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IN SEARCH FOR ETHICAL RELATIONS IN SOCIAL WORK WITH REFUGEES COMMUNITIES: REFLECTIONS ON THE SYRIAN REFUGEE "CRISIS"

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Résumé de l'article

Dans ce document à orientation conceptuelle, nous examinons les aspects politiques de l'humanitarisme canadien dans la réinstallation des réfugiés et ses relations avec la pratique quotidienne du travail social avec les réfugiés. Nous soutenons que les efforts du Canada en matière de réinstallation des réfugiés ont servi à construire une identité particulière pour les personnes réfugiées tout en confirmant le Canada comme étant une nation humanitaire. Cette construction identitaire du réfugié et du Canada a efficacement dissimulé la violence coloniale historique et continue du Canada, sa complicité dans le conflit au Moyen-Orient, ainsi que sa politique raciste en matière de réfugiés. Nous suggérons que, malgré l'orientation de la profession envers la justice sociale, le travail social a été complice de ces constructions identitaires problématiques. En tant que profession façonnée par un investissement historique dans la blancheur, le travail social reste complice dans la différentiation de l'Autre et ce tant que nous maintenons notre identité d'aidant professionnel. Ce document examine la possibilité de perturber l'investissement dans la blancheur comme moyen de créer une condition d'engagement éthique avec les populations réfugiées.

IN SEARCH FOR ETHICAL RELATIONS IN SOCIAL WORK WITH REFUGEES COMMUNITIES: REFLECTIONS ON THE SYRIAN REFUGEE "CRISIS"

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Abstract: For this conceptually oriented paper, we examine the politics of Canadian humanitarianism in refugee resettlement and its relationships to everyday social work practice with refugees. We argue that Canada's refugee resettlement efforts have functioned to construct a particular refugee identity while confirming itself as a humanitarian nation-state. This constitutive identity construction of refugee and Canada have effectively concealed Canada's historical and ongoing settler colonial violence, its complicity in the Middle East conflict, as well as its racist refugee policy regime. We suggest that, despite the profession's orientation towards social justice, social work has been complicit in these problematic identity constructions. As a profession shaped by a historical investment in whiteness, social work remains complicit in the Othering as long as we hold onto our identity as professional helpers. This paper discusses the possibility of disrupting the investment in whiteness as a way to create a condition for ethical engagement with refugee populations.

Keywords: humanitarianism, ethics, refugees, critical social work

Abrégé : Dans ce document à orientation conceptuelle, nous examinons les aspects politiques de l'humanitarisme canadien dans la réinstallation des réfugiés et ses relations avec la pratique quotidienne du travail social avec les réfugiés. Nous soutenons que les efforts du Canada en matière de réinstallation des réfugiés ont servi à construire une identité particulière pour les personnes réfugiées tout en confirmant le Canada comme

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étant une nation humanitaire. Cette construction identitaire du réfugié et du Canada a efficacement dissimulé la violence coloniale historique et continue du Canada, sa complicité dans le conflit au Moyen-Orient, ainsi que sa politique raciste en matière de réfugiés. Nous suggérons que, malgré l'orientation de la profession envers la justice sociale, le travail social a été complice de ces constructions identitaires problématiques. En tant que profession façonnée par un investissement historique dans la blancheur, le travail social reste complice dans la différentiation de l'Autre et ce tant que nous maintenons notre identité d'aidant professionnel. Ce document examine la possibilité de perturber l'investissement dans la blancheur comme moyen de créer une condition d'engagement éthique avec les populations réfugiées.

SINCE THE IMAGE OF THREE-YEAR-OLD Alan Kurdi's body on a Mediterranean beach made global headlines in September 2015, the upsurge of interest regarding Syrian refugees in Canada has been undeniable. Between November 2015 and November 2019, a total of 44,610 individuals were resettled under Canada's Syrian Refugee Resettlement commitment; of these, 18,920 were resettled through the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program (Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Canada, 2019). The last time refugee issues received this amount of policy and public support in Canada was in the 1980s, when Indochinese boat people were resettled. The growing attention to refugee plights among policymakers and the general public is indeed encouraging; however, this seemingly humanitarian response must be examined against a backdrop of Canada's racist and settler colonial nation-building project.

