

Mapping Out Indigenous and Racialized Critical Community-Based Perspectives and Experiences in the Time of COVID

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has had many implications for the lives, health, and well-being of Indigenous and racialized queer individuals and communities across the globe. In this article, three queer social workers (two Indigenous and one racialized settler) situated on the traditional territories of the Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabek, and Neutral/Attawandaron people discuss lived experiences of social isolation and mental health, while navigating work, education, and moments of resilience, in their communities of belonging. Through a circle process, they discuss the implications of social isolation for queer Indigenous, and racialized-settler individuals in the context of shifting notions of community due to the pandemic. The authors engage with unique intersectional social work standpoints that are steeped in Indigenous-centred, critically reflexive, queer, intersectional feminist, and relational approaches that highlight the politics of care, relational accountability, and relationship with Creation and ethics during COVID-19. The article concludes with recommendations for social work practice with Indigenous and racialized queer communities.

Keywords: COVID-19, Indigenous, communities of belonging, mental health, racialized

In Canada and globally, the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted the lives, health, and well-being of Indigenous and racialized queer individuals and communities. Below, the lived experiences and stories of three queer Indigenous and racialized social workers traversing life, work, family, community, ceremony, and education during the pandemic are illuminated. Using a circle format, the authors share their experiences related to mental health and well-being, activism, and belonging in varying communities of belonging. In conclusion, the authors offer some considerations for social work practice with Indigenous and racialized queer communities.

The three of us met weekly on Zoom [software platform] to participate in round-table circle discussion and to write together. The circle-discussion process involved starting our meetings with a smudge and then closing with a prayer. Starting in a good way, which honoured our community and familial traditions, meant being intentional with our gatherings from our unique positions. Amanda suggested we share tea, fruit, and snacks; Giselle smudged; and Maryam did opening and closing prayers, when we expressed gratitude to the Creator and each other. At each Zoom gathering, we did a check-in about living life during the pandemic, talked about our feelings, and shared thoughts related to writing this article. We traced our journeys of what being in community looked like across the four seasons (spring, summer, fall, and winter). Several questions and statements guided our weekly discussions:

- What was it like for you when COVID-19 hit?
- What were you experiencing in terms of social isolation, mental health, work, education, and fleeting moments of resilience in your communities of belonging?
- How did the relationships with land, Creation, community, and time shift?
- What were some losses and gains experienced?

Locating Ourselves

We have unique standpoints and lived experiences. Below, we share aspects of positionality and its intersections that we want to emphasize and lift up in this article.

Amanda

I am a partner, “Mama” to two young children, a member of the queer and Two-Spirit communities. I am of mixed Anishinaabe and white settler ancestry. My maternal family comes from Flying Post First Nation, and my great-grandparents were traditional hunters and trappers on the land near our traditional territory. While I am a second-generation residential-school survivor and grew up as a white-coded,¹ urban Indigenous community member, the legacy of my great-grandparents’, my grandmother’s, and my mother’s intimate relationship with the land heavily influences my own traditional knowledge and my identity as an Anishinaabe person. I am a PhD student in social work, and one of my academic goals has been to incorporate traditional knowledge of the land into my research lens.

Giselle

My ancestors travelled the globe to ensure my presence in the world. My paternal grandfather is from India and immigrated to Kenya, where he met my maternal grandmother, who was from the Seychelles Islands. My dad was born in Kenya and grew up bi-racial in a segregated country. He immigrated to Treaty 3 territory, where he met my birth mother. My maternal grandfather was Métis from the Red River, and my maternal grandmother (Nana) was Irish. My first mom died when I was young, so it was my second mother who raised me; she was Oneida and Scottish. I experience the world as a queer, cis, disabled, white-coded, mixed-race Métis woman. My Spirit name is Niigaanii Zhaawshko Giizhigokwe.

Maryam

I identify as a racialized, queer South Asian cis woman with a visual impairment. As a settler on Indigenous land, I constantly struggle with reconciling and making sense of my existence, which comes at a cost to Indigenous Peoples. Thinking reflexively about my existential purpose in this world, I take seriously my responsibility as a social work educator (non-tenured, full-time faculty member) and activist within the larger queer Muslim community while holding steadfast to relational accountability (Absolon, 2019a, 2019b) and minimizing harms.

