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**MEETING ON A BRIDGE: OPPOSING WHITENESS IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND PRACTICE**

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

The Supremacy of Whiteness in Social Work. Raced; not erased

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Article abstract

Challenging Whiteness and its dominance in social work education and practice is an act of resistance with violent repercussions for Indigenous and racialized social work educators who do this work. In this paper, two authors—one Indigenous and one racialized settler—discuss building bridges between mainstream social work and Indigenous-centred social work by sharing their reflexive lived experiences (personal and professional) of decentering Whiteness, engaging in decolonization, and deploying wholistic ways of teaching and being at a faculty of social work located on Turtle Island. The authors end by sharing some possible strategies and discussion points which can work to bridge the gap and challenge Whiteness in social work.

# MEETING ON A BRIDGE: OPPOSING WHITENESS IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND PRACTICE

*Maryam Khan*

*Kathy Absolon*

**Abstract:** Challenging Whiteness and its dominance in social work education and practice is an act of resistance with violent repercussions for Indigenous and racialized social work educators who do this work. In this paper, two authors—one Indigenous and one racialized settler—discuss building bridges between mainstream social work and Indigenous-centred social work by sharing their reflexive lived experiences (personal and professional) of decentring Whiteness, engaging in decolonization, and deploying wholistic ways of teaching and being at a faculty of social work located on Turtle Island. The authors end by sharing some possible strategies and discussion points which can work to bridge the gap and challenge Whiteness in social work.

**Keywords:** wholistic, decolonization, social work, reflexivity, Whiteness

**Abstré :** Remettre en question la blancheur et sa domination dans la formation et la pratique du travail social est un acte de résistance, ayant souvent des répercussions violentes sur les éducateurs en travail social autochtones et racialisés qui font ce travail. Dans cet article, deux auteures—une Autochtone et une colonisatrice racisée—discutent de la construction de ponts entre le travail social traditionnel et le travail social autochtone, en partageant leurs réflexions sur leurs expériences vécues (personnelles et professionnelles) visant à : décentrer la blancheur, s’engager dans la décolonisation et déployer des méthodes *wholistiques* d’enseignement et d’existence dans une faculté de travail social située

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sur l'île de la Tortue. Les auteures terminent en partageant quelques stratégies et points de réflexion possibles pouvant contribuer à combler le fossé et à remettre en question la blancheur dans le travail social.

**Mots-clés:** *wholistiques*, décolonisation, travail social, réflexivité, blancheur

*IMAGINE TWO VERY DIFFERENT PEOPLE* walking their own pathway worlds apart. They have different worldviews, complex and varying relationships with colonialism and imperialism, different territorial relationships, family traditions, and spiritual practices. Imagine if two such people found each other and met to share their commonalities and learn from one another. What if these two people met on a bridge and started to have curious and in-depth conversations about friendship, alliances, colonialisms, and divergences and convergences in their perspectives. One author of this paper is a racialized Indigenous woman and the other is a racialized woman settler. The metaphoric *bridge* symbolizes social work education, a path forward undertaken by two different people who are navigating conversations with relationality, respect, reciprocity, and reflexivity in mind, body, spirit, and emotion. This bridge arches over a river flowing into many tributaries. The river and its tributaries symbolize the mixture of histories of colonialism and imperialism, racism, Whiteness, embodiments, successes and failures, and learnings from lived experiences.

This reflexive paper is a result of many conversations over a few years between the two authors on the bridge of social work education. These conversations serve as a snapshot of our ongoing learnings and commonalities through the unpacking of collective and individual experiences as racialized women in social work education. These conversations were not confrontational, but curiously engaging, and were founded on respect, relationality, reflexivity, and reciprocity as directed in wholistic andragogy and pedagogies. Most of these conversations were informal, over tea and food, as we discussed the erasure of Indigeneity and Indigenous-centred knowledges (as acts of colonial violence) and the dominance of Whiteness at a graduate program in the Wilfrid Laurier University Faculty of Social Work, located on the traditional territories of the Neutral, Anishinaabe, and Haudenosaunee Peoples. We also discussed the negative impacts of challenging entrenched systemic Whiteness and recalled some backlashes of doing this work. Overall, our main argument is that social work education—across schools and faculties of social work—and practice futures are contingent on decentring Whiteness and White supremacy. Our hope is that the readers find pathways to generate meeting spaces that begin to decentre Whiteness.