For this conceptually oriented paper, we examine the politics of Canadian humanitarianism in refugee resettlement and its relationships to everyday social work practice with refugees. We first offer a critical analysis of Canada's humanitarian response to the Syrian refugee crisis. We draw on critical refugee scholarship to interrogate how the discourse of humanitarianism produces particular identities for refugees as well as for Canada. While the refugee subject is produced as helpless and in need of Canada's protection, Canada confirms its identity as a humanitarian nation-state, which effectively conceals Canada's historical and ongoing settler colonial violence, its complicity in the Middle East conflict, as well as its racist refugee policy regime. We then consider the implication of such identity construction on social work practice with refugees. We argue that social work practice is not immune to such identity construction of the refugee subject. In fact, social work is an active participant in constructing a refugee identity that is ultimately disempowering, as our understanding of the refugee subject often operates under the paradigm

of a minority oppression model. We argue that such construction of the refugee identity is a blockage to ethical social work practice with refugee communities. Finally, we consider the possibilities for ethical practice with refugee communities. Drawing on Ahmed's (2000) work on ethical encounter, Rossiter's (2011) on unsettledness as ethics, and Anzaldúa's (1981) on nurturing of multiplicities, we suggest that the possibility for ethical relations with refugee communities may be found through the unsettlement of whiteness in social work as well as an acceptance and appreciation of the complexity and multiplicity of human identity.

Before we dive into a critical analysis of the humanitarian response to the Syrian refugee crisis, however, we turn critical eyes to our own responses. What you read below is an initial reflexive piece that the authors exchanged between each other soon after we witnessed the upsurge of interest in Syrian refugees. This personal reflection is important not only because it contextualizes the discussion offered here, but also because we are committed to critical reflexivity as a way to open up a new space to consider ethics in social work practice.

Locating Ourselves

Both Anh and Chizuru identify ourselves as migrant settlers of colour. We both have worked with immigrant and refugee communities in different capacities prior to pursuing our doctoral studies. Currently, both of us teach in social work programs and continue to be engaged with refugee communities through community-based research. The reflexive pieces you read below capture the essence of initial conversations we had as we witnessed the upsurge of interest in the Syrian refugee crisis in Fall 2015.

> **Anh:** *I have been immobilized for months, wanting to act, but not wanting to be part of the benevolent Western helpers. Wanting to "save" people, but not wanting to force them into a role of being saved. To do so would impose on them a lifetime of debt, of the un-repayable gift of freedom. I know this debt too well. I was made into a refugee in the destruction of my country of birth during the American war in Vietnam of 1954–1975. I left Vietnam and arrived in Canada as a toddler, about the same age Alan Kurdi was when he drowned in the Mediterranean Sea. Here in Canada, I was socialized to be grateful to the Canadian nation. I learned to retell my narrative of escape and rescue to curious Canadians, to benefit from this story as an "exceptional" refugee who moved from imminent death to professional success. I was used and upheld as the proof of Canada's humanitarianism, and for a long time I did not think there was anything wrong with it. It was the price you pay for being "saved." Yet, the gift of freedom has been unbearable.*
>
> *As a mother and a social worker who is now working with migrant communities, I wanted to act; I felt I could not turn away from the images and stories of these refugees. But I felt that if I became part of the rescue mission, would I not be a hypocrite as I simultaneously critique the state's refugee rescue system and its role in the subjugation of the refugee's personhood? But then if I did not become part*

of the rescue mission, am I still a hypocrite, a social worker who did not act in the face of human suffering? Each night as I cuddled my own toddler to sleep, I thought about the children in war zones, the ones on the road moving from one dangerous place to another, the ones sleeping rough in encampments and transit stations. Is it wrong to want to act in the face of this inhumanity?

