

EDITORIAL:

*RECKONING AND RECONCILIATION: DECOLONIZING SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION*

## **Decolonial Futurities in Social Work Education: Epistemological, Relational, and Institutional Pathways**

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We humbly offer gratitude to the editors of *Intersectionalities: A Global Journal of Social Work Analysis, Research, Polity, and Practice* for supporting the development of this two-part special issue on decolonizing social work education. As a team of guest editors,<sup>1</sup> our collaborative work is reflective of our respective social locations, epistemological and ontological entry points into conceptualizing what decolonization means and can look like in social work education. Through our collaborative process of imagining and facilitating the development of the special issue, we have tried our best to take a decolonial approach to our relationships with one another, to the authors of the articles and the knowledge they have so generously offered, and in navigating issues of power, positionality, and decision-making. Like the work of decolonizing social work education, our efforts have been imperfect, slower than desired, and full of necessarily challenging and meaningful dialogue to reach spaces of agreement and relationality. Decolonizing social work education is an ongoing process, not a destination that we will arrive at, but rather a new set of relationships we are seeking to engage in with ourselves, each other, our students and in social work research, literature, policy, and practice.

### **Contributing Toward a “Decolonial” Landscape in Social Work Education**

In situating this special issue in the landscape of existing knowledge, it is important to begin by acknowledging and honouring the expansive body of scholarship addressing decolonization and reconciliation in social work largely built on the work of Indigenous scholars (see, for example, Absolon & Absolon-Winchester, 2016; Baikie, 2009; Baskin 2011, 2016; Baskin & Sinclair, 2015; Bruyere, 1999; Clark & Drolet, 2014; Gray, Coates, Yellow Bird, & Hetherington, 2013; Hart, 2009; Sinclair, 2004; Sinclair, Hart, & Bruyere, 2009; Tamburro, 2013; Weaver, 2004; Yellow Bird, 2008, 2013). The decolonization of social work is an undertaking that has global resonance but requires local specificity in understanding the Indigenous and colonial histories of the lands on which we live, learn, work, and grow. Decolonial futurities require more than appreciation of colonial histories or territorial acknowledgements. In order to imagine and embody decolonial futurities, we must also attend to our relationships and accountabilities to the Indigenous peoples and traditional teachings of the spaces we occupy in order to learn how to be

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<sup>1</sup> Listed above in alphabetical order.

good (decolonial) relatives and to transform the legacy of social work with communities and nations who have been on the receiving end of colonial violence.

In the lands currently known as Canada, an increased consciousness of and engagement with notions of reconciliation and decolonization continues to take hold in academia and broader Canadian society in response to the Calls to Action issued by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) in 2015. Those of us in social work education (and arguably post-secondary education in general) must reckon with our respective roles and responsibilities in contributing toward decolonization. Of the 94 Calls to Action set out by the TRC, the first 12 target child welfare and education. It is incumbent on those of us who educate social work students (and all of us in the profession of social work) to address these colonial legacies, not simply because we are obligated to do so in response to the TRC, but because we have an ethical and political responsibility to do so in order to live within the stated values and ethics of our profession.

In 2017, the Canadian Association of Social Work Education (CASWE) issued a *Statement of Complicity and Commitment to Change* recognizing the complicity of social work education, research, and practice in the colonial agenda and realities of the lands currently known as Canada. The Statement also outlines the Association's commitments to and imagined pathways toward creating change in social work education in its role as the accrediting body for social work education in Canada. As social work educators, policy-makers, practitioners, and students grapple with the responsibilities of repair for the ways in which the profession has been and continues to be implicated in the implementation of colonial policies and practices, the practicality of how to move the profession forward in a decolonizing manner requires careful attention to issues of power, positionality, resistance, and relationality. It is our hope that the knowledge and applied examples shared by the authors in this first part of the special issue will provide readers with theoretical frameworks, practical strategies, and meaningful concepts and language for taking up or continuing forward in their own decolonial efforts.

Social work education is implicitly practice oriented and, as such, it not only matters *what* social work educators choose to address but *how*. The ways in which decolonization and reconciliation are taken up in the social work classroom ought to be understood as having implications for how students and graduates will take up this work in the field. Social work strives for social justice and has engaged with critical theories in support of its efforts, both in its own theorizing and through integration of theories from outside of the profession to help inform transformative practice; this includes but is not limited to Indigenous approaches, critical race theory, anti-colonial thought, and anti-oppressive practice theories. These particular theoretical frameworks, along with the contributions of scholars outside of social work such as Coulthard (2014), Dei and Asgharzadeh (2001), Lawrence and Dua (2005), Simpson, (2011, 2014, 2017), Smith (1999, 2012), and Tuck and Yang (2012, 2014), help to illuminate the normalizing and naturalizing of colonial ways of knowing, being, and doing utilized within our profession, thereby supporting the articulation of visions and pathways for moving toward relationships of

reconciliation. We are grateful to the authors of this special issue for their contributions toward decolonial theorizing and change-making in social work and to the many reviewers whose generosity, expertise, and insight made this special issue even stronger.