## Who are These People on the Bridge?: Situating the Personal and Political

### *Kathy's Location*

My racial blend is comprised of Anishinaabe and British ancestry. I am from Flying Post First Nation in Treaty 9. I stumbled into social work education out of necessity as I responded to the erasure of my cultural mirrors in my own undergraduate and graduate social work education. Working in the university was not a career goal; rather, it was my goal to take my place in combating colonial erasures of Indigenous everything through my presence and voice of Indigenous knowledge. My skin is brown, my eyes are dark, and my hair is dark brown—I am visibly Indigenous. My racialized presence in the world has meant that my experiences of racism are a result of what people see and then perceive me to be. Based on my skin colour, the perception of who I am seems to be filtered through the plethora of stereotypes and images that folks carry about Indigenous Peoples. I do not feel that most White people really see me; in fact, how could they, when an education dominated by White privilege has grossly omitted the truth about what colonialism did to our peoples? How could White teachers and students look at me as a trespasser in my own homeland and not understand the true colonial history? The rhetorical nature of that question reflects my ongoing frustration of wilful ignorance and illiteracy. Education, media, institutions, and social structures are all culprits in propagating illiteracy and ignorance. White dominance and the colonial erasure of my peoples within these structures has produced generations of people who know very little about who I really am, where I come from, and what being Anishinaabe means. White privilege translates into colour blindness and amnesia. White privilege means that most White people just don't really see me. They only see and hear what has been programmed through their own socialization structures. In an academic institution rife with White privilege, I feel that sometimes I'm wearing an invisibility cloak, because I am often not seen or heard, and wonder how my presence is overlooked. I understand the impact of colonial dominance and violence in perpetuating an erasure. This erasure literally works to erase my history, language, culture, knowledge, values, stories, kinship systems, land relations, and everything else. This erasure propagates a cultural amnesia about Indigenous Peoples and the truth of colonial violence on these lands, and this amnesia fuels White privilege, which is prevalent in the academy. I regularly experience the impact of colonial amnesia and illiteracy within a White-dominant social work education setting.

My lifelong experiences in a violent colonial society—being regarded as inferior, less than, exotic, stupid, subordinate, lost, or someone to be pitied—are evidence of this dominance and internalization of ideologies steeped in “White is right.” My location *is* political, and my survival and

presence are political when an entire multibillion-dollar bureaucratic structure has policies and laws designed to wipe out my peoples and our connection to the land. My consciousness and my presence *are* political. Every day I see and experience colonial erasure (erasing Indigenous Peoples' truth) in education and in an education system where I have consciously sought to transform and decolonize the landscapes of White supremacy.

I have been an Indigenous social work educator and transformer for 30 years, and recently became a colleague and friend of my co-author Maryam when she joined our faculty a few years ago. In fact, Maryam and I have experienced a connection which is due to several reasons. I appreciate her analysis and lens, and I respect the diversity she brings to our faculty. Another facet of our connection is in how we both look. We have similar complexions, eye colour, and hair colour. While we come from different worlds, our brownness connects us. On another level, I see us both as passionate about our work. I am a strong Anishinaabe kwe (Indigenous woman), and I stand and speak up to restore Indigenous knowledge and presence in colonial education, practice, research, and writing. I have been combatting structural racism within social work education for many years by building Indigenous student support services and generating core courses and Indigenous-centred curriculum and programs. Maryam's presence in our faculty has enriched the dialogue, conversations, and movements of inclusivity, diversity and relationship-building between the "mainstream" program and the Indigenous program. I truly appreciate this opportunity to collaborate as we articulate the impacts of dominance of Whiteness and the significance of our presence in transforming the face and body of social work education.

### *Maryam's Location*

It is important to locate where I am, who I am, what I do, why I do it, and whose shoulders I stand on. This is imperative to making sense of my past, present, and futures. Further, this situates social work's "gaze from nowhere" in its varying contexts, as this gaze is not ahistorical and is knitted in relations of power (Haraway, 1988, p. 581). I am a queer South Asian Muslim woman settler, and it is *my* responsibility to be respectful of Indigenous land, peoples, customs, and ways of knowing and being, and to constantly engage in critically reflexive practices to illuminate how my role as a settler in social work is implicated in the ongoing genocide and marginalization of Indigenous people, land, traditions, life, and ways of being and knowing. I entered social work to somehow make sense of and take charge of the dysfunction in my familial home and the outside world. My life experiences related to accessing social services and to recovery and healing from addictions and mental health concerns led me to study and research resistance, agency, and marginalization from

critical intersectional perspectives. I cannot separate who I am from my experiences, what I do, or how I do it. As a social work educator, I do not separate my personal and professional selves, as, for me, they are one and the same. I work, play, socialize, and live in the many communities I belong to, and community is important to me (Bernal, 2002). Sharing where I come from grounds me and consistently reminds me that I am on a journey of healing from inherited historical colonial traumas and contemporary manifestations of White supremacy. I stand here today on the shoulders of my ancestors, my cumulative experiences, and many Indigenous, Black, Chicana, South Asian, racialized, and White critical scholars.

In July 2018, I joined Wilfrid Laurier University's Faculty of Social Work and met Kathy. I instantly felt a strong connection with Kathy because of her politics, her spiritual aura, physical appearance, and her way of walking in the world. She modelled gratitude, kindness, honesty, strength, transparency, reciprocity, relationality, and respect in a multitude of ways. I was in awe. Kathy with her beautiful long brown hair was an older sister I'd never had. Kathy has been a strong racialized female role model who I have been searching for in academe. She is living her truth and is very inspirational. It was because of our relationship and support from Kathy that I am able to do this work with more care and bravery.

