

Investigating the Social World

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This evening...

- Introductions- to each other and the module
- Social science and coloniality
- the quest for objectivity: value, subjectivity and reflexivity

Module overview

By the end of this module you should be able to:

- critically evaluate different theoretical approaches to social inquiry, assessing the differences and commonalities between them
- demonstrate in-depth understanding of the political issues at stake in knowledge production
- articulate how particular theoretical frameworks underpin the practice of social research.

Introductions

Tell us your name, your programme and something interesting about you...

some key questions:

- How do we produce valid and useful knowledge about the social world?
- Under what social and political conditions is knowledge produced?
- What is the relationship of the knowledge producer to the worlds they make claims about?
- Should we investigate the social world in order to explain and interpret it or to change it?

These questions are not settled! But thinking about them will help you to develop your own research and to evaluate the research of others!

In this module:
read critically and
inquisitively

Epistemology

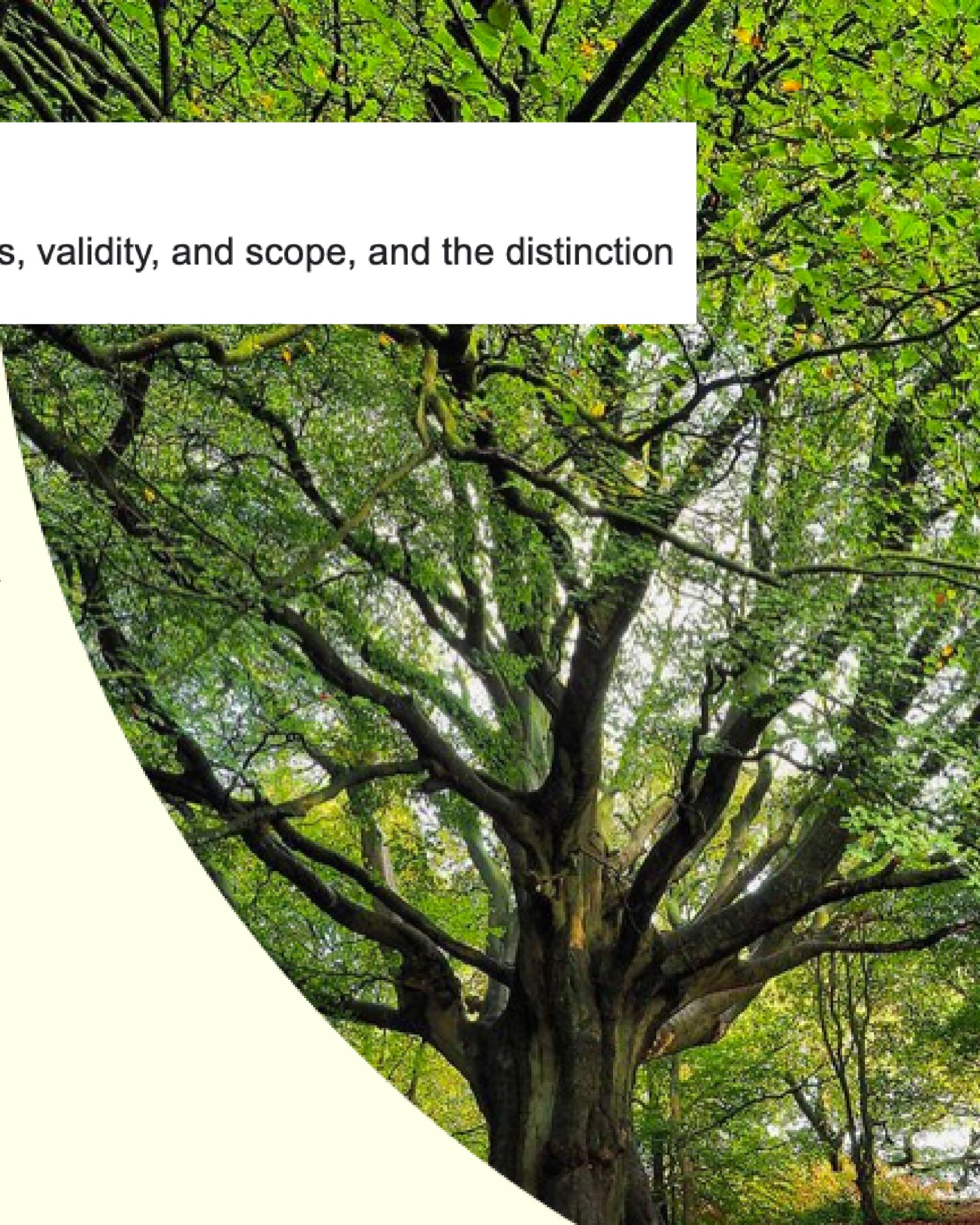
noun PHILOSOPHY

the theory of knowledge, especially with regard to its methods, validity, and scope, and the distinction between justified belief and opinion.