Chizuru: *It was quite extraordinary to witness how the death of one child turned into a federal election matter and became part of everyday conversations in Canadian private and public lives. I couldn't believe that the issue I was so passionate to bring forward from my days of refugee advocacy was finally getting the spotlight. I should have been happy and jumped on the opportunity to help and sponsor Syrians, but instead, I couldn't help but feeling skeptical about this sudden upsurge of humanitarian interests. My years in the refugee-serving sector taught me that refugee advocacy was never just about refugees themselves. Though the primary goal of refugee advocacy is about benefitting refugees themselves, different parties also benefit in the process. People such as myself who assist refugees get praised as notable people who tirelessly work on a good and difficult cause, while the resettling country such as Canada elevates its reputation as a humanitarian nation. The work of advocacy was so much about whether we could evoke the feeling of urgency and goodness in others. The stories of suffering and hardships were very effective tools for an emotional appeal, though as we create that story, we fixed the refugees as needy and vulnerable.*

As I see the pictures of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau hugging newly arrived Syrian refugees on media reports, I cannot help wondering who is really benefiting from the refugee resettlement efforts. When we celebrate our Prime Minister in his efforts to welcome 25,000 Syrian refugees, we forget the historical and ongoing racist immigration and refugee policy as well as settler colonial violence against Indigenous Peoples.

Is there a possibility of engaging in critical action when refugee work is so embedded in the nation-state framework? How can I engage without consuming and owning their pain and suffering? How am I, as a settler of colour, to critically engage in refugee work in a way that does not further erase Indigenous lands, histories, and peoples?

As soon as the Syrian refugee crisis became a mainstream topic in Canadian society, we developed a sense of disquiet. Our responses were both intellectual and emotional. We wanted to do something about it but were frustrated with the ways in which the Syrian refugee crisis was taken up by the public. Regular media headlines told stories of Canada's moral superiority, including "'Finally, a life': Canada comes to the rescue", by *The Guardian* (Davidson, 2020); "The boss who rescued 300 Syrian refugees", by *BBC News* (Silverberg, 2017); "Finding refuge in Canadian friends", by *CBC News* (Froese, 2019); and "Canadians answer call to help Syrian refugees", by *Now Toronto* (Sucharov, 2015). We were critical of the ways in which the public response to the Syrian refugee crisis became more about Canadian humanitarianism than Syrian refugees themselves.

Yet we were also disturbed with the ways in which our own critical analysis immobilized us, making us unable to engage in community action.

At its core, we were concerned with the politics of humanitarianism and how it operates in Canadian nation-making as a white settler colonial state. We have come to see how the discourse of humanitarianism is sustained by imposing the refugee identity ("refugeeness") onto individuals. Refugeeness is an identity construction in which international, national, and local politics, as well as different forms of knowledge (science, medical, legal, social work, etc.), coincide to construct a subject position that flattens the multiplicities of individuals' lives and experiences. Critical refugee scholars have examined the different ways in which refugeeness has been discursively and materially constructed in various contexts—for example, in the 1950 Refugee Convention (Nyers, 2006), UNHCR Operations (Hyndman, 2000), European refugee management after World War II (Malkki, 1995), American social work (Park, 2008), public policy and bureaucratic practices (Zetter, 1991, 2007), and international refugee law (Johns, 2004). While imposing a refugee identity onto individuals does have material benefit (such as material support from international organization and potential resettlement to another country), it functions in other ways as well. Both of our experiences speak to this: for Anh, as a former refugee after the war in Vietnam, her subjectivity is very much shaped by the dominant discourses of the authentic, grateful, and productive refugee, which informs her current practice with migrant communities; for Chizuru, as a former practitioner in the refugee-serving sector, she reflects on how her own social work practice with refugee communities became a complex site of nation-building rather than a site of social justice. We have come to see how our feelings—being stuck between needing to help and refusing to be part of Canada's rescue mission—are already implicated in the politics of humanitarianism. This realization directs us to interrogate the politics of humanitarianism, in which we engage in the next section.

The Politics of Humanitarianism in Constructing the Refugee Identity

Critical scholars have examined the ways in which humanitarian discourse reinforces established systems of power, including its functioning as a technology of control, in bolstering Canadian nation-building, and reaffirming ourselves as good moral citizens through the process of Othering. For example, Hyndman (2000) examined the culture, practices, and operations of the United Nations refugee agency in refugee camps along the Somali-Kenyan border during the 1990s. Drawing on postcolonial theories, Hyndman examined the representation of refugees in humanitarian discourse as people generally as devoid of agency and in need of outsiders to care for them. Refugees are seen as "messy" and in

need of ordering, which the UNHCR brings through an endless "exercise of counting, calculating and coding refugees" (Hyndman, 2000, p. 121). Hyndman argued that this need to discipline refugees affected the ways that refugee camps were designed and operated, which had significant material consequences with regard to refugees' safety, livelihood, and legal rights. Hyndman (2000) asked the challenging question, "[a]t what point do charitable acts of humanitarian assistance become neo-colonial technologies of control?" (p. 147).