¹ I reference Métis writer, Chelsea Vowel’s (2017) interpretation of white-coded to acknowledge both my fair skin and white-passing privilege and also to acknowledge the colonial violence that Indigenous persons with white skin experience as the result of intergenerational trauma, cultural disconnect, and racist policies. This term acknowledges the privilege that comes with having white skin and with passing in public spaces but also holds space for the ongoing cultural harm to our Indigenous cultural identities that we carry.

Tracing Journeys Through Wholism: Medicine Wheel and Seasons

Experiences of our intersectional identities discussed below are represented wholistically² using a Medicine Wheel framework and teachings, as discussed by Anishinaabe scholar Kathy Absolon (2010), Mi'kmaq and Celtic scholar Cyndy Baskin (2011), and Cree scholar Michael Hart (1999) in their own explorations of wholistic social work. Notably, in our experiences and beliefs some Muslim and South Asian cultures coincide with Anishinaabe understandings of the cycles of the moon and seasons. The Medicine Wheel teachings, in many Indigenous communities, represent aspects of Creation that speak to the turning of the seasons, healing, balance within oneself and the universe, and individual and community health and well-being. For example, in our conversations the Medicine Wheel represented experiences embodied through the four seasonal directions. The *East* represents the Spirit quadrant and spring season. The *South* represents the emotions and relationships quadrant and the summer season. The *West* represents the mental well-being quadrant and the fall season. Lastly, the *North* represents physical health and well-being and the winter season.

For many Indigenous Peoples, time is not linear but cyclical (Deloria, 2003). Everything is in motion, and therefore as authors we must look at the whole to see patterns (Little Bear, 2000). From the land, we can see the changes through “animal migrations, cycles of plant life, seasons,” and seasonal cycles are one way to trace time from our “particular spatial location” (Alfred, 2009, pp. 9–10). As authors, we conceptualized this article within the seasons of the pandemic from our wholistic locations—where we physically resided, our spirits, emotions, relationships, and our minds. In Anishinaabe teachings, seasonal cycles represent periods of change. Spring is a time of renewal and new beginnings (Absolon, 2010). In summer, we “draw from the richness around us” (Borrows, 2019, p. 67), and in the fall season, we are “encouraged to prepare for a period of sustained reflection and observation” (p. 67). Winter is a time of sharing stories, sitting in circle, and healing (Absolon, 2010). As we authors gathered together to reflect on the ways our experiences of the pandemic were related to our individual identities as Indigenous and racialized queer people, we grounded ourselves first in considering the seasons and the ways that our experiences were different that year.

Spring 2020

Amanda

As a parent with two young children, social isolation was a period that was physically and mentally hard. This was made more intense because my partner and I juggled two full-time jobs, working from home and parenting our kids. On Friday, March 13, 2020, our children’s daycare closed for what was initially announced as a two-week closure that ended up lasting six and a half months. When our daycare first closed in mid-March, I made a conscious decision to spend more time with my children outside and dedicate time to learning more about Anishinaabe land-based cultural knowledge.

Not long into the pandemic, we started to lose access to the land. First, playgrounds and local parks closed, followed within weeks by the closure of conservation areas and the

² For further reading and exploration of wholistic social work, see Absolon (2010), Hart (2002), and Hill and Wilkinson (2014).

blockading of public trail-access points. I remember driving with my children for half an hour to find a trail or public space where we could be outside, one without barricades and threats of prosecution, just to witness the buds growing on the trees. I remember seeing the orange trail-blocking signs signalling the closure of trails. A new feeling emerged: I was actively being blocked from practising my culture and so were my children. This feeling created a point of connection to my ancestors. Was this a tiny thread of shared experience with what it might have been like for my ancestors to learn that they were no longer able to access their land? It was not the land preventing us from being there or even the pandemic itself, rather it was the external policy of non-Indigenous organizations laying claim to land governance. I recall feeling depressed as we watched the buds of spring grow from a distance and not being able to greet it this year. As Indigenous Peoples, our well-being is connected with the land, and this had not been considered by the settler leadership. Not having access to the land, amid the stress of dealing with a pandemic, while juggling work, life, and parenting, I experienced cultural grief and a loss of tradition.

