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## **(Unsettling) White Queer Complicities: Toward a Practice of Decolonization in Queer Organizations**

Cameron Greensmith  
Kennesaw State University

### **Abstract**

This article expands upon important and growing dialogue around how non-Indigenous peoples can work in solidarity with Indigenous peoples to support their nationhood and sovereignty in the wake of ongoing white settler colonialism in Canada. In particular, this article centralizes queer organizations and implicates their investments in white queerness as sustaining contemporary colonial projects. While queer organizations work toward social change surrounding all things queer and trans, their connections to white supremacy and settler colonialism routinely go unexamined. In an effort to bring light to queer organizations' and workers' complicities in white settler colonialism, this paper makes use of the narratives of 41 non-Indigenous lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) service providers who voluntarily participated in in-depth interviews. By paying attention to their stories of deflections of responsibility in ongoing white supremacist and settler colonial projects, this article considers the extent to which white service providers and service providers of colour can address and embed decolonization within queer organizations in Canada. Together, these non-Indigenous LGBTQ service providers, organizers, and activists carry the potential to utilize their own experiences and understandings of complicity to shape their relationships with Indigenous peoples in ways that support their nationhood and sovereignty.

*Keywords:* decolonization, complicity, queer organizations, white settler colonialism, Toronto

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In her groundbreaking book *Being Good, Being White: White Complicity, White Moral Responsibility, and Social Justice Pedagogy*, Applebaum (2011) theorized the various ways in which the systemically advantaged (white subjects) are complicit in structural injustice (white supremacy). For Applebaum, “‘the white complicity claim’ maintains that white people, through the practices of whiteness and by benefiting from white privilege, contribute to the maintenance of systemic racial injustice” (p. 3). In theorizing white complicity, Applebaum noted that simply acknowledging one’s complicity in systemic injustice is not enough to challenge the ways in which white supremacy structures everyday life: White people must work toward dismantling the very systems from which we benefit. Naming white complicity provides white people the opportunity to locate their whiteness structurally and invites whites themselves to make change to combat racism (Applebaum, 2011; Hill-Collins, 1993).

While Applebaum's work on white complicity shifts discussions away from individual articulations of white privilege, her work does not explicitly address the ways in which theories of white complicity may sustain and normalize historical and contemporary forms of settler colonialism. To ignore or disconnect settler colonial formations from white supremacy does a disservice to the interlocking nature of violence that Indigenous peoples<sup>1</sup> continue to face. Byrd (2011) argued that settler colonialism is "predicated upon discourses of [I]ndigenous displacement" (p. xvii). Meaning that, settler colonialism naturalizes the erasure, assimilation, and dispossession of Indigenous peoples, communities, nations, and lands. Under these circumstances, a settler colonial analytic provides the capacity to address "the logic[s] of superiority, of primacy, [and] of genocide" (Mikdash, 2013, p. 32). As Waldorf (2012) argued in her critique of Applebaum, "Complicity in settler colonialism is also a matter of existing or being on land that was and continues to be stolen from Indigenous peoples" (p. 39). While theories of white complicity have provided necessary criticisms of structural racism in the lives of white people and their seeming "good" actions and intentions, as a theory, it must engage with the interlocking impact of settler colonialism, so as not to erase the historical and contemporary violence that Indigenous peoples continue to face.

Complicity, then, is a call to action—to acknowledge and work against systems of oppression from which dominant subjects benefit. Cannon (2012) noted that white settlers and people of colour have a responsibility to address the uneven and life-altering impacts of white settler colonialism facing Indigenous peoples, communities, and nations. Cannon is not alone in calling attention to the complicities of white settlers and people of colour; indeed, critical Indigenous studies scholars have noted that non-Indigenous peoples must take responsibility for historical and contemporary wrongdoings of settler colonialism (Alfred, 2005, 2009; Cannon, 2012; Dion, 2009; Monture-Angus, 1995, 1999). Notably, this call to action on the part of non-Indigenous peoples has been sparked by Tuck and Yang's (2012) important essay, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," in which they critiqued the use of decolonization within social justice endeavours and movements, arguing that decolonization can no longer be used as a metaphor: "When metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future" (p. 3). As a metaphor, decolonization has the potential to lose its connection to materiality and the land, and to continue white settler colonial projects.

