINS
By letting this go, I stand to gain:

How I See It & Why

“I have learned that the most lethal part of the human body is not the fist; it is the eye. What people see and how people see it has everything to do with power.” - Alok Vaid-Menon, Beyond the Gender Binary

In this activity, I share with you excerpts from books and authors that highlight how perceiving a concept, practice, or norm through a different lens and lineage can shift our interpretation of it in profound ways. A common thread across all of these excerpts is that they challenge the normative interpretations that have been uplifted by governing systems like white supremacy, capitalism, colonialism, and the gender binary.

I invite you to read these analyses and become curious about why these narratives might have been systematically suppressed by the dominant culture.

1. *What and who do they threaten?*
2. *What and who do they uplift?*
3. *What do we stand to gain by adding this interpretation of these concepts, practices, and norms to our understanding of them?*

Note: If you reference and/or share these quotes with others, please make sure to credit and amplify their lineage and shift your resources in the direction of the respective author’s offerings. (Refer to the modules on Lineage and Extraction later in this chapter to understand why these conditions are non-negotiable).

Excerpt 1:

“On one hand, for Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg living Nishnaabewin, material wealth simply didn’t make sense, because we never settled in one place. We were constantly moving throughout our territory in a deliberate way, carrying and making our belongings as we went. Having a lot of stuff made life more difficult on a practical level. On an ethical level, it was an indication of imbalance within the larger system of life. **When Nishnaabeg are historicized by settler colonial thought as “less technologically developed,” there is an assumption that we weren’t capitalists because we couldn’t be - we didn’t have the wisdom or the technology to accumulate capital, until the Europeans arrived and the fur trade happened. This is incorrect. We certainly had the technology and the wisdom to develop this kind of economy, or rather we had the ethics and knowledge within grounded normativity to not develop this system, because to do so would have violated our fundamental values and ethics regarding how we relate to each other and the natural world. We chose not to, repeatedly, over our history.**”
(Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, As We Have Always Done)

Excerpt 2:

“To begin with, this is a profound misunderstanding of Michi Saagiig political systems and governance. The governance and political systems of so-called hunter and gatherer societies in general and the Nishnaabeg in particular remain profoundly misunderstood. **Our rhythmic, seasonal, traveling throughout the territory gets positioned as “nomadic,” rather than as a political and governing structure and process that facilitated a gentle and sustainable use of our lands and waters, a decentralized national leadership, and an intensification of personal and political relationships with a diversity of human and nonhuman nations.**”
(Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, As We Have Always Done)

Excerpt 3:

“Naming the gender binary as colonial is important because when I think about this binary from within Nishnaabeg conceptual thought or from within the reality of so-called hunting and gathering societies, it makes no sense in terms of the ethical systems grounded normativity sets up. Further, it is at odds with the practicality of life in the bush because it restricts and prevents relationships, productivity, and in many aspects, actual survival. If I am to be able to take care of myself on the land, I need to have a reciprocal and respectful relationship with all aspects of creation. I need to have a proficiency in hunting, fishing, gathering, making shelter, traveling, ceremony, warmth, light, and feeding and clothing myself and those reliant upon me. **I cannot restrict myself to an exclusively gendered workload and just expect to survive.**

The word matriarch in reference to Indigenous conceptualizations of power and gender makes no sense to me within Nishnaabeg thought because it reinforces a gender binary, it reinforces anthropological social constructions of Indigeneity, and it reinforces authoritarian power, rather than authentic grounded power.

Nishnaabeg “women” hunted, trapped, fished, held leadership positions, and engaged in warfare, as well as carrying out domestic tasks and looking after children, and they were encouraged to show a broad range of emotions and to express their gender and sexuality in a way that was true to their own being, as a matter of both principle and survival. Nishnaabeg “men” hunted, trapped, fished, held leadership positions, engaged in warfare, and also knew how to cook, sew, and look after children. They were encouraged to show a broad range of emotions and to express their gender and sexuality in a way that was true to their own being, as a matter of both principle and survival. This is true for other genders as well. And while there was often a gendered division of labor (one that I believe was exaggerated by anthropologists), there were also a lot of exceptions based on individual agency.” (Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, As We Have Always Done)

Excerpt 4:

“Again and again, it matters to me how change is achieved. If I think back to my creation stories - whether it’s the Seven Fires story, the story of Nanabush and the turtle’s back, the story of Kinomagewapkong, the people that were created from the ocean, those spontaneous humans - **the creation of the world within Nish-naabeg thought comes from struggle. It was never easy. Mistakes were made. Prototypes were built. It came from a being or beings, fully engaged in a creative process that was a process of struggle. This is in stark contrast to Christian creation stories, where the world was made in seven days and then given to humans. Nish-naabeg worlds were created, collectively, out of struggle, and the process of creating and creation was given to us, not the results of that.** The process, not the results.” (Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, As We Have Always Done)

Excerpt 5:

“She fell like a maple seed, pirouetting on an autumn breeze.*^[1] A column of light streamed from a hole in the Skyworld, marking her path where only darkness had been before. It took her a long time to fall. In fear, or maybe hope, she clutched a bundle tightly in her hand.

Hurtling downward, she saw only dark water below. But in that emptiness there were many eyes gazing up at the sudden shaft of light. They saw there was a small object, a mere dust mote in the beam. As it grew closer, they could see that it was a woman, arms outstretched, long black hair billowing behind as she spiraled toward them.

The geese nodded at one another and rose together from the water in a wave of goose music. She felt the beat of their wings as they flew beneath to break her fall. Far from the only home she’d ever known, she caught her breath at the warm embrace of soft feathers as they gently carried her downward. And so it began.

[1] Adapted from oral tradition and Shenandoah and George, 1988.

The geese could not hold the woman above the water for much longer, so they called a council to decide what to do. Resting on their wings, she saw them all gather: loons, otters, swans, beavers, fish of all kinds. A great turtle floated in their midst and offered his back for her to rest upon. Gratefully, she stepped from the goose wings onto the dome of his shell. The others understood that she needed land for her home and discussed how they might serve her need. The deep divers among them had heard of mud at the bottom of the water and agreed to go find some.

Loon dove first, but the distance was too far and after a long while he surfaced with nothing to show for his efforts. One by one, the other animals offered to help - Otter, Beaver, Sturgeon - but the depth, the darkness, and the pressures were too great for even the strongest of swimmers. They returned gasping for air with their heads ringing. Some did not return at all. Soon only the little Muskrat was left, the weakest diver of all. He volunteered to go while the others looked on doubtfully. His small legs flailed as he worked his way downward and he was gone a very long time.

They waited and waited for him to return, fearing the worst for their relative, and, before long, a stream of bubbles rose with the small, limp body of the muskrat. He had given his life to aid this helpless human. But then the others noticed that his paw was tightly clenched and, when they opened it, there was a small handful of mud. Turtle said, "Here, put it on my back and I will hold it."

Skywoman bent and spread the mud with her hands across the shell of the turtle. Moved by the extraordinary gifts of the animals, she sang in thanksgiving and then began to dance, her feet caressing the earth. The land grew and grew as she danced her thanks, from the dab of mud on Turtle's back until the whole earth was made. Not by Skywoman alone, but from the alchemy of all the animals' gifts coupled with her deep gratitude. Together they formed what we know today as Turtle Island, our home.

Like any good guest, Skywoman had not come empty-handed. The bundle was still clutched in her hand. When she toppled from the

hole in the Skyworld she had reached out to grab onto the Tree of Life that grew there. In her grasp were branches - fruits and seeds of all kinds of plants. These she scattered onto the new ground and carefully tended each one until the world turned from brown to green. Sunlight streamed through from the Skyworld, allowing the seeds to flourish. Wild grasses, flowers, trees, and medicines spread everywhere. And now that the animals, too, had plenty to eat, many came to live with her on Turtle Island.

...On one side of the world were people whose relationship with the living world was shaped by Skywoman, who created a garden for the well-being of all. On the other side was another woman with a garden and a tree. But for tasting its fruit, she was banished from the garden and the gates clanged shut behind her. That mother of men was made to wander in the wilderness and earn her bread by the sweat of her brow, not by filling her mouth with the sweet juicy fruits that bend the branches low. In order to eat, she was instructed to subdue the wilderness into which she was cast.

Same species, same earth, different stories. Like Creation stories everywhere, cosmologies are a source of identity and orientation to the world. They tell us who we are. We are inevitably shaped by them no matter how distant they may be from our consciousness. **One story leads to the generous embrace of the living world, the other to banishment. One woman is our ancestral gardener, a cocreator of the good green world that would be the home of her descendants. The other was an exile, just passing through an alien world on a rough road to her real home in heaven.**

And then they met - the offspring of Skywoman and the children of Eve - and the land around us bears the scars of that meeting, the echoes of our stories. They say that hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, and I can only imagine the conversation between Eve and Skywoman: "Sister, you got the short end of the stick..."

...In the Western tradition there is a recognized hierarchy of beings, with, of course, the human being on top - the pinnacle of evolution, the darling of Creation - and the plants at the bottom.

But in Native ways of knowing, human people are often referred to as “the younger brothers of Creation.” We say that humans have the least experience with how to live and thus the most to learn - we must look to our teachers among the other species for guidance. Their wisdom is apparent in the way that they live. They teach us by example. They’ve been on this earth far longer than we have been, and have had time to figure things out. They live both above and below ground, joining Skyworld to the earth. Plants know how to make food and medicine from light and water, and then they give it away.” (Robin Wall Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass)

Excerpt 6:

“One line of this poem [Adrienne Rich’s “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children”] that moved and disturbed something within me: *“This is the oppressor’s language yet I need it to talk to you.”*

...Reflecting on Adrienne Rich’s words, I know that it is not the English language that hurts me, but what the oppressors do with it, how they shape it to become a territory that limits and defines, how they make it a weapon that can shame, humiliate, colonize.

...I imagine them [hooks’ ancestors] hearing spoken English as the oppressor’s language, yet I imagine them also realizing that this language would need to be possessed, taken, claimed as a space of resistance. I imagine that the moment they realized the oppressor’s language, seized and spoken by the tongues of the colonized, could be a space of bonding was joyous...I imagine, then, Africans first hearing English as “the oppressor’s language” and then re-hearing it as a potential site of resistance. Learning English, learning to speak the alien tongue, was one way enslaved Africans began to reclaim their personal power within a context of domination.

...Needing the oppressor’s language to speak with one another they nevertheless also reinvented, remade that language so that it would speak beyond the boundaries of conquest and domination.