Giselle

In early March 2020, I was actively organizing in solidarity with Wet'suwet'en.³ As a PhD student in social work, I had helped organize a student demonstration during which we left our classes and school building to participate in a round dance on the main street of Kitchener, Ontario. I was connecting with others to discuss how to support the ongoing blockades and was acting as a surety for land defenders. My activism was abruptly halted with COVID-19 despite activist movements moving online. I was too overwhelmed.

On the eve of the shutdown announcement, I became physically ill. My community rallied to take care of my daily needs, bringing me prepared food and groceries. Friends and family were calling regularly to check in on me. Even with all the love, I was feeling vulnerable and lonely. Not having a partner or children, I was struggling without physical touch from another human. It was eight weeks before I had my first hug.

Maryam

I am someone in recovery from addictions and ongoing mental-health challenges, and with COVID-19 I commenced the impossible acrobatics of trying to juggle madness, work, family, kin, and community needs, while trying desperately to stay “safe,” to stave off a complete breakdown, and to stay afloat. The “business as usual” and “staying positive” mantras at work exhausted me. I was a dishrag on its way out.

The pandemic jaundiced the queer Muslim community with its “new realities and new normals.” *Could I still attend communal prayers in person? What is going to happen to all the in-person social, cultural, and political events which keep community grounded and sustained? What does being in community look like now?* These questions were flurrying all around me in dialogue and conversations since there was much confusion and misinformation about COVID-19! The pandemic made everything feel fast, unsafe, and unpredictable. I felt as if I needed to work overtime to keep up with new information and everyday happenings. The queer Muslim community, already marginalized, built on the shoulders of a few community members,

³ For more information on Wet'suwet'en, please see <https://unistoten.camp/about/wetsuweten-people/>

began to slowly unravel. People started to die from COVID-19, and substance and alcohol use increased. Some queer Muslims hid further inside the closet, some had to return to abusive and uncomfortable family situations, and some with financial and resource capital, like me, floated in and out of crisis. People were afraid. I was afraid. I felt the oppressive lures of isolation and relapse on the horizon.

Summer 2020

Amanda

In my understanding, survival for Indigenous community has always meant to *pull together*. My grandmother speaks of survival and resilience from her residential-school experience in terms of the relationships she had with her peers and the ways they would uplift, inspire, and protect one another and the most vulnerable during those times. My childhood memories are mainly of outdoors, of being surrounded by a strong community of aunties, cousins, and grandparents around to ensure that my needs were met. Community and culture are so intertwined for me.

As a queer Indigenous family with children, summertime is a season of community gatherings and celebrations of identity. We make a point to travel to Pride Month celebrations in Toronto (an annual event with a goal to feature and celebrate LGBTQ2S⁴ community), not just to visit with our LGBTQ2S chosen family and friends but also so that our children can see their family visible, reflected, and celebrated. Indigenous Peoples' Day events and community Powwows offer not just an opportunity to learn and gather with community but also a place for our family to feel a sense of belonging and pride in our community connections and cultural traditions.

Giselle

Summer was a welcome relief from the loneliness of spring. Being outdoors more often, having access to the land (without the worry of being policed) and being able to gather with some family helped with the loneliness. During this time, the rules of how many people could gather in "bubbles" became a bit more complicated. I felt very anxious that if I contracted COVID-19, I would have to disclose all the people I had seen. I was reminded of my time working in the HIV/AIDS community, and conversations about COVID-19 seemed similar to conversations about safer sex and disclosure. I openly talked about my bubbles with friends and family yet felt awkward because of feelings of shame, and balancing these took a significant toll on my mental health.

Over the summer my twin died. Maria and I had spent one weekend a month together for the past 10 years as a commitment to our love-ship. Immediately after her death, I felt her presence in the trees and wind. She was so joyous about life and, despite my sorrow; it was difficult not to be joyous for her Spirit journey. Because of the pandemic, the celebration of life we had was a small outside ceremony underneath the cedars. Although there was to be no hugging, our bodies pulled together like magnets.

