

Beyond “Indigenous Social Work” and Toward Decolonial Possibility: Stories from Toronto’s Red Road

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Abstract

While social work has been a specific technology of settler colonialism levied against Indigenous Peoples, the phenomenon of “Indigenous social work” is now rather comfortably discussed and included within university curricula and places of social work practice. This article is a creative adaptation of a research project with four generations of Indigenous social workers in Toronto, culminating in 10 intersecting short stories that work to make visible “the Good Red Road” in the city. The *story landmark* shared here is one of these stories, a pit stop along the road. Its function exists somewhere between that of petroglyphs and carving your name into wet cement. It helps mark where we have been as Indigenous social workers, how we imprint onto the landscape, and how the Land can guide us in important directions. This landmark is an invitation for those involved in Indigenous social work to not only consider the story pathways we have created but also how these story landmarks could lead Indigenous Peoples, communities, and Nations to destinations previously foreclosed to our imaginaries by the boundaries of our professional survival. That what may lay between us and decolonial possibilities is our refusal of the profession itself.

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Plink. Light escaping the curtain nudges my right eye open. *Yawn.* I pull my toes and fingers away from my body. *Stretch.* The sun is shining. Birds are chirping outside the window. I hear the flutes of “Morning Mood” from Edvard Grieg’s *Peer Gynt* rise slowly in my ear. “Ah, peace,” I think to myself for a moment. Basking in the stillness of early day. *Huh?* I scrunch my face as I contemplate the source of the music. Wait a minute? I lift my upper body from the mattress and strain to open my left eye. *Plunk.* Only to find another eye staring directly into it. “Aho, sister, good morning!” Trickster shouts. Flinging his arms and boom box into the air. “Ahhhhhh!” I scream, smashing my head on the classic silver tape deck, bringing the music to a screeching halt. *Whir.* Startled and fumbling, I fall out of bed. *Clunk.* I land splayed on the floor, my sweatpants entangled in long-worn-out sheets. *Boink.* Trickster’s head pops out from atop the mattress. “‘Bout time you woke up.” *Rumble.* “I’m getting hungry!” he continues, tummy growling. *Argh.* I gather myself from the floor and some clothes from the closet. “What’s for breakfast?” Trickster asks, hanging in the door frame. I look him over in his shiny white sneakers, skinny jeans, T-shirt emblazoned with a portrait of Sitting Bull donning neon sunglasses. He has swapped his boom box for a pair of bright-red headphones that sit around his neck, from which pour the sound of powwow tunes mixed with electronic beats. “A little privacy, please?” I say, using the door to push him out of my room. Exasperated, I lean against it a moment and take a deep breath. *Exhale.* Still, a small smirk escapes the corner of my mouth.

Shuffle. Shuffle. Shuffle. I run a brush through my hair as I descend the stairs of our little split-level apartment in the heart of the city. This is Toronto, and I can already hear the bustling outside of people starting their day. My family is not originally from this place, the beautiful territories of the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaune, and Huron-Wendat. A woman of mixed Mi'kmaw, Wolastoqiyik, Acadian and Ukrainian heritage, my family was first brought to Toronto when my grandfather left residential school at the young age of 15 and stole away on a cargo train that just happened to be headed for this city. He eventually returned to the East Coast, an incredible story in and of itself. Many years later, after my mother was born, one of eight children, my grandparents returned to this city, attempting to reunite my mother's siblings who had been scooped and scattered into foster and adoptive care between the East Coast and Toronto. Bringing them all together, for the very first time, in a small house on Bleecker Street, in what is known as St. James Town. Just a stone's throw from where I now live in my little apartment in the city. "Where *we* live. I think you should say *we*!" Trickster hollers towards me, gathered in the kitchen with my partner and our kiddo.

Plop. I sit with a coffee as my partner pulls on the fridge handle, rummaging through assorted drawers, putting together a quick breakfast. He's an Anishinaabe man whose family's experience is, unsurprisingly, much like my own. They ended up here too, after residential schooling and folks aging out of foster care.

You see, the story of social work and the stories of Indigenous Peoples in this city are intimately connected. A strange tale that is entangled in many people's lives. Some of us, who now find ourselves working in the profession, complicate this story even further. "Tricky, really," shares our friend. It's true. *Sigh.* I too am a trained social worker. I've both spent my life engaged in Indigenous social services in this city and witnessed the rise of the phenomena of "Indigenous social work," now rather comfortably discussed in university curricula. As settler colonialism is not an event but a structure and process that continue to unfold over time (Wolfe, 2006), I cannot help but ponder the implications of these developments.

It is important to note that *social work* is not synonymous or generalizable to all helping traditions. It is a regulated profession with its own system of governance, registration, principles, education, history, practices, values, limits, and jurisdictions. In Canada, the boundaries of the profession are contained largely within bodies that exercise authority by recognition of provincial and territorial levels of government (e.g., Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers). These provincial authorities work with state (federal)-level accreditation bodies like the Canadian Association for Social Work Education. Though specific, social work is in a constant effort and process of formalization and consolidation, securing itself as a protected title in many territories and strategically managing the definition, membership, and exercise of that title. As social work scholars like Alston-O'Connor (2010), Baskin (2011, 2016), Baskin and Sinclair (2015), Blackstock (2009), Fournier and Crey (1997), Fortier and Wong (2019), Hart (2002, 2003), Hart and Pompana (2003), Sinclair (2004, 2007), Sinclair et al. (2009), Sinha et al. (2011), and Sinha and Kozłowski (2013) have worked to outline, this ongoing project of the professionalization of social work is due to emergent opportunities to claim expertise, expand authority, and define practices through its management of Indigenous Peoples within the settler colonial state-building process.