The idea of Canada as a humanitarian leader is historically constructed and deeply ingrained in its national narrative. Dauvergne (2006) addressed the stealth operation of the humanitarian discourse within Canadian and Australian migration laws. Dauvergne attended to the flexible nature of humanitarian discourse, arguing that "[h]umanitarianism is not a standard of obligation, as justice would be, but rather of charity. Humanitarianism defines us as good when we are able to meet the standard, and justifiable when we are not" (2006, p. 72). Dauvergne further argued that the enactment of humanitarianism requires reinforcing the difference between "us" and "them." This relationship is not of equality nor mutuality but is founded in the process of Othering. This Othering process contributes to defining the identity of the Canadian nation. Thus, "[p]art of our humanitarianism is about... applauding ourselves. When humanitarianism is used in immigration laws and discourses, it tells us something about ourselves as nation—that is, the extent of our aspirations to goodness—and something implicit about our national identity" (2006, p. 73).

A clear example of the effect that Dauvergne identified can be found in the Indochinese refugee rescue of the 1970s, when Canada's humanitarian response through private and public partnership resulted in the resettlement of over 120,000 people by the end of the formal refugee period in the late 1980s (Canadian Council on Refugees, n.d.). It is of great national pride that, in 1986, the people of Canada were awarded a Nansen Refugee Award for their resettlement efforts of Indochinese refugees. Critical scholars have since interrogated the productive ideological work of the figure of the Indochinese refugee within discourse of humanitarianism in the service of Canada's nation-building (Ngo, 2016; Nguyen, 2013). Nguyen (2013) traced this work in his literary analysis of Thúy's *Ru* (2009), the celebrated and award-winning semi-autobiographical work that details the struggles and successes of a young Vietnamese refugee settled in rural Quebec. Nguyen points out how these refugee narratives perform a service to national identity: "Read as public demonstrations of success… these narratives help to confirm liberal ideals of freedom, democracy, and equality. They function as proof of the inclusive, tolerant, and fundamentally nonracist constitution of the Canadian and American national space" (p. 17). Similarly Ngo (2016)

has argued the discourse of humanitarianism in the Indochinese refugee rescue has functioned to produce subject positions of the model refugee, which as a consequence, erases the complex Cold War politics into a narrative of Vietnamese victims and Canadian saviours.

The historical idea of Canada as a humanitarian leader in refugee resettlement is carried on in the current response to Syrian refugee migration. The photographs of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau greeting Syrian refugees upon their arrival to Canada are well-circulated, well-embraced images that shape the public perception of what Canadian humanitarianism looks like in action (The Canadian Press, 2015). The response to the Syrian refugee crisis by the general public also carries the legacy of the Indochinese refugee period. For example, one large non-profit group named themselves "Lifeline Syria" as a nod to the original "Operation Lifeline", the name given to the sponsorship campaign directed at Indochinese refugees (lifelinesyria. ca). Molner (2016) suggested that the re-circulation of "emotionally charged stories" such as that of Alan Kurdi can result in "disastrous misapprehensions and dangerous conflations" when they are repeatedly done without critical discussion (p. 72). While the image of Canada as a humanitarian nation dominates public discourse, the complexities and multiplicities that are embedded in the construction of the Syrian refugee crisis are erased.

For example, the sudden and intense media and public attention given to the plight of Syrian refugees after the death of Alan Kurdi in the autumn of 2015 made it seem as though the conflict in Syria had just begun. In reality, however, conflicts in Syria have been ongoing since the spring of 2011. The Syrian crisis is often portrayed as a civil war, a conflict between the authoritarian government and its oppositional groups, particularly that of the group variously called ISIS, ISIL, or Da'esh, but the reality is much murkier, complicated, and transnational in nature (Carpenter, 2013). Carpenter (2013) described as significant factors in the Syrian crisis the ethnoreligious diversity in Syria, as well as the historical triangular geopolitical tensions among Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey, and the ancient rivalry between the Sunni and Shiite factions of Islam. The situation has been further exacerbated by the international relations between the Western governments (i.e. U.S., U.K., France), Russia, and China, as they disagree on how to deal with the fighting in Syria based on their own national interests (Carpenter, 2013).

