I’d like to begin my paper by giving some context to the following statements. As the director of University-Wide Art Studies here in Aalto University, my current approach to creativity is first and foremost pedagogical. In other words, I’m preoccupied with trying to think what education – not research per se – could mean as a radical act of creativity. But since I’m a researcher too and continue to do research on histories, philosophies, and politics of art education on the side, I do have something to say about research as well.

That said, I took the liberty of writing a little essay for you (as writing is my main instrument of thinking). Rather than describing how to implement radical creativity in research (or research in radical creativity), my intention will be to lay some ground for posing further questions about the topic of our symposium. This is, in fact, what I often aim to do with research in general, so you may consider this essay as an act – whether radical or not – of research, if not creativity.

Decolonial scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith begins her influential book Decolonizing Methodologies (2012) with a following statement:

> From the vantage point of the colonized, a position from which I write, and choose to privilege, the term ‘research’ is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, ‘research,’ is probably one of the dirties words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary. (p. 1)

When addressing the title of this symposium – Research as a Radical Act of Creativity – Tuhiwai Smith’s words urge us to ask, whose research, whose creativity, whose radicality, and whose acts are we, in fact, talking about here today, and why. This is crucial, I believe, because if “radical creativity” is understood as something that “disrupts the status quo” and “brings forward new ideas” and “novel practices,” it is worth keeping in mind that there are plenty of life-worlds – both human and nonhuman – that have been and continue to be disrupted and destroyed by various acts of overzealous researchers and educators who wish to change the world according to their own image.

Hence, if research is a “dirty word” for the colonized, as Tuhiwai Smith suggests, it’s not because the peoples she refers to are anti-science. Rather, the point is that academic research – more than often done of them rather than with them or by them – has been merely yet another technique of control and exploitation to which the indigenous and the subaltern have been – and continue to be – subjected for centuries.

Of course, researchers have not been alone. As educational historian Thomas D. Fallace (2015) has argued, the tradition of student-centered, creativity-laden educational thought...
and practice has its roots in theories of cultural evolution, where some (read: White upper middle class) stand as universalized measure of proper creative expression for others; a measure that has guided educators to distinguish those whose acts are considered properly creative from those who seem merely disruptive (and thus in need of correction) (see also Lentis, 2017). If research is a dirty word, so is creativity from this perspective.

So, what to do with these two dirty words here today? One might argue that Tuhiwai Smith’s argument is particular to her position; that her critique as an indigenous Maori based in New Zealand points merely to a particular history that is very distant or even separate from what we as researchers do here in Aalto. While it is true that she does speak from a Maori perspective, her perspective is not disconnected from the connected histories of science, colonization, and global flows of capital any more than the universalized discourse on academic research as such (c.f. Loomba, 2014). To neglect her words is to neglect the fact that science, research, and – I must add – arts as we know them today are products of a world in which colonialism and colonist exploitation of people and natural resources have formed (and continue to form) the source of wealth required to develop and sustain institutions of science, education, and art. Moreover, to neglect her words is to neglect the fact that this history is not over, and that it is very much living in methodologies, epistemologies, and even ontologies on which a plethora of research in academia today – also in here Aalto University – is based.

Since unpacking the whole history of the relationship between academia and colonially is impossible given the short time I have (and, indeed, would be a bit off topic), I will focus on discussing the idea of research and creativity as “acts,” particularly historical acts that allegedly “disrupt the status quo,” “bring forward new ideas,” and induce “novel practices.” My claim will be that radicalizing, or, as I suggest we should do, decolonizing these two dirty words (research and creativity) requires a different relation to time and history than what we find from such future-centered narratives of change. This is because, as Tuhiwai Smith (2012) puts it, “Coming to know the past has been part of the critical pedagogy of decolonization. To hold alternative histories is to hold alternative knowledges. The pedagogical implication of this access to alternative knowledges is that they can form the basis for alternative ways of doing things.” (p. 36)