Indigenous communities are the keepers of social work's stories, its past, and its present, bearing witness to the design and deployment of new strategies, new services, new systems of

“care” to tend to the harms of previous interventions. Extending state violence across generations. Like the residential school system, which sprouted at least three follow-up interventions—child welfare, mental health, and criminal justice. Then each of these sprouting another three of their own. Rather than narrowing or limiting the effects of settler colonial interference in our families and communities, these systems of care seem to multiply it. I look over at my now four-year-old, as she munches on blueberries from an animal-print bowl. Born only in 2016, I consider how she is the first generation in her family to be raised by parents who have not been institutionalized in some way. While this points to the ongoing settler colonial violence of social work that the scholars above have all worked to outline, in so many ways, this child, and their whole generation, is an opportunity, a calling, a reminder to dream new realities for our children, for our futures into this world.

The Red Road Materialized

Trickster is inhaling his bowl of cereal and making eyes at my partner’s toast. “I’ve got to get going. You coming, friend?” I ask. *Grumble*. He motions something I interpret to mean he will catch up with me later. *Smooch*. A few kisses on foreheads, and I head out. *Click*. I lock my door and move towards the railing at the top of our stoop. *Whew*. The summer is ending, but it’s already a hot one in the city. I lift a forearm to wipe my brow. As a social worker for well over a decade in Toronto, I’ve worked within various corners of interlocking systems of Indigenous social services in this city. *Boop. Boop. Boop*. I descend the stairs and make my way out to the sidewalk. *Shuffle. Shuffle. Shuffle*. Walking these streets from service, to service, and back again. Steps so familiar, I move through the space without needing to consider directions. *Sizzle*. I can feel the heat radiate from the sidewalk and hear the hum of the pavement below my feet. Standing at the corner of Jarvis and Carlton Streets., I stop to look down, first at my shoes, then lower to the concrete. *Huh*. Am I imagining things? Or does it seem recessed? I lift one foot, to examine the sidewalk more closely, and then peer over my shoulder to consider the route I have taken. *Squint*. A trail through the concrete appears, for only a moment, before disappearing as I loosen my gaze. Curious. *Hmm*. Lakota scholar Vine Deloria Jr. wrote that

the contrast between Christianity and its interpretation of history—the temporal dimension—and [North American Indigenous] religions—basically spatially located—is clearly illustrated when we understand the nature of sacred mountains, sacred hills, sacred rivers, and other geographical features sacred to [Indigenous Peoples].¹ (p. 120)

A renowned philosopher and writer, Deloria Jr. articulated the importance of centring space for Indigenous Peoples, versus time. Dene scholar Glen Coulthard further considered this contribution:

Deloria does not simply intend to reiterate the rather obvious observation that most Indigenous societies hold a strong attachment to their homelands, but is instead attempting to explicate the position that land occupies as an ontological framework for understanding relationships. (2014, p. 60).

¹ Deloria Jr.’s original text includes the terms “Indian tribal” and “American Indian tribal”, which have been replaced here to represent current language guides.

I pause to reflect on the movement of generations of Indigenous social workers through the city. I look south to Allan Gardens, a space long a part of my life as a person and social worker in the city. Bordered by the organizations Anishnawbe Health Toronto, the Native Women's Resource Centre, and Miziwe Biik Aboriginal Employment and Training, the park has also been the site for many gatherings, from organized vigils honouring missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, trans, and two-spirit peoples and the Idle No More food and clothing drive to casual meet-ups with community. These moments fill the space and flood my mind in unison. And just like that. *Snap*. They are gone.

Shuffle. Shuffle Shuffle. I continue west down Carlton Street. Sium and Ritskes (2013) stated that “storytelling and Indigenous land are both part of the sustaining and resurgence of Indigenous life and are not easily separable” (p. vi). “Stories!” I hear someone shout out from behind me. Looks like our friend Trickster has caught up to us after all. Running swiftly from the direction of our apartment. *Panting. Panting*. He doubles over, catching his breath, and slowly straightens to meet my gaze. *Wheeze*. “I’m a master storyteller, you know. Perhaps I could be of some assistance?” he says, plucking a hat out of the air and tipping it towards me. “It’s true,” I ponder to myself, despite his shenanigans. Trickster has been written about in many academic journeys—Jo-Ann Archibald (2008), Fyre Jean Graveline (1998), Darryl Bazylak (2002), Peter Cole (2006), and Heather Harris (2002). In their/her/his/its many manifestations, Coyote, Raven, Wesakejac, Glooscap, and Nanabozho, Trickster has been part of storytelling since time immemorial. An original teacher, he explores the nature of being and doing in relationship to others and the world, most often exposing the conflicts or incongruences when they arise within these relations. As Cree-Métis scholar Fyre Jean Graveline stated, in many cases, “our teachers help us to see ‘the upside down, the opposite, and the other balances of things around us’” (p. 11). Trickster stories call on us to feel and think deeply and critically about the relations being described.

“Well, come on then, Trickster,” I say waving him along. “We have a lot of walking to do.” I shout as we continue along the path. In *Indigenous Storywork*, Sto:llo scholar Jo-ann Archibald highlighted the significance of *story pathways* for Indigenous Peoples, borrowing from Gregory Cajete’s understanding of pathways, noting that “‘path’ symbolizes a journey and a process; ‘way’ is a cultural philosophical framework” (Cajete, 1994, as cited in Archibald, 2008, p. 12). Though some may see Archibald’s use of pathway as figurative, a literary device much like metaphor, I am overtaken by these words and believe they are far more material, as in “like *literally*,” really, actually, physically, story pathways. I hop along the pavement, moving from word to word. I stop at a stone. Or is it a comma? I take pause and recall how Cree scholar Winona Wheeler (2010) identified land as mnemonic:

Natural phenomena as well as petroglyphs and other artifacts carved on the landscape—trenches dug during warfare, wagon tracks, property boundary markers, even old abandoned cars—contain embedded stories and serve to nudge memory. The land is mnemonic, it has its own set of memories ... (p. 55).

