

## DECOLONISING NARRATIVES IN COMMUNICATION: A CASE STUDY OF *THE TIPPING POINT TO DECOLONISE SUSTAINABILITY*

Cinthy Sopaheluwakan and Rahul Ranjan

### Abstract

Narratives hold immense power in shaping reality and mobilising resources. Acknowledging the intimate connection between the climate crisis and racial injustices is vital. In this regard, decolonial perspectives are increasingly indispensable to tackling the challenges in this emergent crisis, where human-led corporations, practices, and politics drive ecological shifts. While techno-managerial solutions abound in our daily conversations and policy praxis, storytelling offers profound potential to reimagine our world. This article shows how collaborative practices are crucial in weaving together stories and experiences by echoing the emotional resonance of the climate crisis narrative to communicate our environmental reality and cultivate informed public awareness. Using the case study of *The Tipping Point to Decolonise Sustainability*, an initiative centred on climate storytelling, highlights how collaboration can spur discussions on decolonising sustainability. The article shows how we can craft an equitable future by acknowledging the power of storytelling and working together to communicate environmental reality.

Keywords: Storytelling, Climate Crisis, Decolonial, Sustainability, Norway

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*Storytelling is at its core decolonising, because it is a process of remembering, visioning and creating a just reality, where Nishnabeeg live as both Nishnabeeg and peoples. Storytelling then becomes a lens through which we can envision our way out of cognitive imperialism,*

*where we can create models and mirrors where none existed, and where we can experience the spaces of freedom and justice. (Simpson, 2011, p. 281)*

## **Introduction**

Stories form the basis for ways of relating to and becoming part of the world - both human and non-human. In the epigraph above, while theorising decolonial thought, Leane Betasamosake Simpson and Edna Manitowabi advocates for narrativising the past through a decolonial lens that reveals how colonial power draws legitimacy from the production of discursive knowledge. Stories hold a powerful place in our society. They have the power to structure reality and produce a discourse that could effectively mobilise resources. Various, “Narratives, occurring in media, in public discourse, political agenda or even scientific debate, are vehicles for complex phenomena, such as climate change.” (Arnold, 2018, p. 12)

Climate change reveals our entanglement at a planetary level. Human footprints are causing vast change, impacting the entire ecology. The term Anthropocene, a geological epoch in which humans become key drivers of ecological change and pose unique methodological challenges to any discipline, is now widely accepted (Mathur, 2021). While some natural scientists are hesitant to concede the term for describing the changes on a planetary level, the term urges us to take seriously the moral and ethical challenges that it poses. These challenges emerge from histories and ongoing processes of colonisation that seek to privilege specific forms of knowledge and often do not recognise the experience of individuals/communities as necessarily useful.

However, the climate crisis is deeply embedded in racial injustices that disproportionately impact historically marginalised communities. Kathryn Yusoff weaves together the racial histories of the Anthropocene - calling for “different kinds of world-making” (Yusoff, 2018, p. 26). Similarly, Zoe Todd, an indigenous anthropologist, calls for “indigenising the Anthropocene” (Davis & Turpin, 2015, p. 241-254) to critically engage with the moral urgency of the Anthropocene and, by extension, with the climate crisis, to avoid flattening the differences. In other

words, variables such as race and inequality that are detrimental to access, privilege, and challenges sit at the core of the climate crisis.

Often while narrativising this crisis, there is a tendency in portrayal of climate in policy and popular media to overemphasise 'techno-managerial' aspects, including adaptations and mitigations. These are essential considerations in approaching climate change, but more is needed. Nightingale et al. (2020) show how 'technical fixes' remove any anticipation of the unknown of the climate crisis, which rests within the many worlds of communities and their experiences. They argue that "plural framings offer better possibilities to deal with the multiple uncertainties of climate change" (p.346), thereby granting an agentive force to storied lives. Therefore, communicating environmental reality is crucial for bridging the gap between seemingly different strands of knowledge, and is fundamental to shaping informed public awareness about the extinction of species and a deepening inequality.