### **Understanding Our Language and Terminology on the Bridge**

Both of us are interested in generating inclusivity, minimizing harm, and walking with humanity in social work education and practice. Here, the colonial rain is always pouring down. The river and its tributaries are filled with colonial tropes, harms, and divisive strategies. We share an umbrella to keep dry and warm, and this connects us on the bridge. Both of us are Indigenous from different lands, and *Indigenous* is our umbrella. Whose umbrella you stand under influences the degree to which you stay dry. Indigenous is also being used as a political device to unite local and global social justice movements in which individuals and communities are rising up against colonization, capitalist exploitation of resources (e.g., land, labour), and laws and governance. This term recognizes the inherent plurality of perspectives, lived experiences, identities of Indigenous people and Indigeneity which exists within Turtle Island<sup>1</sup> and across the globe. The term "Indigenous" is interlinked with colonialism, as the former seeks to engage in decolonizing land, customs, bodies, epistemologies, and ontologies. Indigenous is not a static concept, and its local and geopolitical contexts continue to shape and inform its relevance, understandings, and importance to social work education and practice (Dei, 2011; Hart, 2010; Sinclair et al., 2009; Wane, Adyanga & Iimi, 2014).

The term “Whiteness” refers to the dominance of Euro-Western values and beliefs in educational institutions. It inhabits and permeates all areas of life. Whiteness is violent and insidious; it serves as a backdrop for geopolitical and local social relations. Whiteness refers to ultimately anything (e.g., norms, expectations, ideas) considered as right, normal, and good by those who seek to maintain the status quo. It is constructed as the core and centre to which everything is compared, intentionally and unintentionally. It is invisible and yet visible and evident in discourses and discursive constructions of bodies, spaces, ideas, ways of being, knowing, lives, and ultimately anything that does not belong to it or inhabit it (Ahmed, 2006; Razack, 1998; Said, 1978). For example, colonialism is Whiteness in play, a tool used by White supremacists to erect an arbitrary false centre or core against which Indigenous and racialized communities and customs are measured. Colonialism has made “the world ‘white,’ which is of course a world ‘ready’ for certain kinds of bodies, as a world that puts certain objects within their reach” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 111). At this juncture in history, Whiteness is continuously hard at work to reproduce itself through the moral, economic, social, political, and cultural forces operationalized through state-sanctioned oppression and subjugation (Thobani, 2007).

The term “racialized” signifies the social, cultural, economic, historical, and political processes at work that engage in the construction of Othering practices based on race, ethnicity, mental health, sexuality, and ability, among a range of positionality markers. Contemporary discourses of “difference” play a key role in racialization of people and communities (Puar, 2007; Razack & Perera, 2014). For example, the processes of Othering and difference-making orchestrated against Indigenous people is very much connected to the land, and is different to what is experienced by Brown and Black individuals. Over the decades, there are and have been considerable efforts made through the Indian Act to remove Indigenous identities by creating laws that strip Indigenous people of their land rights and convolute heredity and ownership in interracial couplings. As a result of such Othering, Indigenous and racialized people, identities, and customs are relegated to the margins (Tuck & Yang, 2012). It is at these margins, these contested sites, that resistance, solidarity, alliance, and bridge-building can be mobilized to enact change (hooks, 2000). Notably, membership in Black, Brown, Indigenous, and racialized communities does not guarantee solidarity and similar politics or values. This is important to note, since sameness cannot be assumed on geography and isms, as work is required to maintain critical vigilance and challenge internalized oppressions (Razack, 1998).

## Unpacking Social Work Education and White Dominance on the Bridge

Like other mainstream postsecondary education programs rooted in colonialism and White dominance, social work education and practice—from their inception—have been complicit in maintaining colonial injustice vis-à-vis White supremacy, violence, and oppression of Indigeneity through various mechanisms of power, control, and domination that have taken the shape of land occupation, residential schools, the Indian Act, the current child welfare system, and the Sixties Scoop, to name a few examples (Kennedy-Kish et al., 2017). Indigenous social work educators and practitioners have been forever fighting against Whiteness and White supremacy, fighting to Indigenize faculties and schools of social work across Turtle Island (Absolon, 2011, 2020; Sinclair et al., 2009; Wilson, 2008). Many racialized and White settlers cognizant of settler colonialism have also expressed solidarity against White supremacy and Whiteness in social work education and practice by responding to calls to action outlined by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC, 2015), and attempting to bridge the gap between Indigenous-centred social work and Eurocentric and White social work education and practice (Clarke et al., 2012; Khan, 2019).