This is similar to Deloria Jr.’s (1973) description of a “sacred geography” (p. 121), whereby “every location within their original homeland has a multitude of stories ... that cumulatively produced the [Nation] in its current tradition” (p. 121).

Reflecting on the stories of Indigenous social workers in this city reminds me that “stories serve as signs or marks of our presence, functioning much like landmarks on a map” (Doerfler

et al., 2013, p. 1). I consider Indigenous social workers' relationships to this land and how we have impressed upon the landscape. Ojibwe scholar Heid E. Erdrich described *landmarks*, the marks or signs that we leave behind that others find, marks that help us to understand place and that connect us across time. She pointed out that the marks can be literary, that they can be stories (p. 14).

As Erdrich stated, this is not an effort to toil with colonial geography or to engage in western practices of mapping. Our stories LIVE here. They can be found in the parks, buildings, intersections, and neighbourhoods of Toronto. Not bound by the western restraints of time. Walking through the city, you may see them if you look openly. You may hear them if you listen carefully. *Snicker. Shhhh!* "Long pauses make me uncomfortable," Trickster says, failing to hold in a laugh. *Sigh.* I shake my head. "Sorry, jeez!" *Shrug.* And continue onward. "Aye. Not more walking!" groans Trickster. He's such a complainer. "Fine with me," I say, feigning concern. "You can stay here, and I'll go on ahead!"

Walking Toronto's Red Road: The Story Pathways of Indigenous Social Workers (Penak, 2019) is the storytelling project mentioned above, which resulted in the intersecting creative short stories that work to make visible "the Good Red Road" in the city. Though the etymology of the phrase is debated and uncertain, it gained popularity during the rise of the Red Power Movements of the 1960s and 1970s, much like Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (1999) exploration of the term "Indigenous" as born of the struggles of the American Indian Movement (AIM; p. 7) and Graveline's (1998) use of the concept "the Indian way" as a method of communicating in relation to the dominant order or "White way" (p. 22). In *Red Skin White Masks*, Coulthard (2014) explored the rise of Red Power in a compassionate but critical engagement of the colonial politics of recognition incubated during this time. He explored how watershed events like the 1969 White Paper "inaugurated an unprecedented degree of pan-Indian assertiveness and political mobilization" (p. 5).

This shift is reflected in the Indian Association of Alberta's response, *Citizens Plus*, dubbed the "Red Paper," a galvanizing document drafted by Harold Cardinal (1970). Cardinal was instrumental in the formation of the National Indian Brotherhood, a precursor to the Assembly of First Nations. In *The Unjust Society* (1969) and *The Rebirth of Canada's Indians* (1977), he chronicled the developments of the Red Power movement through scathing reviews of Canadian Indigenous policy. The use of the phrase, the Good Red Road, has gained substantive popularity within urban Indigenous programming. Ushered in by services created and facilitated by generations involved in and influenced by AIM and Red Power, it can and has held within it many local and specific knowledges but also operates as a homogenizing force. The Red Road is often a metaphor for collections of lessons about how to live a good life. Wandering the story pathways of Indigenous social workers in Toronto, the Good Red Road took on additional meaning. It was not only the theme of the work people were doing within community to guide healing and wellness; it was a physical presence, a road materializing from the travels of those who had taken on its purpose.

Indigenous social workers in Toronto have not just taken up the call of the Red Road—we have created one. Like a well-travelled trail through the forest, the pavement holds the routes of generations of social workers in the city: a legacy of experiences, of stories living out on the landscape, of important lessons to be learnt, and cautions to heed. Just as Anishinaabe scholar Kathy Absolon used lessons from bushcraft to navigate Indigenous research in her

book, *Kaandossiwin: How We Come to Know* (2011), and “located the markers on the land and used those to find [her] way” (p. 82), we offer one of the story landmarks along Toronto’s Red Road here, so readers and ourselves alike do not lose our way along the pathways of Indigenous social work.

Trickster and the Tongues: Lost and Found

Honk, Hooooonk! Whoops, careful there. We have made our way west to Yonge and College. This is a busy spot in the city. People, buses, and bike couriers, oh my! I take a moment and watch all the people scurry across the intersection, access cards on lanyards bobbling around on their necks. Folks may not realize that this is a major landmark for Indigenous social workers in Toronto. Native Child and Family Services of Toronto, Toronto East General Aboriginal Day Withdrawal, the Native Child Youth Drop-In, and two of Aboriginal Legal Services’ offices all can be found on these four corners.

Shuffle. Shuffle. Shuffle. You can’t move through this space without at least doing a Nish nod. *Bonk!* “Hey!” I bump into Nicole Wemigwans, one of the youngest of the Indigenous social workers in the larger story-gathering project. “Oh, here. It looks like you dropped this,” I say, picking a lanyard off the ground. She looks at the thin black rope threaded through an identification card in my hand, outstretched towards her, takes a deep breath and looks back up at me. “It’s not mine anymore,” she says, with a sigh. She pushes the lanyard back towards me. And begins to move past. I turn and call out after her, “Where are you going?” Without pause she shouts back, “I just need to be in community. And so that’s where I’m going!” *Huh.* I watch her disappear into the distance. *Yoink!* In the blink of an eye, our old friend Trickster runs by, swipes the lanyard from my hands, and scurries into the intersection. *Argh.* “Trickster!” I shout. I see him place the lanyard around his neck and disappear into the crowd of people.