In the mouths of black Africans in the so-called “New World,” English was altered, transformed, and became a different speech. Enslaved black people took broken bits of English and made of them a counter-language. They put together their words in such a way that the colonizer had to re-think the meaning of English language. Though it has become common in contemporary culture to talk about the messages of resistance that emerged in the music created by slaves, particularly spirituals, less is said about the grammatical construction of sentences in these songs. **Often, the English used in the song reflected the broken, ruptured world of the slave.** When the slaves sang “nobody knows de trouble I see --” their use of the word “nobody” adds a richer meaning than if they had used the phrase “no one,” for it was the slave’s body that was the concrete site of suffering. And even as the emancipated black people sang spirituals, they did not change the language, the sentence structure, of our ancestors. For in the incorrect usage of words, in the incorrect placement of words, was a spirit of rebellion that claimed language as a site of resistance. Using English in a way that ruptured standard usage and meaning, so that white folks could not understand black speech, made English into more than the oppressor’s language.

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...In the classroom setting, I encourage students to use their first language and translate it so they do not feel that seeking higher education will necessarily estrange them from the language and culture they know most intimately. Not surprisingly, when students in my Black Women Writers class began to speak using diverse language and speech, white students often complained. This seemed to be particularly the case with black vernacular. It was particularly disturbing to the white students because they could hear the words that were said but could not comprehend their meaning. **Pedagogically, I encouraged them to think of the moment of not understanding what someone says as a space to learn. Such a space provides not only the opportunity to listen without “mastery,” without owning or possessing speech through interpretation, but also the experience of hearing non-English words.**

...At a lecture where I might use Southern black vernacular, the particular patois of my region, or where I might use very abstract thought in conjunction with plain speech, responding to a diverse audience, I suggest that **we do not necessarily need to hear and know what is stated in its entirety, that we do not need to “master” or conquer the narrative as a whole, that we may know in fragments. I suggest that we may learn from spaces of silence as well as spaces of speech, that in the patient act of listening to another tongue we may subvert that culture of capitalist frenzy and consumption that demands all desire must be satisfied immediately, or we may disrupt that cultural imperialism that suggests one is worthy of being heard only if one speaks in standard English.**

...When I need to say words that do more than simply mirror or address the dominant reality, I speak black vernacular. There, in that location, we make English do what we want it to do. We take the oppressor's language and turn it against itself. We make our words a counter-hegemonic speech, liberating ourselves in language.” (bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress)

The Mind-Body Split & Disembodiment

**“I talked about how Gzhwe Manidoo transferred all the knowledge that went into the creation of the universe to Nishnaabeg bodies, but that the knowledge was so vast it didn’t just stay in our heads, it spilled into every aspect of our beings.”
- Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, As We Have Always Done**

Mainstream social R&D practices and traditional academia often reinforce the concept of the mind-body split. Similar to the myth of objectivity which separates the observer from the observed, the mind-body split sees the mind and body as separate entities that aren’t connected. It uplifts the mind as the generator of knowledge, as the sole location of information-gathering, processing, interpreting, and sharing. It perpetuates a false hierarchy of the mind as the dominant dimension of our being, the ruling authority over our other dimensions including our bodies, emotions, and spirits. In research, this mind-supremacy shows up in the treatment of research and knowledge gathering as a solely intellectual pursuit.

As with all persisting beliefs, it would serve us well to critically examine who benefits when we uphold them. In the words of somatic practitioner Staci K. Haines,

“The mind-body split reifies a particular power-over system as well. We consider who and what is associated with being rational - science, maleness, whiteness, education,

and wealth - the “right people” to decide, advance, and rule. Consider also who and what is associated with body and feeling - sin, irrationality, emotions, “hysteria”, women, transgender, people of colour, the exotic (read racist), indigenous, earth, desire - the “wrong” people to decide and lead. You can hear the multiple forms of oppression informing these and, in turn, how they are supported by rationalism. This is not a vote dismissing rational thinking altogether or to rid us of science and scientific inquiry. Rather, it is to awaken to what is shaping us. What have been the costs of rationalism and who has repeatedly been thrown under the bus by its precepts? What of this do we want to question and change? What of rationalism as a cultural norm is deadening, disconnecting, or harmful?”

In treating a research interaction as a solely intellectual exchange, we invisibilize the ways in which our bodies, emotions, and spirits can be activated in a research setting. We lose key data when we choose to ignore our bodies, emotions, and spirits as generators, keepers, and conveyors of knowledge. We also end up prioritizing research methodologies and practices that engage just the mind, and care for just the mind, rather the body, emotions, and spirit as well. For example, the word “empathy” gets thrown around a lot within the fields of human-centered design and design research. However, the combination of mind-supremacy and the myth of objectivity can result in some pretty problematic best practices in the name of empathy. In the words of social designer Sarah Fathallah and A.D. Sean Lewis,

“Many designers believe that empathy is what allows some individuals, who are removed from a challenge, to solve said challenge while remaining “user-centered.” It absolves design professionals of the responsibility to center lived experience, as they can “walk a mile in the shoes” of others. Poorly designed products and services can then be explained as an outcome of lack of empathy, rather

than the inability of design professionals to do the work of community-building that allows them to be trusted by and in service of those their designs should serve.”

In other words, empathy shouldn’t be about researchers being able to imagine what the communities they are engaging have gone through, but rather about valuing and prioritizing the lived experience of the “going through”, of the embodiment of those experiences, as enough. The mind-body split and the belief in the mind’s supremacy over the body, makes it easier to accept and believe that this kind of empathy is enough. That the interpretation of the imagined experience in the researcher’s mind is somehow just as or more valid than the participant’s lived experience and embodiment of it. What if, instead, we created space for participants to describe how their lived experience around a particular topic is embodied within their thoughts, feelings, sensations, bodies, behaviours, and relationships? What more could we learn?

The arbitrary compartmentalization of the mind and body doesn’t have to be the way forward for social R&D. In the words of Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson,

“My body and my life are part of my research, and I use this knowledge to critique and analyze. I will not separate this from my engagement with academic literature, because in my life these things are not compartmentalized.”

She goes on to share that, ““Theory” is generated and regenerated continually through embodied practice and within each family, community, and generation of people. Theory isn’t just an intellectual pursuit. It is woven within kinetics, spiritual presence, and emotion. It is contextual and relational. It is intimate and personal with individuals themselves holding the responsibilities for finding and generating meaning within their own lives.”

Pause. Process. Integrate.

Reflection Prompts

On the Mind-Body Split & Disembodiment

1. *How, and in what contexts, do you experience the **mind-body split** in your life?*
2. *How, and in what contexts, do you experience **mind-supremacy** in your life?*
3. *How has subscribing, consciously or unconsciously, to the mind-body split or disembodiment **served** you in the past?
How has it **cost** you?*
4. *Which people, institutions, and settings in your life **reinforce** the mind-body split and disembodiment the most?*
5. *Which people, institutions, and settings in your life **challenge** the mind-body split and disembodiment the most?*

6. **Who do you associate with rationality vs. irrationality?**
What characteristics differentiate the two in your eyes?
7. When have you **banked on empathy** (i.e. what you imagine someone's lived experience might be based on what you know or interpret of their circumstances) to avoid centering that person's lived experience as they would articulate it? What motivated you to resort to the former over the latter?
8. How does Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's assertion that **"Theory isn't just an intellectual pursuit. It is woven within kinetics, spiritual presence, and emotion."** land for you? Where do you experience resonance or resistance and why?

Honouring Lived Experience

“Catharine MacKinnon reminds us that “we know things with our lives and we live that knowledge, beyond what any theory has yet theorized.” Making this theory is the challenge before us. For in its production lies the hope of our liberation, in its production lies the possibility of naming all our pain - of making all our hurt go away.” - bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress

In this module, we dive deeper into the concept of lived experience.

The term “lived experience” has entered the mainstream lexicon in recent years. It’s in job descriptions (i.e. “*we value lived experiences of... x, y, z.*”), it’s in the comments section of social media threads, and folks in power are predictably sprinkling it into speeches, campaigns, and content creation. This is both encouraging and caution-inducing. It’s encouraging because it has the potential to open us up to a form of embodied knowledge that we’ve ignored for so long, and it is caution-inducing because this too can be co-opted and wielded to uphold the dominant systems. Giving lived experience the value and weight it deserves requires an understanding of what separates it from “theory” or other forms of knowledge. To help clarify the distinction, I’ve curated two quotes from two people whose own lived experiences place them in a more informed place than me to speak on it.

The first is a quote from author and professor bell hooks, from her book, *Teaching to Transgress*:

“Years ago, I was thankful to discover the phrase “the authority of experience**” in feminist writing because it**

gave me a name for what I brought to feminist classrooms that I thought was not present but believed was valuable. **As an undergraduate in feminist classrooms where a woman's experience was universalized, I knew from my experience as a black female that black women's reality was being excluded. I spoke from that knowledge.** There was no body of theory to invoke that would substantiate this truth claim. No one really wanted to hear about the deconstruction of woman as a category of analysis then. Insisting on the value of my experience was crucial to gaining a hearing.

...Now I am troubled by the term "authority of experience," acutely aware of the way it is used to silence and exclude. Yet I want to have a phrase that affirms the specialness of those ways of knowing rooted in experience. I know that experience can be a way to know and can inform how we know what we know. Though opposed to any essentialist practice that constructs identity in a monolithic, exclusionary way, I do not want to relinquish the power of experience as a standpoint on which to base analysis or formulate theory. For example, I am disturbed when all the courses taught on black history or literature at some colleges and universities are taught solely by white people, not because I think that they cannot know these realities but that they know them differently. Truthfully, if I had been given the opportunity to study African American critical thought from a progressive black professor instead of the progressive white woman with whom I studied as a first-year student, I would have chosen the black person. Although I learned a great deal from this white woman professor, I sincerely believe that I would have learned even more from a progressive black professor, because this individual would have brought to the class that unique mixture of experiential and analytical ways of knowing - **that is, a privileged standpoint. It cannot be acquired through books or even**

distanced observation and study of a particular reality. To me this privileged standpoint does not emerge from the “authority of experience” but rather from the passion of experience, the passion of remembrance.

Often experience enters the classroom from the location of memory. Usually narratives of experience are told retrospectively. In the testimony of Guatemalan peasant and activist Rigoberta Menchu, I hear the passion of remembrance in her words:

“My mother used to say that through her life, through her living testimony, she tried to tell women that they too had to participate, so that when the repression comes and with it a lot of suffering, it’s not only the men who suffer. Women must join the struggle in their own way. My mother’s words told them that any evolution, any change, in which women had not participated, would not be change, and there would be no victory. She was as clear about this as if she were a woman with all sorts of theories and a lot of practice.”