It is not an overstatement to say that at least for the past two hundred years, the globalized science of the “West” has been intimately connected with the idea of historical development. What this means is that science helps to keep history on the move by paving the way for a better world to come; that science does away with superstitious and aristocratic forms of government that trap peoples and communities in old, ossified ways of living; that science is an inevitable part of a functioning, forward-looking democracy. Science is, in short, central to the social and political imaginary of “Western modernity” and the world history it is expected to write. What makes this narrative so irresistible is that it seems to make perfect sense – after all, who would be against such grand ideals?! However, its benevolent irresistibility entails what Michel Foucault (1984) once called the “‘blackmail’ of the Enlightenment” (p. 42) in European thought; namely “a simplistic and authoritarian alternative” (p. 43) between freedom (brought by the tradition of Enlightenment rationalism) and domination (that is, an “escape from its principles of rationality” [p. 43] into the kind of mercurial autocracy of Trump, Lukashenka, and
others). In short, either one “Shapes the Future” or “Shapes a Sustainable Future” (as Aalto’s current and new strategies have it) or subjects oneself to a history beyond one’s control. Hunt or be hunted.

But whose future does this narrative guide us to imagine? Whose acts are considered as part of its progressing history that runs on the endless production of “new ideas” and “novel practices”? Let’s examine these questions through an example. In Hawaii, the plans to build the world’s most advanced astronomical telescope in the Mauna Kea mountain have been met with protests that demand to respect and preserve the sacred land of the indigenous Hawaiians (Witze, 2020). The area is arguably one of the best places on Earth to make astronomical observations (indeed, there are already thirteen telescopes on the mountain), and building the new observatory would benefit not only the scientific community – a through that, the whole humanity (assumedly, at least) – but might also support the local economy. However, besides these rather easily translatable values (research and money), the project would, yet again, occupy another piece of Indigenous, sacred land that has already has a long history of occupation. As Kealoha Pisciotta, one of the protesters at Mauna Kea described the protests in an interview: “For Native Hawaiians, there is a question of our right to self-determination as defined by international law, but I think it’s so much bigger than that … It’s about us learning to live and be interdependent.” (Van Dyke, 2019, para 9) One could say, then, the protests at Mauna Kea are “shaping a future” where the priorities of wellbeing are somewhere else than in the seemingly inavoidable Euro-American modernization; a future that the telescope simply cannot offer (as a sidenote: a wonderful recent film by Lemohang Jeremiah Mosese titled “This is Not a Burial, It’s a Resurrection” captures well a similar dynamic in Lesotho).

Again, one could argue that this example presents merely a local conflict over a particular piece of land – a conflict that has nothing to do with the work that we do here in Aalto (of course, if you want a local example, there’s plenty to discuss about forestry and mining in the Sami lands up north). However, pitting a “universal” science (as a thing of the future concerning the entire humankind) against “particular” sacredness (as a thing of the past specific to the local community) is precisely how the “blackmail of the Enlightenment” works, and something that decolonial scholars like Tuhiai Smith ask us to unlearn. Here, the Indigenous Hawaiians’ will to “learn to live and be interdependent” – a statement not at all alien to the project of European modernity as well – stands as an act of resistance that challenges the universalized benefits of scientific and economic progress (the two main arguments for the project) and the history this progress writes. Their resistance does not stem from some sudden historical dialectics between the past and the future; rather, the point is that the resistance has always been there, and that squaring it out from history or seeing it as a singular occurrence is precisely the dirty work of coloniality. As decolonial theorist Javier Sanjinés (2013) argues, this is why:

> to decolonize means to unveil the hidden complicity between the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality. This implies incorporating into the analysis of modernity [the] contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous, which has traditionally been taken as a sign of ‘backwardness’ on the temporal scale, and of ‘primitivity’ and ‘barbarity’ on the spatial scale. (p. 55)
This brings me finally to the topic of creativity, radical or otherwise. Going back to the claim that radical creativity “brings forward new ideas that challenge prevailing organizational modus operandi, rejecting incremental and iterative processes in favor of novel practices and approaches” (as the description of this symposium has it), I think it is important to discuss what kind of non-contemporaneity might it entail and why. Instead of seeing the fracture that radical creativity introduces in the present merely in terms of the future (“novel practice and approaches”) or the past (some originary point of authenticity), I see that radical, decolonized creativity may point to the present itself as a site of infinite contestation, asking us to pay attention to “noncontemporaneous” pasts and futures in this present.