In *The Trickiness of “Indigenous Social Work”: Stories from Toronto’s Red Road* (Penak, 2022), readers follow Trickster westward inside Native Child and Family Services of Toronto to learn about the development of Indigenous social services in the city and the lessons whispered by the ghosts of social work past. This time we will make a U-turn and see what happens when we follow Nicole instead, what learning comes from the story pathways of this ... different direction.

Shuffle. Shuffle. Shuffle. We walk east again down Carlton and turn south down Parliament Street. There’s Council Fire! That big purplish-blue building—you really cannot miss it—the local friendship centre here in Toronto at Dundas Street and Parliament. *Boom. Boom. Boom.* I hear a big drum as we turn the corner east again into the heart of Regent Park. Similar to St. James Town, this neighbourhood is one of the last vestiges of affordable housing downtown. A community with tons of life! *Buzz.* Think murals, community kitchens, supervised injection sites, community centers, and farmers’ markets—you name it! Where Black, Indigenous, and people of colour alike organize to sustain love and life under perpetual threat of gentrification. It’s Council Fire’s annual powwow. I look over and see Nicole Wemigwans. She’s in the middle of the circle, smiling, singing alongside a drum. *Sizzle.* It’s midday now. And it’s getting hot at this gathering. *Glug. Glug. Glug.* I slam some water and look around for some shade. Developers have gotten their hands on this area of Regent. A big grassy area, with some abstract concrete structures and little saplings with hardly any foliage. *Slosh.* I drag my hand down my sweaty cheek. Did I mention it’s hot?!

I look across the park and see the Toronto Birth Centre, or TBC as it's called, on the south side of Dundas Street East and Sackville. "What day is it?" I ask myself. *Hmm*. "Ah, Friday!" That means Rochelle will be facilitating a children's Ojibway language group at TBC. Perfect. A chance to get some air conditioning and visit with a friend. *Clink*. I press the button at the crosswalk and wander towards the TBC. *Shuffle. Shuffle.*

Roar. Giggle. Snort. Walking up the stairs, I can already hear the kids in Rochelle's program, clearly having a great time. "Boozhoo miigwech bi-izhaayeg. Gigiizhiitaami na? enh! Nishin! Ikidog miinawaa. Oh nishin maajtaadaa!" What a scene: the play mats are out; Ojibway children's books are scattered across the floor; toys are labelled in Anishinaabemowin; the kids, friends, and families are smiling and singing. They are surrounded by beautiful murals made by the Indigenous community here of medicinal plants, including some original artwork by Métis artist Christi Belcourt, and everywhere smells like that fresh baby smell. *Chuckles*. It really is a magical place. "Aaniin ezhi-ayaayan niwijiwaagan? Giminoayaa na?" I call out. I've been joining Rochelle's Ojibway children's language groups for about two years now with my toddler. Trying to expose this little rug rat to their Indigenous languages as much as possible right from the start. And let me tell you, it's an incredible thing to witness. Because for most of us, this wasn't our experience, and language revival is something we started much later in life, Rochelle included.

Rochelle is Ojibway and for her family, Anishinaabemowin, the Ojibway language, is like ... like ... a beautiful song! And I do not mean just any old song and a hand drum, but like a chorus of voices, of *all* her ancestors singing together with all their collective wisdom! I glance past Rochelle at the artwork on the wall. *Swish*. The canvas starts shifting. Colours swirling. From the painted florals and herbage behind her appears a lodge. *Wow*. I stare intensely. The painting is recounting a story in its illustrations! *Gulp*. From inside the lodge, I can hear voices reverberating and bouncing off the walls. There are drums, and flutes, and shakers, and clapping, and stomping, and swaying, and dancing. The acoustics are incredible! As the fullness of the voices fills every inch of the space, the lodge cannot contain the extensiveness of the song and, like the smoke from the fire, it *poours* up out of the lodge and fills the entire territory, the entire universe, with its words. The song is their truth. It reveals a worldview necessary for their survival, necessary to carry forward their way of life and relationship with the universe.

One night, someone, a stranger, a Trickster, resting on a hillside, heard this beautiful song and followed it *all* the way back to the village. "Wow, what a song!" the Trickster thought to himself, tapping his foot to the beat. *Blink. Blink*. He peeked through a tear in the lodge covering. Hips swaying, transfixed by its rhythm, he watched the singers, mouths wide open, from which their truth flowed out into the world. He observed the way it moved through space and filled the entire universe. He thought, "Aha! If I had that song, I could fill the universe with whatever I wanted!" *Smirk*. Plotting and scheming, he tiptoed away and hid in the bushes until everyone went to sleep. *Snore. Whistle. Snore*. As the people rested peacefully, Trickster snuck into their lodges. *Creeeaaaak*. One by one, Trickster plucked out their tongues! *Plink. Plink. Plink*. One person here, another there, some entire families! "The song is mine now!" he proclaimed. *Cackles*. He shoved the tongues unceremoniously into his sack and ran off with them before morning. When dawn came, the Ojibway people woke, only to find their tongues were gone, that someone had taken their song! *Woosh*. The paintings begin to shift back to their original depictions. Generations have passed and some families are still missing their tongues.