### **On Process**

For us, the question was not whether to take up the work of decolonizing social work education or not, but rather *how* we go about imagining and enacting it. This special issue exemplifies our hope for decolonial change and transformation of social work education. In taking up this path of reckoning and reconciliation, we understood it would mean relating to each other in the ongoing context of colonization and its associated and implicit harms and risks. This reality showed up immediately and throughout the process from when we discussed the framing of the call, to our experiences of reviewing the manuscripts, providing feedback and editing, and in navigating relationship building and accountability with each other, the authors, reviewers, and journal editors.

We approached every aspect of the context and process of the special issue as an opportunity to question how and whether we would be able to enact a decolonial approach. At times we needed to slow down the process, reverse decisions, and revisit issues of accountability with each other and community members. We chose to prioritize creating and holding space for accountability as we processed our disagreement, uncertainty, anger, fear, gratitude, and excitement. The challenges we faced in working together on this special issue represent microcosms of colonial relations.

Particularly relevant to our navigation of power with each other was how we situated who we are, our relationships with each other, and where we are currently located. We are working as assistant and associate professors in the School of Social Work at the University of Victoria, on the traditional territories of the Lekwungen peoples, and of the Songhees, Esquimalt, and WSÁNEĆ peoples. We strove to disrupt the dynamics of power that impede working in a decolonial way. As an Anishinaabe Two Spirit person, an African Caribbean lesbian, and a white woman, it was important that we came to these discussions cognizant of our shared understanding that decolonizing social work education must include analyses that step well outside of the binary of white settler and Indigenous relations. Simply put, how might we approach this work without the kinds of erasures that preclude talking to, talking with, and talking back, including actively resisting appeals to innocence (Fellows & Razack, 1998; Tuck & Yang, 2012) and subversion by politics of diversity and inclusion?

### **Learning by Doing: Applied Examples of Decolonizing Social Work Education**

In part, the call for this special issue sought to contribute toward a growing picture of what decolonizing social work education looks like in action. We were grateful to receive numerous submissions that helped to describe the realities, opportunities, and challenges in applying decolonizing principles “on the ground” in

the creation of new programs and transformation of existing ones. These articles reflect on the contextual factors that contribute toward change and resistance, the importance of process and relationality in how we nurture decolonial futurities, and the impact of decolonizing efforts on our well-being, relationships, and sustainability as educators and educational leaders.

**Absolon** describes the development of the Centre for Indigegogy, which was founded in 2017 at the Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University. The Centre offers professional development training for social work educators, administrators, and practitioners with the aim of decolonizing social work education through the delivery of a Decolonizing Education Certificate program, an Indigenous Educators Certificate in Indigegogy, and a series of Wholistic Practice professional development workshops. Absolon evocatively frames decolonizing as a detoxifying process aimed at “clearing out the colonizing knowledge and practices that we have ingested and adopted from colonial social work education” (p. 9) In reflecting on the process of imagining, developing, and growing the Centre and its pedagogical offerings, the author emphasizes the importance of attending to context, intention, process, relationship, and the need for *conscious* and constant efforts toward decolonization.

This first part of the special issue also includes two articles focused on decolonial efforts at the Myron B. Thompson School of Social Work (MBTSSW) at the University of Hawai‘i, both of which offer important theoretical insights and promising practices based in the authors’ experiences of navigating the struggles, gifts, and opportunities in striving to Indigenize their social work programs and in the creation of an interdisciplinary health program. As scholars of colour who participated in the Indigenization process in the MBTSSW, **Nakaoka, Ka‘opua, and Ono** articulate the challenges, strategies, and lessons learned throughout this dynamic process. The authors present and utilize a critical race theoretical framework “OiwicRT,” that fundamentally recognizes the status of Hawai‘i as an occupied and colonized space and provides a tool to centre racialization and Indigenization without privileging one over the other. Following Lawrence and Dua’s (2005) acknowledgment that antiracism movements require decolonization to fully recognize Indigenous peoples, the authors are able to speak to the three years of long and contentious debate over things like the meaning of *Indigenization* and questions concerning exclusion of the rich and unique multicultural context of Hawaii. A significant outcome of these efforts was the development of an additional educational competency (in addition to the nine core competencies articulated and mandated by the Council of Social Work Education) that required social work students at MBTSSW be able to understand: (a) the impact of occupation and the resultant effects of cultural trauma; (b) the significance of land, place, and culturally resonant practice; (c) respect for host traditions, protocols, ceremony, guesthood, and spirituality as central to decolonized professional practice; and (d) knowledge of one’s own culture, values, and practices.