I know that I can take this knowledge and transmit the message of her words. Their meaning could be easily conveyed. What would be lost in the transmission is the spirit that orders those words, that testifies that, behind them - underneath, everywhere - there is a lived reality. When I use the phrase “passion of experience,” it encompasses many feelings but particularly suffering, for there is a particular knowledge that comes from suffering. It is a way of knowing that is often expressed through the body, what it knows, what has been deeply inscribed on it through experience. This complexity of experience can rarely be voiced and named from a distance. It is a privileged location, even as it is not the only or even always the most important location from which one can know. In the classroom, I share as much as possible the need for critical thinkers to engage multiple locations, to address

diverse standpoints, to allow us to gather knowledge fully and inclusively. Sometimes, I tell students, it is like a recipe. I tell them to imagine we are baking bread that needs flour. And we have all the other ingredients but no flour. Suddenly, the flour becomes most important even though it alone will not do. This is a way to think about experience in the classroom.”

Several things stood out to me from this analysis by bell hooks. Firstly, I wanted to underscore her observation and regret that the term “authority of experience”, which substantiated her unique voice and perspective as a Black woman when she first encountered it in feminist writing, had since been used to silence and exclude. This is an example of how concepts and vocabulary from radical movements are co-opted in service of upholding the status quo. Similar to the ethos of “All Lives Matter” in response to “Black Lives Matter”, the phrase “authority of experience” which was meant to give voice and legitimacy to those whose experiences have been historically undervalued, has now been weaponized to say that *“everyone has lived experiences, so if you get to speak about yours, then I can speak about mine.”* What’s worse is that this argument often devolves into either/or thinking where historically privileged groups can and have said to their historically marginalized counterparts, “According to *my* lived experience, *your* lived experience can’t be true.”

I also appreciate the ways in which bell hooks offers the “passion of experience” as an alternative and less hierarchical way of talking about what she originally references as the “authority of experience.” The term “authority of experience” implies experience that affords someone power over others. In other words, the vocabulary itself reinforces the systems we are trying to dismantle. “Passion of experience” on the other hand, implies an expertise that comes from within, knowledge that is more embodied, and that isn’t necessarily exerted to gain power. I see this shift in language as an act of generative refusal.

Another powerful use of language in this quote is bell hooks' reference to the lived experience of a particular reality as a privileged standpoint or location. While the word "privilege" on its own means "*a special advantage or right possessed by an individual or group*," we in the thick of cancel culture have weaponized the term as a tool for calling out and shaming. We have narrowed its use to refer only to unearned privilege (i.e. rights or advantages gained by birth or social position), and erased the fact that there is an entire category of advantages that are earned through lived experience. Making this distinction helps us see privilege not as inherently good or bad, but rather as something to be mindful of when we make choices about who to listen to and what we believe grants them the credibility to speak to a particular experience.

Lastly, bell hooks speaks to the "passion of experience" as encompassing many feelings, particularly suffering. She observes that there is a particular kind of knowledge that comes from suffering, and in doing so, she complicates the experience of suffering. While the historically privileged have looked at the suffering of the historically marginalized largely through the lens of pity ("*poor them*"), guilt ("*I feel uncomfortable that I have what you don't*"), superiority ("*if only they just saved more money / stayed in school / said it in a different tone / [insert opportunity afforded by unearned privilege here]*"), and/or saviourism ("*let me save you from your troubles so I can feel good about myself for helping*"), hooks' analysis underscores the expertise that is gained through suffering. She invites us to consider the perspective that, "*they may know more than me because of what they've been through that I haven't*". hooks also points out that the knowledge gained through suffering is expressed through the body. In this sense, part of the resistance to accepting lived experience and "passion of experience" as legitimate forms of knowledge may be rooted in our internalization of mind-supremacy. If we do not see the body as a vast and credible source and conveyor of knowledge, if we limit that capacity just to the mind, we in turn minimize the lived experience that resides in the body.

The second quote is by author and community curator Mia Birdsong, from her book, How We Show Up:

“In a 2003 interview with writer and cultural critic Hilton Als, **Toni Morrison rejects the idea that labeling her work as “female” or “Black” narrows it or limits its reach and accessibility because** *“being a black woman writer is not a shallow place but a rich place to write from. It doesn’t limit my imagination; it expands it. It’s richer than being a white male writer because I know more and I’ve experienced more.”* This sentiment resonates with my experience of being a Black woman. It also applies, to varying degrees, to the experience of being marginalized in general. The most liberatory, evolved, boundary-breaking people I know hold identities that are marginalized in some way.

...It’s people who are barred from entering “mainstream” society and have to build on the edges, who provide visionary, life-affirming examples of what’s possible. I’m not romanticizing the suffering, trauma and bullshit that oppression causes. Nor am I suggesting that everyone who experiences oppression does, or should be expected to, create beautiful, future-facing alternative societies. But people in positions of privilege certainly aren’t doing it. The savior volunteerism, the accumulative consumption of wellness experiences, and those treks to Bali and Bhutan to discover purpose and meaning through other people’s spiritual practices generally miss the point. I love time spent in the woods or days lying in the sand as opportunities to breathe, reflect, be present, and decompress. But the places we go to escape the distractions and obligations and stressful busyness of our everyday are not where we build our lives. And it is in the mundane, the hardship, and the realness of life that what we’ve built is tested and refined.”

Mia Birdsong's perspective, for me, reinforces bell hooks' insight while also cautioning us in useful ways. In sharing the quote by Toni Morrison about her experience as a Black woman writer, Birdsong underscores the point that having lived experiences of marginalization means that you know more because you have been exposed to more. Echoing hooks, Toni Morrison as a Black woman wrote from a more privileged standpoint than a white male counterpart. While it may be hard to accept that within the constraints of the dominant systems, it makes sense that those who have faced the most oppression also carry the potential to be able to envision the most liberatory movements. They will be able to perceive, acutely and uniquely, what liberation feels like, because they have the lived experience of knowing what oppression, acutely and uniquely, feels like.

That said, Birdsong also cautions us against romanticizing the suffering, to be mindful of how we frame or tell the story of suffering. It is important that we not use lived experience as an excuse to put the burden of transforming harmful systems on those experiencing the most oppression. There is a difference between giving lived experience the credibility it deserves and using it as an excuse to absolve us of the harms that resulted in the experiences of oppression in the first place.

The goal isn't to enable more suffering so that it breeds more visionary leaders - this kind of break-you-to-build-you thinking is paternalistic and deeply problematic.

Rather, we must be accountable to the harm that continues to be caused by the oppressive systems we've enabled to date, while giving those who have experienced the most suffering at the hands of these systems the resources they need to heal enough to be able to envision the liberatory alternatives that address the root causes of harm. There's a big difference.

Pause. Process. Integrate.

Reflection Prompts

On Honouring Lived Experience

1. *When have you seen the idea of lived experience or “authority of experience” weaponized? (i.e. “According to my lived experience, your lived experience can’t be true.”)*
2. *What does it look like to create environments that value lived experience, without weaponizing it?*
3. *What is your visceral reaction to hearing that someone who has experienced more marginalization than you knows more than you? To hearing that their lived experience puts them in a more privileged location in terms of their authority of experience?*
4. *If lived experience “is a way of knowing that is often expressed through the body, what it knows, what has been deeply inscribed on it through experience,” how might we shift our knowledge gathering practices to be more inclusive and respectful of the knowledge held within and conveyed through one’s body?*
5. *How do we currently label, judge, and/or treat the “passion of experience” or the “passion of remembrance” within the fields of research, academia, and society as a whole? Is it something we uplift or minimize, respect or demean? How does our response to the passion of experience shift depending on who it’s coming from (i.e. a well-dressed person on a TEDEx stage vs. an underhoused person on the subway. Who we imagine in response to both of these descriptions is also quite indicative of the unconscious biases we carry.)*

Extraction

“The act of extraction removes all of the relationships that give whatever is being extracted meaning. Extracting is taking. Actually, extracting is stealing - it is taking without consent, without thought, care or even knowledge of the impacts that extraction has on the other living things in that environment. That’s always been a part of colonialism and conquest. Colonialism has always extracted the indigenous - extraction of indigenous knowledge, indigenous women, indigenous peoples.”
- Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, As We Have Always Done

Extraction is widespread within the field of research and social R&D in specific. In this module, we will examine the direct and indirect ways in which extraction manifests within social R&D.

EXTRACTION: SEVERING FROM THE RELATIONSHIPS THAT GIVE SOMETHING MEANING

One way of defining extraction is as the severing or removing of the relationships that give whatever is being extracted meaning (Simpson, 2017). This includes the severing of knowledge, information, processes, and products from their culture, their context, their lineage, and their origins. Cultural appropriation is an example of extraction. One example of the immense and long-term harm that this kind of extraction can cause is linked to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Published initially in 1943, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is a theory of human motivation that posits that humans

are motivated by five basic categories of needs: physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization. This theory is often presented as a hierarchy with physiological needs at the bottom and self-actualization at the top, with the assertion that when a lower level need is met, the next need on the hierarchy becomes our focus of attention. Despite Maslow's sudden death in 1970, this framework has become a mainstay not only within psychology but has also infiltrated the worlds of business and design, among others. What is less known to most, and what I only learned last year, is that Maslow's framework of self-actualization is rooted in and informed by the Blackfoot worldview. Maslow stayed with the Siksika Nation, Blackfoot Confederacy in the summer of 1938 before publishing "his" model of self-actualization. However, there was no mention of the indigenous lineage of this framework. In the process of extraction, the insights gleaned from the Blackfoot community were severed from the community's understandings of ancestral knowledge, spirituality, and multiple dimensions of reality. Maslow also failed to fully situate the individual within the context of community ([Blackstock, 2011](#)). For instance, if Maslow had more fully integrated Blackfoot perspectives, the model would be centered on multi-generational community actualization versus individual actualization and transcendence. Instead, Maslow's hierarchy of needs has been used over the years to reinforce the idea that we as humans are focused on individualistic pursuits and therefore thrive in individualistic cultures.