Queer organizations—social services, health care, and educational initiatives—are sites that often mobilize the language of decolonization and Indigenous

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<sup>1</sup> I use "*Indigenous or Indigenous peoples* [to] refer to the original inhabitants of a particular geographic territory or area, as well as to collective Indigenous peoples internationally" (Madjidi & Restoule, 2008, p. 78). Due to settler colonization across the Americas, *Indigenous peoples* is used to connect "the people of the land" to ever-increasing inequalities that worked to erase (e.g., residential or boarding schools), inflict violence upon (e.g., the child welfare system), and kill (e.g., smallpox blankets) Indigenous peoples. Thus, there is also power in the word *Indigenous*—as a refusal to be erased from the ongoing forces of white settler colonialism.

solidarity—yet, their actions often go unexamined. This paper queerly gazes back upon the queerness of queer organizations to challenge the ways non-Indigenous queer people may be complicit in ongoing white settler colonial projects. Here, queer organizations become important sites for considering the ways in which calls to engage respectfully and responsibly with Indigenous peoples are couched within discourses of inclusion, diversity, and difference (Greensmith, 2018). These queer organizations, with their investments in all things queer and trans, are dedicated to addressing inequalities that manifest through heterosexism and cissexism. And, these organizations are not being challenged for their ability to do such important work in that area; rather, what is at stake here is how normatively white queer organizations and workers alike often use Indigenous peoples in their claims for being woke, anti-oppressive, or doing the work of social justice. This has especially negative consequences for Indigenous peoples themselves, as they routinely are produced as unworthy of services and queer care (Greensmith, 2016). Thus, queer organizations in downtown Toronto, which is in the traditional territories of the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples, and must be challenged for the ways they are complicit in white settler colonialism.

In order to address the various and complex ways non-Indigenous peoples may be complicit in the erasure, dispossession, and genocide of Indigenous peoples, this paper asks: How do the narratives of non-Indigenous LGBTQ-identified service providers shape how they come to know, think about, and understand their own roles and responsibilities in addressing the complexities of white supremacy and settler colonialism? While this paper focuses heavily on the experiences of whites, as always connected to the interlocking violence of white supremacy and settler colonialism, my use of *non-Indigenous* is more pointed; that is, the term is used to hail whites and people of colour in their potential complicities in sustaining white settler colonial violence. And, this is an important distinction, as I elaborate below, as many critical Indigenous studies scholars have called out the ways in which global systems of inequality routinely marginalize Indigenous peoples: these systems that whites and people of colour—often unknowingly—participate in and sustain. Thus, in order to address the particular forms of violence lodged within queer organizations, I first theorize the ways in which innocence and complicity continue to shape white LGBTQ people and their understandings of responsibility, followed by a brief explanation of the methods used for this inquiry. Next, I situate the larger theorization of complicity within the narratives offered by the non-Indigenous research participants. Finally, I offer a set of conclusions as a mode for considering the ways in which non-Indigenous LGBTQ service providers might address their complicities in white settler colonialism in the form of action: decolonization. The resulting discussion provides an avenue through which to consider how non-Indigenous LGBTQ peoples might work within and outside the neo-liberal confines of queer organizations and social movements, and still address their own responsibilities in undoing white settler colonial projects.

### Theorizing Innocence and Complicity

In order to conceptualize how non-Indigenous LGBTQ service providers move toward assertions of innocence, and indeed their own complicities in white settler colonialism and its projects, it is important to look at how innocence has been theorized. Innocence refers to the notion that oppressed individuals and groups are “unimplicated in the oppression of others” (Fellows & Razack, 1998, p. 339). And, as Hill-Collins (1993) noted, “We typically fail to see how our thoughts and actions uphold someone else’s subordination” (p. 25). Indeed, this failure to recognize how our claims to being “only-marginalized” subjects, or only experiencing trauma, can signify complicity in others’ oppression, which illustrates that participation in the marginalization of others requires ongoing interrogation on the part of privileged subjects. Fellows and Razack outlined how, in deflecting their attachments to and investments in white supremacy, white women often naturalize a hierarchical model of oppression, whereby their experiences of sexism are deemed most concerning and valuable—a perspective worth criticizing as white women’s whiteness is compartmentalized when making such a claim. In centralizing their experiences of sexism, white women “race to innocence” by disconnecting from how they may very well contribute to “the oppression of others” by deflecting their responsibility in white supremacist projects (Fellows & Razack, 1998, p. 340). The unmarked nature of whiteness allows for white subjects (e.g., white poor people, white LGBTQ people) to understand their actions as neutral, and thus, see themselves as unimplicated in systems of white supremacy and projects of nation building (Schick & McNinch, 2009). The work noted here on white innocence provides the theoretical backdrop against which to expose the ways in which white LGBTQ subjects—many of whom were interviewed for this project—continue to participate in and sustain white supremacy.