To see creativity as an untimely fracture in the present time is certainly not a novel idea. For example, we could go back to Thomas Kuhn’s passing statement in The Structure of Scientific Revolutions: “[l]ike artists, creative scientists must occasionally be able to live in a world out of joint” (Kuhn, 1962/1996, p. 79). However, as I have discussed elsewhere (Tervo, 2017), in Kuhn’s case (and cases similar to him), creativity is summoned not in order to challenge science, but to save it. This means that the difference that creativity introduces to scientific research eventually falls back to the sameness of science’s historical progression. In fact, such “occasional” deviances from the norm merely secure the very conditions of possibility of the norm itself, allowing one to return science to its allegedly essential function; that is, to produce historical novelties (to follow Kuhn’s terminology) by taking otherness within its explicatory order. One could say, then, that the old Hegelian dream of overcoming the strangeness of the world – an overcoming that, for Hegel, laid the ground for a true historical existence he specifically assigned to Europeans (more particularly, to Germans) – can be still be seen hovering over the academic imagination. Or, as Robert J.C. Young (2004) has put it:

> History, with capital H … cannot tolerate otherness or leave it outside its economy of inclusion. The appropriation of the other as a form of knowledge within a totalizing system can thus be set alongside the history (if not the project) of European imperialism, and the constitution of the other as ‘other’ alongside racism and sexism. (p. 35)

How, then, to understand creativity (radical or not) without falling back to the colonizing sameness of historical progression? To paraphrase Tuhiwai Smith (2012), how to learn “alternative,” not new, “ways of doing things” (p. 36) in radically creative research?

Interestingly enough, Jessica Dempsey, the deputy director of the East Asian Observatory responsible for the Mauna Kea project, also refers to creativity as one solution to their troubled situation in Hawaii. In an interview in Nature published last January (2020), she says: “I’m kind of glad in some ways that we’ve been forced into this conversation. … We didn’t do enough creative things in our local community in Hawaii until we were forced to — by people saying that this is not okay” (Witze, 2020, p. 458).

While it is unclear what these “creative things” she refers to actually are, there are two points that make this statement interesting. Firstly, considering that the protests are still underway today (seven years after the approval of the project), Dempsey and her crew seem to have many “creative things” yet to do with the community if they wish to settle the argument. Secondly, the need for such “creative things” did not stem from the
research itself, but from an insistent “no” that their research faced; a “no” that forced them into a conversation with the local community.

I suggest that this “no” can be understood as the kind of “contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous” discussed above; that is, as an act that, in this particular case, points to a tension between the coloniality of “science” and decoloniality of “sacredness.” It is an act that forces to listen; that forces to pay attention to the ethics of research beyond the scientific community (including universities’ IRBs or ethics boards). This “no” is not a sign of backwardness, anti-science, or a dead end. It is a “no” that affirms pasts and futures that academic research might not be able to control, but is nevertheless intricately connected to.

Taking all this into consideration, what do I have to say about research as an act of radical creativity? My intention in this short paper has been to understand the historicity of acts of research and creativity aside from universalized narratives of historical progression. I acknowledge that since my inquiry is mainly limited to “dirty words,” more systemic, institutional, and practical considerations will have to wait for another time. Nevertheless, what I’m proposing here is that instead of seeing radical creativity merely as something that saves academic research from itself, it could be understood as an act of listening and paying attention to what already exists; that is, as an act that affirms those “no’s” that force us in academia to act otherwise.

References