⁴ The acronym LGBTQ2S refers to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Two-Spirit people.

Maryam

Summer is a time for rejoicing with family, kin, and community—to host gatherings laden with food and love. This season was especially hard because of the social-gathering restrictions that limited the number of people one could have over. In the news, there were many stories about South Asians being chastised and fined for holding community gatherings like weddings and celebrations of cultural and religious high holidays. Community gatherings were banned, and the South Asian community was targeted unfairly through the use of racist tropes and discourses in the media and by politicians. *What about the anti-masker and white-supremacist gatherings?* You did not hear that on the news.

I became isolated, and this impacted my mental health in mainly negative ways. I usually use summer to “recharge my batteries” with community for the upcoming school year. Instead, I was feeling even more depleted. I spent the summer anxious and fearing getting sick. Connecting online over Zoom, Skype, or Whatsapp did nothing for me. I was left with more longing and fear. Again, I turned myself to work, driven by anxiety mainly about the implications of online and remote teaching for my eye health. My visual impairment did not gel well with such teaching as it pushed all interactions (meetings) and discussions to online platforms. I spent the entire summer turning all of my in-person courses into online- and remote-learning-friendly delivery methods. This was highly taxing on my eyes. I was on my own. I felt like a relapse was around the corner.

Fall 2020

Amanda

In the spring and summer, I had turned to the cultural teachings of land and to community to get me through and to help to offer some enrichment for my children and family. I used these lessons in my work with Indigenous students, modelling ways to reconceptualize learning and work throughout the pandemic. Even though the work looked different, threads of survival and cultural pride could still be fostered.

This strategy faltered in the fall as I found myself turning inward to a place of thinking, preparation, and depression. My children were able to return to daycare, but I was burnt out. I struggled with maintaining mental well-being amid the continuing uncertainty about the safety of schools and daycare and the growing second wave of infections. The weather turned colder, and an impending sense of doom set in. *What would we do?*

Giselle

Grief over my twin’s death was becoming more acute, as we had planned a two-week holiday in the fall. Instead of this holiday, I rented a cottage, and my intention was to rest, grieve, and be in ceremony. I was feeling the impacts of the cancellation of ceremonies, Pride, and Powwows over the summer. This lack of connection to Creation, ceremony, and community, coupled with profound grief, left my spirit feeling depleted. When I went up north, I brought my medicines to feast my twin’s Spirit with each meal. Because of chronic aches and pains and precarious mental health, I often sat and spent time with my relatives in Creation. For two weeks, I did just that: I sang songs of prayer and gratitude. I wept and I journalled. I had conversations with the cedar trees, squirrels, fish, and wind. I was reminded of the gifts of life and love. Death and grief no longer became overwhelming; instead, love and gratitude surfaced in

new ways. I could hear my twin's joyous laughter. Her presence comforted me. She was one of my ancestors now, and I could feel her in the company of my first mom and sister, who had made their journeys into the Spirit world many years ago.

Maryam

The new school year came at a high cost because I had missed out on summer community gatherings and recharging. I struggled with managing mental health and recovery (after a relapse in late August), visual impairment, and the constant push to produce and perform as a strong and competent instructor. *How could I model productivity, strength, and mentorship for the incoming MSW⁵ students when I was barely getting by?* I knew I was going to get poor course evaluations. They do not capture the intersectional nuances of positionalities, abilities, and sociopolitical, historical, cultural, and mental-health contexts. I am not tenured. I struggled with offering support to peers and students and attempting to create an online community. My teaching evaluations came back, and I was left with a bad taste and felt defeated. I had another relapse during the so-called "holiday" December break. I went to the doctor to increase my medications.

Winter 2021

Amanda

My instincts in winter are to follow the teachings of the bears and the animals: stay in, cozy up, and share stories and times indoors with family and friends. In the winter of 2021, I found myself vacillating wildly between feeling stagnant and stuck, mourning the lost opportunities of the past year, and seeking opportunities for the upcoming spring and summer seasons.