Focusing on the development of the Native Hawaiian Interdisciplinary Health program, **DeMattos** also reflects on the deliberate, challenging, and creative

Indigenization process at MBTSSW from his perspective as a non-Indigenous social worker in the position of developing and implementing Indigenous curriculum for Indigenous students. DeMattos provides an overview of the program and examines the ontological, epistemological, relational, and institutional struggles involved in creating a program aimed at transforming how both social work and medicine are imagined, taught, and practised by and in relation to Indigenous peoples. This article emphasizes the importance of attending to identity, positionality, reciprocity, and place (land) in efforts to decolonize and Indigenize educational programming and in re-imagining the epistemological and ontological terrain of professional knowledge systems in the health and helping professions.

The work of **Koleszar-Green** utilizes the teachings of Guswhenta (the Two Row Wampum) and the concept of being a “Guest” to articulate a framework for understanding the differential roles and responsibilities of Indigenous and non-Indigenous (Guest) educators in taking up the work of decolonizing social work. Rooted in the context of Canadian social work, this article explores the mutual responsibilities shared by all social work educators in responding to the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada and in realizing the decolonial commitments articulated by the Canadian Association of Social Work Education in its *Statement of Complicity and Commitment to Change*. This article also serves to elucidate the uneven burden of decolonizing work experienced by Indigenous social work educators and articulates some considerations for how to move forward together in solidarity and with nuanced understandings of various roles and responsibilities based on our respective identities and positionalities.

### **Beyond the Binary**

In seeking to push beyond the often inferred Indigenous/white binary in decolonial theorizing, two of the articles in this issue centre the voices and knowledge of racialized scholars in articulating what decolonization can look like in the context of education and practice. **Moreno and Mucina** reflect specifically on ethics and praxis for racialized practitioners working alongside Indigenous communities. They examine the problematic ways in which racialized and Indigenous peoples are positioned in relation to one another through, for example, a focus on “diversity” in human services. The authors also reflect on the binary framing of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in the reports and Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada and how this binary serves to equate and therefore erase distinctions between Black and racialized groups and white settler society. They note that this “false sense of equality for Black and racialized practitioners who continually experience racism, xenophobia, racial profiling, and cultural/linguistic assimilation, among many other forms of colonial violence” (p. 96) at the hands of white settlers, can impede or complicate opportunities for meaningful and strategic relationships between Indigenous and racialized peoples. The authors conclude by articulating their emerging pathway to ethical praxis; one that is grounded in decolonial love and that centres the willingness to take up ethics centred on risk rather than allyship.

**Hackett** articulates an African Caribbean approach to decolonizing social work in order to contextualize, historicize, depathologize, and de-individualize the manifestations of colonial harms experienced by African Caribbean peoples in the lands presently known as Canada. These harms, captured in what the author names as “social injury,” are visible in disproportionate rates of child welfare apprehension, incarceration, and educational pushout that reflect alarming similarities to the colonial realities faced by Indigenous peoples in so-called Canada. Hackett examines the historical presence of peoples of African descent in Canada and the relationship between anti-Black racism, settler colonialism, and social work through examples of forced migration and child welfare. In addition to advocating for more social work curriculum that presents the lived experiences and realities of African Caribbean peoples through a decolonial lens, the author also articulates the need to address epistemic racism in social work education by addressing naturalized and racialized notions of who is framed as a “knower” and who is framed as a population to be “known” about. Addressing epistemic racism also means recognizing the formal and informal contributions of African Caribbean peoples to social work knowledge, including African social work scholars and educators, students, and practitioners.

### **Decolonizing Social Work**

Decolonizing social work is not just about *what* we do, but *how* we do it. The articles in this first part of the special issue individually and collectively speak to the relational terrain of change-making; citing the wise words of Elders, Dr. Cindy Blackstock (2009) noted that “we did not get here alone and we are not leaving alone” (p. 143). The authors who have generously shared their knowledge speak in varied ways about the necessity of attending to relationships and relationality in how we broker decolonial change in pedagogy, curriculum, representation, and practice. The articles presented here offer guidance and strategies for navigating the hard work of truth-telling about historical and contemporary colonial realities of social work education and practice and reckoning with what it means to write a new, decolonial story of what social work can be. We end as we began—from a place of gratitude for those who would so generously offer their knowledge and for the space provided by *Intersectionalities* to bring forward these important conversations. To the Ancestors who survived colonial violence and to those whose lives were stolen, we lovingly dream of decolonial futurities that honour you, all our relations and the little faces yet to come...

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