Yet, an analysis of whiteness alone does not adequately address the interlocking nature of whiteness and settler colonialism. In discussing this connection, Razack (2002) argued that investments of white settler<sup>2</sup> innocence, which allow for whites and their descendants to easily understand themselves as naturally connected to the land, further erases the presence of Indigenous peoples. Evocations of white settler innocence impede the ability of whites to consider the everyday conditions contributing to the white settler colonial projects they often belong to. Haig-Brown (2009) also alluded to notions of settler innocence, when asking her non-Indigenous pre-service teachers to consider how the land they reside on—as a place they have made or might be able to call home—is contested. Moreover, as Cannon argued, in order for decolonization to prevail, Indigenous peoples, people of colour, and whites alike must be conscious of the land they reside

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<sup>2</sup> Smith (1999) discussed European settlers’ relationship to colonial power, stating that they “left a permanent wound on the societies and communities who occupied the land named and claimed under imperialism” (p. 21). White settlers, as subjects of the nation-state, are required to subsume a powerful role of complete and supreme authority over Indigenous peoples and their lands. This powerful role is connected to investments in white settler sovereignty and the nation-state, which they are implicated in sustaining as settler descendants.

on, the histories of colonial violence that created the conditions connected to the land, and of the already formed relationships they have with Indigenous peoples.

Greensmith and Giwa (2013) have noted that the question of who is or who is not a settler is unproductive; the analytic rests within the terrain of identity politics and the individual claiming the settler category. Instead, Tuck and Yang (2012) suggested that all non-Indigenous peoples are contributors to settler colonial projects, and contended that they must move beyond evocations of settler innocence, described as “excuses, distractions, and diversions from decolonization” (p. 10). While Tuck and Yang implicate all non-Indigenous peoples as a consciousness-raising tactic, they do so without fully engaging with the racist and colonial conditions that people of colour live through—thus, people of colour specifically have differing relationships to settler colonialism (Amadahy & Lawrence, 2009; Byrd, 2011; Cannon, 2012; Fujikane & Okamura, 2008; Jafri, 2012, 2013; Lawrence & Dua, 2005). For example, Patel, Moussa, and Upadhyay (2015) noted: “Complicity cannot be theorised in isolation. Complicity in one structure does not erase complicities in others. Rather, they are always enabled by, and enable other structures of complicity” (p. 13). While people of colour may be complicit in white settler colonialism, their complicity is evoked differently—either through the context of transatlantic slavery, migration, and forced exile, and/or transnational labour patterns—all of which produce people of colour as Other to the seeming white majority in Canada (Thobani, 2007).

Thus, the resulting discussion of settler innocence and complicity within this paper considers the fissures in history that separate whites from people of colour and highlight the important differences within their relationships to white settler colonialism. This paper shows how within the processes and practices of queer organizations, non-Indigenous LGBTQ service providers move toward settler innocence somewhat differently—as minoritized queer and trans subjects. I extend Tuck and Yang’s (2012) analysis of innocence to bring discussions of whiteness, queerness, and settler colonialism into conversation. I illustrate that, in order to address the workings of white settler colonialism within the context of queer organizations, one must consider how white LGBTQ people’s evocations of innocence are connected to their own (or their organization’s) understandings and articulations of (white) queer politics.

The inception of queer organizations, as a modern (white settler colonial) project, occurred in conjunction with the civil rights movement, deeply tying queer politics and communities to progress (Greensmith, 2018). As Morgensen (2011) argued, “queers within a white settler state ... become modern through homonationalist participation in colonial and imperial rule that awards citizenship for defending the state and educating subject peoples in civilizational values, including sexual modernity” (p. 226). As a result, queer organizations, with their ties to municipal governing structures and their not-for-profit status, rest upon whites having invested in the Canadian nation-state and the settlement process (Greensmith, 2016). White queers are required to justify their work within their pretense of a global “community” as well as appeal to white settler multiculturalism by folding people of colour and Indigenous peoples into projects that still reproduce white

settler colonial power relations. While many Indigenous scholars have noted the complexities that arise in naming one's complicities in white settler colonialism, it is equally important to situate critiques of queer complicity within the lexicon of whiteness. Thus, it is important to engage the multifaceted ways in which both whiteness and settler colonialism work together to marginalize and inflict violence upon both Indigenous peoples and people of colour.

