

Our Stories Are Not Footnotes

Culture, memory, and the right to shape Caribbean research

Why this matters across the islands

Research must connect what colonial borders separated.

**Too often,
the islands are
spoken about separately.**
But many questions are connected:

- memory
- language
- labour
- dignity
- justice
- who shapes the future

**Not six
separate footnotes.
One shared
Caribbean question.**

Core claim

The people of the islands are not just subjects of research.

**We are here.
We think.
We remember.
We create.
We resist.**

**We have the right
to shape research
about us, with us,
and for us.**

Culture is serious business

Not entertainment only; not a side programme.

Culture is how a people:

remember
explain themselves
protect dignity
pass on truth
keep breathing

If research ignores culture, it misreads the people.

Listen for the silences

Silence is often produced by power, not by absence of voice.

**Some histories
are not silent
because our people
had no voice.**

They are silent because the official record
did not listen.

We listen for silences produced by:

- survival
- shame
- migration
- poverty
- language loss
- colonial power

St. Martin example: the salt pond as archive

Lasana M. Sekou gives us a model of culture as method.

**Salt is
memory.
labour.
sweat.
wound.
preservation.
resistance.**

When we read the Great Salt Pond only as geography, we miss its historical meaning.

When we read salt as memory, ponds, roads, family names, songs, stories, and silences become evidence.

The official record remembers unequally

Archives are evidence, but they are also products of power.

When researchers enter the archive, we must ask:

Who wrote this record?

For what purpose?

Who is named?

Who is reduced to a number?

**Who must we return to in the community
to complete the truth?**

Digitization is not decolonization

A colonial record remains a colonial record when scanned.

**A searchable archive
can still preserve hierarchy
while appearing modern.**

Digital access helps. But without descendant knowledge, community truth, and oral memory, digital tools can continue the silence.

Risk points:

- name cleaning can erase traces
- linkage can follow owners more than families
- standardization can flatten uncertainty
- databases can turn people into records again

From person as record to person as relative

The database must not erase kinship, dignity, and uncertainty.

A database can follow:

ownership
sale
manumission
emancipation

But research must restore:

mother
father
child
worker
ancestor
neighbour

Sometimes uncertainty is the evidence.

Language carries home

Multilingualism is historical intelligence, not confusion.

Language carries:

memory

class

humour

shame

struggle

resistance

belonging

If our methods cannot hear the language of the people, they cannot understand the people.

Education must not train our people outward

Colonial schooling often rewarded distance from home.

**Colonial schooling
did not only educate.
It trained minds
for empire.**

Key questions:

Are we still training young people mainly to leave?

Are we still validating them only when they fit outside standards?

Are we teaching them to mistrust their own histories?

Different stages. Same world system.

From extraction of bodies to extraction of intellect.

**Colonialism did not abandon its labour logic.
It reorganised it.**

Slavery

forced labour

Indentureship

controlled labour

Colonial schooling

trained intermediaries

Skilled migration

brain robbery

Migration can contain courage and coercion at the same time.

Honour contribution. Do not hide exploitation.

Polite language can soften hard history.

**Yes, our ancestors
contributed.**

But many contributed under bondage,
contract systems, dependency,
unequal law, and no fair choice.

**When we soften
exploitation,
we soften
responsibility.**

Repair must touch life

Apology matters, but apology alone is not enough.

**Repair must include
memory, education,
access to archives,
stronger institutions,
language dignity,
and equal rights now.**

Because people cannot build a future on symbolism alone.

Culture is not separate from justice.
Language is not separate from justice.
Labour is not separate from justice.
Research is not separate from justice.

What accountable research looks like

Research must leave capacity, not only reports.

Start from island reality

Do not force island life into imported boxes.

Return the knowledge

People who make research possible must be able to use it.

Strengthen local institutions

Leave tools, training, archives, and capacity.

Measure community benefit

Publication alone is not the standard.

Listening is not the same as extracting.