In Kathy's experience, both as a student and then educator in social work, faculty were ill-equipped to build in knowledges about Canadian history and Indigenous Peoples' oppression and subsequent poverty, homelessness, unemployment, incarceration, addictions, violence, and high mortality rates. Social work education, as a whole, has generally failed to adequately contextualize the issues that confront Indigenous Peoples. White dominance in social work education shape shifts into interesting forms, one being the refusal of faculty to engage in their own decolonizing journeys. They therefore cannot teach what they themselves do not understand. Perhaps the problem runs deeper into their training, and the needle continues to point at the failure of education. Further harm is compounded when solutions and social work practice approaches omit any political or social context of colonization as cultural genocide against Indigenous Peoples.

I have witnessed faculty resist integrating Canadian colonial history vis-à-vis Indigenous Peoples, stating that it's not clinical enough. How can we train social workers to be vacant of a social and political analysis of the root stressors of the misery of people we serve? Shouldn't educators help students understand the political–personal configurations? A non-exhaustive list of key reasons to do so include to debunk blaming the victim, to restore family relationships, to redistribute social responsibility toward governments, and to help social workers to understand their role in activism, lobbying with governments that continue to marginalize and cut back on supports and services to children and families. A



political–personal analysis helps us to support people in understanding real human responses to inhumane structured colonial violence, versus pathologizing and victim-blaming that focuses on micro-solutions to macro-level root causes. That, to us, would be a more responsible clinical analysis. Contrary to what one would think, social work as a profession with Indigenous people has been an arm of colonizing governments' policies of extermination and social policing of Indigenous Peoples.

As Indigenous people have earned their degrees and taken their places in postsecondary education, they have been warriors against White dominance that create spaces for authentic inclusion of Indigenous knowledge, curricula, community, faculty, staff, and students. Indigenous-centred programs are evidence that authentic spaces for transformation are possible through Indigegogy, circle work, land-based education, and decolonizing pedagogies (Absolon & Dias, 2020). Graduates of the Wilfrid Laurier University's Indigenous Field of Study Master of Social Work program are steeped in wholistic learning, Indigenous ceremonies, and Indigenous scholarship, all of which lead to transformative and healing graduate experiences (Hill & Wilkinson, 2014). After graduate school, many settler students (in White-dominant programs) are still ill-equipped to do less harm in the lives of Indigenous Peoples whom they may service because their education has omitted the necessity of critical courses addressing tough issues that may disrupt White, privileged social work students and administrators (Baskin, 2016; Sinclair et al., 2009).

In recent years, schools and faculties of social work have integrated more anti-oppressive lenses to their courses. Is this enough? Indigenous-centred curricula are being increasingly accepted and lead by Indigenous educators. We reiterate some questions that commonly arise once students begin to unpack, unlearn, and understand the roots of White supremacy and dominance:

- I want to be a good helper; how come my training didn't teach me about the roots of racial inequity and cultural genocide against Indigenous Peoples?
- How come we are only learning about Eurocentric theories, methods, and practices?
- What is White dominance, and am I a bad person if I am White?
- As a racialized settler, how am I implicated in Whiteness and settler colonialism?
- How come I didn't see or know about colonialism and White supremacy?
- How is this domination ignored in social work education for those who seek to address social injustice?
- Why are social workers ignorant of the very systems they get trained by and then work in?
- How does being a part of a broken system neutralize social workers' capacity, mind and abilities to effectively enact change?

Tackling White dominance can only be addressed when decolonizing becomes a part of curriculum and the curtains to Whiteness are opened. White privilege and White dominance are extensions of one another, resulting in educators and practitioners “who don’t know what they don’t know” (Absolon, 2011).

In Maryam’s experience, it is the settler’s responsibility and *not* the Indigenous communities’ to pick up work in decentring Whiteness. The focus is on settlers and this work should not involve Indigenous people because Indigenous communities are engaging in their own work at repairing, restoring, and reconciling within their own nations. If Indigenous people want to be involved, or partner with these efforts, there needs to be a memorandum of understanding in place between settlers and Indigenous people. A memorandum of understanding can detail specific tasks and roles for each person based on their unique standpoint, gifts, and capacities. It can also highlight the main purposes of its existence (i.e., why are settlers doing work to decentre Whiteness? What accountabilities do settlers have to Indigenous people and land? How does social work benefit the settlers?). Any shared understanding or memorandum has to honour the Two Row Wampum Treaty, and must be facilitated in a way that honours and emphasizes relationality, reflexivity, respect, and reciprocity. Settlers doing this work solo can be accountable to Indigenous people by uplifting and centring critical Indigenous voices in community and academe, and by learning from Indigenous-led social movements that speak to social justice and decolonization. A great place for settlers to start is to individually or collectively answer the TRC’s calls to action. Another strategy is to work on unlearning one’s own ethnocentric beliefs and values through reflexive methods. Racialized settlers can also think about how they are making White supremacy visible and dismantling it within their families and communities of belonging. It is also the responsibility of critically oriented, racially marginalized settlers to decentre Whiteness and challenge White supremacy, as it is a moral responsibility and is part of working toward an equitable, socially just world and relations (Byrd, 2011; O’Brien, 2017; Phung, 2015).