More recent investigations into Maslow's work reveal that the hyper-popularized versions of his work are not entirely reflective of what he believed. To begin, he never created a pyramid shape to represent the hierarchy of needs. In fact, the image of a pyramid was created in the process of bringing Maslow's psychological work into management studies, and has since taken on a life of its own. The pyramid depiction reinforces that people are motivated to satisfy only one need at a time, that a need must be fully satisfied before they move to a higher level need on the pyramid, and that a satisfied need is no longer a motivator of behavior. This is

not what Maslow believed. According to him, most people “*are partially satisfied in all their basic needs and partially unsatisfied in all their basic needs at the same time.*” This is actually more aligned with the Indigenous worldview that human needs are not uniformly hierarchical but rather highly interdependent with cultural values and laws defining how balance is achieved on personal and collective levels. We are also learning that closer to the end of his life, Maslow talked about a motivation higher than self-actualization: self-transcendence, or the desire to be connected and in service to something greater than oneself. While this is closer in belief to the Blackfoot understandings of community actualization, it wasn’t picked up as swiftly, likely because of the dissonance it posed to the prevailing systems which are largely rooted in individualism. I share these details to reinforce that even though Maslow had good intentions, by severing his framework from its original Indigenous lineage, he not only caused immense harm to the Blackfoot community, but also left his work vulnerable to be co-opted and misrepresented by the dominant culture. The lineage, context, and relationships that surround a particular piece of knowledge or practice not only give it meaning but also give it the stability, rootedness, and resilience to hold up in the face of adversity. This is what Maslow denied his work by not acknowledging its Blackfoot lineage. And these breaks in lineage and relationships are precisely what the systems of colonialism and capitalism depend on to thrive. It is easier to steal that which is not rooted. It is easier to commodify that which is not bound by relationship. Extraction is an age-old practice, a cornerstone of colonial culture, and this is just one of the ways it shows up in the world of research. We will dive deeper into the importance of lineage in an upcoming module. Extraction can also be defined as taking knowledge, information, process, and product in a way that causes harm. In a research context, this includes opening people up in ways that we cannot close them back up. In other words, opening people up in a way that re-traumatizes. I will share an example of this based on a true story. A community-based organization in Toronto brought in

design consultants to help them figure out how they could best serve newcomer Filipinx youth in their community. Specifically, the focus was on Filipinx youth whose mothers immigrated to Canada through the federal Live-In Caregiver program. These youth were often separated from their mothers at a young age when she immigrated, and then once she had established some semblance of security in Canada, she would sponsor them to join her in Canada, often in their teenage years. To try and better understand the experience of these youth, the design consultants got the organization's youth workers (who had long-standing relationships with the youth) to connect them with the youth, and then chose to meet with them on their own. The consultants used their "ethnography-informed" tools to get the youth to disclose some fairly intense experiences and did not close them back up. Remember that these are kids, many of whom thought their mothers abandoned them as babies because one day mom was there and the next she was gone. Even more, the design consultants did not follow up with the youth workers at the organization to let them know that the youth had disclosed some rather intense experiences so that they could provide support accordingly. It was only when the youth workers happened to ask the youth about the research engagement that they realized they were really affected and ultimately re-traumatized as a result of the experience. This was clearly an extractive approach which did not respect the basic principle that if you are opening people up, you have the responsibility to make sure you can close them back up, or at least connect them to the necessary, age-appropriate, and culturally-responsive resources. No amount of quotable quotes from participants featured in flashy conference presentations or gut-wrenching personal stories on aesthetically pleasing profile cards justifies the harm caused in this context.

Reflection Prompts

On Severing the Relationships that Give Meaning

1. *(When) have you, consciously or unconsciously, severed a concept / belief / practice / framework from one or more of the relationships that give it meaning? What were the set of conditions that enabled that extraction to take place and to be seen as acceptable (or even applauded)?*
2. *(When) have you experienced someone else extracting from your work by severing one or more of the relationships that give it meaning? In your view, what were the set of conditions that enabled that extraction to take place and to be seen as acceptable (or even applauded)?*
3. *What thoughts, feelings, and/or sensations did the example of the research engagement with the Filipinx youth elicit in you? Have you engaged in and/or experienced a similar type extraction? Does the analysis of this particular example shift how you think about your own experience?*
4. *What are the ways in which you ensure that you are able to close people back up when you open them up?*
5. *What lengths have you gone to to uncover “good stories” or “juicy insights”? At what cost? What were the set of conditions that justified that cost and/or potential harm?*

EXTRACTION: NON-RECIPROCAL VALUE EXCHANGE

Extraction can also be defined as a transaction in which the value exchange between researchers and participants is not reciprocal. One of the most tangible manifestations of this kind of extraction is the resistance on the part of researchers to paying research participants fairly or at all for their time and labour. In the words of social designer Sarah Fathallah,

“As a researcher, I am being paid, as is the driver who takes me to the research location and the interpreter who helps me translate. Why shouldn’t participants get paid too? Like all of us on the team, they are sacrificing their time in order to contribute to the research effort, and they often incur expenses too, like transportation to the research site or airtime to coordinate with the team. There’s also a significant opportunity cost, like time not spent caring for children or minding a store. In Haiti, some of the communities we spoke with were subsistence farmers, growing just enough pigeon peas, maize, and millet to survive. Time away from the farm can literally mean less food on the table. In more practical terms, compensation helps recruit participants, and serves as a very justified token of appreciation. We could not complete the project without them.”

The resistance to compensating participants is also linked to our inability to see and acknowledge the act of sharing one’s lived experience as labour. This is reflected in giving participants’ bus tokens, but not compensating them at all or fairly for the time they spend sharing with us. When thinking about what fair compensation for this kind of labour might look like, it’s important to recognize that we’re not just paying participants for the time they spend with us, but also for the years of experiencing, surviving, learning, and integrating all that they share with us in that time.

We may also have resistance to compensating participants because we believe we are providing them with more value than we actually are. For example, after a vulnerable disclosure on the part of a research participant, qualitative researchers and/or ethnographers often walk away with a sense of accomplishment, feeling pride in the fact that someone felt comfortable enough with them to disclose such sensitive information. What they often don't realize is that for the participant, this interaction is usually not the equivalent of telling a friend what happened to them to get it off their chest. Rather, it's the participant doing the work of trying to explain their lived experience to someone whom they've never met before and have no relationship with. In other words, this isn't a free therapy session provided by the researcher to the participant. Rather, it is more often an educational experience provided by the participant to the researcher, which consists of content and context that would otherwise be inaccessible to the researcher, and therefore must be compensated accordingly.

We as researchers may also believe that the promise that the community's input will inform a report that may then be used to push for some meaningful change in the future is enough compensation for participants. Here we use the potential and promise of a useful outcome, to justify uncompensated labour in the process. In actuality, as researcher and designer Sasha Costanza-Chock describes,

“In most design processes, the bulk of the benefits end up going to the professional designers and their institutions. Products, patents, processes, credit, visibility, fame: the lion's share goes to the professional design firms and designers.”

Lastly, we may also believe that participants are sharing because they want to and that their consent means additional compensation is not warranted. Does that mean you and I should not be paid for our work because we want to do it or enjoy doing it?

When we think of compensation and reciprocity within a research context, we often assume that monetary compensation is the only

option. Adequate financial compensation that is proportional to the labour undertaken by research participants is especially important in moving toward some semblance of equity in a largely capitalistic society. And, what does it look like to simultaneously build models of value and ways of working that don't center money in the same way? In an upcoming module on Reciprocity, we will explore what it means to think of reciprocity in a research setting as an exchange of gifts rather than commodities. We will dig deeper into how we might offer value to participants *during* the research engagement itself, rather than assume that a promise of future change is adequate.

Pause. Process. Integrate.

Reflection Prompts

On Non-Reciprocal Value Exchange

1. *What is your relationship to the practice of paying those you engage in research for their time?*
2. *What factors do you take into consideration when determining what is an appropriate form or amount of compensation for research participants? (e.g. the amount of time they spend engaging with you, the energy invested in translating their experience for you, the travel time, the lived experiences that inform the insights they share with you, the opportunity cost of them spending this time with you, the cost of potential care or support they may need to seek out after the engagement, etc.)*
3. *What internal beliefs or external barriers prevent you or your colleagues from seeing the sharing of one's lived experiences as labour that deserves to be compensated?*
4. *Have you had an experience of feeling good after a participant discloses something vulnerable to you? What assumptions on your part may have contributed to this feeling?*
5. *When have you used the promise of future change to justify not compensating participants (or compensating participants inadequately) in real-time?*

6. *How might we think about compensation and reciprocity as ongoing? How might we deliver immediate, short-term, and long-term value to the people and communities we engage in research?*
7. *In what ways might the tool of honoraria - often shared under the caveat that “we know that this is not at all representative of your experience and insight, and instead is just a small token of our appreciation for your time and energy” - prevent more radical and sustainable change around fairly compensating participants for their labour?*
8. *Based on what participants and/or communities have articulated to you about their needs and experiences, what forms of reciprocity outside of monetary compensation might be of value to them?*

EXTRACTION: GETTING “COMMUNITY AMBASSADORS” TO DO THE EXTRACTING FOR US

Another manifestation of extraction in the social R&D sector involves sending in “community ambassadors” to do the work of extraction for us. These community ambassadors often share one or more identities with the participants or communities we are trying to engage, and this lived experience tends to give them more access to participants. Often these community ambassadors are brought on for the diversity they contribute to a team and the access they provide to people and communities that would otherwise be inaccessible to the institution. They add colour, they can speak the language, they understand the cultural norms, and they are trusted by the community. However, their diversity of thought and culture are not as enthusiastically welcomed and are often resisted.

Author Austin Channing Brown describes this resistance through a racial lens, “Whiteness constantly polices the expressions of Blackness allowed within its walls, attempting to accrue no more than what’s necessary to affirm itself...It wants to see a Black person seated at the table but doesn’t want to hear a dissenting viewpoint. It wants to pat itself on the back for helping poor Black folks through missions or urban projects but has no interest in learning from Black people’s wisdom, talent, and spiritual depth. Whiteness wants enough Blackness to affirm the goodness of whiteness, the progressiveness of whiteness, the open-heartedness of whiteness. Whiteness likes a trickle of Blackness, but only that which can be controlled.”

In the example I described about design consultants engaging with Filipinx youth, the majority white consultants recruited the organization’s settlement and youth workers (many of whom are of Filipinx heritage) to be “crew members” and “co-design” with them. In truth, the consultants leveraged the relationships these workers had built with the youth to get access to them, and once they had access, they completely diminished any and all experience and expertise that the youth workers had to offer to the

project. Even worse, community ambassadors are also convenient scapegoats when something goes wrong. They weren't innovative enough. They couldn't think outside the box. They couldn't rally the community. They couldn't see the broader vision. This practice absolves the researchers and the institution of the responsibility they have to cultivate trusting relationships with the communities they are supposedly serving. Echoing author Austin Channing Brown,

“It’s so easy to believe the pretty pictures on the website filled with racial diversity, to buy into the well-crafted statements of purpose, to enjoy being invited into the process of “being part of the change.” The role of the bridge builder sounds appealing until it becomes clear how often that bridge is your broken back.”