Rochelle was born in Scarborough, was raised much of her life an hour outside of Toronto in a place called Cambridge and moved back to the city about 20 years ago. “Yeah, so I came back for school. I graduated from high school and went straight into university,” she says. Rochelle was expressly interested in child protection and originally completed an undergraduate degree in Sociology and Aboriginal Studies in order to get there. But while she was studying, the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers became the regulatory body for social work in the province, and many jobs in child protection followed their preference—and, in some cases, requirements—for training specifically in the discipline of social work. So Rochelle did a second undergraduate degree in social work online through the University of Victoria. That’s a lot of school! And a lot of dedication to break into the field of social work. But something drove her, motivated her to peek into social work’s ... sack. “I knew about social work all my life. I think that, while it’s not something we talked about a lot, my dad’s childhood experience had a big impact.” Rochelle understands that child protection had a big effect on her family. Her father actually lived in a foster home right around the corner from where she now lives in the east end. She recalled,

When I was like, nine, I all of a sudden got an aunt and an uncle, which was amazing. My aunt had put an ad in the newspaper to find her siblings because they had been separated as children—so one sibling was adopted, one was put in foster care, and one was with a family member, and they didn’t see each other for 40-something years. She put an ad in the *Toronto Star*, and so then I got an aunt. And I don’t know if you know this but, for nine-year-olds, that basically means gifts. *Giggles*. So, that was always a part of my understanding of social work, that experience of children and the complexities within families that are created through the profession and that kind of thing. I didn’t really have a way to articulate it, even when I moved here.

Rochelle found her way into many exciting jobs supporting Indigenous students and educational programming, and then went back to school to upgrade her credentials. While completing the Indigenous Master of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University, Rochelle found herself surrounded by other Indigenous women, and

several of them were fluent in Ojibway, and so I would always be listening and that kind of thing ’cause we would go away for a week to do the courses—well, I dreamt while I was there about doing an Ojibway language group, and it was me and a bunch of little children.

That dream had reignited an interest that Rochelle already had for Anishinaabemowin, her family’s language, as she had been slowly uncovering and practising it in her own time. Only this time, it was different:

I think that the ability to bring some of the critical thinking, some of the supportive aspects, some of the different social work understandings to language learning is very beneficial—not that I’m saying that people who want to do language learning should become social workers. That is not what I’m saying. But there’s a lot of trauma related to language. We were told for a long time that the language is not important and that they shouldn’t use it. That if they shared it with younger people, it could put them in danger and that kind of thing.

So Rochelle brought the trauma lens she had learned in her social work training to language learning:

I think that being able to frame it as a trauma that needs to be attended to is really beneficial 'cause often relationships around language sort of fall apart because learners are very eager and they lose sight of the fact that we're not just healing the language, we're also healing our communities. It might take a year or two years or something to work with someone until they feel comfortable to say sentences in the language. But that's part of that healing. You can't force it. You can't make people heal on your timeline. And so I think that understanding was helpful for me.

Rochelle's efforts in language revitalization began to shift: it was no longer just about learning the language. It was about healing for community and healing for herself, from violence, a structural violence that Rochelle could now identify:

For some people the language is really a metaphor for their entire relationship with colonialism, and it's not something that's going to get fixed overnight. It's also, I think, a good metaphor for this negative talk we have about ourselves. People are always talking about how hard the language is, and in my mind, the piece that's always missing from that conversation is "Isn't every language hard?" The thing that makes it so much harder, in my mind, is that we are also dealing with this colonial violence.

This understanding of the systems impacting language learning has really transformed Rochelle's own language abilities too.

It's a legacy of colonialism and the efforts to destroy Indigenous knowledge dividing communities yet again. Separate people long enough that they forget that they can communicate in their own language and, when they come back together, they'll force each other to use English. I think that social work education gave me tools to understand it in a way that is less threatening to me,

Rochelle stated, reflecting on her relationship with social work.

Chatter. Buzz. Zing. The room is full of energy. What started as a children's group brought friends, guardians, parents, and now grandparents together. So Rochelle is not only there with her kids but her parents too! She is going over the lesson with everyone in the room. Today, we are learning colours, and not just the names, but the various differences in the Ojibway colour system. She explains how basic colour categories are not universal and how every language in the world has different numbers of colours. Some have four, or 11, but Ojibway has five. *Giggle.* We chuckle as we stumble trying out some of the words. She reminds us not to feel discouraged if someone says a different word than us because some words like "blue" can be described in a multitude of ways:

Zhaawshkwaa covers the spectrum from green to blue. And so we didn't need a separate word for blue because it was part of this range of the spectrum. We don't have to look at this through the English lens, through the colonial lens. We can understand what happened to the language through the traumas that it has been exposed to and not judge each other. Then all the different words for blue make sense. They're different because people compared them to different things. The colour of a blueberry, the colour of the sky: that's the words they use, which is not hard to understand once you stop trying to force the language to fit English. And the same happens with the calendar and probably a lot of things I don't know yet.

As Rochelle speaks, again I notice something in the murals behind her. *Swish.* Some movement. What is that? I watch the colours shift and reorganize into a small burlap sack.

Plop. It immediately falls out of the frame and spills out onto the floor. *Splatter.* “The tongues!” I shout. The children and parents look up at me confused. *Smile.* I grin awkwardly, trying not to draw attention to the severed tongues gathered behind them. As Rochelle speaks, I can see the sack shrinking, appearing less and less full. I hear someone squeak, “Uh oh!” and I look around the room. *Thump.* Not far from where the sack fell, Trickster jumps out from the canvas!