To expose the potential complicities of non-Indigenous LGBTQ people in settler colonialism, I home in on the ways in which queerness is typically conflated with whiteness. This queerness is (re)produced within queer organizations, and thus is worthy of exploration. McNinch (2008) addressed the very real effects of homophobic violence and trauma that gay cisgender men experience in rural Saskatchewan and described the everyday experience of marginalization that “connects ‘(us) fags’ and ‘(them) Indian[s],’ as well as any group with markings of difference” (p. 90). Here, McNinch drew attention toward the potential connections between queers and Indigenous peoples as a helpful starting point; however, in doing so, McNinch's work can easily erase their differences and experiences of oppression. In particular, McNinch's analogy creates two-spirit,<sup>3</sup> queer, and trans Indigenous peoples, as well as queer and trans people of colour, as subjects who cannot bridge the single imaginary of (white) queerness and (straight) Indigenous nations or people of colour. Within this particular reading, perhaps there seems to be a missed opportunity surrounding the ways in which interlocking theories of race and homophobia might work together to create alliances that may not have ever before been imagined or formulated between “‘us (fags)’ and ‘(them) Indians’” (p. 90).

Understanding the complexities that emerge within our individual biographies as they are tied to larger structural apparatuses of violence would make it difficult to make such a connection; instead, focusing on difference, as hooks (2000) has reminded us, may indeed allow for solidarity among groups, who can develop relationships precisely because they understand how they may contribute to the problem—rather than to the solution. This recognition of difference (systems of privilege and oppression) would do away with simplistic, flat articulations of inequality that conflate histories of colonization with that of queer phobia, and allow for “us (fags)” to think differently about how to work with Indigenous peoples respectfully and responsibly.

While McNinch (2008) seems to conflate the oppression (white) queers and (straight) Indigenous peoples experience, Francis's (2011) work discussed how whiteness is mobilized within the queer subversions and performative politics of Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan's “Lesbian National Parks and Services” (LNPS). The LNPS performance intends on destabilizing the heteromascularity attached to wilderness spaces, like national parks, and queering these spaces through the performers' own articulations and understandings of being lesbians (Francis, 2011). Yet, as Francis argued, within these queer subversions, the LNPS performance artists

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<sup>3</sup> *Two-spirit* is an English term used by Indigenous peoples to “reflect their gendered and sexual differences, as well as their connections to Indigeneity” (Greensmith & Giwa 2013, p. 130).

rely “on taken-for-granted ideas about the innocent character of the landscape they inhabit to serve as the backdrop for a performative challenge to masculinist and heteronormative assumptions” (p. 113). Within these disruptions of white heteromascularity, the LNPS performers do not outwardly address the contradictions that exist within their own processes and practices of white settler colonialism. As Francis (2011) suggested, the LNPS performers’ move toward white innocence is a way to remain unimplicated in projects of white supremacy. However, this can also erase the possibility of white lesbians’ upholding and maintaining settler colonialism as they critique the whiteness of heteromascularity. In terms of queer complicity, then, the works of Francis (2011) and McNinch (2008) provided important theoretical avenues through which to address how (white) queers, in divergent ways, can easily deflect their responsibility in sustaining white settler colonialism.

### **Taking a Closer Look: Methods**

Situated within the context of downtown Toronto, this paper bases its inquiry within the narratives of 41 non-Indigenous LGBTQ service providers who have worked or continue to work within large queer organizations. The queer organizations that were chosen indicated in their mission or mandate that they provide their services and supports to LGBTQ communities—often including Indigenous peoples as one of the populations that they serve. Downtown Toronto is one of the few large urban cities in Canada that contain queer organizations, and thus was the ideal place to conduct this qualitative research. Although two Indigenous persons participated in the research project, their interviews were not included, as the primary focal point within this research project is to consider the ways non-Indigenous peoples perceive Indigenous peoples within their work. The Indigenous participants were interviewed to get a complex discussion of the problems affecting queer organizations, and specifically to discuss the ways in which larger queer organizations engaged in partnerships with Indigenous organizations.