Being a bridge builder in the sense that Brown describes takes a toll on the body, mind, and spirit. As the bridge builder, you feel the dissonance that is created when a relationship is unbalanced and extractive, but the nature of your role is to keep the peace. You find yourself explaining and justifying the extraction to the people you're supposed to be looking out for. You feel guilty for not being able to adequately advocate for them, for not being able to make yourself heard. You feel like a pawn in a game that is rigged. You are being harmed, you are being extracted from. And more often than not, this emotional labour is invisibilized and not compensated either.

In many ways this “community ambassador” model takes its inspiration from the settler colonial practice of approaching key local community members with the promise of more and better, and sending them in as missionaries into their own communities to preach the gospel. In the world of research, we used coded words like “local champions” and “positive deviants” to extract labour and access through what is essentially re-packaged, “representative”, “culturally-sensitive” colonialism.

The extent to which we have engaged and continue to engage in extractive practice within research can be challenging to sit with. One of the key takeaways for me has been the ways in which harmful ideologies and practices continue to mutate with the times and be reborn under the guise of seemingly progressive best practices like “human-centered design” and “community engagement”. While the insidious nature of extractivism can make it feel like there’s no way out, I believe that the alternatives are already here and embodied among the same communities that the dominant culture seeks to suppress. In the words of Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson,

“The alternative to extractivism is deep reciprocity. It’s respect, it’s relationship, it’s responsibility, and it’s local.”

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson

We will explore more of what this can look like in the upcoming Reciprocity module.

Pause. Process. Integrate.

Reflection Prompts

On Community Ambassadors

1. *When have you engaged “community ambassadors” or the equivalent in your work? What were your or your organization’s motivations in doing so?*
2. *What thoughts, feelings, and/or sensations does Brown’s observation that “Whiteness constantly polices the expressions of Blackness allowed within its walls” bring up for you? Have you experienced and/or enabled, consciously or unconsciously, this kind of policing?*
3. *Have you had the experience of being a bridge builder between your organization and the people and/or communities it was engaging? How would you describe your experience of this role?*
4. *How does the comparison of the “community ambassador” model to practices of settler colonialism complicate your appraisal of this model?*
5. *Within your field of work, what are some ways in which harmful ideologies and practices from the past have mutated with the times and re-emerged, packaged as present-day “best practices”?*

Acknowledging Lineage

“Before I use work by writers, scholars, and artists outside of the Nishnaabeg nation in my own writing and thinking, I ask myself the same series of questions. Where does this theory come from? What is the context? How was it generated? Who generated it? What was their relationship to community and the dominant power structures? What is my relationship to the theorist or their community or the context the theory was generated within? How is it useful within the context of my own people? Do we have a similar concept or theory? Can I use it in an ethical and appropriate way (my ethics and theirs) given the colonial context within which scholarship and publishing take place? What are the implications of citation, and do I have consent to take this intellectual thought and labor from a community I am not a part of? Does this engagement replicate anti-Blackness? Colonialism? Heteropatriarchy? Transphobia? **This critical process, I think, is a process that many Indigenous academics already do naturally, and the answers are not easy, nor will they be the same for everyone.**” - Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, As We Have Always Done

In this module, we will unpack the concept of lineage. More specifically, we will explore the practice of naming and honouring lineage as an antidote to extraction.

For the purposes of this work, I am defining lineage as “*who, what, and/or where something comes from.*” Its origins. Its roots. For example, in the Extraction module, we talked about the lineage of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs framework as being rooted in Black-foot worldviews. If extraction is the severing of the relationships that give an idea, concept, or practice meaning, then honouring the lineage of an idea, concept, or practice takes steps to uplift, resource, and credit the people, places, and relationships from which it emerged.

We may resist acknowledging lineage for several reasons.

For one, we may believe that we came up with the idea on our own, and that it was just “inspired” by another person, community, or culture. Linked to this, is the belief that we are smarter, more innovative, and/or more of a thought-leader if we come up with something on our own versus in collaboration or in community with others.

There is also the belief that knowledge that is new or novel is more valuable than knowledge that has been shared across time and space, across generations, geographies, and people. All of these beliefs are enforced by the prevailing systems of oppression - capitalism, colonialism, white supremacy, and patriarchy among others. Notice that they all reinforce an either/or way of thinking that limits our agency to false binaries - something is either novel or not worth sharing, something is either your own or not important enough. This either/or thinking and the idea that there is only one right way, are both characteristics of white supremacy culture.

In this module, I want to share with you a few quotes from leaders who I feel speak with nuance about the importance of acknowledging and honouring lineage.

The first set of quotes is an excerpt from a live conversation between author and social justice facilitator adrienne maree brown and culture strategist Sage Crump via the Emergent Strategy Ideation Institute in July 2020.

Sage Crump: I quote people a lot and I do it intentionally. For me it's a political practice to keep other people's names in my mouth because white supremacy tells me that all my ideas are genius and they're only my own. And mostly they're not. We're all impacted by other folks and we are genius community. And how do I keep making that visible?

adrienne maree brown: Because we are socialized by capitalism and socialized toward uplifting individual genius people that are isolated, it's so hard to move through the world and lift up ideas and share ideas without then getting put into that pedestal location. Or being put into that place of "Oh, it's just you." That is an emergent practice to me: keeping other people's names in your mouth...It's one of the many things we can do to start to combat that concept of an individual genius that doesn't require us to disappear ourselves.

I don't want to see Black women disappear ourselves. I don't want to see us limit our capacity to be brilliant. I think we're both brilliant. I think we keep brilliant company. And I think we have brilliant ancestors and brilliant influences. And I think there's plenty of room for all of it. I think there's something for me about consistently reinforcing the community nature of it all.

In this conversation, I really appreciate the ways in which brown and Crump hold multiple truths, rather than fall victim to the false binaries I mentioned before. They acknowledge that they can name the lineage of an idea and all the people who contributed to it, while not disappearing themselves and their own contributions. Both can co-exist.

Another human and teacher whom I've witnessed speak about lineage and attribution in a nuanced way, is therapist and somatics teacher Prentis Hemphill. Below is an excerpt from the transcript of [a video](#) they published in April 2021. This video was a response

to and a reflection on a series of incidents where people had either miscredited or not credited one of Hemphill's quotes around boundaries:

“Boundaries are the distance at which I can love you and me simultaneously.”

“I understand that sometimes we hear something and we may think we came up with the idea. We may think that it came to us, but it may have been something that she [person who used Prentis's quote without attribution] saw in passing that just kind of got embedded, and in her own journaling something very similar emerged. I know that I don't own the words. **I don't own boundaries, I don't own anything about the concept, but I do think it's really important to, as much as we can, name where our ideas come from, and when we don't do that, it's not just about ownership. It's about honouring, it's about appreciation.** I think that's one of the things that colonization, that patriarchy, that white supremacy, that all these systems of oppression do is they are ahistorical. They like to have us pretend that we sprung forth on our own, that we are these pioneering individuals that create ideas alone. And we're not even. For me, the concept around boundaries and distance, I'm sure came to me from many different conversations with other people around boundaries. The thing is, for me, it's really important for me to define things in a way that is visceral, that I can feel them. So I have lots of definitions for a lot of things that feel very visceral to me. And so I came up with that definition because my own values and priorities around visceral and felt definitions created that. So it's like there's so much wisdom, knowledge, insight from other people, relationships that I'm interacting with but it's coming through the prism of me. My values, my intentions, my commitment. And that is what makes it

unique. That's where we share our gifts - how do we take what is happening or what we're learning around us and let it shine through the prism of ourselves. I understand the complexity of that. **No one statement can just emerge from one person and that's why I think it's actually really important to name where things actually come from. Name the lineage of thought that we are in and not disappear people's contributions to it.** Because that's where we start to express these systems of oppression because the people that get disappeared, the people's whose work gets disappeared, or that we even imagine that we can take without attributing, or we imagine that their name isn't valuable enough in order to be shared, that's how we keep replicating these patterns of oppression and that's how we tend to disappear the contributions of Black people, of people of colour, of Indigenous people, of gender non-conforming people, of femme people. All the people who we imagine are unsightly or don't have power inside of these systems. We disappear them, their thinking, their contribution, we absorb it and give it to those who we feel like have more power. And in that way, we keep reinforcing the way power is structured now by not allowing the truth to actually come out. By not allowing people to actually know where many of our insights and ideas and thoughts come from. It's frustrating, it pisses me off, honestly, when it happens like that, when it feels like there's a disappearing of me and someone feels like because of their status or their power - this is how I'm conceptualizing it - because of their status or power, they can absorb my contribution and make it theirs without much consequence. That is so frustrating to me." ([Hemphill, 2021](#))

Several things struck me about Hemphill's perspective. One is the observation that many of the prevailing systems of oppression, including colonization, patriarchy, white supremacy, are ahistorical. They thrive on the erasure and forgetting of what happened in

the past, the erasure of where something comes from, the erasure of lineage. When we take a moment to think about the power of lineage, the motivation of these systems to keep us distant from it are clear. The lineage, context, and relationships that give something meaning also give it the stability, rootedness, and resilience to hold up in the face of adversity. It's harder to co-opt, re-package, and commodify a culture, practice, or a worldview when there's a profound understanding of its lineage. The lineage of a practice comes with instructions on how to care for it and protect it from exploitation.

The other piece that struck me about Hemphill's perspective is the question of whose work gets disappeared. For a sector that harps on the importance of citations, it is critical to examine who and what traditional research and academia deem as worthy of a citation. Whose last names do we forget to include? Whose doctorates do we forget to include? Whose names do we misspell? What knowledge products do we deem as credible? Who has access to creating those kinds of knowledge products? How does your valuation of Hemphill's thinking change if I told you they shared the insight above via an Instagram video rather than in a Forbes article or a peer-reviewed journal? When do we name the source of where we heard something (e.g. *"The other week I was listening to a podcast where Brené Brown was talking to sex researcher Emily Nagoski..."*) and when do we choose to leave out a name, either consciously or subconsciously (e.g. *"a friend of mine says..."*)? Are there patterns within the ways we respond to this question?

Finally, I appreciate Hemphill's distinction that attribution isn't about ownership. Ownership and possession are colonial constructs that have been leveraged to support commodification and other extractive practices. We are conditioned to believe that paying for something, owning something, confers upon us a set of rights to act upon it, modify it, and profit off of it however we wish. **Attribution and lineage are about treating something as a gift rather than as a commodity, and honouring the relationships that give a concept or practice meaning. You can attribute something without owning it, and owning something doesn't absolve**

us of the responsibility to honour its lineage. We will explore this idea further in the Reciprocity module.