Social work may have brought Rochelle closer to recovering language for her family, but it is also what caused it to disappear in the first place. This relationship with social work is *really* complicated—former generations being taken into care was the impetus for her family to stop speaking in the first place. Trickster runs over to his beloved sack and takes a peek inside. *Rustle. Rustle. Gasp!* He sees that some of his tongues have escaped. “Yikes!” he proclaims, and scurries around the room groaning, searching for his lost goods. *Whimper. Shuffle. Whimper.*

Rochelle told me that

being directly impacted by the harm that social workers have done is a hard thing to shake. You go to social work school and, as much as you talk about theory, it’s always in the back of your mind that you do a lot of harm. The profession does a lot of harm. I think that part of that, too, is why there’s a desire to not claim a social worker identity because it puts you in direct conflict with the community.

Rochelle has always worked on the periphery of social work. One reason for that is self-imposed: “I always really feel like, oh, I’m not really a *social worker*,” but the second has to do with social work’s inability to facilitate the work she is doing. She spoke of her conflict with social work as it continues to remove Indigenous children from their families and languages. While seeing the opportunity for collaboration with social work tools in her efforts, she also sees how social work has hoarded resources and shut out real language revitalization:

So when we started to think about having a family, one thing I wanted to be able to provide them was the language, and so I started to approach different organizations in the city about how that might be possible, and they all were very clear that it was not something that was on their radar, not something that they were going to be involved in.

She continues, shaking her head:

The interesting thing is we are starting to see more funding for language, and I am fairly confident that when that comes around the organization will all start doing language and they won’t be interested in working with grassroots people who have been doing this in their community.

She says passionately that

they will continue to recreate the same beginner classes and workshops we see that commodify and hoard the language, using it to get people in their doors rather than using the opportunity to develop real relationships. And worst of all miss the mark on serving the community and its overwhelming desire to be able to provide knowledge of the language to our children. Disappointing but not unexpected, the systems in which these organizations exist put them, like many Indigenous social workers, in extremely difficult situations where time to think beyond performance metrics and intake numbers is unimaginable.

Rochelle moves over to a stack of learning tools she's made—translated children's books, charts of song lyrics, kids' toys, and a label maker.

So the message was you have to do it yourself—I was learning already, but this realization forced me to amp it up—so I speak to the kids in Ojibway and I'm doing a couple of groups around the city. And trying to find ways to use all the resources that I've developed and that kind of thing to benefit other people without the organizations,

And that's exactly what she's doing. Some may see being in Toronto as a disadvantage to language revitalization, but Rochelle reached out to make important relationships and repair connections, like hanging out with all the seniors at the Native Canadian Centre because

we have a lot of fluent speakers, but everyone forgets that because they don't talk to them about it. Like, they're somebody else's family, and I think that often in the city we feel like if we were back home it would be easier.

Rochelle has worked with these relationships to develop a network of Anishinaabemowin speakers and learners, creating supports and experiences using free community spaces throughout the city, like the Birth Centre or the Toronto Public Library. She also facilitates excursions like hikes, tobogganing, and trips to tourist attractions in the city, which bring everyone together all in Anishinaabemowin for more land-based and interactive learning. Though she would never say this herself, she has created something important in this city. Many of us are indebted to her for all the energy it has taken for her to support the next generation of Anishinaabe kids here in Toronto. The way she sees it, "I kind of feel like just this little, like I'm just like this little tiny rock and I'm just sitting in this little river, trying to change it a little tiny bit. Redirect it a tiny bit." *Yelp. Zoom.* As Rochelle is teaching, I see Trickster buzzing around the room, fumbling with his sack. He rushes around to scoop the tongues back into the bag, but each time he opens it to put more in, a few more escape.

The class finishes up, and the kids are shouting "Gigawabamin!" as they leave. I help Rochelle pack her supplies in a large rolling suitcase. I pick up a stuffed bear with a tag that says "makwa"; it simultaneously makes me smile and shed a small tear. *Sniff.* As I pack the bear away, Rochelle comes up to me and says, "All those families who feel like they're not doing enough, I think that I just want to remind them that what they are doing is of huge value." *Cough.* I clear my throat and wipe my eye. Rochelle picks up her suitcase full of supplies. "So where to now, my friend?" I ask her. "We've created a little break-off group that we do in immersion over by the school," she says. "Want to join us?" "Maybe see you there later today," I respond. I wave as Rochelle and her family head east. As they walk into the distance, I see her lean over and speak to her children. The kids laugh as they respond. It's all very typical ... except that it's in Ojibway. *Smile.*

Beyond Indigenous Social Work and Toward Decolonial Possibility

"Hey there, cousin!" Trickster shouts, shaking the sparkles off his body and pulling a little yellow plastic building block from his ear. *Plop.* He joins me sitting on some rocks outside the TBC. We're taking a little story pit stop to reflect on the pathways we have journeyed through together. I look out onto Regent Park. Forms shift in the afternoon sun. The construction of new condo buildings loom over the gathering, casting a shadow west of the

dancers. Inching closer towards them as the day passes. Even from a distance, I feel that coolness hit my body. It sends a shiver down my spine. King (2003) reminded us that

once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world. So you have to be careful with the stories you tell. And you have to watch out for the stories that you are told. (p. 10)

Indigenous social work is a story on a roll, and it is gaining momentum, propped up by curricula in universities, accreditation standards, and professional registration requirements. It's spreading across the landscape. Aguirre (2015) explored how western academic theory is a form of storytelling and how its story is in conflict with Indigenous ways of knowing that seek to redefine its authority, boundaries, and substance (p. 185). She demonstrated how this encounter can advance in insidious ways, how

some characterizations of transformative action are inadequate or even complicit in ongoing dispossession by describing Indigenous practices to align with their own projects and projections. That is, some conceptual languages can appropriate or filter our voices, reforming Indigenous subjectivities to reflect back the ideals or more often *failed* ideals of others [emphasis in original]. (p. 185)

