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Vulnerable research: Reflexivity, decolonisation, and climate politics

Charlotte Weatherill

Abstract

This article is a proposal for embracing 'vulnerable research' as an approach that fully accepts and reckons with the harms that research reproduces in a context of climate change and ongoing colonialism. It engages three literatures: on embracing vulnerability in research, decolonising research, and decarbonising research. I argue for taking a vulnerable approach to research, accepting and embracing vulnerability as method in order to challenge the embedded binary of the invulnerable researcher and the vulnerable research subject. Vulnerable research is a particularly important approach in the context of climate change, as the hubristic need to be the person in the vulnerable places, doing the research, is itself vulnerabilising in its environmental harms. I therefore argue that vulnerable vulnerability research requires trust, delegation, and a decentring of the research expert. This would also enable a realignment of knowledge and expertise which is needed for decolonising climate research.

Keywords

climate politics, decolonisation, knowledge production, reflexivity, vulnerability, vulnerable research

> writers must write with *aroha/ alona/ alofa/ loloma*, respecting the people they are writing about, people who may view the Void differently and who, like all other human beings, live through the pores of their flesh and mind and bone, who suffer, laugh, cry, copulate, and die.
>
> (Wendt, 1982: 58)

> those nagging and inescapable questions like what is the point of this theoretical research, who actually cares about this work, and am I really changing the world or just commenting on it?
>
> (Lisle, 2016: 429)

> You already know enough. So do I. It is not knowledge that we lack. What is missing is the courage to understand what we know and to draw conclusions.
>
> (Lindqvist, 2018: 2)

The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

Corresponding author:
Charlotte Weatherill, The Open University, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, UK.
Email: Charlotte.weatherill@open.ac.uk

Introduction

This article is a proposal for embracing 'vulnerable research' as a way to reckon with doing research that is political, ethical, and honest about the role of research in perpetuating global harms. I call this vulnerable research, because this approach requires letting go of the justifications upon which much of academia relies, and also the authority and privilege being an academic lends us. This process is one which I am attempting to navigate, while also being a precarious researcher who is fighting to enter this space. Rather than suggesting a new research method, this article's contribution is to bring together and engage with three different but related literatures that are all asking questions of research methodologies in their own way. Roughly, these literatures approach methodological questions from a position of reflexivity, decolonisation, and climate concern. To these literatures, I also add my experience and difficulties with researching vulnerability and climate politics while being committed to feminist and decolonial principles, which include avoiding the reproduction of the harms I am studying.

The three quotes that start this article outline the reasons that vulnerable research is important. Albert Wendt is discussing the possibility of white/settler researchers contributing to knowledge of the Pacific as a region that is working against the wounds of colonialism. The quote comes in a section on Pacific diversity that is celebrating the rejuvenation of Pacific cultural expression in a period of decolonisation (Wendt, 1982: 57–60). The quote I use here is his note on papalagi[1] writers, who have long written on the Pacific in ways that range from 'the hilariously romantic through the pseudo-scholarly to the infuriatingly racist' (Wendt, 1982: 58). Wendt is saying that papalagi are welcome to continue writing on the Pacific, but must do so with respect and with an acknowledgement of humanity. My claim is that this in itself is already a challenge to the academic model, which instead of respect, centres the researcher's authority and instead of humanity, centres research subjects' relevance to pre-formulated research questions.

The second quote, by Debbie Lisle, brings my point home: we are in a moment of multiple crises, where the liveability of earth is being attacked by our social and economic systems, and where the critical theory that highlights this is seen as separate to policy work. Embracing vulnerable research that accepts this and carries on anyway is fundamentally important in a moment where the other option is to cede ground to life-destroying systems. The third quote, by Sven Lindqvist, I will return to in the conclusion.[2]

There is a growing body of work that is asking similar questions. For example, Q Manivannan just posed the question, How do we (scholars) make peace with knowledge in a time where scholarship itself seems cruel? (Manivannan 2025) and in this Special Issue, Rhys Crilley (2024) asks, 'Should we be writing at a time like this?' This article is my own response to these questions, coming from the position of a climate politics researcher, committed to feminist and decolonial principles. From this perspective, academia is complicit. From this perspective, research reproduces forms of harm that it purports to study. Our research questions are insufficient, our funding and ethical approval systems are not fit for purpose, and our research practices are actively harmful. Against this, vulnerable research is an approach that makes new demands on researchers, which are uncomfortable but crucial. To this, I bring my research into vulnerability, a concept that unlocks some of these difficult questions.