Hemphill also goes on to talk about what it would be like to live in a world where attribution is normalized. They say:

“It’s very very frustrating to me because I think if we actually attributed, if we actually honoured where things came from, the whole world would have to shift around that. The whole world would change. We would not be ashamed of where we came from. Because that’s what it’s about. Not being ashamed of where we come from, not being ashamed of who taught us, not pretending that we did things on our own, not pretending that our ideas just came just from us in this moment, but we’re able to like weave ourselves together, our thought together, our insight together, naming the unique contributions that each of us make without disappearing any of them. And that’s what I really really long for around this.” ([Hemphill, 2021](#))

I appreciate Hemphill naming that part of not attributing where we learned something from is rooted in shame. Again, this is something worth examining.

Who and what are we taught to be ashamed of?

Who and what systems benefit from that shame?

What needs to shift in order to be able to take pride in crediting the lineage of the things we know, believe, and practice?

Personally, I think there is a level of rigor that comes with being able to delineate and credit the lineage of an idea. It shows that you have reached beyond the flavour-of-the-week or the buzz-word-of-the-month or the trend-of-the-year and instead developed a robust understanding of where something originated, and the ways it has evolved and been shaped into what it is today.

Honouring lineage is a practice that needs to be practiced to be honed. Perfectionism and the fear of getting it wrong are the ways

in which white supremacy culture keeps us from tearing it down. If you don't know the original source of a quote, concept, framework, or practice, start by sharing who or where you learned it from. This allows space for the fact that an idea may have multiple sources or lineages, yet still allows you to acknowledge and credit the person, place, or context that gave you access to it. I think part of capitalism, and part of the practice of building leaders up, putting them on a pedestal, and knocking them down so swiftly when they make a mistake, is fueled by the notion that individual people come up with ideas, own them, and are ultimately responsible for what they become. Normalize asking people where or from whom they learned something. Hyperlink the people, organizations, and articles from whom you are sharing information or ideas, so that they get the exposure. If you would like to reference a piece of content that isn't publicly available, ask the source of that content if they are comfortable with you sharing it, and if and how they would like to be credited and/or compensated. If someone is generous enough to make their resources available under a Creative Commons license, respect the conditions that come with that license. If you are profiting (in the form of financial and/or social capital) from someone else's content or labour without their explicit and enthusiastic consent, notice the beliefs that make you feel like you can do that. And because every practice can be co-opted, continue to notice your motivations for engaging in this practice. Are you citing and sourcing people only when you have social or financial capital to gain from the affiliation? Are you citing and sourcing only when you know someone is watching to see that you are? Or is it a consistent practice no matter who it is or what you are citing?

Pause. Process. Integrate.

Reflection Prompts

On Acknowledging Lineage

1. *What are some of the reasons as to why you have not acknowledged lineage in the past?*
2. *Where do you stand on the following beliefs?*

“I am smarter, more innovative, or more of a thought-leader if I come up with something on my own versus in collaboration or in community with others.”

“Knowledge that is new or novel is more valuable than knowledge that has been shared across time and space, across generations, geographies, and people.”

“Naming all the people who contributed to an idea disappears or devalues my contribution to it.”

3. *Whose work are you more prone to disappearing?
Why do you think this is?*
4. *What do you think of Hemphill's observation that "many of the prevailing systems of oppression, including colonization, patriarchy, white supremacy, are ahistorical."?*
5. *How much time or energy do you invest in investigating and understanding the lineage of a thought, practice, belief, or framework that you apply in your work?*
6. *How does paying for or owning something change your perception of your responsibility to acknowledge its lineage?*
7. *What role does shame play in shaping your beliefs and behaviours around acknowledging lineage?*
8. *How does perfectionism or the fear of getting it wrong stop you from engaging in the practice of understanding and acknowledging lineage?*
9. *Do you credit and acknowledge lineage even when you know no one is watching to see that you are?*

Embodying Reciprocity

“Research is marriage, not a one-night stand.” Julie Bull, 2018

In this module, we’re going to explore the concept and practice of reciprocity. You may remember that in an earlier module, I suggested reciprocity as an antidote to extraction. Reciprocity is another one of those terms whose definition can get muddled and synonymized with related concepts like interdependence, relationality, and reconciliation. In going back to the etymology or origins of the word “reciprocity,” we see that it’s derived from the Latin *reciprocus*, which means: *moving backward and forward, alternating; mutually exchanged or exchangeable*. And the suffix, *-ity* refers to the state of being something. In other words, reciprocity refers to the state of moving backward and forward, alternating, and mutually exchanging.

With this in mind, this module unpacks two key concepts, including: knowledge as a gift versus a commodity, and research as a practice of visiting.

KNOWLEDGE AS A GIFT VS. A COMMODITY

The following is a conversation that never happened between myself and Potawatomi scholar and botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer. The dialogue features quotes from her book, Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants, and my own reflections in trying to connect her teachings to the practice of research.

Robin: *“It’s funny how the nature of an object - let’s say a strawberry or a pair of socks - is so changed by the way it has come into your hands, as a gift or a commodity.”*

Mathura: I wonder how the way knowledge or data comes into our hands changes how we treat it. Do we feel more or less of a responsibility over knowledge that we gain from anonymous surveys vs. one-on-one interviews vs. community consultations? Do we treat the knowledge we gain through these research engagements as a gift or as a commodity?

Robin: *“I have no inherent obligation to those socks as a commodity, as a private property...I have paid for them and our reciprocity ended the minute I handed her the money. The exchange ends once parity has been established, an equal exchange. They become my property.”*

Mathura: What’s the current equivalent for researchers, in terms of the transaction that absolves us of any obligation to research participants or the knowledge they have shared with us? What’s the transaction that makes what they share with us “our property”? Is it the signing of the consent form? Is it the handing over of a meagre honorarium or bus token or gift certificate?

Robin: *“A gift creates an ongoing relationship...As the scholar and writer Lewis Hyde notes, “It’s the cardinal difference between gift and commodity exchange that a gift establishes a feeling bond between two people.”*

Mathura: What is our relationship to research participants or communities after our research engagements with them? Is the sharing back of findings however many months or years later just a token, or is there an element of ceremony to it? How connected do we feel to the people and communities we engage in research? Again, do we treat the knowledge we gain through research participants as gifts or as commodities?

Robin: *“That is the fundamental nature of gifts: they move, and their value increases with their passage...The more something is shared, the greater its value becomes. This is hard to grasp for societies steeped in notions of private property, where others are, by definition excluded from sharing.”*

Mathura: In what ways do the norms within research and academia exclude us from sharing the knowledge we gain through research? Do we believe that research and community knowledge increases in value as it is shared? Or do we actively take steps to limit the ways in which it can be shared? If so, do we create barriers to access because we believe this knowledge is powerful and don't want it to spread, or because we believe that exclusivity increases the value of this knowledge? Do research participants, from whom this knowledge is derived, have a say in how and with whom and under what conditions their knowledge is shared? Is there knowledge gained through research that we choose not to share because it challenges our own or our organization's agenda or strategic plan? And, if/when we share this knowledge, do we also share credit and royalties with the people and communities from whom it was derived?

Robin: *"From the viewpoint of a private property economy, the 'gift' is deemed to be 'free' because we obtain it free of charge, at no cost. But in the gift economy, gifts are not free. The essence of the gift is that it creates a set of relationships. The currency of a gift economy is, at its root, reciprocity. In Western thinking, private land is understood to be a 'bundle of rights,' whereas in a gift economy property has a 'bundle of responsibilities' attached."*

Mathura: What if a consent form was framed less as a bundle of rights afforded to the researcher re: what they can do with the data collected, and more as a bundle of responsibilities that the participant bestows on the researcher in terms of caring for, protecting, uplifting and sharing the stories they've shared with them? Does paying research participants fairly mean we as researchers no longer have a responsibility to them? Is there a world in which we can normalize paying for the labour that participants extend, but not owning the knowledge they share with us? Or, even in research engagements when money is not exchanged between researchers and participants, and knowledge is shared "for free", can we normalize that knowledge as a gift rather than as a commodity? If so, what are the set of relationships that this gift creates

and what responsibilities does it confer upon us as researchers? What might the back and forth, the alternating, and the ongoing mutual exchange between researchers and participants look like in a world where reciprocity is centered over extraction?

This question marks the end of the conversation that Robin Wall Kimmerer and I never had. As you might have noticed, my contribution to the dialogue included more questions than answers. These are questions that we as researchers may not be used to asking, and I think that's exactly why they are worth exploring. One of my favourite strategies for building the future world that we want now is to start asking different questions than the ones we're used to asking.

Pause. Process. Integrate.

Reflection Prompts

On Knowledge as Gift vs. Commodity

1. *Do you believe that the research engagements you've designed to date have been sites of mutual exchange between researchers and research participants? How do you think the participants you engaged would answer this question?*
2. *Do you experience the knowledge you gain through research participants as gifts or as commodities? How do you distinguish between the two?*
3. *How does the way that a piece of knowledge or data comes into your hands change how you treat it? For example, does the responsibility you feel toward data gathered through anonymous surveys feel different than knowledge gathered through a one-on-one interview or a community conversation?*
4. *What is your relationship to research participants or communities after your research engagements are complete? Are your research engagements isolated events or are they a part of a broader, ongoing relationship-building effort?*
5. *What considerations do you take into account when deciding how, to what extent, and with whom you share the knowledge that emerges from your research?*

RECIPROCITY THROUGH THE ACT OF VISITING

Next, I want to explore reciprocity through the act of visiting, specifically in the ways that Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson describes it. In her book, As We Have Always Done, she shares that,

“Visiting within Nishnaabeg intelligence means sharing oneself through story, through principled and respectful consensual reciprocity with another living being. Visiting is lateral sharing in the absence of coercion and hierarchy and in the presence of compassion. Visiting is fun and enjoyable and nurturing of intimate connections and relationship building. Visiting is the core of our political system (leaders visiting with all the members of the community), our mobilization (Tkamse and Pontiac visited within and outside of their own nations for several years before they expected mobilization), and our intelligence (people visiting elders, sharing food, taking care).”