The role of the Canadian military in exacerbating the conflicts in the Middle East is rarely interrogated but is important to note. A highlight is the active bombing missions conducted by Canadian military personnel in Syria and the Middle East for 17 months from October 2014 to February 2016 (Pugliese, 2016). In addition, the Canadian government contributed minimally to the humanitarian

response at the beginning of the conflict, with minimal refugee resettlement efforts prior to 2014. According to the Canadian Council for Refugees (2013), only nine Syrians were resettled by the Canadian government in the first eight months of 2013. The humanitarian response was mainly financial, with Canada promising $203.5 million in January 2012 for international humanitarian assistance efforts in Syria and neighbouring countries, and $110 million to support development projects in Jordan and Lebanon (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2013). This is in stark contrast to the number of displaced persons. As the violence and fighting escalated in Syria, an estimated 8 million people were internally displaced and 4.5 million Syrians had fled the country since the conflict began (UNHCR, 2015). Most Syrians fled to the neighbouring countries of Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, and Turkey, and these neighbouring countries continue to be the key players in offering refuge for the majority of Syrians, in addition to hosting thousands more refugees (Orchard & Miller, 2014). Canadian complicity in Syrian conflicts—the pre-mediated policy that kept Syrians "there" not "here" through development "aid" and indifference on the part of the Canadian public—are rarely discussed in the current context, in which the resettlement efforts by the Liberal government and the Canadian public are depicted as fundamentally good and moral through the discourse of humanitarianism.

Just as importantly, the humanitarian discourse prevalent in the representation of—and reaction to—the Syrian refugee crisis erases a deep tension existing in the relationship between refugee resettlement and settler colonialism. In other words, what are the implications of "welcoming" Syrian refugees on the land that is stolen and continues to be dispossessed from Indigenous communities? Lawrence and Dua (2005) made an important point about how anti-racism discourse in Canada often does not take into consideration violent colonial histories against Indigenous Peoples and thus furthers contemporary colonial agendas. Their intervention was further discussed by Sharma and Wright (2008), who raised concerns about the risk of categorizing all migrants as settlers, as well as "naturalizing an ethnicized, racialized and nationalized relationship between people and with land" (p. 121). Taking both of their arguments into consideration, our concern is not so much about if and whether the Syrians and refugee communities at large should be considered settlers, nor is it about deciding who is more deserving and underserving of public attention. Rather, our concern is with how the act of welcoming refugees dismisses the historical and ongoing dispossession and erasure of Indigenous land, people, and culture, and confirms Canada as a humanitarian nation. Indeed, this concern is particularly challenging in the current context where the transnational migration—either as "voluntary," "forced," or somewhere in between—is a predominant feature of our society. While

we have no easy answer to such a complex question, we do believe that it is an important matter of responsibility to continue to ask.

Implication of Refugee Identity on Social Work Practice

Humanitarian discourse is not only employed at the level of policy and institutional practices, but also at the level of social work intervention. Park's (2008) discourse analysis on construction of "refugee" in American social work revealed that social work has historically contributed to the production of the vulnerable identity of the refugee subject. Our past social work experiences also speak to the ways in which refugee-related social services assume a homogenous refugee identity through popular notions that present refugees as poor, needy, foreign, traumatized, and so on. Even when social workers may be critical of the ways refugee clients are represented, our services were designed according to this vulnerable identity. Based on this assumed identity, refugees are categorized through the welfare system, mental health discourse, and settlement practices, in spite of the diversity within the refugee population. With the reproduction of refugeeness comes a process of Othering, as the helper and helped are codified along the lines of class, race, citizenship, and gender.