I have chosen to primarily focus on investigating the relationship that whiteness and settler colonialism play out in queer service providers’ complicities for two important reasons: (a) I am individually located within the structure and context of white settler colonialism, and (b) the queer organizations under question are over-represented by white people. The analyses I utilize are not intended to call out people of colour; it would be politically problematic to do so, since I have limited lived knowledge of how white supremacy and colonialism impact LGBTQ people of colour.

Of the 41 non-Indigenous LGBTQ people interviewed for this project, 29 identified as white and 12 identified as people of colour. In-depth interviews were used to emphasize the research participant’s own articulations and understandings of social phenomena (Mason, 2009). The goal of the interviews was to centralize the discussion around the ways in which queer organizations include (or do not include) Indigenous peoples and the ways in which service providers themselves imagine how change could happen at the level of practice, policy, and beyond. The interviews analyzed within this paper are organized thematically to address the ways in which non-Indigenous LGBTQ service provider’s stories fit into discourses of innocence

and complicity: what I am calling deflections of responsibility. In order to understand the complexities of experience and knowledge in queer organizations, I employed purposive and snowball sampling methods to recruit research participants. Prospective research participants needed to: (a) understand themselves as non-Indigenous, (b) identify as LGBTQ, (c) work or have worked at a queer organization in the downtown Toronto area, and (d) be over the age of eighteen.

In my initial meeting with the research participants, I discussed the research more specifically, the goals of the project, and how I would ensure confidentiality. In order to ensure confidentiality, some research participants asked that their name and institutional affiliations remain anonymous. As a measure to ensure confidentiality, I have chosen not to name any of the queer organizations. In addition, research participants were provided the opportunity to choose a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. Before participating in the interview, the research participants were asked to sign informed consent documents. Audio recordings of the completed interviews were transcribed verbatim. Once the transcriptions were complete, the recordings were destroyed. Member checking was utilized to ensure the utmost trustworthiness of the data gathered. All of the research participants were given an opportunity to review their interview transcript and the draft of the research project. Many research participants chose not to participate in this process.

### **(White) Queer Complicities**

In order to get fuller pictures of the research participants own articulations of their work, and their relationships to Indigenous peoples, I highlight how the various and complex ways non-Indigenous queer organizations and their workers remain complicit in the ongoing oppression Indigenous peoples face. Three major themes emerged from the research participants' narratives: (a) moving to innocence, (b) complicity as inclusion, and (c) deflections of responsibility. These findings reflect the ways in which the research participants articulated their own understandings of queer organizations and the extent to which Indigenous peoples and nations might be better included. I consider how some white LGBTQ service providers continue to claim innocence in terms of the ongoing oppression of people of colour and Indigenous peoples.

### **Moving to Innocence**

The narratives below depict how some white LGBTQ service providers imagine queer organizations through the lens of trauma—as very real experiences of homophobia and transphobia. The narratives of trauma that are evoked within queer organizations operate to sustain the perception that LGBTQ peoples experience only oppression due to their sexual and/or gendered minority status. In theorizing trauma, I utilize the work of Brown (1995) and Million (2013). Brown described trauma as a “wounded attachment,” whereby subjects connect their experiences of violence to identity-based political movements, and in doing so, re-centre their own pain. I note that being “in pain” can often preclude subjects from acting responsibly to the pressing needs of people of colour and Indigenous peoples. In addition, Million contended that the acknowledgement of Indigenous peoples' trauma has turned into



an industry within the helping professions, whereby Indigenous peoples are only ever imagined as “damaged,” and in need of saving. It is not the experience of queer trauma that is in question here; the issue is how trauma (or our queer wounds) gets used as the basis for doing particular kinds of helping work and can, inadvertently, produce non-Indigenous LGBTQ subjects as complicit. The interviewees’ stories of trauma articulate a sense of the urgency and necessity of the work within queer organizations—and, how this pain shapes their imaginations of service users, and indeed, of queerness.