We firmly contend that *storytelling* can be a potent tool for decolonising narratives in communication. It is a process that involves remembering, visioning, and creating a just reality. Therefore, it becomes a lens through which we can envision our way out of cognitive imperialism and develop models and mirrors where none existed. Stories have a commanding place in our society and can structure reality, producing a discourse effectively mobilising resources. They are vehicles for complex phenomena such as climate change in media, public discourse, political agendas, and scientific debates.

We argue that *telling tales* about crises with their complexity and entanglements offers radical possibilities to reimagine our world. Storytelling becomes a structuring force in attending to and moving along with many ways of being in the world.

Collaboration across sectors is crucial to communicating environmental reality, bridging the gap between seemingly different strands of knowledge shaping informed public awareness about the extinction of species and deepening inequality. We place immense value on collaboration as an attempt to weave together stories and

experiences and, importantly, streamline the affective register of the crisis narrative. To illustrate this point, we use a case study of *The Tipping Point to Decolonise Sustainability*, an event presented by [The Big Picture](http://www.thebigpicture.co) (www.thebigpicture.co), an organisation that I (C.S.) founded and lead.

This article shows how, through this initiative that builds on *telling tales* about the climate crisis, collaborations prompted a discussion on decolonising sustainability. In particular, I designed a public-facing event in September 2023 in Oslo with invited speakers who mainstreamed the relevance of decolonising the discourse on sustainability, which is saturated with the language of 'greening' the environment. We believe that without racial/indigenous justice, there is no climate justice (Sultana, 2022). This bold but well-established claim is core to our beliefs and principles for developing collaborations.

### **Experimental Space**

The Big Picture is an impact organisation working at the intersection of sustainability strategy and storytelling. As an organisation located in the Global North working within climate change and putting efforts to mitigate the effects of climate change towards a more just and regenerative society, we realise that narratives about climate change often portray it as a result of human activity and not as a project for colonial powers (Singh, 2023). It is usually also disregarded as an effect of colonisation (Gayle, 2022) and remains what many have claimed as a form of "climate colonialism" (Lewis, 2023, para. 7). Recognition of this complexity sits at the heart of the initiative.

We curated an experimental space to tell complicated stories of climate, sustainability, and Indigenous environmental struggles that are deeply impacted by long colonial histories, in an open and accessible public format. The platform aims to steer alternative perspectives and narratives about sustainability by creating a public-facing scholarship. This goal was realised through our event, *The Tipping Point to Decolonise Sustainability*.

This article discusses *The Tipping Point to Decolonise Sustainability* event in the context of the importance of decolonising praxis, collectivism, and partnership as an alternative method of resilience and disrupting hegemonic narratives.

The event was led by a small team and guests, including Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) speakers from the Global South and immigrants in Norway with English as their second language. See Figures 1 and 2. These choices of speakers were exercised to ensure that representation - especially within environmental discourse in Norway that is saturated with 'greenwashing' - could be punctuated by voices from diverse and experiential perspectives. Often, representation is deemed a matter of compliance. But for our event and, more broadly, for The Big Picture organisation, it is a matter of ethical practice that “decolonisation is not a metaphor” (Tuck, 2012).



Figure 1. *The Tipping Point to Decolonise Sustainability* event in Oslo, Norway, September 2023. Photo by Alex Asensi.



Figure 2. *The Tipping Point to Decolonise Sustainability* event in Oslo, Norway, September 2023. Photo by Alex Asensi.

The deliberate efforts and sustained labour to create the experimental space exhibit the spirit to plant “the seed that questions, provokes, encourages, pushes us to continue to think and analyse” (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 100). This approach emerges from a continual engagement with an idea, ‘right relationship’, which is rooted in construing decoloniality in praxis: listening deeply, self-reflexivity, creating space, and being in action, as argued by Gram-Hanssen and colleagues, as well as centring lived experience, seeking people at the margins, and learning with humility, honesty, and humour (BlackSpace, 2022; Gram-Hanssen et al., 2022; Paradies, 2023).