Critical scholars urge us to unpack the moral impulse to "do good" by helping, and to ask ourselves both what relations and structures of power are being produced, sustained, and reaffirmed, and also what subjectivities are enabled and limited. In the context of international development, Heron (2007) stated

> When we feel compelled to 'help' by rushing to the rescue of a situation or persons, especially—but not only—Others elsewhere, we need to ask ourselves to what extent colonial legacies of racialized relations of comparison, planetary consciousness, obligation, and entitlement are at play, compounded by our internalized socialization as good. (p. 155)

Kisiara (2015) examined the academic and community-based presentations in Western New York in which Syrian and neighbouring refugees were invited to provide their "voices" in presentations on refugee experiences in which "the refugees' roles are largely to provide the suffering narrative, which are often decontextualized relative to the refugees' life trajectories but contextualized within the agenda of the event organizers" (p. 166). Kisiara likened the presentation and narratives of the selected refugees as conforming and fulfilling the "voyeuristic gaze" of the audience members, many, for whom this is their first encounter with the refugee Other (2015, p. 168). In this way, the suffering of the Syrian refugee is taken away and consumed by the helping subject. Thus, under the veil of altruism, the relations of power between nationals and the refugee Other are further solidified in both relational and material ways, while

reaffirming structures of dominance and oppression. Humanitarianism is never just about the recipient of humanitarian efforts, but always about its (unequal) relationship.

Our critical analysis of humanitarianism leads us to ask: how is it possible to imagine social work with refugee communities that does not replicate the unequal relations that are produced by Canadian humanitarianism? While we do not have a singular answer to this complex question, we want to offer direction where we see some possibilities. First, we will draw on Ahmed's (2000) discussion of ethical encounters. In order for us to engage in ethical practice with refugee communities, we must go against the essentialization of the refugee subject—that is, we must accept the impossibility of representation. This leads us to Rossiter's (2011) unsettledness as ethics, and in this case, we argue being unsettled is to let go of our own representations of ourselves as professional helpers from a discipline rooted and saturated within whiteness (Badwall, 2014; Heron, 2007; O'Connell, 2013), which brings us to the final conceptual intervention found in Anzaldúa's (1981) work on nurturing of multiplicities.

Ethical Encounters

Ahmed (2000) talked about the "ethical encounters" (p. 137-160). Drawing on Levinas and Derrida, she argued that encounters with Others are always and already mediated, and never simply here and now. By this, Ahmed meant that what we know (and don't know) about the Other inevitably relies on what is already socially available or consumable. For the case of refugees, we already know them to be helpless, backward, and potentially dangerous when we encounter them. As social workers, we know them to be traumatized, vulnerable, and deserving of help. This existing knowledge about refugees prevents us from meeting refugees here and now. Ahmed (2000) asked:

> What are the conditions of possibility for us meeting here and now? [...] If we begin to think of the relationship between ethics and difference, then we can examine differentiation as something that happens at the level of the encounter, rather than 'in' the body of an Other with whom I am presented. (p. 144)

We extend on Ahmed's (2000) question and explore one possible way to meet "the refugee" here and now. As Ahmed argued, differentiation takes place at the level of encounter, not "in" the body of an Other with whom you are presented, nor in the body of ourselves. Differentiation does not exist innately but is produced relationally within the socio-political and historical contexts of the encounter. It is important, then, that we examine how this differentiation is produced, how differentiated relations are sustained, and how this form of relation functions within a web of global power relations.

Here we go back to our discussion on the Syrian refugee crisis. When we, including us authors, "encountered" the "Syrian refugee," it was through the image of Alan Kurdi on the internet or television, a body that was lifeless on the beach. We encountered this lifeless body through the pre-existing discourse available for a refugee child, flattening him and fixing him as a token of the Syrian refugee crisis. With this, we are complicit in what Levinas would call "symbolic murder" (as cited in Rossiter, 2011, p. 985). While the differentiations between him and us seem so innate as we witnessed his lifeless body, ethically we must think that it was still created through the encounter. Ethically, we have to think about what this differentiation means to us.

By interrogating the context within which we encounter the Other, we are reminded to question and even suspend the preconceived ideas and notions we have of this Other. Suspending what we think we know of the refugee means that we must constantly work against our impulses to fit the complex migrant experiences into linear narratives of the authentic refugee subject, which inevitably produces the subject of the bogus refugee (Bradimore & Bauder, 2011; Mountz, 2004). Finn (2016) drew on Dean (2001) and operationalized this concept in practice as anticipatory empathy, in which we "consciously reflect on the cultural-political, community, and organizational contexts in which we are coming together with [O]thers and to think about the ways in which these forces might infiltrate the emergent relationship" (p. 212). With direct consequence to our practice as professional helpers, we must reframe our work with refugee clients as ethical encounters; we must resist our desire for comfortable complacency in our assumed knowledge of the Other and our impulses to be the good professional helper.