The work settlers need to do to challenge Eurocentric knowledges and values, and walk towards wholistic approaches to social work education and practice, can take many forms. No matter how well-intentioned the settler, it is imperative to acknowledge to yourself and students that attempting to bridge the gap between Indigenous-centred social work and White-dominant social work can be a complex and harmful enterprise for many reasons. First, as mentioned above, because of social work’s past and current role in the subjugation of Indigenous Peoples and ways of being at multifaceted levels—and specifically, social work’s failure and slow uptake in responding to the TRC’s calls to action within education and practice, especially in the child welfare system (TRC, 2015)—social work and social workers can *never* be reconciled as free of harm. Second,

settler colonialism has a history of appropriating Indigenous knowledges (ontologies and epistemologies) while preserving the status quo. Third, the neoliberal state's emphasis on practices of individualism (devoid of community) and rationalism that privilege greed and the individual acquisition of wealth occurs at the disastrous expense of the world's natural resources through exploitation and privatization of resources. Neoliberalism can be understood as an "approach to social, political, and economic life that discourages collective or government services, instead encouraging reliance on the private market and individual skills to meet needs" (Baines, 2011, p. 30). For example, the Lake St. Martin First Nation community in Manitoba was destroyed and displaced by a flood in 2011. The flood was a direct result of hydroelectric damming. Water is understood as a commodity in the neoliberal state, and so Manitoba's government constructed dams to harvest hydroelectricity. The dams were constructed with limited consultation with the Lake St. Martin First Nations and the impacts (social, economic, cultural, and health) of this development on the Indigenous community were severely downplayed. The building of dams was done in the name of profit: gains for the settler community at the expense of the Lake St. Martin First Nation community's lives and livelihood (Ballard, 2017).

Such state practices and ideologies are in direct opposition of Indigenous communities' sustainability practices and roles as stewards of the land. Furthermore, the marketplace mechanisms and practices of domination have already violated the Dish with One Spoon treaty and have added to the strained and oppressive relationships with Indigenous communities. Due to these and other reasons, some Indigenous social work scholars have taken a firm stance against settler involvement, no matter how well-intentioned, in engaging with Indigenous knowledges, customs, and championing ceremonies. This is rightly so, given the context and history of social work appropriation and settler colonialism.

For a non-tenured faculty member, walking towards wholistic education and practices as a racialized settler is an uncomfortable, vulnerability-making, and error-filled unlearning process steeped in settler colonialism. I have made many trespasses in this walk. Once, I had asked an Indigenous Teaching Assistant (TA) to locate readings on Indigeneity for a micro-practice course. At that moment in time, I was exercising professional power over the Indigenous TA, and patted myself on the back for being inclusive. I was relishing in my goodness, and felt comfortable because if the readings were critiqued, I would not be penalized. I was safe. I would avoid culpability because it was the Indigenous TA who selected the readings. The truth is that I did not become aware of this until I heard an Indigenous colleague expressed her frustrations about settlers dumping their learning and efforts on the Indigenous communities. Yet again, I was unable to avoid harming and implicating Indigenous people for my learning to happen, and at their expense.

In classes, I explain the importance of wholistic education and practice in my personal and professional life—that wholism engages all aspects of an individual within their community and natural world contexts. While learning about and doing social work, I did not see myself represented, and neither were all parts of my being nourished. It is through the inclusion of lived experiences and the involvement of my emotions, spirit, embodiment, and mind that I started to heal from racism, Whiteness, and Othering related to living and identifying as a queer South Asian Muslim woman settler. Healing also came from embodying anti-colonial, postcolonial, liberatory, and progressive approaches to Islam, and inviting all parts of my being into everyday life. With the healing came the hard realization that I needed to face up to settler colonialism and to unpack internalized Whiteness. I started to make substantial changes to my course content, assignments, and teaching practices that were a departure from mainstream White-dominant social work. Notably, these changes transpired in relationship with primarily Indigenous—with some racialized and White—peers and friends, and in the context of community-building across perceived differences based on shared ethics and politics against Whiteness. There is a small yet growing community of instructors and graduate students at Wilfrid Laurier Faculty of Social Work who are committed to challenging settler colonialism in all its forms by working towards decentring Whiteness in curricula.

I started to use circle pedagogy in a core social work ethics course. I needed to shift further away from the expert stance. I changed to a more transparent, learner-based, and curious stance which involved robustly discussing power dynamics in the classroom while respecting all truths and their accompanying beliefs. Honouring people's truths, even racist truths, stopped me in my tracks. In order to cope, I brought in my own cultural medicines (haldi, kalonji, adrak, and ashwagandha, to name a few) to the circle to facilitate healing. These medicines, among others, helped my mind, body, spirit, and emotions to heal from various maladies. My mother, who rarely went to a western doctor, used ayurvedic and homeopathic medicines native to South Asia. I had come to the realization that decentring Whiteness in my classroom was not a professional act, but it was actually a part of how I chose to live and walk in this world.