The context of Norway as a site for the event matters to explain the tension. It is a country with a high level of homogeneity and a complicated relationship towards colonialism that differs from other Western countries. Recently, several protests have highlighted the pressing concerns about the rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Sámi community, in Norway. While many issues are increasingly surfacing to

challenge the green and clean narratives about Norway, the Sámi-led protests against the Fosen wind farm in northern Norway that violates their human rights have gained global traction (Kassam & Niranjan, 2023). Activists demanded the removal of turbines to maintain the seamless movement of reindeer herding. These contradictions highlight the perils of 'green transitions,' especially when they overlook the longstanding history of resource extraction and colonisation of Indigenous Peoples. Therefore, the public image of Norway as being at the forefront of green innovations while having a recent history of green colonialism (Normann, 2021) also complicates the hegemonic narrative. See Figure 3.



Figure 3. A permanent tent was installed by Sámi activists in Oslo. Photo by Rahul Ranjan).

*The Tipping Point to Decolonise Sustainability* emerged as the space where Indigenous knowledge, academic scholarship, and industry insights converged. A

caveat to represent what makes this event an *attempt* at decolonial dialogue recognises that this is an emergent practice, insisting on learning from experiences through upsetting the methodological pursuit in academic writings that often claim to ‘work on’ the community and not alongside, or in solidarity with (Ranjan, 2023). It focused on centring the leadership and lived experiences of the four speakers from formerly colonised countries and from one currently still experiencing colonisation. The collaboration was also intentionally designed to involve a multidisciplinary approach with collaborators’ intersectional identities-, to flatten the disciplinary discursive power hierarchy. The platform invited collaboration from an academic, an Indigenous scholar, an industry insider, and a stand-up performer, taking an interdisciplinary approach to the creation of participatory knowledge to break down silos. While on the one hand, a series of speakers presented a complex and profoundly layered understanding of sustainability, on the other hand, we designed the event to embed humour as part of the storytelling as well. In recognising the spirit of public-facing scholarship, we conceded that capturing the expansiveness in life and using humour in climate change communication can be helpful (Kaltenbacher & Drews, 2020).

*The Tipping Point to Decolonise Sustainability* emerged as a self-funded, group-centred work that did not depend on outside factors such as funding or sponsors, and it allowed the event to be a collaborative and decentralised innovation. The partners developed meaningful engagement, recognising how narratives, whether academic discussions or experiences of working with movements, informed their presentations. Dialogue about the need for care and transparency, including the autonomy to not have to answer questions from the audience that the speakers might perceive as harmful to them considering their lived experiences, was central to co-developing the format for the presentation. While the event was primarily self-funded by The Big Picture, it provided token financial compensation for the speakers, which is an uncommon readily accepted practice that expects speakers to contribute voluntarily at conferences or seminars. This prompts us to explain how and why narratives, whether experiential or meta, matter in storytelling practices about the emergent climate change crisis (or, to restate Simpson’s point about decolonising narratives and storytelling, challenge cognitive imperialism).



## Narratives Matter

Historical power dynamics and colonial legacies have shaped current narratives in sustainability. These legacies continue to inform and perpetuate sustainability practices. Narrative structures often “allow us to gain an understanding of events and how they relate to one another and our lives” (Arnold, 2018, p.1). The imperative narratives within climate change and sustainability have been shaped by powers such as the United Nations’ (UN) Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (IPCC 2022) and Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015). The UN’s public discourse presenting climate change as an apocalypse, an external enemy, or “the Other” (Ivic, 2023, p. 23) minimises the root problem of the result of colonisation. According to scholars Dudman and De Wit (2021), the IPCC, as the main body of scientific climate change, has a communication mode that historically needs more reciprocity, lacking inclusion and equitable dialogue with the underrepresented public. Colonial legacies manifest in ways such as colonial visual practices deemed “fossil fuel violence,” including “visually misleading advertising promoting fossil fuel as bringing economic prosperity and clean energy”, “selective visibilising to assert colonial power” or “invisibilising” (Spiegel, 2021, p. 6, Fig.2).