Unsettling Investments in Whiteness

Our desire for professionalized knowledge and our impulse to be the good helper are what create the differentiation between the social worker and the refugee client. Drawing on Gottlieb, Rossiter (2011) explained that "knowledge of [O]thers necessarily reduces the [O]ther to something we possess, something we have acquired, and something—ultimately—we will use" (p. 985). As social workers accumulate knowledge about "refugees" through theories and models in classrooms and use this knowledge in practice, we make the refugee Other as an extension of social work concepts and skills. It is through this process of knowledge production and utilization that refugee clients become subjected to social control and symbolic murder. Thus, for Rossiter (2011), professionalized knowledge cannot be a basis of ethical relations; instead, the ethical relations must be built on unsettling the process of differentiation between the refugee and the professional helper. Rossiter's (2011) approach to social work ethics direct us to the necessity of interrogating how we come to desire professionalized knowledge and identity.

Critical social workers have argued that such professionalized knowledge and expert identity is historically tied to the ideals of whiteness (Badwall, 2014; Heron, 2007; O'Connell, 2013). As Heron (2007) argued, whiteness was historically constituted through imperatives to help, specifically through the production of desire to aid populations in need (Heron, 2007). In the settler colonial context of Canada, social work as a profession has played a key role in reproducing and upholding the ideals of whiteness (Nobe-Ghelani, 2019). In the operation of whiteness, we need the refugee client to be who we want them to be—racialized, deserving, needy—in order for us to be who we are—the moral helper, the expert. These ideals of whiteness position and sustain the divide between helper and helped, national and migrant, professional and client. As we invest in our own selves as professional helpers within social work—a discipline that is rooted within a colonial legacy of sexism, classism, and racism—we require the racialized, helpless bodies in order to enact our professional skills and knowledge.

This perspective brings us to consider how it is possible to disrupt our investment in whiteness as social workers. Unsettling whiteness is challenging particularly because whiteness in our profession and in Canada as a whole is deeply embedded and historically produced. It is also a vulnerable process, because whiteness has been the standard of goodness and morality in which we are led to believe as the way to be successful, happy, or competent social workers (Badwall, 2014). It is also unsettling and uncomfortable as we come to know how much we are invested in the ideal of whiteness, and how we are inevitably complicit in the further production of refugeeness. Yet, we believe we must listen deeply to this discomfort. In her discussion of mindfulness-based pedagogy, Wong (2004) introduced an integrated mind-body-emotion-spirit engagement in critical social work education. She proposed a practice of mindfulness of discomfort in which we stay in touch with and embrace our feeling of discomfort, rather than judging it as wrong and pushing it away. She encouraged us "to take [our] feeling of discomfort as a teacher and a friend—as a precious opportunity for learning and growth—by greeting [our] discomfort with a gentle smile and a friendly hello" (2004, p. 16). By doing so we come "to listen to what [our] feeling of discomfort may tell [us], instead of busying [ourselves] with reacting, defending or hiding: 'What is my feeling of discomfort trying to tell me, about myself, about my social locations in the society?' (2004, p. 16).

As professional social workers, we are trained as the knowing subject who is supposed to recognize the signs of post-traumatic stress disorder and come up with intervention plans from an anti-oppressive framework. We are supposed to be the compassionate expert who understands the socio-political conditions that refugees come from and help integrate them into Canadian society. When we fix ourselves in the subject position of the professional helper—an extension of the white settler colonial

state—we require those helped to be fixed as well. In order for us to return to the point of an ethical encounter, we first have to unsettle our investment in the profession, but, at the same time, we have to nurture our own multiplicities to resist the socio-political demand that we flatten ourselves.