In this article, there are two different frames of vulnerability at work. The first is a binary that dominates in the 'lie' (to use Lisle's term, 2023) of what research and academia is. This binary is between the invulnerable researcher and vulnerable research subject. This is the model of academia and research, but it is false. It is a fantasy, it is

performance, and it does not reflect how academics or researchers experience research, or how it feels to be a researcher (Shepherd, 2023; Sherry, 2013; Tang et al., 2020). The second frame of vulnerability is a counter-frame, which is being developed by researchers who see potential in using the term to break down this binary. Theoretically, this frame draws on work by feminists such as Judith Butler who challenge conceptualisations of vulnerability that define it through weakness, and instead foreground resistance (Butler, 2004; Butler et al., 2016). This reframing suggests that there is a power in acknowledging and embracing your own vulnerability as a researcher (Eriksen, 2022; Page, 2017) but also, I argue, in allowing yourself to be vulnerabilised by your research decisions.

In this article, I will explore the idea of vulnerable research through four sections. The first section will engage with reflexive research from across disciplines that is seeking to break down the invulnerable model of research. The second section will engage with decolonial literature that is arguing for research to move away from the mastery model in order to overcome the coloniality of knowledge production. The third section will engage with climate politics as an area of research that brings with it additional reasons for changing the current dominant research model, and its own ethical demands. The final section is my own reflections on attempting to conduct vulnerable research, with some successes and failures that help to demonstrate the barriers to this model. My argument is that it is fundamentally important that we ask these questions of ourselves as researchers, not just because it is ethical, and reduces our negative impact on the world, but because it has the potential for pushing research beyond the limitations by which it is currently constrained.

Vulnerable research: Reflexivity

Researchers who are writing reflexively about the research process often come from a feminist position (Ahmed, 2017; Boer Cueva et al., 2023; Page, 2017). This is because acknowledging the personhood of both the research(er) and research(ed) is a fundamentally feminist approach. So too is the embrace of vulnerability. What comes through in the reflexive literature is that vulnerability is not something that should be denied or avoided. There are three moves that can be identified in the pursuit of vulnerable research: dismantling binaries such as invulnerable researcher/vulnerable research subject; challenging mastery and rationality as possibilities in research; and embracing solidarity, empathy, and difficulty. In this section, I will address these points in turn.

First, reflexive research argues for the need to break down the binary of invulnerable researcher and vulnerable research subject (Ballamingie and Johnson, 2014; Bashir, 2020; Sherry, 2013; Tang et al., 2020). Much of the research that is done in the Global South by Global North researchers is premised on the idea of vulnerable populations, whose vulnerability needs to be better understood in order to reduce inequality, or argue for more just outcomes. Power differentials in this research relationship are often addressed through positionality statements, or through choosing qualitative methodologies that allow for the research subject to have input in the direction of research. However, critical work is increasingly arguing that this is not enough (Gani and Khan, 2024; Njoku et al., 2025).

Positionality statements represent a vulnerable moment in research writing, where the researcher's personhood holds focus. This moment can help to expose power relations. However, it leaves intact 'a hierarchical narrative structure, reinscribe(s) researcher authority, and leave(s) out how knowledge is indelibly and dynamically impressed by bodily others' (Van Wingerden, 2022: 3). The researcher's authority or ability to know

and find out is not challenged, it is merely contextualised. It is a moment of vulnerability that is declared and then put aside, leaving the reader to accept its implications. These statements are made in the context of power differentials that are often racialised (Gani and Khan, 2024: 2). This is particularly true for vulnerability research.