In classes, I talked about the limits of my knowings and situated these in the context of my childhood, upbringing, and lived experiences—all implicated in settler colonialism. I talked about what it meant for me to practice wholistic pedagogy and to walk towards Indigenous-centred knowledges and approaches. I talked about intentions, respect, appropriation, and causing harm. I demonstrated vulnerability and opened myself up to lots of criticism.

Some White and racialized settler students understood what I was trying to do; however, most hated what I did as they wanted to see the

expert and couldn't accept circle pedagogy and what it meant in the class. The student feedback in course evaluations communicated dismay about my lack of expert *stance* and *objectivity*, discontentment with being directed to listen to one's inner voice, respecting all beliefs, and waiting for their turn to speak in the circle. I had failed. How could I achieve the tenure dream with negative course evaluations? I cried and reflected. All I know now is that I want to continue on my journey, and I am in the process of working through some of these issues piece by piece and sitting with all of it.

### **Decentering Whiteness and Decolonization on the Bridge**

We are still on the bridge, where it continues to rain colonialism and White dominance. We talked about many ways to dismantle and disrupt Whiteness and colonialism, and found this to be a perplexing and discomfoting exercise. For example, we were perplexed by the fact that, by dialoguing about these topics, colonialism and Whiteness continue to be centred and remained the focus. Having conversations about such topics gives them life because this is the nature of this course. One cannot talk about dismantling colonialism and White dominance without making it the focus. Even though this is the case, we still persisted in our conversations because our intentions were different. Our intentions were to challenge these hegemonies, and so we talked about these topics critically and reflexively. Below are some reflections from our conversations on dismantling White dominance and colonialism in everyday teaching and praxis.

### **Don't Hide Behind Whiteness and Professionalism**

"Decolonizing" is a verb that demands action, reflection, and practice. It is a journey of unpacking one's beliefs and values. Engaging in decolonizing can be uncomfortable, but the rewards of transformative praxis far outweigh temporary discomforts (Absolon, 2019a). Non-Indigenous schools and faculties of social work tout the benefits of decolonization yet very rarely walk their talk. Many settlers have not yet unpacked their beliefs and values, which seep into curricula and teaching practices. Such beliefs and values sustain inequity and hierarchies and are often disguised under the veil of professionalism. Part of professionalism is to perform the expert role, to not acknowledge or attend to one's power and maintenance of Whiteness, to maintain hierarchical power dynamics, and to maintain objectivity.

Blackstock (2017) warns social workers against the lure of professionalism and urges them to "never fall in love with your business card" when doing work that supports social justice and decolonization (p. 123). The author urges social workers to perform social work in a

way which prioritizes “moral courage” (p. 122). Following Kidder (2003), Blackstock (2017) argues that “moral courage is the ability of an individual to take a public stand on an issue when he or she will likely experience some personal or professional harm” (p. 122). Moral courage is needed to unlearn and unpack one’s beliefs and values, and to walk in ways that are *simpatico* with your talk. For example, a way to demonstrate moral courage is to do a land acknowledgement instead of asking an Indigenous person to do it. Reconnecting to the land does not mean reading an obligatory land acknowledgement. It does not mean asking Indigenous people to take on this land acknowledgement. This is not an act of *truth* and *reconciliation*. It is inappropriate and exploitive. White and other non-Indigenous settlers seem to make audacious and tokenistic requests without consciousness. For example, Indigenous people are regularly being asked to do an opening ceremony and land acknowledgement for a conference or event without ample time to offer anything of substance. White dominance regards Indigenous knowledge as a commodity, and White people act with entitlement to it. When boundaries are drawn, there is a backlash to being corrected or redirected. It is important for settlers to think about what land acknowledgement and where they are situated means to them and to do their own work respond to the TRC’s calls to action.

### **Accept That You Do Harm Every Day**

This work involves recognizing and living with the fact that, as a social worker, one is *always* engaging in harm, irrespective of modalities used or progressive discourses. For example, in order to do social work, we must participate in unjust systems of inequities and hierarchical power dynamics (i.e., service users are dependent on the will of the social worker). Coming to terms with the fact of doing harm is a requirement for transformative healing.

Conversations around harm and appropriation need to happen in the classroom. It is important to distinguish between *appropriation* and the *deflection* of social workers’ responsibility. In both practice and education, we have observed colleagues deflecting an issue by claiming innocence (Rossiter, 2001) because they felt it was “not their place” or that they “don’t have the authority” to remark and discuss. Sometimes colleagues think there is an innocent space, when in reality there is no such space. It is like thinking that one can be fully neutral and objective. Instead of talking about remaining innocent, it is important to discuss doing less harm as a strategy.