As a doctoral student, academically it felt hard. I felt caught between a sense of urgency about my community and professional responsibilities and trying to attend to academic work that felt more abstract and less immediate. My priorities were consistently my family and community, and at the same time there was tension as I was called to prioritize my academic work. This was hard—the foundation of my academic work was within my community. I had a responsibility to ensure my community was doing okay. Once again, I was struggling with the tension between my values and the dominant values of the post-secondary institution where I work.

My professional work has centred on supporting Indigenous students who, by virtue of our shared experience as Indigenous persons with similar colonial histories and experiences within post-secondary spaces, are an extension of my own communities. I have spent considerable time thinking about what they were going through and how I could be supportive. I had a responsibility to the students, to the community, and to that circle of connection. This is what it has meant to practice social work from an Indigenous perspective—to recognize my own place in the circle. I was not so good yet at holding space for myself in that circle; that part was a work in progress.

⁵ Master of Social Work degree.

In March 2021, a year to the day that my children's daycare had closed and our lives had shifted with the pandemic, I received a COVID-19 vaccine. In my mind, the vaccine offered hope to our family that we might be able to reengage more quickly in some of the Indigenous community building and cultural relearning that we had lost, not just in the previous year, but throughout the Nation's history. I found myself looking forward to spending time with my grandparents and the other community Elders. In the previous year, I had missed their laughter and come to realize the ways their words helped me to ground experiences in traditional teachings and our community history.

My maternal grandmother passed away in April 2021. I found myself thinking about her and the way that she had taught me to relate to my own identity through my relationships with the land, and how hard that had felt in the previous spring when we had not been able to access outdoor spaces during the first lockdown. I think of my grandma when I walk in the bush. She taught me that it is absolutely possible to know the land so well that you never get lost out there.

Giselle

Winter transitions are always difficult for me. As the days become shorter, I feel the lack of sun and daylight throughout my lodge of life. I can anticipate depression setting in, and the impending doom is palpable. In late October, my 87-year-old father fell and broke his hip. No one was home so, when the neighbour found him, he was rushed to the hospital for emergency surgery without family around. No one could visit because of COVID-19. His mental health deteriorated quickly. He was hallucinating and confused. My five sisters and second mother were panicked and enraged because we knew he was not getting adequate care. Trying to manage a crisis during a pandemic is particularly challenging. All six of us would have been visiting my dad regularly. I kept putting sema [tobacco] down for his recovery. My second mom started to get brief visits at the rehab [rehabilitation hospital], six feet away from him and wearing a mask. However, on the day my father was being released from the rehab centre, my second mom died very suddenly. The shock and grief were unbearable.

This was the second memorial and funeral I would help organize during the pandemic. There was no touching or hugging family and friends for comfort. Our grief, coupled with my dad's physical recovery, was overwhelming. I moved in with my father on a part-time basis to help care for him. Several weeks later, a friend died of COVID-19. I remembered someone saying that when you are part of particular communities, you experience death more frequently. I felt this acutely.

Maryam

The new year felt like the year before. Everything was the same. I was so exhausted from teaching and performing in the fall semester that I couldn't bring myself to prepare for the winter semester. To be honest, I barely got by. The students found a lot of errors in my course outlines. I did my best to apologize and be flexible. It felt like I was apologizing to everyone all the time. *Sorry, about not performing because my mental health is suffering.... Sorry, my eyes are beyond tired and fatigued.... Sorry, my headaches are getting out of control because of the online Zoom meetings.... Sorry, I exist....* I looked ahead to summer 2021 and made so many promises to engage in community, to enjoy being outdoors more, and to work less. I did

not want to repeat last summer. I felt defiant. I was not sure if my intentions would come to fruition. I had some hope.