Vulnerability, if understood as a globally distributed differential exposure to harm, is imagined as a racialised and feminised characteristic (Arora-Jonsson, 2011; MacGregor, 2010; Weatherill, 2024c). Vulnerability is therefore researched in order to understand power dynamics and inequality, which produces some important work, for example in the fields of critical disaster studies (Gaillard et al., 2017; Remes et al., 2021) and critical adaptation studies (Mikulewicz, 2018; Taylor, 2014). However, there is an implicit 'we' and 'they' in this divide between researcher and research subject (Eriksen, 2022). My argument is not just that failing to challenge this assumption reproduces power relations that are colonial, although it is also that (Bankoff, 2001; Bradshaw et al., 2022). It also places limits on what knowledge can be produced. Failing to challenge the idea that vulnerability is a characteristic that is held by Others, a situation that lies elsewhere, is a fantasy that is enabling the perpetuation of the colonial status quo (Weatherill, 2024a). Vulnerable research, that accepts the vulnerability of the researcher, means understanding vulnerability as relational, a condition that cannot be measured or understood in isolated units, but a shared condition that is either mitigated or exacerbated according to the colonial political economy (Bhambra, 2020).

Second, reflexive approaches argue against the idea of mastery and rationality as possibilities in research. Sometimes this idea is named as the explicit problem, such as 'Undoing Mastery' (Linz and Secor, 2021) or 'Unmastering Research' (Van Wingerden, 2022). What is interesting is that this work is again engaging vulnerability as a concept that can help to achieve this end. For example, Linz and Secor (2021: 110) argue that vulnerability is the opposite to mastery. Vulnerability is exposing and unprofessional. It is the condition that researchers are supposed to avoid most strongly. According to the mastery model, knowledge is a project and a purpose that we as researchers can achieve due to our training, our resources, and our specialised knowledge. The 'big lie' (Lisle, 2023) is that this is how research is done, something that we all contribute to when we write our research up in ways that make it all sound intentional. However, this is again reproducing patterns of harm that need to be dismantled. It also denies the experience of researchers who travel to sites of violence and are meant to leave unchanged and unharmed (Van Wingerden, 2022).

Other research challenges mastery and rationality through synonymous concepts such as confidence or modesty (Lisle, 2016, 2023) or care-full research (Berents et al., 2024). Participatory action research is an example where vulnerability is centred and the 'lore of objectivity' is rejected (Burawoy et al., 1994; Guishard, 2009). A recurring theme here is that there is something dishonest or uncomfortable about research that wants to embrace messiness and difficulty but needs to meet the requirements of academia and its gatekeepers (Lisle, 2023: 267). Funding bodies need a level of certitude that is incompatible with vulnerable research, and journals want distinct method sections that meet their criteria of objectivity and replicability. Another layer of vulnerability is added to researchers who refuse these terms and therefore fail to meet institutional expectations for where they publish, or who funds their research. For example, the feminist researchers who make space for the potential of being wrong, and the importance of changing your mind (Page, 2017: 16).

In the face of this, the third move in this reflexive body of work is to advocate for the embrace of solidarity and empathy. Much of the research discussed in this section engages

with the work of Sara Ahmed (2024), a feminist researcher who refuses academia's terms in pursuit of being a feminist killjoy. In turn, Ahmed (2017: 10) is inspired by Black feminist and feminist of colour scholarship that argues that theory can do more the closer it gets to the skin. In the next section, I will discuss how scholarship on race and decolonisation shows the importance of moving towards vulnerable research. However, this notion of closeness and the difficulty of closeness are essential to reflexive work.

Ahmed names difficulty through the idea of sweaty concepts:

> The task is to stay with the difficulty, to keep exploring and exposing this difficulty . . . Not eliminating the effort or labor becomes an academic aim because we have been taught to tidy our texts, not to reveal the struggle we have in getting somewhere (Ahmed, 2017, 13).

There is so much about this quote that sums up the vulnerable research approach. Research should not be fast, and easy, and unemotional. In a context where there are multiple genocides taking place, in which our governments, institutions, and consumption patterns are implicated; easy, detached research should not be possible. In a context where climate change is not being prevented, the future is looking increasingly uncertain; easy, detached research is a waste of limited time. In this context, research needs to sit with the difficulty, and researchers need to allow themselves to feel threatened.