One possible strategy to do less harm is to observe Freire’s (2008) critical consciousness, which has been adopted widely by critical scholars (Sinclair, 2009). The first step in critical consciousness is to acquire knowledge about yourself and students through critical and honest

discourse, deliberation, and reflection. It is important to be critical about your knowledges and the meanings of those knowledges to help enact social change within a community context. If you don't understand the journey, how is it then possible to teach and take students on a journey of unpacking Whiteness and colonialism? There is a problematic absence of dialogue and spaces in social work education that decentre Whiteness and engage decolonizing journeys. The absence of such by default generates harm. Notably, it can be *less harmful* or appropriative when settlers are invited to partake in ceremonies and are engaging within the traditions and customs with Indigenous people or communities. In other words, Indigenous people are the ones leading ceremonies, and settlers can help by respecting their right to exercise their own traditions without interference.

In terms of practices, for example, doing healing work with Indigenous service users who want to engage in smudging can be done appropriately if the service user finds smudging helpful. In this case, the settler will ask if smudging is helpful and can provide a smudging bowl and sage for use. Importantly, it is the Indigenous service user who would be doing the smudging and the non-Indigenous social worker would partake if invited, and not lead (Kennedy-Kish & Carniol, 2017). Accepting White dominance is akin to colonial violence and means coming to terms with the fact that colonial social work practices steeped in White dominance are in fact doing harm, and then thinking about how to consciously minimize these harms in one's consciousness and practice. Coming to terms with this understanding takes time and requires an interrogation of one's internalized roadblocks (e.g., through recognizing anti-Indigenous racism, resisting the expert stance, knowing that services users are autonomous and agentic, and being open to multiple ways of healing) to generate space for the possibilities of perpetuating practices steeped in colonial violence. Confronting one's internalized White dominance and roadblocks, as mentioned above, can be a journey of truth-seeking and courage. Eventually, this unpacking generates space to transform one's lens and practice. It is well known that Canada is one of the colonies of the British Crown, and it may be worth exploring and beginning conversations that unpack the layers of how colonialism infests one's socialization, social work education, and practice might. Avoiding responsibility by saying that you "don't want to be accused of appropriating" or that the issues are "not your concern" is simply a justification to not engage or pick up one's responsibility to decentre Whiteness or decolonize. We encourage readers to look at Kathy's work on decolonizing education and decolonizing as an act of reconnection to the land (Absolon, 2019b).

### **Include Non-Dominant Critical Scholarship**

Decentering Whiteness requires an acceptance that White dominance prevails through Eurocentric theories and methods of practice, much like decolonizing requires an acceptance that colonization is real, with real repercussions on humanity (Acquash, 2013). Part of the work involves recentring the idea that humanity is made up of many races, nations, and ethnicities. Doing this reflects an acceptance of personal responsibility, relationality, and reciprocity. Without a doubt, this work is for serious trailblazers who carry a consciousness rooted in a relational accountability to the earth, the giver of all of life, and to truth and a good moral compass. Perhaps one's relationship with Spirit and Creator is what moves one onto trudging pathways toward wholism and balance. Critically considering how White dominance excludes others' experiences and relevant approaches can move toward making our practice more inclusive of spiritual expressions, ideas of kinship, and anti-colonial approaches—and toward restoring relationships with land.

Our relational accountability to Mother Earth as a source of health and wellness is missing from most schools steeped in White domination. Understanding the relationships between wellness of the land, decolonization, and wellness of the people is paramount to building pathways out of White dominance and decentering Whiteness in education and practice. This means accepting that Indigenous Peoples are the original peoples of Turtle Island (Absolon, 2019a, 2019b).

### **Discuss the Two Row Wampum Treaty**

One pathway for critically engaging in decolonization involves reflecting openly on land appropriation and, since it is a foundation of all other agreements or treaties, on the Two Row Wampum treaty between Indigenous people and settlers. Treaties emerged out of an agreement to share in the life the land affords humans, in which the idea of responsibility supersedes ownership and possession. This treaty is about the respectful coexistence of Indigenous people and settlers travelling alongside one another, where neither group has the right to step into the other's pathway, but both have peaceful relations. The settlers were supposed to travel their own path and not interfere with Indigenous sovereignty, traditions, livelihoods, and ways of life. The settlers violated the original treaty and colonized Indigenous land and people in their quest for land that they would extract and exploit for economic power and greed. Colonization has and continues to be about land appropriation, and it is this colonial legacy which is perpetuated by settlers unconsciously living on stolen land. They do this while pretending to address social injustice and inequity, and without casting a critical gaze onto their own ideological roots and dominant methods.