What do we know? How do we know what we know? How is knowledge justified?

Related to these questions is another set of questions, that we need to examine in historical context:

- How is knowledge recognised as knowledge (institutionally, politically etc)?
- Where is knowledge seen to be located (in which bodies and spaces)?
- Whose knowledge counts?

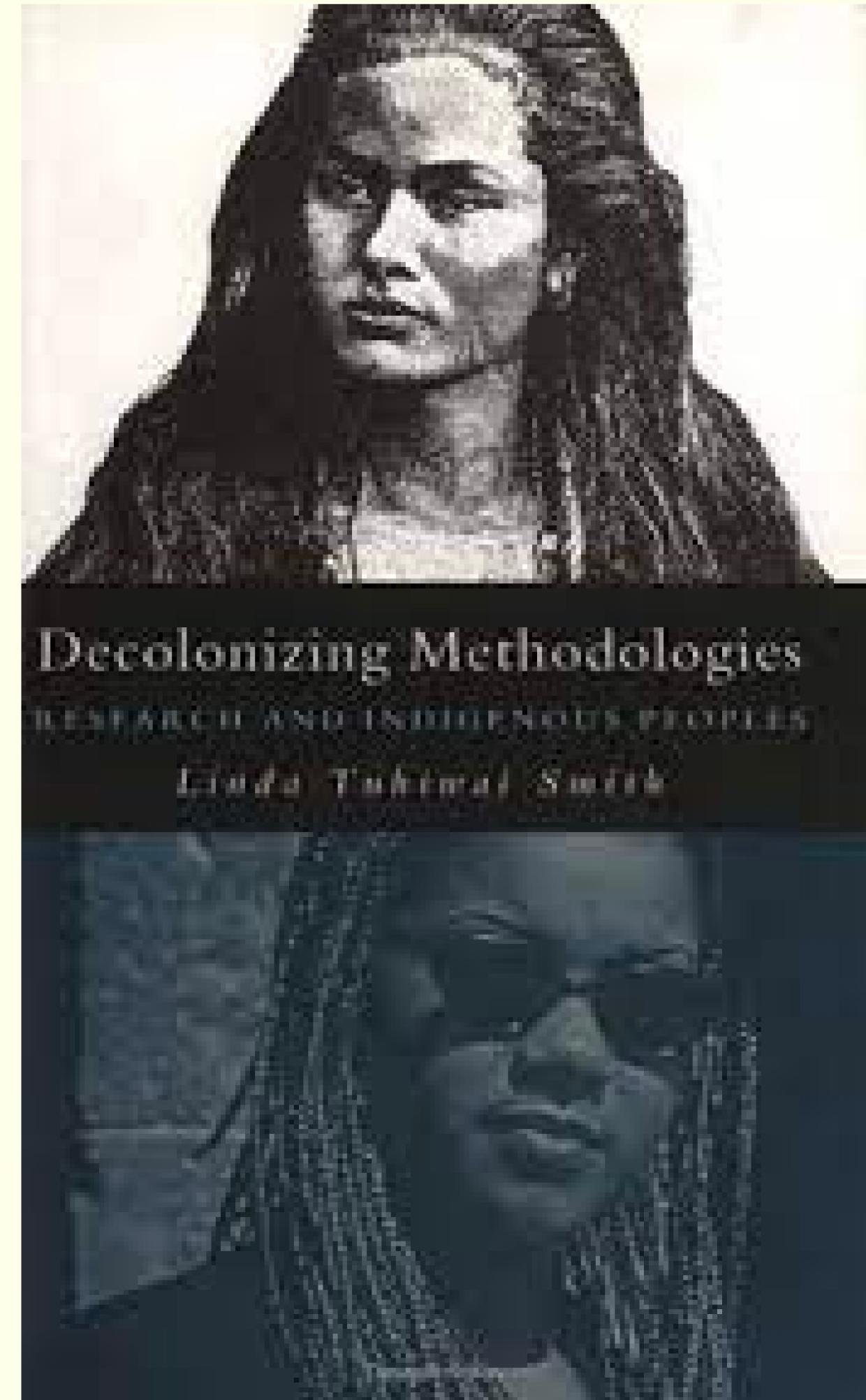


An archive of knowledge

'Western research draws from an "archive" of knowledge and systems'- a cultural orientation, a set of values, a different conceptualization of such things as time and space" reflecting different and competing theories of knowledge, highly specialized forms of language and representations of power.