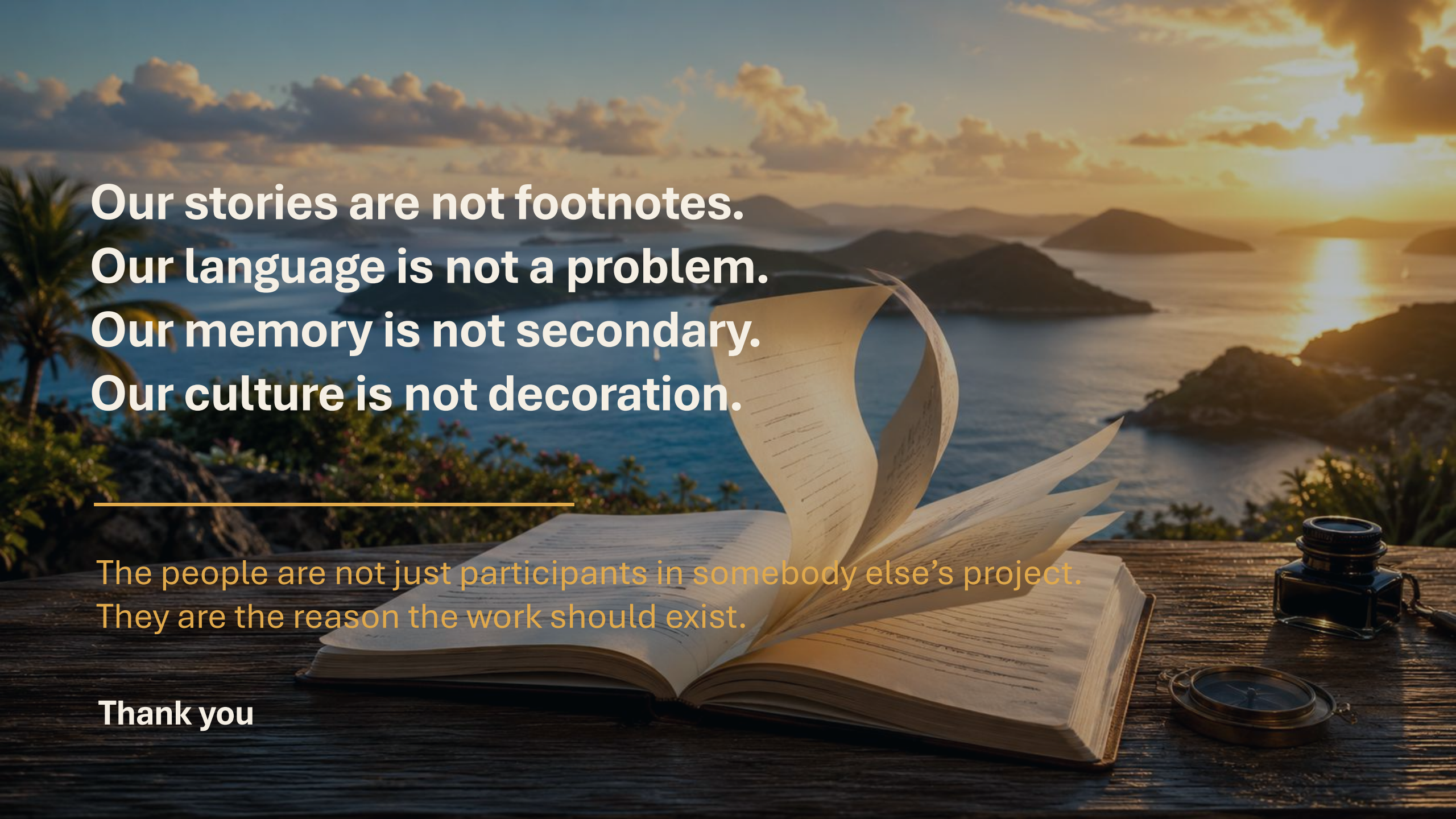
The standard

Not visibility without benefit. Not inclusion without power.

**Research
with the people.
Research
for the people.
Research that
answers to the people.**

Not:

- consultation without change
- archives without access
- memory without repair
- digitization without decolonial method
- research without accountability



**Our stories are not footnotes.
Our language is not a problem.
Our memory is not secondary.
Our culture is not decoration.**

**The people are not just participants in somebody else's project.
They are the reason the work should exist.**

Thank you

Selected intellectual anchors

Backup slide for Q&A / notes.

Caribbean & decolonial thought: Williams, Fanon, Rodney, Beckford, Hall, Quijano, Wynter, Ngũgĩ.

Dutch Caribbean / St. Martin grounding: Arrindell on language and identity; Allen on oral history and slavery memory; Oostindie on Dutch colonial memory and migration; Guadeloupe on St. Martin/Sint Maarten social worlds; Sekou on St. Martin literary memory, salt, land, and resistance.

Presentation source: keynote manuscript, “Our Stories Are Not Footnotes,” Raymond Jessurun, DCRW2026.