## **Work to Understand Land Back Movements**

Often Indigenous activists are protesting pipelines, graveyard excavations, golf courses, or ongoing land developers' encroachment on Indigenous territories and lands. This has been happening since colonists started exploiting and extracting from Mother Earth. The land conflicts are ideologically rooted in responsibility and accountability to the land, in contrast to ownership and harnessing of the land. These represent two opposing views on how we are to live in relationship to the land. Social work is a culprit in the dispossession of lands from Indigenous Peoples because social workers historically and continually enforce colonial policies and practices that deny people access to the land and the healing and strength that she offers to them. For example, social workers, alongside the Catholic Church and RCMP, were instrumental in facilitating the residential schools. Social workers were wilfully ignorant of the deaths, terrible living conditions, and horrific abuses inflicted on Indigenous children at these schools (e.g., starvation and abuse, amongst other heinous acts).

Cultural approaches to teaching, learning, healing, and practices are rooted in earth-based philosophies and traditions. The land is a source of life. Decentering Whiteness means restoring the land back to Indigenous Peoples. The ongoing dispossession of land for Indigenous social work education, culturally based approaches to practice, and professional development spaces continues today. For example, there are copious restrictions placed on land use by municipal, provincial, and federal zoning laws. Seeking a venue to hold Indigenous culture camps, setting up sacred fires, and even smudging in public spaces are all highly regulated and require permission from colonial powers. Land needs to be restored to Indigenous organizations, programs, and communities, both urban and rural. In Kitchener–Waterloo, graduates of the Wilfrid Laurier University Indigenous Field of Study Master of Social Work program occupied Land Back camps in both Kitchener and Waterloo to amplify the Land Back message in spaces where Indigenous peoples are marginalized. Decentering Whiteness means to recentre Indigenous Peoples within their land by redistributing the land to Indigenous Peoples, groups, and organizations.

## **Kathy's Closing Thoughts**

We must engage in the work of decolonizing, decentering, and tackling domination based on race, sexual orientation, class, ability, and ethnicity, to name a few markers of difference. We live in a world in which White supremacy has been unleashed and acts of hate and racism are increasing. The global COVID-19 pandemic, social distancing, lockdowns, and isolation are creating challenges to social movements that build momentum by numbers, such as Black Lives Matter, Missing

and Murdered Indigenous Women, Idle No More, and No Pipelines. Where do we continue to combat White dominance in an era of social isolation and pandemic fatigue? With that being said, one can continue to ask critical questions, be curious, dig deeper, and call out colonialism and White dominance. One can continue to engage in critical literacy by decolonizing their mind and unpacking, unpacking, and unpacking. This brings to mind an article that Michael Hart (2003) wrote titled: "Am I a modern-day missionary?" This question is still relevant in a journey of combating and decentring Whiteness in social work education and practices. The question today might be: in what ways am I a modern-day colonizer? Preparing for the journey of decolonizing is preparing for a life-long road trip of unpacking what we were taught and deciding what works and what does not. We need to continually unpack beliefs, ideas, and practices in order to create space for repacking ones that generate balance between all humans and the earth.

### **Maryam's Closing Thoughts**

Am I a good and innocent social worker since I have made confessions? Do my clumsy and imperfect attempts towards wholistic education and practice provide exoneration of my complicity in oppression, power, and domination? Am I doing more harm than anticipated? How can I anticipate these harms and their implications? Clearly, the answer to the first two questions is no. I will forever be dangerous to Indigenous colleagues and a threat to wholistic education and practice (Rossiter, 2001, para. 20). As for the last two questions, the jury is still out for me. I don't know the answers. What I do know is that, perhaps with this uncertainty, I can learn to tread with more conscious care, not losing sight of my complicity while attempting to navigate the inherent contradictions in my being.

We are grateful for this opportunity to cross paths and meet on a bridge, and that we each had courage to engage and get to know one another. We met on this bridge and shared our umbrella of Indigeneity as we connected about our collective and individual experiences as a racialized Indigenous person and racialized South Asian settler who both teach in social work education. Standing on the bridge with one another has been a unique space that we created to begin unpacking and decentring the impact that White dominance has in our lives, personally and professionally. The conversations will continue—they must always continue. We wanted to share a model of coming together in conversation and reflexivity around ways that we experience White supremacy and dominance in our spaces of teaching and practice. We offered our reflections and conversations as a bridge to unpacking what is often invisible and underacknowledged in social work education and in education in general. These are gross omissions of harm that continue to

be problematic. Ultimately, we hope to plant seeds towards tearing down systems that support White supremacy, patriarchy, sexism, racism, and colonialism. We want to build bridges with diverse communities toward restoring balance and belonging for all of humanity. We both stand with Audre Lorde, who, in a speech in 1984, eloquently stated that we can't dismantle the master's house using the master's tools.

## NOTES

1. This term is *not* being used as a pan-Indigenous term to refer to North America. Instead, we use this term to centre worldviews and ontologies of the Anishinaabe Creation story that refer to North America as 'Turtle Island'.

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