Josh, a 53-year-old South Asian queer cisgender man, discussed how such a focus on experiences of trauma can sometimes be unproductive and disconnected from his own experiences as a queer person of colour. As he explained:

[At] conferences I see gay men whining about what Catholicism and Christianity has done. I am like, “Oh, for heaven sake, you are 50 years old, get over it, get a grip. Stop blaming your mom and dad and the Church for everything that has happened to you.” I look at the way Western gay culture has been perpetuated and it does not in any way enlighten me. I try to consciously distance myself from it. (13/02/25, Transcript 17, p. 12, Toronto, ON)

Josh’s narrative came out of a larger discussion of the whiteness of gayness and the representations of respectability within LGBTQ communities in Toronto. Josh considered how his experiences as a queer person of colour did not necessarily fit within “Western gay culture.” In the context of discussing conferences that Josh went to, he observed that white gay cisgender men typically evoked the common perception that one’s religious upbringing is anti-gay, and thus they experienced trauma and pain in their present out of those painful (religious) experiences. Josh noted that this perception of trauma, popularized for white gay cisgender men, was not representative of his own experiences as a person of colour. Josh argued that the focus on trauma experienced by white gay cisgender man with a Christian or Catholic upbringing is unhelpful, since it focuses on blame, re-centres the whiteness of gayness, and erases gay cisgender men raised in, for example, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and Jewish families. Josh’s comments echo those of Million (2013), who observed that the violence of religious trauma as a “singular” form of oppression creates a hierarchy within evocations of trauma through which Indigenous peoples’ contemporary experiences of genocide and conquest become disconnected.

After outlining the routine, repetitive trauma that gay men experience, Ryan, a 34-year-old white gay cisgender man with Indigenous ancestry,<sup>4</sup> said: “I just feel that gay men are remarkably well suited to dealing with shit hands. In so many areas of our lives everything is shit and it is accepted and it is fine.... it mystifies me that it is acceptable” (13/03/09, Transcript 23, p. 6, Toronto, ON). Ryan’s narrative is problematic because it invokes a universalizing idea of gayness as experiencing only

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<sup>4</sup> Ryan self-identified as white at the beginning of the interview; yet, as he and I started to develop a relationship and connect, he shared that he recently found out that he has Indigenous ancestry. He did not share anything else with regard to this finding and did not indicate that this had impacted him or his understandings of the work he does.

oppression, which can uplift the pain of white gay cisgender men and leaves their claim to being wounded unavailable to critiques of how their pain is experienced through their whiteness. Ryan's normatively white understanding of "shit hands" experienced through gay oppression, in particular, excludes the multifaceted ways in which violent systems of oppression impact others marginalized by heteropatriarchy who may not necessarily be, nor want to identify as, "gay." That is, the version of "shit hands" evoked by Ryan through his own lexicon erases the ways in which people of colour and Indigenous peoples, who are routinely produced as straight, are erased from experiencing trauma or pain.

Brandon, a 53-year-old gay white cisgender man, discussed with me his thoughts on how there can be similarities between the trauma experienced by HIV-positive gay cisgender men and that of Indigenous peoples.

Q: What is some of the learning that you are getting out of working within your organization?

A: That we have things to learn from the Aboriginal<sup>5</sup> community so a lot of the tools that we are developing ... even the holistic model ... honouring that we are working on Native lands ... I came across the trauma-informed tool kit, which actually came out of [a province in Canada] with a larger Aboriginal influence on its development. It talked about historical trauma. They did not just grow up invalidated for what they did but for who I was. That actually really resonated with me as a gay man [and] informs the work that I do in terms of expanding my own awareness around what does it mean to be Othered. (13/03/09, Transcript 22, p. 6, Toronto, ON)

Brandon's narrative discussed how his learning shifted around the work that he did through a perceived connection to Indigenous peoples and their experiences of trauma. This connection Brandon saw occurred through considering experiences of invalidation as being shared. Yet, within Brandon's narrative, he made a switch from "they" to "I," since the category "gay" cannot be shared and was thus claimed for himself—no matter who (Indigenous or non-Indigenous) is inhabiting it. During Brandon's discussion, he at first understood that Indigenous difference must be acknowledged. Yet, within the particular slippage from "they" to "I," Brandon used (white) gay identity as a way to dissolve difference when considering the collective trauma gay cisgender men and Indigenous peoples experience. Here, gayness becomes produced as a universal—a cross-cultural phenomenon that grants white gay cisgender men "access" to the experiences of (straight) Indigenous peoples whom they otherwise would not be able to say they understand. Returning to McNinch's work, Brandon's narrative showed an attempt to bridge a gap between (white) gay cisgender men and (straight) Indigenous peoples, particularly where he erased the differing experiences of invalidation, trauma, and being Othered. As

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<sup>5</sup> I only use *Aboriginal* within my reporting on the in-depth interviews conducted for this research project. The term *Aboriginal*, unfortunately, is a common trope used within everyday speech to mark, differentiate, and Other Indigenous peoples in what is now known as Canada. In using *Aboriginal*, I acknowledge the ways in which the term was created by the settler colonial Canadian nation-state (Alfred, 2005).

