

Canadian Social Work Review Revue canadienne de service social



INTRODUCTION THE SUPREMACY OF WHITENESS IN SOCIAL WORK. RACED; NOT ERASED

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Volume 38, Number 2, 2021

La suprématie de la blancheur en travail social. S'affirmer sans s'effacer

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URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1086119ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1086119ar>

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Association for Social Work Education / Association canadienne pour la formation en travail social (CASWE-ACFTS)

ISSN

2369-5757 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Hill, G. (2021). INTRODUCTION: THE SUPREMACY OF WHITENESS IN SOCIAL WORK. RACED; NOT ERASED. *Canadian Social Work Review / Revue canadienne de service social*, 38(2), 58–61. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1086119ar>

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**INTRODUCTION:
THE SUPREMACY OF WHITENESS IN
SOCIAL WORK.
RACED; NOT ERASED**
Gus Hill

Aaniin, Waase-gaaboo Ndizhnikaaz, Anishnaabe Endaw, Obadjiwaan miinwaa Bawating Ndoonjibaa. Hello, my ceremonial spirit name is Waase-Gaaboo, and the name that I have been called for my whole life is Gus Hill. I am of Ojibwe, British, and French ancestry. I grew up in Batchawana Bay, and Sault Ste. Marie in the province of Ontario. My ancestors come from the North Shore of Lake Huron and the Eastern shore of Lake Superior, in Ontario.

I write this editorial on behalf of the collective editorial board of the *Canadian Social Work Review (CSWR)*. In an effort to attend to my relational accountability to you, our colleagues, I invited reflections from the members of the journal's editorial board. I was asked to stand in front of this themed issue of the journal, and I do so humbly. I will share some of these reflections here. Please note that I am reclaiming my Indigeneity by not capitalizing the colonial nouns.

This special themed issue on the Supremacy of Whiteness in Social Work came out of many years of discussion within the editorial board of the *CSWR*. The past decade has seen reflections and outrage about the governments, neo-fascism, neo-nazi-ism, and anti-BIPOC racism occurring in ever-increasing frequency across north america resulting in the Black Lives Matter and Idle No More movements. I am proud to be the co-editor of this collection of papers. I am encouraged by the messages these articles contain. It is a challenge to respond to powerful topics such as Whiteness in a timely way. When is the right time? Is there a wrong time? In this sense, it is always timely to make and hold space for our colleagues to dismantle Whiteness.

The collection of writings contained in this issue make me think there are some serious questions that need to be answered, not necessarily in dialogue, but in embodiment, in action, in social work practice, research, and education. It is time for collective action that is not just about words; to address our complicity and our complacency with regard to Whiteness. Whiteness affects us all, and to varying degrees we are all colonized. Simple observation: I am writing this piece in the english language, and you will read it in the "two official languages" of colonial canada.

Can we talk about Whiteness? This is a genuine question that I ask you, because the majority of you are of White ancestry. More pointedly, can we talk about Whiteness without White people becoming defensive, wounded, aggressive, and even violent? Can we talk about racial trespass? About racism? Can we ride this train of discourse without it jumping tracks to something else, such as gendered-violence, lateral violence, and other forms of violence that settlers use to armour up against discussions about inherent racism? This occurs so quickly it is imperceptible. When one is impassioned and assertive about experiences of racism, this is not violence, and it is not personal. So, I ask again “Can we have these conversations about Whiteness without detraction, distraction, deflection, and armouring up in defence?”

What does it mean to be e-raced? I have been reflecting on the term “gaslighting” lately; referring to making someone question their own reality—in this case, race. Experiences of minimalizing, essentializing, and reductionistic discourses that make racialized people question their own experiences of racism is an example of colonialism in action. I have experienced this very phenomenon where a White friend will explain away incidents of racism committed by another White person. Often, words such as intentions, or “they are a good person” or that I have “misunderstood” them are used. Why do White people rescue fellow White people from the difficult conversations and the challenging, unsettling, confronting emotions they experience when racism arises? This process of letting one another off the hook for racist behaviour is problematic. And where gaslighting occurs, it is doubly so. As a racialized, FNMI-Indigenous academic I have been told that I am over-reacting, I have been told that a third party’s intentions are good, I have been told that I am too sensitive to repeated racial transgressions, I have been told that we just need to sit down so the White person can explain to me why my reactions to racism are unprofessional. Every racialized person has experienced violence in these academic spaces.

Experiences of racism are not erased because a White colleague is louder, better defended, senior in rank, older, or better known in academic circles. These experiences remain in between people, where they fester and develop into feelings of mistrust, resentment, and a type of academic violence that needs to stop.