Power is expressed at both the explicit and implicit levels. Dissent, or challenges to the rules, is manageable because it also conforms to these rules, particularly at the implicit level.

production of knowledge has material consequences - 'Ideas about these things help determine what counts as real.'



Mataatua: The house that came home



Transformed into an object of colonial knowledge

'It changed from being a "living" meeting house which the people used and had become an ethnological curiosity for strange people to look at the wrong way and in the wrong place.'

Binary oppositions in Western knowledge production

Western knowledge production doesn't just overlook other ways of knowing but is structured on their negation. Western modernity brought into being through invention of those dispossessed and enslaved as the 'irrational/subrational Human Other' through which 'Rational Man' is defined (Wynter 2003)

Mind
Subjects
Rational Man
Science
Civilization
Thought

Body
Objects
Other ('lesser' humans) & animals
Superstition, culture
Savagery/Nature
Instinct

Research 'through imperial eyes'

Research 'through imperial eyes' describes an approach which assumes that Western ideas about the most fundamental things are the only ideas possible to hold, certainly the only rational ideas, and the only ideas which can make sense of the world, of reality, of social life and of human beings.

It is research which is imbued with an 'attitude' and a 'spirit' which assumes a certain ownership of the entire world, and which has established systems and forms of governance which embed that attitude in institutional practices.

Group exercise

What makes a knowledge claim valid ?

- What do you look for when you consider truth claims (in research and elsewhere)?
- For the purposes of this discussion, you can reflect here on your own instincts/feelings, as well as the reading
- Try to be as specific as possible. Eg if you say something like 'rigor' or 'evidence' try to describe what you mean by those terms

More introductions

Tell us your name, your programme and something interesting about you...

Objectivity

'Scientific knowledge is reliable knowledge because it is objectively proven knowledge... [It is] derived in some rigorous way from the facts of experience acquired by observation and experiment.

Science is based on what we can see, hear, and touch, etc.

Personal opinion or preferences and speculative imaginings have no place in science. Science is objective' (Chalmers 1982, 1).

'[S]cientific beliefs, practices, institutions, histories, and problematics are constituted in and through contemporary political and social projects, and always have been' (Harding 1991)

Facts and values

positivism/empiricism

scientific knowledge of any social phenomena could only be pursued by adapting the method and logic of natural science.

difference between natural facts and social facts, both both constructed as research objects

'Value free' inquiry

- How can social science maintain scientific validity when its object of study is human behaviours and beliefs ?
- 'Passionate detachment'- hard work and enthusiasm, but – 'One should neither preach one's religion nor impose one's politics on a captive audience.'
- Remove observer bias by 'becoming the emotional, cognitive, and moral equivalent of a blank slate' (Rosaldo 1993)



Max Weber, passionately detached

Disrupting 'masculine heroics'

'a captivity narrative' more than an adventure story:

- 'Suddenly, something in me gave up. I had no will to struggle further. Dropping to my knees and lowering my head to the ice, I crawled toward home, seething with humiliation and rage but totally unable to stand up. Shielded by the parka and hood that fell over my face, I wept at my ignominy.'

(Rosaldo 1993, 177-179)