Million (2013) has argued, Indigenous peoples' trauma results from their multigenerational experiences of settler colonial violence that is still occurring in the present day. Thus, the residual (heteronormative) trauma experienced by (white) gay cisgender men cannot be equalized to that of (straight) Indigenous peoples' experiences of colonial violence. Brandon's narrative provides the context in which to consider how Indigenous peoples' traumatic experiences of white supremacy and settler colonialism become folded into a universalizing trauma that is then consumed by white gay cisgender men.

Related to Brandon's narrative on the similarities of trauma between white gay cisgender men and Indigenous peoples is the narrative of Brett, a 31-year-old white queer genderqueer person, who discussed why it is important to consider the impact of colonialism and decolonization within the work that they do.

We need to acknowledge that we live on colonized lands and that we have some major cultural violence going on around Aboriginal people. But then also between the links between the idea of colonialism, decolonization and how that might be applied to other aspects of our [queer] lives and identities. How are queer people colonized by straight people? (13/04/30, Transcript 38, p. 2–3, Toronto, ON)

Brett's narrative addressed the ways in which colonialism continues to inflict violence upon Indigenous peoples and the need for decolonization to occur. In discussing the connection decolonization has to other axes of oppression, Brett asked: "How are queer people colonized by straight people?" By asking this question, Brett could easily erase the historical and contemporary differences in power between white queers and Indigenous peoples within the white settler society of Canada—specifically, how white settler colonialism invites white settlers to participate in its violent projects of Indigenous elimination, and assimilate and surveil the bodies of people of colour. More importantly, Brett's turn of phrase illustrates how (white) queerness is conflated with Indigenous peoples' experiences of trauma and used as the basis from which to interpret any form of trauma, with the result being that if Indigenous peoples are colonized, then that must mean that queers are colonized, too.

Although queer organizations are flourishing and developing rigorous programming and supports for its service users, it is clear from some of the white research participants' narratives that whiteness remains normalized and the differences between white queers and Indigenous peoples are made to dissolve when experiences of queer (gay?) trauma are centred. A hyper-focus surrounding trauma and its alleviation can constrain queer organizations and the ability of its workers to effectively decolonize—especially when they consider themselves to experience only oppression. While the trauma experienced by white LGBTQ service providers comes to constrain the delivery of queer services and the imagination of who is or can be queer, it is also essential to consider how Indigeneity is imagined within queer organizations. Indigenous peoples and cultures continue to be symbolically included by white LGBTQ service providers, which ultimately fuels white settler colonial logics through deflections of responsibility within and outside of queer organizations.

### Complicity as Inclusion

The narratives around Indigenous peoples' inclusion are important to consider insofar as they can easily re-inscribe normatively white articulations of queer organizations. Many of the research participants discussed how Indigenous peoples could be included within the context of queer organizations. In talking about what queer organizations could do differently to be more inclusive of Indigenous peoples, John, a 54-year-old white gay cisgender man, illustrated that there are appropriate avenues for service providers to follow.

Q: What shape would your programs you are involved in take if they were designed to address the needs of Aboriginal people?

A: It would be developed by Aboriginal people for Aboriginal people. Whatever advisory groups or whatever would be [developed would] largely consist of Aboriginal people. I imagine there would be all sorts of community consultations and needs assessments that would specifically ask Aboriginal people what kinds of services they need ... and the hiring of counselling staff or whatever would be from that community and the services would ... refle[t] what the needs assessment would be for them and would be evaluated on a ongoing basis with service users and community people and ongoing connections would happen with other Aboriginal organizations to get ongoing feedback around its effectiveness. (13/03/21, Transcript 30, p. 12, Toronto, ON)

It is important to locate the research participants' narratives within a larger historical critique of social work and service provision, which illustrates that it is comprised of institutions founded upon the death and disappearance of Indigenous peoples (Greensmith, 2016). White service providers have been told for years that service provision needs to stop barring Indigenous participation, permit Indigenous service providers access to Indigenous service users, redirect Indigenous service users to Indigenous service provision, and grant forms of control over Indigenous service provision to Indigenous peoples and communities. John's narrative indicates that white LGBTQ service providers must consult with and indeed let Indigenous peoples and communities have primary say around how queer organizations should operate. However, this queer organizational model is saturated in neo-liberal logics insofar as the appropriateness of the service delivery is not based on Indigenous communities' wants and needs; rather, the service delivery is deemed appropriate only if a needs assessments is measured and deemed effective. This version of inclusive queer organizations illustrates how the effectiveness of programs outweighs the accountability of white service providers (and organizations) to Indigenous peoples and communities. Moreover, it erases the already well established work of Indigenous organizations in Toronto (e.g., 2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations<sup>6</sup> [2-Spirits] and the Native Youth Sexual Health Network<sup>7</sup>).