Climate change has increasingly become a buzzword. Various powerful institutions need to pay more attention to longer histories of reinforcing methods and techniques overlooking place-based knowledge. In her work on climate change as a spice, Dewan presents “how donors, NGOs, consultants and government bodies with different agendas, priorities and knowledge backgrounds ‘translate’ climate change to legitimise their activities” (Dewan, 2022, p. 538). Assumptions of universal applicability do not simply characterise these control processes through model climate change mitigation and adaptation; they also effectively flatten the inequality of decision-making power and place-based knowledge. Therefore, storytelling about climate change must be informed by the region’s historical development and the disparity of resources that disproportionately allocate its effect.

Increasingly, it has become evident that bottom-up rather than top-down narratives have proven to be more successful and transformative in climate action (Hinkel et al., 2020). Decolonial narratives shift the focus away from Eurocentric values by using storytelling that captures lived experiences. In this process, storytelling, as Vasudevan et al. describe it,

*“how people make sense of the world and our place in it, an iterative process of interpreting reality through observation and the exchange of ideas. Storytelling, as a means of theorizing the structural from embodied experience, is a fundamental methodological intervention of Indigenous, Black, and third world and women of color feminist traditions.”*

(Vasudevan et al., 2023, p.2).

Particularly within climate change mitigation and sustainability work, narratives are crucial in mobilising organisations and the public for action-oriented goals such as mass demonstrations and environmental litigation (Veland et al., 2018). Decolonising narratives also break binaries of Western/Eastern, right/left, religious/secular, and other categories proposed by Eurocentric thoughts (Mercanti & Riem, 2022). Decolonial methodologies can “understand the complex impacts of climate change, particularly on those with historically excluded voices” (McQuaid & Pirmasari, 2023, p. 577).

Understanding narratives is a crucial decolonial tool not simply for challenging the flattened notions of environmental changes and for the sake of telling different stories, but also for how crucially narratives help develop a counter-narrative. These counter-narratives, a form of *telling tales*, we argue, capture peoples’ experiences and longstanding histories of inequality, which deepens the understanding of the climate crisis. When narratives are not extractive, exploitative, paternalistic, patronising, and/or appropriative, they create the possibility of reimagining an alternative future.

## Value of Public Discourse

To our knowledge, a public-facing scholarship such as *The Tipping Point to Decolonise Sustainability* has been an inaugural event in Oslo and an opportunity for opening sustainability to possible contestations. We reflected on the role and outcome of the event. *The Tipping Point to Decolonise Sustainability* was a form of provocation, an art in storytelling, a tool of critique, and a way of resisting the status quo, particularly within a Nordic setting. Among others, the event can be viewed as an exercise in practising incremental resistance, where we asked ourselves, could we challenge the status quo within the sustainability space by having an open public discourse and questioning the roots of climate change? While we concede the proposition of Warde et al. (2018) that “the climate globalised the environment through the very nature of climate change, as an increase of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere exists everywhere” there is an increasing need to address its localised effects and complex interactions with inequality equally.

Climate change is a universal crisis in an unequal universe. In her evocative article, journalist Aruna Chandrasekhar argues, “People, not carbon emissions, should be at the west’s climate action” (Chandrasekhar, 2020). By focusing exclusively on “trust the science” as the rallying point for most of the West’s climate action, we are forgoing accounts of human experiences and histories - none of which can be isolated from the *storying of* climate change, which at the moment seems saturated with carbon. Especially within Norwegian public debate, it has been rare to witness an intersectional perspective, at least until recently, when the Sámi protest brought to the country small news bits within global media.