This idea is similar to that of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013), who wrote that settler-state systems are based on the negligence of the mass intellectuality of oppressed peoples. Extinguishing Indigenous imaginaries through assault, assimilation, or starvation, academia is a core character in the Rolodex of actors who sustain settler colonialism. These authors link professionalization, such as is seen in social work and social work education, with the process of colonialism. They state that it is

unwise to think of professionalization as a narrowing and better think of it as a circling, an encircling of war wagons around the last camp of [I]ndigenous women and children. Think about the way the American doctor or lawyer regard themselves as educated, enclosed in the circle of the state's encyclopedia, though they may know nothing of philosophy or history (p. 34).

I gaze at the cityscape with Trickster. While exploring the story pathways of Indigenous social workers along Toronto's Red Road, we can see this process unfold both discursively and materially.

Whether it is the tracks of the wagons circling described above or those created by Indigenous social workers, land is not just an object that is acted upon but a relation of mutual engagement. And while we may forget, either innocently with the passing of time or perhaps even purposefully. Reflecting on the work of Wheeler et al. (2013) supports us in understanding how "the land remembers and constructs relationships with those who live on it" (p. vii). It retains our stories, our movements, our relationship with it. The land can help us recollect, reflect, and remain accountable. It helps us to understand how the story of Indigenous social work has unravelled across Toronto, a Red Road paved right through and around communities. Trickster, a kind of purposeful anachronism, a physical and ontological shape shifter, speaks to the unique nature of time and space as taken up by Deloria Jr. (1973) and others. While his stories push back on a kind of urban terra nullius, highlighting the full and vibrant lives and stories inside of it, they also connect and implicate us as Indigenous social workers in establishing story pathways where colonial social work past and Indigenous social work present are intimately connected. These story landmarks nudge our

memories, nudge our minds to consider how our efforts and institutions have become pathways, not just of our own initiatives, but of the settler colonial project of social work.

Settler colonialism, as we know it, is an extractive exercise: it extracts land, resources, humanness. These extractive processes are divisive, removing people from family, community, and creation in a way that severs the whole and violently isolates pieces for management, civilizing, or disposal. This atomization is rooted in the Cartesian individual, the liberal, now neo-liberal, belief that the individual is the primary social unit—a kind of ontological supremacy inherent to settler colonialism (Grande, 2004, p. 99). This forms the lens through which life itself is viewed; from which society is organized, problems are understood, and solutions are developed; and which determines what choices are made available to the collective imaginary. A project that both the academy and social work itself are a part of—a settler colonial state-building process.

Both academe and the social work profession extract the individual from the social so the individual can be managed and put into service for the state. The individual and the settler colonial state are established as true, knowable objects—they are constructed as real and eternal. This rolls out in social work practice and education, where Indigenous communities and social workers alike are pulled out of relation and into the Red Road. Indigenous social work in the city facilitates this displacement, violently and otherwise, while at the same time it controls and mediates access to resources, community, culture, and health. Indigenous Peoples can ironically work to rescue social work, even building pathways for it, because it claims to hold some kind of key to these connections. This is a material reality developing on the land that also directs our imaginations to the pathways further entrenched by this process. These stories highlight a trickery that has taken our love and need for family, community, and creation and transformed it into a project of social work futurity. “Gosh, this is tricky,” says Trickster, scratching his head.

This is depicted in Rochelle’s story: social work severed her own and her family’s connections to language, each other, community, and she was made to believe initially that language reclamation can only happen if facilitated through these same institutions. Readers discover with her that the ability to realize the dream she has for her family, the actual healing of language within community, is possible precisely through taking back the power she initially recognized and placed within Indigenous social work. As she described how social work hoards resources and entraps learners within a didactic formal curriculum reproduced endlessly across community—much like her realization about the colonial conflict around standardization of a word for the colour blue—she came to understand that the process of homogenizing and containment within social work actually prevents the relationships necessary to revitalize a living language. That language is healed through connections with *each other* rather than being a resource or skill acquired as an individual through engagement with the state.

Indigenous social work, much like critical academics or critical social work practice, constructs a false choice, a choice to keep people within it. Whether a classic approach of individual clinical intervention or a critical approach that seeks systemic interventions speaking truth to the power of the state, both pick up social work, dust it off, and send it back out to work on Indigenous communities—and both continue in many ways to reify the state, even if it is as the devil we know. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1993) talked extensively about

this phenomenon, the “unrecognized contradiction” of how even radical intellectual traditions work to conserve the west as subject, maintaining its state formations (p. 69). While I am interested in articulating the costs of operating within the profession of social work, I am called to consider what this story landmark can tell us about decolonial possibilities. Harney and Moten (2013) asked, “What would be outside this act of the conquest circle, what kind of ghostly laboured world escapes in the circling act ...?” (p. 34). They took up Spivak and what she referred to as *the first right*, the right to refuse (Paulson, 2016). She described this as the right to refuse that which has been refused to you, like the “choice” to heal Anishinaabemowin within Indigenous social work, which precluded the very thing Rochelle was seeking. Rochelle refused the choice as offered.