Nurturing Multiplicities

So, we ask again, what are the conditions of possibility in meeting "the refugee client" here and now? We suggest that in order to meet "the refugee client" here and now, we must think of the social work encounter as always and inherently relational in which differentiations created in the encounter are as much about us as about our client. It requires us to encounter both "the refugee client" and ourselves as someone who is full of (hi)stories that cannot be contained within overarching "refugee stories," "immigrant stories," or "social work stories." Anzaldúa's work elucidated the function of universalism as an attempt to define and confine, and, in this quotation, she urges us to understand our identity as complex and multiple:

> Think of me as Shiva, a many-armed and legged body with one foot on brown soil, one on white, one in straight society, one in the gay world, the man's world, the women's, one limb in the literary word, another in the working class, the socialist, and the occult worlds. A sort of spider woman hanging by one thin strand of web. (1981, p. 220)

Following Anzaldúa, we argue that we must let go of the desire for whiteness that is (self)imposed on us and must embrace the multiple selves, bringing forth our unique and at times marginalized experiences and knowledge that may destabilize the whiteness in our profession and our personal lives. For us authors, our East Asian migrant subjectivity is produced in relation to whiteness, and the colonial legacies of our existence drives us to move closer to whiteness. We are aware that, though we are critical of whiteness in our profession, we are also invested in it. Our investment in whiteness urges us to pursue the ideals set by Euro-American standard of goodness and morality while hiding the complex relations we have to our profession and Canadian nation-state. In this process, we reduce our multiple (hi)stories as we become professional helpers, and in turn, participate in the essentialization of refugee clients. Thus, in order to free individuals from their "refugeeness," we must free ourselves from the whiteness in which we have come to be invested. We must remain aware that neither refugeeness nor whiteness captures the multiplicities of the encounter between the refugee client and social worker. Ethical relations are built on acknowledgement that knowledge about the refugee and ourselves is always incomplete and partial; such relations must allow for a discursive space where our existing knowledge

about Other and self is in chronic unsettlement. This may open up a possibility for conditions in which we can meet "the refugee client" here and now.

Conclusion

In this paper, we reflected on our ongoing conversations about the Syrian refugee crisis and the public responses in Canada. We were frustrated about the ways in which Syrian refugees were used as tokens of Canadian humanitarianism, while at the same time were equally disturbed by the ways critical analysis immobilized us. Our sense of frustration and immobility became the starting point in which we set out to find a place for critical action—an action in which "refugees" are not consumed by Canadian humanitarianism, and action that leads to an ethical encounter with people who are labelled as refugees. We began with the interrogation of the politics of humanitarianism in Canada, which revealed how the current humanitarian response to the Syrian refugee crisis was built on the past humanitarian response to Indochinese refugees. We examined the ways in which the figure of the refugee is used as a technology of Canada's nation-building project through the discourse of humanitarianism, which veils its complicity in international conflicts and continuing legacy of settler colonialism. Based on this critical analysis of Canadian humanitarianism, we seek a space for ethics in refugee aid movements and social work with refugees drawing on Ahmed's (2000) work on ethical encounter, Rossiter's (2011) on unsettledness as ethics, and Anzaldúa's (1981) on nurturing of multiplicities.

   We have argued that, in order for an ethical encounter to take place between refugee subject and helper, it is critical that we understand how differentiations are made not innately but relationally, at the level of encounter. For social work encounters with refugee clients, we suggested that differentiations are created via professional knowledge and expert identity, which is historically tied to the ideals of whiteness. We addressed the need for unsettling whiteness in our profession in order to free our clients from their "refugeeness." This unsettlement of whiteness in our profession opens up a possibility for ethical relations where the encounter is not determined by pre-existing discourses about refugees and social workers. In this way, this paper contributes to the critical social work literature that points to the operation of power—here the humanitarian discourse—in discursive constructions and subject-making. We extend this literature to highlight the ways social work itself, as a helping profession, both is complicit in the construction of the refugee identity and offers a possibility for disruption.

This paper does not attempt to articulate a solution to bridge our critique with responsible action. Nor do we attempt to diminish or to dismiss the earnest action that is occurring at this moment in communities, institutions, and at the policy level—action that seeks to address the very real, material, and immediate perils that refugees are currently experiencing. Rather, this reflective piece is a call for introspection, thought, inquiry, and awareness. It is also an attempt for us to grapple with our own need to act as practitioners, in light of the critical lens in which we view the Syrian refugee crisis as part and parcel of systems of domination. In our own practice, we continue to engage in work with refugee and migrant communities through our teaching and community partnerships. We do so in a state of constant unsettledness, knowing that the work we do is inevitably entangled with dominance. While our reflections are ongoing, it is hoped that our insights spark more discussions and engagements around the politics of social work with the refugee community.

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