Overall, the move in critical research to reflexively embrace vulnerability suggests two things. First, being vulnerable as a researcher means rejecting the lie that you are invulnerable, an expert who can objectively and passively gather and present knowledge in response to research questions. This is particularly important in a global moment of increased vulnerability, to a changing climate and rising inequality and violence. Second, being vulnerable as a researcher means allowing your research to be less authoritative. This goes against the requirements of our academic institutions, meaning both our employer universities and funding bodies, who want us to declare ourselves original, our research to be a unique contribution, and our writing to be impactful. We need to do this to secure a job, secure funding, pass probation, and secure a promotion. Not doing this risks vulnerability, but is nevertheless vital. In the next two sections, I will discuss vulnerable research in relation to decolonisation, which engages with this latter move, and climate change, which is primarily about the former.

Vulnerable research: Decolonisation

The next stage in the vulnerable research approach is steered by the decolonial literature. From this position, research and the politics of knowledge are fundamentally important for avoiding epistemic violence and the coloniality of knowledge production. Thinking about decolonisation is also important for making sure that vulnerable research avoids being a self-reflective or individual process only, ensuring that this process is politicised. There is such a huge body of research that engages in the question of how to decolonise international research, decolonise theory, and decolonise disciplines that it is almost impossible to summarise (some examples include Bendix et al., 2020; Mohanty, 2003; Shilliam, 2021; Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). In the face of this, what I focus on here is research that has helped me navigate questions of how to do research in my own context of vulnerability discourse and climate politics.

I have found it useful to think about the Pacific in reflecting on these questions. This is partly because it is the context I have engaged with most, as a region I have discussed

in my research before, but also for three additional reasons. First, the Pacific is regularly identified as a vulnerable region (Barnett and Campbell, 2010; Farbotko and Lazrus, 2012). Second, the Pacific has a long history of extractive or 'helicopter research' (Leenen-Young and Uperesa, 2023; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). This applies to some islands and some island states more than others, but the extractivism of research is resisted from the Pacific because of this issue (Farbotko et al., 2023). For example in 1984, the Vanuatu Cultural Council imposed a research moratorium that was lifted in 1995 alongside new research guidelines (Curtis, 2010). Third, the Pacific is geographically placed so that research conducted by those based in Europe or the United States unavoidably involves long flights and a high carbon cost. In this section, I will address these points in turn.

The framing of the Pacific as an 'extremely vulnerable' region, and the research that flows from that, has lessons for decolonising vulnerable research. The identification of the Pacific as vulnerable has led to a lot of research attention, but much of this has reproduced discourses such as the 'sinking islands' (Farbotko, 2010; Weatherill, 2023a). These discourses of inherent vulnerability naturalise the loss of islands, treat islander lives as disposable, and have been used repeatedly over time to justify violence and occupation in the region (Maurer, 2024; Weatherill, 2023a: 10). In the Pacific then, the identification of the region as vulnerable has led to further vulnerabilisation.

Using vulnerable regions as sites of research therefore needs to be explicitly decolonial in order to avoid this inescapable 'vulnerability trap' (Weatherill, 2023a: 3). More so, decolonial research needs to view climate colonialism as more than a metaphor (Bhambra and Newell, 2022). Research needs to approach decolonisation as praxis, meaning that it is also committed to the principles 'of Indigenous self-determination and repatriation of Indigenous land' (McDonnell and Regenvanu, 2022). In much of the Pacific, this means supporting the ability of Islanders to maintain sovereignty on their land, something that is being challenged by the threat of climate change and those who are causing it; and the neocolonialism of climate adaptation proposals such as the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme, and the contested Falepili Union (Kitara and Farbotko, 2023).