I want to remind us all about Canada’s long history of marginalization of racial bodies, of Indigenous politics, of BIPOC ways of seeing, being, knowing, and doing, of Ancestral histories, of experiences of slavery, apartheid, eugenics, genocide, and ongoing colonial violence.

De-centring Whiteness is a phrase I have been using in recent years. The program in which I teach, the Indigenous Field of Study at Laurier, launched a pilot Indigenized PhD program and de-centring Whiteness was one of the principles we embraced. But what does it mean? Is it enough to privilege and centre FNMI-Indigenous scholarship,

pedagogies, ontologies, axiologies, epistemologies, and methodologies as a strategy toward decolonization?

To my mind here is the greater challenge: for as much as “woke” settlers and BIPOC academics are centring BIPOC ways of seeing, being, knowing, and doing, there are many more times as many academics marginalizing the same discourses, in an intentional effort to preserve what was and what is, and resist what could be.

It is particularly privileged to never have to admit intentional or inadvertent racism, to never censor oneself because of skin colour, ethnicity, or religious practices, or need to recognize and stand down from an argument. We pay lip service to the deconstruction of colonial Whiteness but we are all embodiments of the very thing we seek to deconstruct. While this is not news, we are in unique times.

We talk about poverty as if it could never happen to us, mental health issues as if we are immune, aging as if we are drinking from a fountain of youth, and privilege as if we do not embody it.

We are the bricks of privilege that make up the structures of colonialism. Would we dismantle the house of privilege if it were to leave us homeless?

None of us is giving up our comfortable positions at these colonial institutions, even as we engage in discourses about Whiteness, privilege, greed, and violence. We somehow manage to leave the work of deconstruction at our institutions, and carry ourselves home toward respite.

What does it mean when someone says “I don’t want to perpetuate colonialism” or “We need to be mindful about perpetuating/propagating/replicating colonial oppression?”

Is this not exactly what we do in our jobs? We, each of us, seek higher education and work for the colonial degrees, culminating in the phd. Along the way we compete and compare, and celebrate those who earn the best scholarships. This process becomes engrained, and soon we find ourselves competing and comparing as educators. What we fail to do is interrogate the colonial process.

We compete for tenure-track positions, struggle to earn tenure, all the while declaring that we cannot stand up and speak for fear of punishment by those who hold the power to grant or deny tenure. When we earn tenure, we set our sights on promotion, or larger grants, or publishing the work that we thought too critical or radical. Eventually, we earn a place of safety, security, and stability that affords us the ability to speak freely. By the time we reach this place, we are the colonial institution and what we have to say only perpetuates the colonial violence with which we have been imprinted.

This process teaches us a kind of radical individualism that serves as one of the cogs in the wheel of the machine that is colonialism, capitalism, and violence.

We are, each of us, bricks in the colonial structure. That building is one that divides people in society; some people are allowed in and some people are not.

I wonder what would happen if I stopped acting like a brick. Will it make a difference? Probably not. But . . . what if we all stop acting like bricks? Will the structure crumble? Will the structure be forced to take on a new shape, a new form, a new function, a new ethos, a new social work?

Our rhetoric holds us back.

The majority of you, my colleagues, are of White ancestry. I, too, have White ancestors. Whiteness is not about being White. I contend that Whiteness is about the embodiment of unchecked colonial privilege. I have it, you have it, we all have it. What do we “do” with “it?”

I am calling for an honest appraisal of privilege. I am calling for a new ethos for our profession. I am calling each of us out for our complacency and complicity in the colonial structure.

While we do this challenging work, I want to remind us of our relational accountability to the profession, to one another, to the people we serve, and to ourselves. We need each other. We need to be kind, loving, respectful, and generous towards each other and to ourselves. Our profession is built upon these principles, among others, and not radical individualism and the quest for greater privilege and wealth.

This is what I was inspired to write by those colleagues who bravely contributed to this theme issue of the *CSWR*. As the first FNMI-Indigenous editor of the *CSWR* I am proud of the progress we have made. I applaud the vision of our collective that has made a pathway for Indigenous review of Indigenous scholarship. I applaud my colleagues for supporting the creation of space for expanded membership, and a third pathway, on the journal editorial board that is on par with our Anglophone and Francophone colleagues. I applaud the creation of a third editor position for an FNMI-Indigenous person. I applaud the honest conversations we have had over the years and the creation of the overdue pathway for FNMI-Indigenous scholars on *CSWR*'s editorial board. We all walk on the same land alongside the same waters breathing the same air, and working towards walking side-by-side.

Miigwetch,
Gus.