Therefore, what we hoped to achieve at this event was to create awareness and ignite discussions about the colonial influence and impact on what we consider sustainability today. The platform showcased an imaginative, creative, multi-perspective dialogue on colonial legacies in sustainability. Also, it provided a tangible model for platforms to mainstream diverse resources in the pursuit of decoloniality. It legitimised the knowledge of people from the Global South and the Indigenous community. *The Tipping Point to Decolonise Sustainability* emerged as a

showcase for an alternative practice, performance, and concept by an organisation that challenges the capitalist mainstream (Temper et al., 2018) and provided an example of how this model can be duplicated and innovated upon in the future within the discourse on climate change and sustainability.

A key outcome was understanding the Indigenous perspective, where “sustainability is deemed as a part of the machinery of capitalism” (Lorenzo, 2023), thereby critiquing uneven modes of development. In other words, as one of the speakers at the event, Dr. Liisa-Rávná Finbog, a Sámi scholar and duojár (Sámi storyteller and knowledge-holder) from Oslo, Vaapste, and Skánit in the Norwegian part of Sápmi, emphasised, sustainability is appropriated and absorbed to advance the colonial modes of governance further. With sustainability professionals predominantly in attendance, *The Tipping Point to Decolonise Sustainability* generated tremendous interest and critical engagement. The discussion on climate advanced beyond carbon. Finbog’s powerful and poignant talk foregrounded Norway’s complicated history of Sámi colonisation - which is, interestingly, also at the point of confrontation with its approach to sustainability. These confrontations, primarily through the recent protests in Norway, have warranted enormous challenges in practicing sustainability without sufficient grounding in place-based struggle and land. With great eloquence, Finbog braided these seemingly different strands - colonisation and sustainability - to a predominantly Norwegian audience. In other words, storytelling about the past and the present becomes a portal to imagine decolonial futures. The anticolonial and decolonial storytelling often reveals that “to tell stories is to weave theory. Anticolonial storytelling reveals that otherwise imaginaries are not located in distant futures or abstract theories, but emergent from within the *longue duree* of planetary disaster” (Vasudevan et al., 2023, p.3). When told in public, these stories become witnesses to the unequal histories.

The word *radical* is derived from the Latin noun *radix*, which means root. In this sense, digging into the origins of climate change narratives and engaging by creating a new practice (Temper et al., 2018), like *The Tipping Point to Decolonize Sustainability*, can be considered radical. In framing conflict as productive and a way of transformation (Temper et al., 2018) within sustainability, the outcome

above was a slight nudge toward radical transformation. This public-facing scholarship can be radically transformative by confronting the fundamental structural reasons for unsustainability, inequity, and injustice, such as capitalism, patriarchy, and state-centrism (Temper et al., 2018).

### **Creative Collectivism**

Based on the attempt to use *The Tipping Point to Decolonise Sustainability* as an experimental alternative, we proceeded with a more extensive discussion: how do we continue and sustain these transformations? Through the experiences of this event, we foresee a possibility for the continuation of the dialogue of decolonising dominant narratives through platforms and collectives that foster opportunities to expand capacity, leadership, and decolonial praxis. The event also substantially enables us to understand how dialogues will “benefit from laying aside heroic narratives where a single villain (neoliberalism, industry, climate change) is defeated once and for all by a single hero (the environmental activist, the United Nations, the engineer, the consumer)” (Veland et al., 2018, p. 45). The individuated and isolated stories of victories suspend possibilities of partnership and plurality of environmentalism realised through engaged dialogue with communities. Decolonising the climate change discourse and practice, as Farhana Sultana argues, “The coloniality of climate seeps through everyday life across space and time, weighing down and curtailing opportunities and possibilities through global racial capitalism, colonial dispossessions, and climate debts. Decolonizing climate needs to address the complexities of colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, international development, and geopolitics that contribute to the reproduction of ongoing colonialities through existing global governance structures, discursive framings, imagined solutions, and interventions” (Sultana, 2022, p.1). These interventions, rightly pointed out by Sultana, cannot be sublimated as a form of compliance, thus absolving its radical potential to upset structural inequality.