Second is the issue of helicopter research, defined as research that is done by Global North researchers in the Global South, with little local input, for the benefit of themselves and their institutions (see Adame, 2021; Haelewaters et al., 2021; Minasny and Fiantis, 2018, for some more thoughts on avoiding helicopter research). Some disciplines are more implicated in this problem than others, where fieldwork is normalised, even for students. There can be some ways to design research to limit the impact of arriving in a community, but the question has to be: why are you there? What is your presence giving to communities? The colonial history of politics and IR has been increasingly explored and uncovered (Sen, 2023; Shilliam, 2021 and Special Issue). This process goes on across disciplines, from geology to anthropology to geography. However, putting this knowledge into practice has to require more than a change of theoretical framework, particularly given the costs and burdens of 'being researched' (Farbotko et al., 2023).

Finally, the islands of the Pacific are all geographically positioned so that research conducted by those based in Europe or the United States involves long flights and a high carbon cost. This carbon cost of research will be discussed more in the next section, but separating the two issues completely is not possible. Yes, fieldwork has a massive carbon cost and requires a movement of resources, often from public funders to private companies such as airlines and hotels. It is also the epitome of the colonial, extractive research model. Here, I appreciate the reflections of Kiran Asher, reading Gayatri Spivak (Asher, 2019; Spivak, 1995). This reflection sets up a dichotomy between fieldwork understood

as the retrieval of knowledge, requiring travel to the subaltern/the vulnerable Global South research subject; versus a model of 'learning from' (Asher, 2019: 125). Importantly, learning from can be done from a distance. This latter approach may sometimes allow for fieldwork, if the knowledge being sought is not already available or being shared, or accessible in any other way, and you are the only one who can access it. But this is already a different bar than having research questions, or funding.

All these issues taken together, decolonised vulnerable research suggests a deeper questioning of the role of Global North researchers, and in particular requires a far higher bar for fieldwork. Researchers in Global North institutions need to ask themselves whether their planned research is going to be helpful to the communities they wish to spend time with, or whether it risks exacerbating vulnerabilising processes. Literature on decolonial research is fundamentally important for answering this question, and potential counterarguments. Because sometimes, vulnerable research is going to mean accepting that you are not the right person to be doing the research, you are just the one who can afford to do it. The vulnerability of vulnerable research again becomes that of letting go and rethinking the role of yourself as a researcher. Perhaps thinking instead of how to obtain and pass on resources that enable research to be done locally, or to act as a person who can help provide access for researchers struggling to enter certain spaces. Not only would this lead to more ethical research, it would also enrich what knowledge is able to be produced, research that does not have to filter itself through what a Global North researcher is able to understand or interpret.

Vulnerable research: Climate change

The final consideration for vulnerable research is the issue of climate change. Climate change represents a huge challenge to the current model of research. Or at least, it should. Research exploring this area is growing, and while approaches vary, these articles are all trying to understand why harmful practices continue. One such practice is academic flying, that is, flying for research and conferences. Climate change demands much more from us than an end to unnecessary flying, but it is a valuable area to interrogate as it raises fundamental questions of vulnerable research, such as what are we willing to give up, and why have not we changed already.

I say, 'what are we willing to give up', because much of the research being done is interrogating the drivers of flying (Bagutti et al., 2024). One study based on research into staff at University College London (UCL) found that:

> More than 80% of respondents agree that flying has a detrimental impact on our planet. However, only 39% of respondents feel guilty when flying, while around 40 % oppose more expensive flying or UCL making carbon offsetting mandatory (De Vos et al., 2024: 4).

Most academics know that flying is a problem, and that they are doing harm. Yet they are not willing to stop. Strikingly, in the UCL example, questions are not even about research, but conferences. I will address the question of why this is shortly. But understanding flying as a harmful practice that people will not give up even for non-essential travel like conferences means the problem we are facing here is fundamental. A final, notable point on willingness to change is that flying is often a consumption practice that cannot simply be replaced with something less harmful; rather, it requires avoiding that practice entirely (Ullström, 2024). This depends slightly on geographic location, as high-speed trains do exist in Europe, and in the United Kingdom we can get to mainland

Europe or the island of Ireland by train and /or ferry, but a lot of travel is currently unfeasible without flying. And when that irreplaceable consumption practice is the route to prestige and career prospects, giving it up is vulnerabilising.