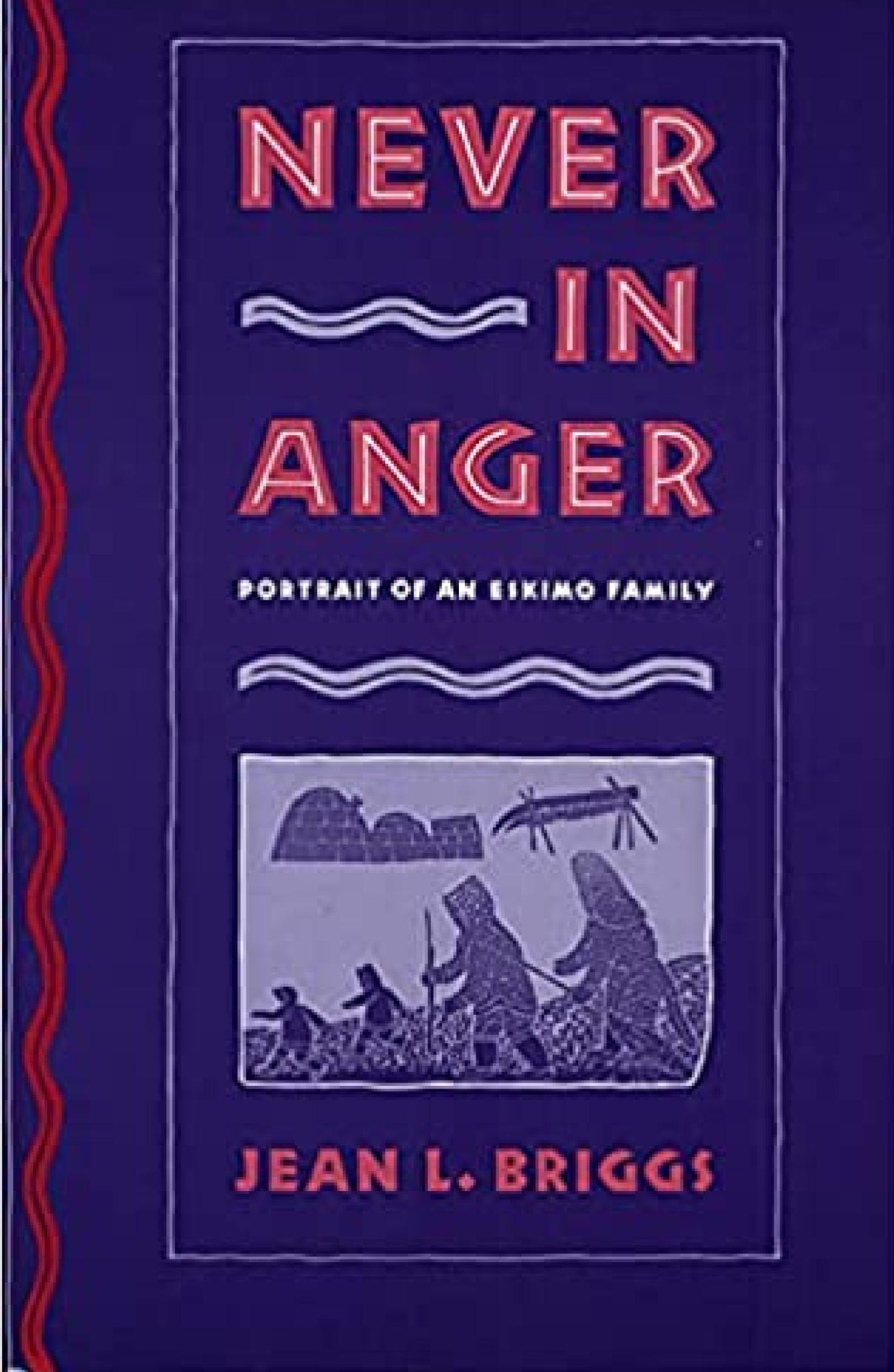
Iqaluit, where Briggs did her fieldwork.
Photo by Johan Hallberg-Campbell for NPR

'Lesser' sources of knowledge

Briggs's own depression and her hosts' response to it becomes central to Never in Anger. They become sources of insight into the cultural configuration of emotion

'Passionate detachment' too 'severely restricts the legitimate sources of knowledge for social analysis. Feebleness, depression, rage, anxiety can be sources of knowledge.' (Rosaldo 1993, 177-17