The practice of visiting as Simpson describes it presents as an antidote to extraction, for several reasons. Firstly, it puts the researcher and the researched on more equal footing. Visiting involves both parties sharing of themselves, rather than just the participant sharing their stories. It requires shared vulnerability between both researchers and the researched. It also requires that researchers examine themselves and their personal lineages in the same way that research participants are often asked to reflect on and share their lived experiences around the research topic. Visiting also emphasizes enthusiastic consent in a way that most research engagements do not. Visits are welcomed, rather than imposed or incentivized. You choose to engage in a visit. Last, and perhaps most radical, Simpson describes visiting as fun and enjoyable and connective. How often do research participants walk away from research engagements feeling like this? What if the goal was to design research engagements as acts of care, connection, play, and healing? Going back to the words of Robin Wall Kimmerer, **how**

would our relationship to the knowledge gained through research change if it came into our hands through intimate acts of care rather than through detached acts of extraction?

The lineage of the Nishnaabeg practice of visiting dates back to the Michi Saagiig Nishanaabeg origin story. Simpson shares that:

“In Nishnaabeg practices, our first intellectual, Nanabush, physically walked the world twice after it was created. Nanabush did not walk the world through a liberal lens to help “those less fortunate.” Nanabush did not walk the world to see how natural resources could be harnessed or how people could be exploited into a particular economic or political system. Nanabush walked the world to understand their place in it, our place in it, to create face-to-face relationships with other nations and beings because Nanabush understood that the Nishnaabeg, that we all, are linked to all of creation in a global community. On the epic journey around the world, Nanabush visited with the different human and nonhuman nations that make up our world. They shared and generated story, ceremony, song, and action. They carried with them the political and spiritual practices of the Nishnaabeg as they visited different nations’ homes. They created a collective consciousness and set of international relationships with each aspect of creation, which they passed on to the Nishnaabeg.” (Simpson, 2017)

What I appreciate about the story of Nanabush is that they visited for the sake of visiting, to understand their relationship to those around them, rather than to impose a particular set of beliefs or accomplish a particular agenda. I appreciate that knowledge generation in the context of visiting is relational. It is co-created, as Simpson described, through story, ceremony, song, and action. There is an element of ritual to it. What would it look like if research engagements felt like rituals? Visiting as Simpson describes,

both takes time and doesn't happen on a timeline. It's ongoing. It's not that a particular project motivates the building of relationships through visiting, but rather that visiting is a way of moving through the world, and when there is a cause to mobilize around, the relationships that have been built through visiting help us move toward it together. The practice of visiting also invites us to become intimate in a way that makes it harder to extract from each other. Extraction, or taking something in a way that severs it from the relationships that give it meaning, requires a level of dehumanization. This dehumanization, which positions the other as "lesser than" - less worthy of safety, belonging, and dignity - is one of the ways in which we justify the harm we cause. On the flip side, being in relationship with the other breeds nuance, allows us to see each other as complex, dynamic beings, and makes it harder to judge and punish those with whom we don't agree. While visiting doesn't guarantee that we will always agree or see eye-to-eye, it gives us the muscles, context, and shared history to be able to hold and move through that tension when it emerges.

What would it look like to normalize visiting as a practice within the world of research? Research projects are often implemented within the constraints of the amount of funding and time allocated for that work. It's likely that we'd come up against, "*there's no time for visiting.*" What if there was? What if visiting was an overhead responsibility - similar to overhead costs like rent, utilities, and insurance - as a part of a shift in organizational culture toward centering reciprocity? What if visiting was built into budgets and resourced consistently and over time? What is one small step we can take in the direction of uplifting visiting not only as legitimate, but as a crucial step in the pursuit of non-extractive R&D? If we don't feel like we can visit with a community or set of people whom we are hoping to engage in research, that in itself is an important point of reflection. Is it because we feel we won't be welcome? Why might that be? What is your relationship to this community or set of people outside of your role as a researcher? What is the relationship between your respective identities,

privileges, and lineages, and what responsibility does that confer upon you as the researcher? What judgements, if any, do you have around visiting? Perhaps it feels like a waste of time, like it's not connected to a tangible outcome, or like there's no way to know if you're doing it right. Any discomfort or resistance we experience around these questions is data that is worth examining.

Drawing on Robin Wall Kimmerer's description of a gift economy and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's description of visiting as a Nishnaabeg practice, I'm asking myself:

- What if we treated knowledge gained through research as a gift rather than as a commodity?
- What if we designed research engagements as experiences we are gifting to ourselves as well as the communities we are engaging? How might we make them fun, enjoyable, and connective?
- What if research engagements were an alternating back and forth, a mutual exchange between researchers and the researched?
- What if visiting was a legitimate, resourced, and ongoing way of gathering, processing, and sharing knowledge?

Pause. Process. Integrate.

Reflection Prompts

On Research as a Practice of Visiting

1. *What is your first impression of research as a practice of visiting? What parts of it resonate? What parts of it do you experience resistance to?*
2. *What would have to change about the way you or your organization currently approach research in order to be able to engage in research as a practice of visiting?*
3. *What do you think it would take for you to experience the process of research as fun, enjoyable, and connective?*
4. *What do you think it would take for the people and communities you work with to experience the process of research as fun, enjoyable, and connective?*

Chapter Five

Where Do We Go From Here?

The toolkit has intentionally focused thus far on “being with” what is and interrogating it, including and especially when it’s uncomfortable. The instinct to solve, to fix, and to move through the discomfort as quickly as possible is natural, and long-lasting change and meaningful repair require an embodied understanding of the roots and impacts of our actions. Now, we can allow this embodied knowledge to guide our next steps.

In this chapter, we will:

- Examine the ways in which we may need to work on building or rebuilding trust, either with ourselves or with others.
- Conclude our exploration as it relates to this toolkit and reflect on how, if at all, our somatic shapes have shifted as a result of this process.
- Share resources to support learning around repairing harm.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Building & Rebuilding Trust

“When safety has been broken in ourselves, when our boundaries have been profoundly crossed or violated, as mine had, as yours have, I think there’s a way that we don’t even know how deeply we end up mistrusting ourselves. We start to believe we did something wrong because that boundary, that thing we were using to protect ourselves, got violated or crossed, and we didn’t stop it. It doesn’t matter that we couldn’t stop it. We’ve betrayed ourselves, and start to think, “Well, I betrayed myself once. What’s to say I’m ever really trustworthy.”” - Spenta Kandawalla, The Politics of Trauma

In the process of working through this toolkit, you may have come face-to-face with the ways in which you have broken trust with yourself or others. You may mistrust yourself after uncovering a belief or best practice you’ve subscribed to that you are now realizing is quite harmful and counter to your core values. You may experience or finally be able to contextualize the mistrust you have perceived from those you have harmed as a result of your internalized white supremacy. It is important to remember that while trust can be broken in a matter of seconds, it takes time to rebuild. In her book, The Politics of Trauma, somatic practitioner Staci K. Haines breaks trust down into its three component parts: intention, competence, and reliability. She defines them as follows:

“Trust is intention + competency + reliability, all held within an analysis of systemic power and conditions.

Intention. The first thing we want to assess and align is intention. What is your intention? Can you explore what another’s intention is? What are they meaning, going for, intending? What are you meaning and going for? Is the intention good, for a larger purpose, considering you, considering others or the organization, or the community?

Competency. Competency is having the relevant skills to keep your promise. It is having the abilities to take the actions you say you will. Oftentimes, a gap between intention and competence is where breakdowns in trust can occur.

Reliability. This is when we are able to align intention and competence in a repeated way, over time. This is when people know they can count on us, because it has been shown over time. This is where we can assess others as well. Will they show up over time aligned with their intention and with the relevant competencies?

Power and trust. We need to acknowledge structural power within trust, as well as dynamics of power interpersonally. Is there a person in the dynamic who has more power to define and to decide? How are they acknowledging and working with that power? If there are structural power differences, can these be named and worked with proactively? In addressing power, there are still the other subsets of trust, intention, competency, and reliability that need to be built.

Breakdowns in trust come when any of the four components of trust - intention, competence, reliability, or addressing power, are missing. Perhaps there is competence and skill, but not a clear or good intention. Perhaps there is intention and skill, but an inability to address power - we’d hold this as a lack in one of the other three as

well. We can assess in ourselves and others which of these skills is present and which is missing. **Each of these can be worked on and practiced to increase trust and trustworthiness.**" ([Haines, 2019](#))

A fifth overarching factor I would add as integral to the process of building or rebuilding trust is time. Intentions clarify over time, competence develops over time, and you need time to prove reliability. Last but not least, power, and our understanding of and relationship to power, is dynamic and can shift over time.

And because rebuilding trust takes an investment of time from all parties involved, it's important that before we engage in this process, we assess: *Is there a good enough reason to do this? What will be gained in mending this trust?* In other words, is there a strong "why" that will serve as an anchor through the choppy waters of repairing broken trust? While individual parties may come into the process with different motivations, aligning on a collective "why" is crucial. Often, these collective "whys" extend beyond wanting to soothe or get rid of uncomfortable feelings like guilt and shame harboured within individuals (short-term) and rather are rooted in commitments to the greater whole and visions for the collective future (longer-term). Some examples of this include: wanting to be in right relationship with those around us, wanting to build a culture of accountability, wanting to embody alternatives to punishment in response to harm, and/or wanting to cultivate the conditions for intergenerational, intercultural, and interracial healing.

As we go about making these assessments, Haines reminds us that,

"For many of us, present-day breakdowns of trust hit up against recent or historical ways we have been harmed or endangered. This cascade can feel like rebuilding trust or extending trust again is impossible or just a bad idea. Here we are asked to address and continue healing these previous harms, until we can assess what's in front of us based on the current situation."

Pause. Process. Integrate.

Reflection Prompts

On Building & Rebuilding Trust

1. *How do you experience Staci K. Haines' definition of trust? Do you agree with the component parts she describes? Are there any components she articulates that you hadn't previously considered to be a part of trust? Are there any components you would change or add?*
2. *Are there particular elements of building trust that you have weighed more heavily than others? (e.g. "If my intention is in the right place, then it matters less whether or not I have the right skills.") What do you think influenced this weighting?*
3. *Based on your previous experiences of trying to rebuild trust after having broken trust, how much time and how many times has it taken to mend what was broken? How have your expectations of what it means to be reliable been different when you were the person who experienced harm versus the person who caused harm?*
4. *Based on your previous experiences of engaging in a process of trying to rebuild broken trust, what have been some examples of "good enough reasons" to show up to this process?*

5. *Alternatively, when have you opted to not to engage in rebuilding trust? What factors contributed to this decision?*
6. *In what ways has working through this toolkit resulted in broken self-trust?*
7. *Which components of trust do you think you need to bolster in order to rebuild this trust with yourself?*
8. *What would be your “why” or your motivation for engaging in this process with yourself?*
9. *Do you think this breakdown of trust is solely about your engagement with this toolkit in present-time, or does it also hit up against recent or historical ways in which you’ve been harmed or endangered?*

On “*What Can White People Do?*”

**“White supremacy is like white bread...
it’s not healthy but I’ve been eating it my whole life.”
- Someone Who Would Probably Prefer to Remain Anonymous**

This section is solely about what white people can do to heal their own trauma, and does not include what they must do to end the ways in which white supremacy harms people of color. Plenty of resources have already been provided and shared widely around the latter.