With this in mind, the question of 'why haven't we changed already' has to be addressed. One driver is our careers; 'fly or die' is as accurate as publish or perish (Strengers, 2014). I have flown once as an academic, in order to attend ISA in Montreal, the year I finished my PhD, knowing this would demonstrate internationalisation and help me get a job. That was my thought process, and it was probably the correct choice for my career. There is prestige attached to travelling to North America, in a way that needs to be questioned, especially at the current moment. However, understanding thought process is not enough, and we need to go beyond behavioural analysis. Thinking more structurally, or politically, brings up barriers to change, beyond individual decision making.

Thinking structurally quickly shows that academia as it is, is not a space designed to be carbon-free or carbon-efficient. This is despite thousands of higher education institutions having issued Climate Emergency declarations (Thierry et al., 2023: 1). In my own attempts to not fly, I have encountered the 'hidden infrastructures' that exist as barriers to replacing flights with train travel (Paterson and Weatherill, 2022). These include privatised travel companies that cannot or will not book international trains, and 'competing scarcities' of resources (Weatherill, 2024b). In the neoliberal institution, budgets are tight, time is limited, and researchers are overworked and disempowered (Latter et al., 2024). In practice then, even deciding not to fly does not mean that you will be able to avoid it. Returning to Ahmed (2017), in raising these issues you also risk being identified yourself as the problem.

Yet there are people who are attempting to drive decarbonisation. The Academic Flying Less Movement (AFLM), for example, recognises the outsized contribution to climate change made by 'more affluent high socioeconomic status individuals located in the non-geographic Global North, which includes many academics' (Katz-Rosene and Pasek, 2024: 260). There is a strong argument, then, that academics should be leading the way to decarbonisation (Urai and Kelly, 2023). Decarbonisation done in a way that is attuned to vulnerable research would also push back against deteriorating conditions in the university. For example, engaging in 'slow scholarship' that 'values community building, deep thinking and rest crucial for intellectual work' (Urai and Kelly, 2023: 4).

In a competitive market, where jobs are disappearing and not being replaced, we are driving each other to be ever more productive, people falling behind and failing depending on how much they have to give, and how much they need in reserve; for family, for friends, for care beyond waged work. Surely, it is not just for the good of the planet that this needs to change. Think of Teresia Teaiwa's reflections on unsustainability: 'It remakes itself after the revolution. It is sustainable. It sustains itself. We are its collateral damage. Stress, anxiety, depression, hyper-tension, domestic violence, state violence, corruption, substance abuse, poverty, animal abuse, environmental degradation . . .' (Teaiwa, 2011: 178). The question therefore needs to be: how can we avoid remaking unsustainability, even as we decarbonise our research practices?

This section has explored the issue of academic flying in relation to climate change in order to unpack some of the tensions of decarbonising research. However, vulnerable research requires more than an end to flying, because climate change also presents an additional challenge to the idea of the invulnerable researcher. As climate change mitigation has failed, and warming is now expected to reach 3°C temperature rises, there is no invulnerable subject. As extreme weather events in the United States, the United Kingdom,

and across Europe have shown us, the 'Global North' is not the safe zone that it is imagined to be (Weatherill, 2024a). Even if academia fails to adjust, events will eventually overtake it. Researchers who embrace vulnerable research and change their research practices now will be ahead of the game in that respect.

Climate change therefore necessitates thinking reflexively about the purpose of research, your role in it, and its potential harms. How else could research be done that does not require you to travel across the world? Again, the answer seems to be decentring yourself as a researcher. Fostering local connections, funnelling resources to places to enact their own research, hiring local researchers – not just as Research Assistants but as full partners in research, and staying in touch online. This shows how decolonisation and decarbonisation can be complementary. These issues are related – researchers are able to tell themselves that it is okay if I fly because the work I am doing is really important. Or it is okay if I fly because everyone else is. Or it is okay if I fly because individual action makes no difference. As if all actions aren't inherently political and harm that can be avoided shouldn't be. But other people also being complicit is not an excuse to do harm.