Harney and Moten (2013) proposed that the path to a great beyond is paved with refusal (p. 8). Connecting back to Coulthard’s (2014) rejection of the colonial politics of recognition, and to Tuck and Yang (2012) who advanced the understanding that “decolonization offers a different perspective to human and civil rights based approaches to justice, an unsettling one, rather than a complementary one. Decolonization is not an ‘and.’ It is an elsewhere” (p. 36). The story shared here indulges this proposal, to refuse this version of the Red Road, so as to flex our imaginations. It opens with the youngest Indigenous social worker, Nicole Wemigwans, *refusing* her lanyard and leaving the centre of Indigenous social work located at the intersection of Yonge and College, an act rendered unimaginable by critical social work theory. Reignited by this refusal, I followed Nicole to a place beyond the profession where what is possible can be reimaged. Nicole, and later Rochelle, sought an elsewhere, an escape from social work.

In *A Poltergeist Manifesto*, Cree writer and scholar, Billy-Ray Belcourt (2016), explored escape with his queer Indigenous poltergeist. He drew from Jodi Byrd’s (2011) book, *The Transit of Empire*, which traced the epistemological leaps through which the concept of *Indianness* came to align with the savage other. Civilizing the other is the rationale for colonial domination that continues to inform western philosophy, and indeed the academy and social work’s thinking and behaviour—its very mission (p. 27). Belcourt (2016) explained how “Indigenous peoples have therefore labored to explain away this savagery, reifying whitened rubrics for proper citizenship and crafting a genre of life tangible within the scenes of living through that are constitutive of settler colonialism” (p. 23). As he explained,

these scenes, however, are dead set on destroying the remnants of that savagery, converting their casualties into morally compatible subjects deserving of rights and life in a multicultural state that stokes the liberal fantasy of life after racial trauma at the expense of decolonial flourishing itself. (p. 23)

If settler colonialism is a fortress of civilization, Belcourt’s prose is a plea for Indigenous Peoples to stop articulating themselves in a way that *expands* this enclosure. In Regent Park, where Nicole and Rochelle are found, the land echoes this reality of the Red Road in the gentrification encroaching on the landscape from the direction Nicole is attempting to leave behind and in the failure of the new development to offer relief in the heat of the day.

Belcourt (2016) considered that escape may be facilitated by embracing that which made Indigenous Peoples uncivilized in the first place. I ponder as I watch Trickster attempting to pace along the curb, failing to balance like a tightrope walker. *Flop*. The opposite of this civilizing, extractive, atomization, enclosure, management, which I described earlier, is not the

reform of the system to make new things knowable, categorizable, and manageable by the state—by social work—but to be unmanageable, unprofessional. Rather than extending and fortifying the pathways of Indigenous social work—of the Red Road—decolonial possibility lies *beyond* it. In this, the power of the liberal colonial state is its Achilles heal—the need for the individual—and so its antithesis is that which is not individual, a commons, a collective that has always existed within Indigenous lives and ontologies. A kind of prefigurative politic, or what Kelly Aguirre (2015) referred to as a *Refigurative* politic, found within the stories of those regenerating particular and substantive alternatives to colonial forms of relationality (p. 187). A process seen in Rochelle’s story, which does not simply foreground tragedy but brings decolonial possibilities into focus. Like that tiny rock in the river, Rochelle redirects her choices, ideas, and efforts away from Indigenous social work, and the kind of vertical configuration that reifies settler colonial state relations, and towards a horizontal orientation in which life and language flourish within networks of relationships. As Algonquin scholar Mallory Whiteduck (2013) reminded us,

when we write, Native writers are responsible to our families, our communities, and the larger Native academic community. Our stories represent a fundamental love and respect for our homeland, and writing them ensures our children can return home regardless of their physical location. Through stories we can achieve decolonization by responding to past and ongoing oppression, while actively moving beyond it. Continuance manifests when we thrive in a space of our own....
(p. 72)

Whiteduck further bound land and story together, explaining how decolonization is facilitated by the strength of this connection and tested by whether it brings our families home. Rochelle’s story powerfully recentres this Indigenous futurity, as she explored the pathways of Indigenous social work, considering whether they led her children away from or towards these relations. In many ways, this story landmark begs consideration of what may be possible if Indigenous Peoples and others divest ourselves from social work. As Rochelle continued with her family eastward, even further beyond the pathways of Indigenous social work, in a simple and powerful exchange with her children in Anishinaabemowin, how the conditions for life to thrive can be found outside the boundaries of the profession becomes evident.

The powwow is wrapping up. “Come on!” says Trickster as he skips across the street. *Honk. Hoonk.* People are leaving. Trickster helps fold tables and collapse canopies. There are lots of hugs and high-fiving. *Chuckle.* I wander across to the field. The impressions from the gathering are still held by the grass. *Shuffle Shuffle. Shuffle.* The stories shared here today are a reminder that there is and always will be existence beyond the boundaries of the colonial state. Expressed in both the content of this work, and its form, our present and futures are a *creative* exercise. While these stories explore how we have created pathways of Indigenous social work into the world, they remind us we can create into the world again. That it is possible to give ourselves and each other permission to peer over the confines of the Red Road that limits our view, and to enter these borderlands so we can be together and in the world in other ways. What may be possible if Indigenous social work is refused and the imagination opened to decolonial possibilities foreclosed along the boundaries of the profession, where deprofessionalization, abolition, and creating for Indigenous futurities become real choices, opportunities to get to worlds unimaginable within the current one.

I watch Trickster run off into the distance and hope these stories may offer something to those who are travelling these pathways with me and to those who may come after us, to run towards decolonial futures. *Shuffle. Shuffle. Shuffle.* I come to the edge of the park, and while the boundary is marked only by a strip of gravel, I have a sense that this journey has led me to a great wall. *Tap. Tap.* While they have set out a new obstacle, I can feel these next steps are leading me home.

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