Implications for Wholistic Social Work Practice

Our conversations revealed how specific aspects of intersectional identities were impacted by the pandemic. Our conversations also revealed that we could not return to the pre-pandemic world because pre-COVID-19 lives seemed like a faraway dream. Tracing our experiences wholistically through the teachings of the Medicine Wheel helped us to understand that the COVID-19 pandemic had wreaked havoc on our spirit, emotions, relationships, mental health and well-being, and physical health and well-being. Some implications for social work include the following:

- Fundamental aspects of ourselves and linkages to communities of belonging were out of sync and unbalanced. Pre-COVID, we were able to engage in community celebrations, communal grieving, holding and hugging loved ones, and being on the land.
 - The East direction, which represents Spirit and the spring season, was marked by generations of land and loss, and mechanisms of surveillance (policing) orchestrated when main trails, parks, and conservation areas were closed during the spring. We were all affected by the lack of access to communal prayer, ceremony, healing, grieving, and celebrations.
 - The South direction, which speaks to emotions and relationships and the summer season, was a time when our identities as queer people were felt strongly. This was the case because our communities of belonging provide invaluable support in a world where stigma, racism, and isolation reign; the absence of community was particularly jarring.
 - The West direction represents the fall season and the mental-health and well-being quadrant of the Medicine Wheel. During this time, we experienced fluctuations in our mental health that had varying repercussions: depression, anxiety, increased medication, relapses, and further isolation.
 - The last quadrant, North, represents physical health and well-being in the winter season. The advent of online teaching and learning severely compromised our ability to cope with varying disabilities and growing anxieties. The continued losses (death of family and friends) alongside the distanced gatherings and funerals led to increased fatigue and unbelievable exhaustion.
- The pandemic also has had significant impacts on our teaching and learning. Pre-COVID-19, we engaged in in-person learning and teaching, gathering in hallways and parking lots to have conversations. As doctoral students and instructors we have been stretched beyond our limits trying to lift up our spirits while also being accountable to many communities. For example, being doctoral students, we have lost a year of funding and “productivity,” which has affected our academic curricula vitae (another colonial hoop), and for instructors the loss of productivity could affect advances toward tenure. Even though we had academic privilege, there was *no* room in the machine to mitigate the intersectional impacts of COVID-19 on our teaching and learning as racialized and Indigenous people. It is clear within this setting who was being productive, and that

- continued to be white, cis gender, heterosexual men who were sheltered through systems of white supremacy and colonial privilege.
- Pre-COVID-19, our communities continued to experience everyday and systemic coloniality and othering. The economic, social, cultural, and land-based disparities caused by historical and ongoing coloniality and imperialism were highlighted extensively throughout the pandemic. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to practise from the politics and ethics of care, truth-telling, relationality, reciprocity, and love despite the pandemic (Absolon, 2010; Vareed, 2017). The pandemic has erased and minimized these dynamics, and practising and honouring these relationships and principles can be acts of resistance and defiance.
 - Truth-telling involves recognizing that social work discourse and mainstream practice is grounded in Eurocentric values, systems, and colonial oppression, which has harmed and continues to harm those outside of Euro-Western norms (Hart, 2002). For example, marginalized Indigenous and racialized communities rely on members of their community to get by because of anti-Indigenous racism, xenophobia, and anti-South Asian and anti-Black racisms. All of us draw from our communities of belonging and on the social and emotional reserves of support and labour, alongside resistance and resilience, within our communities. Our communities are struggling because of the unequal distribution of wealth and the systemic injustices faced by Indigenous and racialized communities through years and years of myriad state-sanctioned oppressions (Blackstock, 2017).

Conclusion

Utilizing a wholistic framework provides an opportunity to untangle ourselves from colonial social work education and practices. Indigenous wholistic social work recognizes that individuals are interconnected and inseparable from family, community, Nations, and Creation. Reaching for harmony and balance strengthens connection to ourselves, to families, to communities, and to land (Absolon, 2010; Baskin, 2011; Hart, 2009; Nabigon, 2006). “Community is the water in which we swim. It is both the medium and the message of humans ‘being’ human” (Cajete, 2015, p. xvi). The pandemic separated us from our communities and the impact has had devastating impacts on our wholistic well-being.

As we finalize this article in the spring of 2021, we are looking forward to doing things differently in the summer of 2021, irrespective of how many people are vaccinated and lockdowns. We *will* survive and *be* in community. We will have more robust conversations about managing “risk” to ourselves and our communities, and we will engage in situational and ethical conversations with regard to our wholistic health.

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