My vulnerable research

In this final section, I will return to my three vulnerable research areas in turn, reflecting on how I have navigated these thoughts in my research so far. This has involved compromise, failures, and some small victories. Hopefully, sharing these stories will help to make a theoretical exploration more concrete. This is what vulnerable research has looked like in practice.

Vulnerable research started as an idea during my PhD, writing on the concept of vulnerability in climate politics, specifically in relation to the Pacific, and engaging with a lot of feminist literature. My PhD began in September 2019, meaning that within a few months, my plan to travel by train to COP and meet some Pacific activists who I could interview was over. In fact, due to my partner's extreme clinical vulnerability, I stayed in lockdown between March 2020 and August 2021, the point at which both my partner and I had been given our first two vaccinations. All of this meant two things: (1) I was going to have to defend writing about the Pacific while not doing any fieldwork and (2) vulnerability was everywhere, in layers that were overlapping and overtaking my mind. Not wanting to simply write a positionality statement, I developed a 'Vulnerable Research' section in my first chapter. In this sense, adopting a vulnerable research position felt very personal and exposing, but it helped me rather than hindered me. It gave me a language in which to express the strange experience that was my PhD, and how my research changed in response to living vulnerability at the same time as researching it.

As well as being necessitated by reflexivity, and the fact that vulnerability was not only all I was thinking about, but also something that I was experiencing and living, vulnerable research was from the start designed to be decolonial. Even before COVID, my proposal never included fieldwork in the Pacific. In my thesis, I gave three reasons:

> Firstly, to avoid the extractive model of knowledge creation that is the subject of much of my critique in chapter 4. Islands have been treated as laboratories and resource pools by white researchers since the arrival of Europeans in the region, and the effect of this has been devastating. Secondly, I am focusing on the discursive constructions of the Pacific and Oceania and as such fieldwork would not help me to answer my research questions. Finally, this is a

> climate change project and I therefore deemed it completely inappropriate to fly to places so far away without sufficient justification. Before COVID I was intending to attend COP26, and would have made contacts there for written or online interviews, but my research design would not justify the carbon cost of a long distance flight (Weatherill, 2023b).

Since my PhD, I have been feeling additional pressures to travel to the Pacific. As I seek a permanent lecturer contract, most job adverts require evidence of external research grants, even for entry level positions. Responding to this, I developed and submitted an ESRC New Investigator Grant proposal. Trying to write this from a vulnerable research position was deeply uncomfortable. I had only become excited about the idea as a way to move research funds from the United Kingdom to Tuvalu through hiring a Tuvaluan researcher for 2 years, who could do slow research on their islands. There would be some outputs, I knew, and my career would of course benefit, but it would also represent something more tangible and productive than me continuing with my discourse analysis from the United Kingdom. However, that bid requires you as a researcher to be the focus in a way that I have been trying to resist and write against. This tension ran throughout the project, and the bid was unsuccessful.

Finally, climate change has been the primary reason for everything I have done in university, including starting my first degree. I do not see decisions made on the basis of climate change as individualistic. I am not only an individual, my actions are political and have effects. I am also a teacher and I teach through my actions as well as my speech. I am researching climate change and will not make this problem worse in order to understand it better, or to access more funding or write another publication. I recognise that the world I am willing into being is one in which some practices cannot continue (Newell et al., 2021). I therefore cannot justify indulging in those behaviours myself, even if they are still possible and normalised. This position is part of what is obviously a huge debate within environment and climate politics into the role of individual action. Unpacking the debate is beyond the scope of this article, but for a helpful chapter on the limits of the much-exhausted claims that run something like: '100 companies responsible for 71% of global emissions' see (Paterson, 2021).

An example of how I have decarbonised my research practices is insisting on travelling to Europe by train. I have now done this twice, supported by two different research pots. The first was a logistical nightmare, but there was no question that the extra expense was justified. The second was more difficult. Upon submitting my application, I got a response that thanked me for taking sustainable travel into consideration, but due to the school having a limited budget, could I provide a 'comparative costing of the cheapest travel option (including air travel)' (Weatherill, 2024b). Instead, I provided a comparative carbon costing of the two journeys, first by flight and train, and second just by train. On the basis of this, and my ability to cite the institution's own 'Decarbonising Research' policy, the funding was approved.