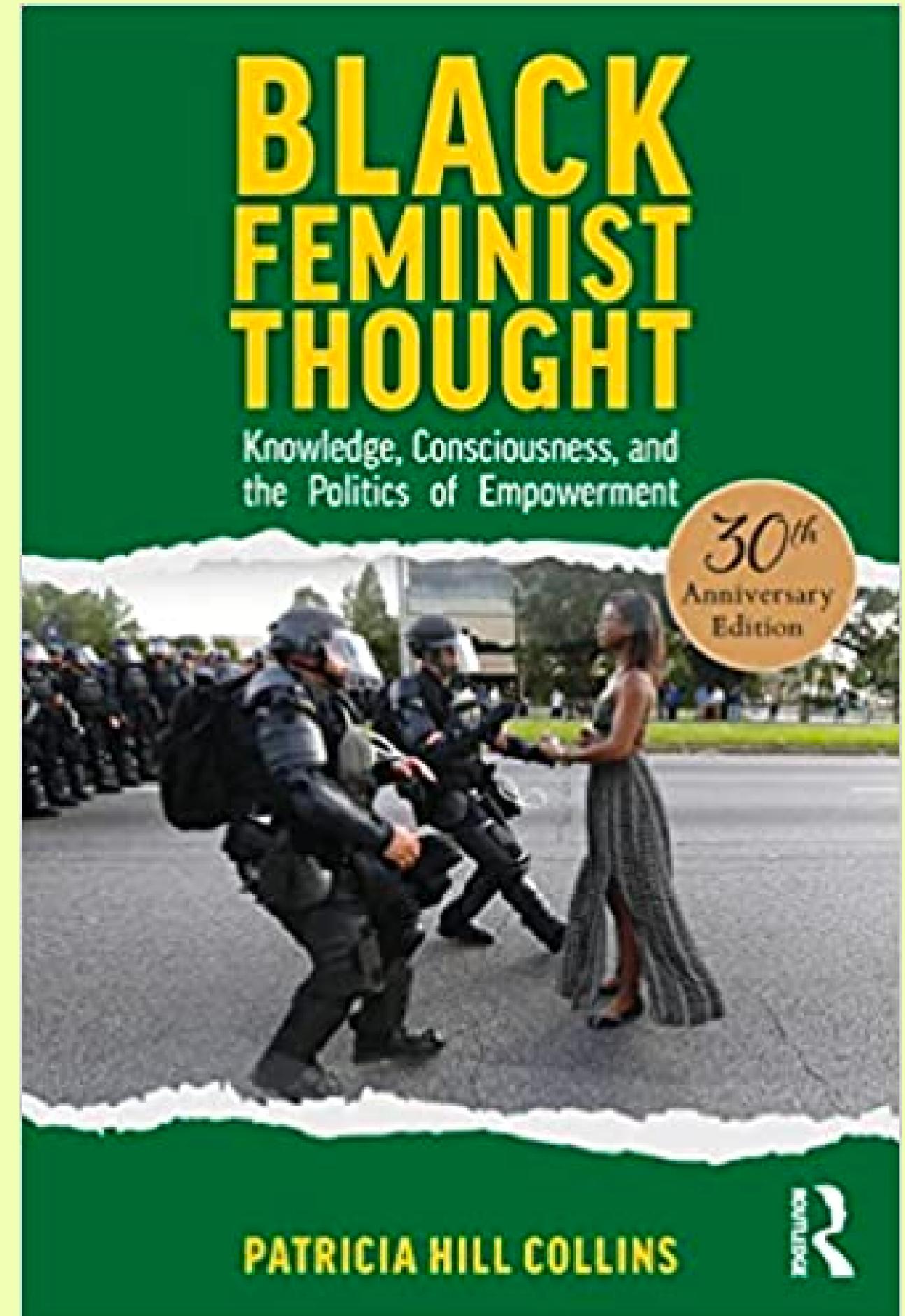
What do you think about this position?



Connections and partial claims

Partiality and not universality is the condition of making claims: I am arguing for a view from a body, always complex, contradictory, structuring and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity (Harraway 589).

- “What is always needed in the appreciation of art, or life is the larger perspective. Connections made, or at least attempted, where none existed before, the straining to encompass in one’s glance at the varied world the common thread, the unifying theme through immense diversity”.
(Alice Walker in Hill Collins 270)



being somewhere in particular

Science has often employed 'the conquering gaze from nowhere' - claims the power to see not be seen, to represent while escaping representation (Haraway 1988, 581).

Reflexivity: Making visible the practice and construction of knowledge and construction of knowledge within research in order to produce more accurate analyses' (Pillow 2003, 178)

The point is to make a difference in the world, to cast our lot for some ways of life and not others. To do that, one must be in the action, be finite and dirty, not transcendent and clean (Haraway 1997, 36)

Discussion

Reflecting on the lecture and the reading:

- What do you think of these arguments making visible the construction/practice of knowledge can produce knowledge that is more valid?
- Should research be about changing the world rather than just describing it? In some cases? All cases? What potential issues might be involved from either position?