Drawing inspiration from an emergent strategy (Brown, 2017), this article prompts us to think of other words about creating more possibilities: intentional adaptation, transformative, non-linear, decentralised, and fractal. Decolonial narratives require

ethical principles of partnership and collectivism, conscious collective action, and co-creation of incremental resistances that allow new ideas and praxis to emerge. It should be aimed at integrating the lived experiences of communities and grassroots mobilisation as a desirable norm. The collectivism that recenters the colonised expertise of the community is based on care, caring connection, collaboration, partnership, mutual respect, and mutual benefit (Eisler, 2002).

Creative collectivism should establish linkages between organisations and activism, intersecting with environmental and social justice (Veland et al., 2018), intentionally diversify, intersectional, equitable, and inclusive, address power imbalance, and challenge structures that perpetuate colonial perspectives.

It needs to expand more into the interconnectedness, interconnection, and interrelatedness of humans and non-humans and rethink the relations between humans and the earth, not as extractive and domination of use, but as a collective (Magrane, 2018)

The alternatives that offer an antidote to climate change narratives can move beyond public discourse and enter the creative processes of community co-creation of art-led methodologies to foster healing, such as contemporary poems, poetry and creative writing, drawing, digital storytelling, songwriting, and photography (Magrane, 2018; McQuaid & Pirmasari, 2023).

## Conclusion

As we navigate the challenges posed by climate change and colonialism, storytelling emerges as a powerful decolonial tool. It shapes and reshapes our understanding of climate change created by colonial mechanisms, making storytelling a crucial avenue for decolonising perspectives. It becomes an emergent force, continuously evolving and resisting the confines of hegemonic power. By weaving decolonial praxis, this paper, through a case study and an extended discussion, suggests that communication opens up space for the plurality of knowledge and futures. At least

in this article, decolonial praxis is perceived as an emergent practice that needs to be more conclusive and exhaustive.

Intentional collectivism becomes pivotal in expanding the frontier of partnership in decolonising narratives. Partnerships rooted in intentional collectivism, conscious action, incremental resistance, and a commitment to radical transformation create a space for a pluriverse. Sustainability organisations must actively confront the complexities of climate change and colonialism and work beyond techno-managerial functions. This assumes our own role, as leaders of organisations or academics, to continually highlight the intersectional nature of the climate crisis and to forge spaces for collaborations.

Partnership and collectivism transcend traditional boundaries, paving the way for a tapestry of voices to challenge dominant narratives collectively. This intentional collectivism has been proven not just as a theoretical framework; it's a living, breathing decolonial praxis that reshapes our approach toward possible futures. This collective effort creates a space for a multitude of knowledge and possibilities to flourish. As the world witnesses the current ongoing genocide of civilians of Palestine, it reminds us that decolonisation is not a metaphor.

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Cinthya Sopaheluwakan is the founder of The Big Picture, an impact organisation working at the intersection of systems, strategy, and storytelling in Oslo, Norway. She has broad experience in consulting in Europe and Asia. She has a degree in physics from Indonesia and a Master's in Business Administration from the Netherlands, and she is an alumna of the Cambridge Institute of Sustainability Leadership program. She is a facilitator, speaker, moderator, writer, and mentor. Her impact work has been published by Forbes. She can be reached at [cinthya@thebigpicture.co](mailto:cinthya@thebigpicture.co) and ORCID: 0009-0009-3308-4080.

Dr. Rahul Ranjan is a writer and Lecturer in Environmental and Climate Justice at the School of Geosciences, University of Edinburgh. He is the author of *The Political Life of Memory: Birsa Munda in Contemporary India*, published by the Cambridge University Press in 2023. He also edited *At the Crossroads of Rights*, published by Routledge in 2022. Between 2020 and 2023, he held a postdoctoral research fellow position at Oslo Metropolitan University and worked on the research project, "Riverine Rights," funded by the Research Council of Norway. He can be reached at [Rahul.ranjan@ed.ac.uk](mailto:Rahul.ranjan@ed.ac.uk) and ORCID: 0000-0003-3905-4017.