These short examples show that vulnerable research is difficult and closes some doors, but it also brings with it positions that are defensible. Vulnerability is not weakness. It is not the opposite of being a researcher. Vulnerability is strength. Allowing yourself to be vulnerable is strength. Actively vulnerabilising yourself to resist violence is brave (Gumbs, 2020). My story so far is small, but globally, there are very brave acts taking place where people are vulnerabilising themselves. The climate protestors giving up their freedom in order to fight the unfolding crisis (Gayle, 2024), and the anti-Palestinian genocide protestors who are being criminalised and attacked (Dean, 2024; Fúnez-Flores, 2024; Hall and Gohil, 2024) both offer models of bravery that inspire me. The question that is increasingly on my mind as I navigate these questions is: What am I willing to give up for a better world?

Conclusion

At the start of this article, I quoted Sven Lindqvist (2018: 2), who wrote, 'You already know enough. So do I. It is not knowledge that we lack. What is missing is the courage to understand what we know and to draw conclusions'. Lindqvist is talking about the knowledge of colonial violence that is known but suppressed. As researchers we know the violence that is done in the name of keeping this world as it is, even as the evidence is buried and the facts denied. We recognise fascism, and genocide, and climate crisis as it unfolds, and we are told that we are wrong, or asked for ever more proof. But the big questions of international politics are not a problem of insufficient data. That is not the site of struggle.

As we pursue decolonisation, we know that the absolute violence of imperialism and colonialism continues to structure international politics, justified through hierarchised constructions of race, gender, sexuality, and class, all of which differentiates the 'value gap of life' (Rutazibwa, The Open University 2024: 18, 20). As we fight climate change, we know that Earth's atmospheric composition has been changed by the burning of fossil fuels to the point where the planet is heating, we know emissions are still rising after 30 years of negotiations, and we know the habitability of earth will only get more threatened the higher temperatures are pushed. Again, the continuation of this form of violence continues because of differentially valued lives, including the more than human.

What this means is that the bar for extractive research processes, be that knowledge extraction or carbon extraction, needs to be raised higher and rethought in the pursuit of a different model. Research needs to be designed honestly, to face up to what harm is being done, in relation to what knowledge is being pursued. Because the current research model is not fit for a less violent world. As Crilley (2024: 6) concludes, 'While critical work has challenged the status quo, the persistence of so much horror and our descent into an apocalyptic nightmare of multitudes suggest that something more radical is needed'. Advocating for a vulnerable research approach is my contribution to the question of where to go from here.

The three literatures with which I have engaged are all equally important for addressing this issue. It is possible to conduct reflexive, decolonial research that is still carbon intensive. It is possible to decarbonise research in a way that only shifts the burdens of research to others, reproducing harms that reflexive and decolonial work would be able to uncover. Insights from all three literatures are needed. I am naming an approach that recognises this challenge 'vulnerable research' to acknowledge that this is an intimidating prospect in the context of a work environment that demands productivity, the constant chasing of additional funds and external validation. Vulnerable research as an approach would instead reward care, slowness, and delegation. It would mean rethinking the role of the researcher, away from the Mastery model, and instead stressing collaboration, teaching, and how we exist in the world as political subjects who constantly ask ourselves: what world are we creating through our actions?

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ORCID iD

Charlotte Weatherill https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6570-8347

Notes

1. A Samoan word used often by Albert Wendt which I understand to refer to white/Europeans, in general and as colonisers. So he'll say 'pre-papalagi' to mean pre-colonisation/European arrival. Or papalagi architecture, or culture to refer generally to European-ness (Wendt, 1982).
2. I read *Exterminate All the Brutes* thanks to a lecture by Dr Olivia Umurerwa Rutazibwa, held at The Open University in October 2024, in which she engages with this quote from minute 18. The lecture is available online (The Open University, 2024).

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