First, understand your lineage as it relates to white supremacy. In the words of trauma specialist Resmaa Menakem, *“Study yourself, your ancestors, and your people. What are their stories, both in America and before they arrived here? How did they end up in the New World? How did their lives lead to yours?”* ([Menakem, 2017](#))

Understand when and how the “trauma of whiteness”^[1] entered your lineage and was passed down to you. Dig deeper to understand how the “trauma of whiteness” manifests in your body, actions, thinking, emotions, relationships, and sensations. How do you embody and enforce the characteristics of white supremacy culture? What arises for you when you notice and acknowledge these embodiments?

How does your relationship to this work change when you believe and pursue it as a path to your own liberation, rather than as a favour to the “oppressed other”?

Familiarize yourself with your trauma responses. How are you activated when the characteristics of white supremacy culture are called into question? What is the site of this activation? Which of your identities are activated? Where in your body does the activation happen? What are the patterns in these activations? What is the purpose of the activation? How does it want you to react? What does it want you to say or do? Is this response in alignment with your commitment(s) or declaration(s)? We all embody white

[1] I encountered the phrase “the trauma of whiteness” from author and activist [Lama Rod Owens](#).

supremacy culture to some extent - it's the air we breathe - but it manifests uniquely in each of us, shaped by our individual contexts and lineages^[2].

What would it look like to decouple whiteness from supremacy?

What would whiteness as a culture look like if it was not defined by supremacy and power-over systems and practices? What would be the characteristics of an anti-white-supremacy culture? What would the embodiment of that culture feel like in your body? When in the past have you experienced a similar feeling?

[2] If you haven't already completed the *Culture Audit Canvas* to unpack your relationship to each of *The Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture* (see Chapter 2), start there. If you are experiencing resistance to it, blending with the resistance somatically (see Chapter 3) can be a helpful starting point to better understand what this work might be activating in you and why.

A Final Word(s)

“Nothing ever comes to rest. Everything keeps moving. Even stationary objects are moving, though we do not see it. Change is constant and that means we are not the same from one moment to another either. Our cells are constantly in the process of changing. So if I am moving through a tough situation, there is no point trying to find “rest” so that I can cope. That is impossible. Instead, I can choose to change trajectory, to move in a direction that will lead me toward peace.” - Richard Wagamese, *Embers*

Dear Reader,

If you’ve made it this far, I applaud your courage for venturing into new and possibly uncomfortable territories within yourself.

Change - whether that’s a shift in beliefs, behaviours, circumstances, and/or sense of self - can feel like death. In some ways, it is. Letting go of what is familiar, even if it no longer serves us, can feel like dying. Allow yourself to grieve the loss. Create the space for grief intentionally, otherwise grief has a way of claiming that space forcefully, often in the form of resistance to new ways of being, doing, and practicing.

Allow yourself compassion through this transition. This is unfamiliar terrain for your body. It too is learning what it’s like to exist as a different somatic shape than it was previously. Like a snow globe that is shaken, it will take time for the learnings to settle and for clarity to emerge. If you feel like you’ve been here before and are frustrated with yourself for not having integrated the learnings sooner, or the last time this happened, I offer you this wisdom from mother, organizer, theologian and writer Autumn Meghan Brown:

“Change is often really non-linear and...sometimes cycles have to repeat themselves multiple times in order for a different outcome to be possible...” There’s a way of thinking out there that suggests that it’s not okay for cycles to repeat themselves. Or it’s a sign that we’re not getting anywhere if cycles repeat themselves. I think in reality, cycles do have to repeat themselves multiple times typically before a behaviour will change. Or before we have enough muscle to make a different choice. I think scientifically sometimes cycles do have to repeat themselves before a different outcome will naturally unfold or mathematically be possible. In that regard...looking at the current conditions and seeing that yes there’s a lot that’s happening right now that is functionally a cycle repeating itself, and then there’s a lot that’s happening because the conditions have changed and the conditions changing have made other things possible inside this landscape that weren’t possible before. And our job is just to meet that, to meet that moment, meet it with readiness and rigor.” - Autumn Meghan Brown, [The Emergent Strategy Podcast](#)

It is my hope that *Dismantling the Master's Tools* has helped develop your ability to respond - your “response-ability” - with readiness and rigor.

As we move through these cycles of change, I want us to remember that compassion and accountability can, must, and do co-exist. It’s true that we are not our trauma - we are not responsible for, or deserving of, our trauma. It’s also true that we are responsible for healing our individual and collective traumas, so that we do not pass it on or blow it through other bodies as we have done to date. Harm begets harm, and healing begets healing. Let’s strive for the latter and trust our bodies to know and help us discern the difference.

This body of work (pun intended) was both a platform for and a product of my own ongoing healing process and in my final words, let me thank you as the reader for bearing witness. Your feedback,

shared within the boundaries I articulated in Chapter 1, is both welcome and deeply appreciated. This includes formal feedback in written or audio form, as well as process artifacts like excerpts of journal entries in response to the reflection prompts, voicenotes documenting a-ha moments, photos of the different tools or activities in action, and/or memes that perfectly capture your state(s) as you move through this toolkit. I've accepted that I will never fully know or understand the true impact of this work, and yet I still crave glimpses into how it has moved you, for better or for worse. Feel free to get in touch and share at hello@dismantlingthemasterstools.com

Love,
Mathura · Temwa

“I mean love that is kind but also honest. Love that is courageous, relentless and willing to break the rules and smash the system. Love that cares about people more than ideas, that prizes each and every one of us as essential and indispensable. I mean love that is compassionate and accountable. I mean love that confirms and reaffirms us as complex and fallible yet lovable anyway, love that affirms us as human.”

Kai Cheng Thom, *I Hope We Choose Love*

Pause. Process. Integrate.

Reflection Prompts

On Taking Stock

1. *How, if at all, has the process of working through this toolkit shifted your beliefs, behaviours, and/or sense of self?*
2. *How has your body been reacting or responding to these shifts?*
3. *Do these shifts feel new, or do you feel like you've been here before?*
If it's the latter, how, if at all, does this time feel different? What feels possible this time that didn't before?
4. *How do you experience the assertion that "compassion and accountability can, must, and do co-exist"?* What is your relationship to both of these practices? Is there one that feels easier than the other?
5. *If you were to describe your experience of this toolkit to a trusted friend or colleague, what would you say? Would you recommend it? Why or why not?*

Further Reading For Repairing Harm

This toolkit is intended to help individuals and groups become more present to the harms they have and continue to cause and/or experience in the name of social R&D. It intentionally does not cross into the territory of repairing harm. Many brilliant practitioners and teachers of transformative justice have written, spoken, and provided resources around engaging in processes of repair. Below is a non-exhaustive list of resources that can guide you in this next important step on the road to justice and accountability. Many of these resources also reference more extensive lists of resources within them.

We Will Not Cancel Us: And Other Dreams of Transformative Justice, adrienne maree brown

Creative Interventions Toolkit: A Practical Guide to Stop Interpersonal Violence, Creative Interventions

Fumbling Towards Repair: A Workbook for Community Accountability Facilitators, Mariame Kaba and Shira Hassan

The Anatomy of an Apology, Rania El-Mugammar

Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement, Ejeris Dixon and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha

TransformHarm.org

Accountability Mapping, Daria

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Beyond the Gender Binary, Alok Vaid-Menon (2020)

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Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018)

Embers: One Ojibway's Meditations, Richard Wagamese (2016)

Holding Change: The Way of Emergent Strategy Facilitation and Mediation, adrienne maree brown (2021)

Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow, Yuval Noah Harari (2015)

How We Show Up: Reclaiming Family, Friends, and Community, Mia Birdsong (2020)

I Hope We Choose Love: A Trans Girl's Notes From The End of the World, Kai Cheng Thom (2019)

I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness, Austin Channing Brown (2018)

My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to

Mending Our Hearts and Bodies, Resmaa Menakem (2017)

Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom, bell hooks (1994)

The Politics of Trauma: Somatics, Healing, and Social Justice, Staci K. Haines (2019)

Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others, Laura van Dernoot Lipsky with Connie Burk (2007)

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White Supremacy Culture, Kenneth Jones & Tema Okun (2001)

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Finding Our Way Podcast, Season 1, Episode 5, Prentis Hemphill (2020)

Irresistible podcast, Episode 44, Tender Masculinity with Eroc Arroyo-Montano (2019)

The Emergent Strategy Podcast: Relating During the Pandemic, Autumn Meghan Brown (2021)

The Good Ancestor Podcast, Layla F. Saad

Videos

Boundaries Quote and Attribution, Prentis Hemphill (2021)

ESII Live: Lessons from Flocking thru Dat Rona Part 2, adrienne maree brown & Sage Crump (2020)

Webpage

What is Somatics, Accountability Mapping (2021)

About the Author

Mathura “Temwa” Mahendren is a storyteller by nature, and a design researcher by nurture.



As the daughter of asylum-seeking refugees fleeing state-sanctioned genocide in Sri Lanka, now residing on stolen land on Turtle Island, the desire to reconcile the dissonances within her lineage often manifests in her work. Her practice is rooted in a commitment to designing and sharing tools, frameworks, and brave spaces that can hold individuals, groups, and relationships through difference, discomfort, grief, change, and ultimately, growth.

As the daughter of two humans whose love survived oceans of distance across indefinite periods of time, the poverty of starting anew in a foreign land, and the sudden and premature loss of their firstborn, Mathura is intimately aware of the ways in which our ability to move through difference, discomfort, grief, change, and growth is deeply intertwined with how and how deeply we were taught to love. To that end, love is both the method and the madness that underpins all of her bodies of work.

In her “spare” time, Mathura is an aspiring meme - has anything else ever made you feel as seen, laugh as hard, and/or rendered you as speechless as the perfect meme?

p.s. Mathura has a Bachelor of Health Sciences from McMaster University, and a Masters of Design in Strategic Foresight and Innovation from OCAD University -- in case that's the kind of bio you were looking for.