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<sup>6</sup> 2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations is a not-for-profit organization that works to support Indigenous peoples whom are HIV-positive, LGBTQ, and/or two-spirited in the greater Toronto area by providing education, one-on-one counseling, and other support services.

Another example of how Indigenous peoples' perspectives can be included within queer organizations came from Cassandra, a 29-year-old white lesbian cisgender woman:

Q: How do Aboriginal peoples fit into your motivations in doing this work?

A: I think there are probably ways in which we could incorporate teaching and form a culturally competent space. Not to have myself deliver that, but to have some of our colleagues in the Aboriginal services deliver. (13/02/28, Transcript 18, p. 9, Toronto, ON)

Cassandra's narrative illustrated her view that a queer services delivery model for Indigenous peoples would need to be more "culturally competent" than it already is in her organization, shedding light on its normative whiteness. However, the inclusion of cultural competency, in Cassandra's estimation, should not come from her, but instead, her Indigenous colleagues. Cassandra's narrative points to the ways in which the inclusion of Indigeneity within queer organizations must be framed within a culturally competent approach, which can be criticized as reproducing racist and cultural stereotypes of people of colour and Indigenous peoples (Pon, 2009; St. Denis, 2011). Cassandra's approach to thinking about queer service delivery differently includes placing Indigeneity and Indigenous culture and teachings within an organizational structure that might not necessarily ever meet the needs of Indigenous peoples or communities. Utilizing a culturally competent approach within queer organizations when working with Indigenous peoples can lead non-Indigenous LGBTQ service providers to think in terms of cultural inclusion alone. This move displaces urgent and necessary attention away from its structure, while simultaneously requiring Indigenous peoples to do the work, further placing the responsibility of inclusion onto them.

Josh (quoted previously; see *Moving to Innocence*) spoke with me about how evoking the responsibility of whites, specifically in the form of land recognition, can result in meaningless gestures of inclusion. As he shared:

We do the usual tokenistic sort of declaring that we are on stolen land and that we have never recognized treaties and all that kind of stuff. It is not that we are giving back the land anytime soon. [Laughs]. So we do that disclosure, but I think it is okay, but I really wonder what it means to somebody who is First Nations sitting there. Does it make them feel any better [about] the historical persecution? ... I think we have a long way to go but also I am not the one to make these decisions. People often say to me: "Well, you are racialized because you think it is an issue." The white people [need to start] saying we need to take the steps to show that we actually genuinely care or want to make the change. (13/02/25, Transcript 17, p. 10, Toronto, ON)

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<sup>7</sup> The Native Youth Sexual Health Network is a nation-wide not-for-profit organization that is youth-led. This organization works toward addressing the interlocking inequalities of racism, colonialism, and heteropatriarchy in Indigenous peoples' lives—trying to attend to the urban/rural divide present within contemporary social work and service provision for Indigenous peoples and sexual health.

Josh's powerful narrative illustrated how declarations of the land as stolen—in this case, referring to Toronto as the territory of the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation—during queer conferences and/or workshops made him feel uneasy. Josh asked whether such declarations adequately address the ongoing (historical) prosecution of Indigenous peoples. Within Josh's queer-of-colour criticism of land recognition, he contended that it should no longer be the sole responsibility of people of colour to take up white supremacy and settler colonialism as causes for concern; rather, his colleagues, who are predominantly whites, need to take active steps in meaningfully engaging with Indigeneity and the land. Josh's narrative provides the context in which to consider how queers of colour are working toward understanding the struggles of Indigenous peoples, and provides an opportunity to consider the depths of action required of whites in addressing the historical legacy of white settler colonialism in Canada (in which their organizations are firmly embedded).

Robert, a 32-year-old white queer trans man, illustrated how discussions of the land can often be empty:

I think twice about what [this gesture] actually does when we open a conference or we open a discussion and somebody who is not a white settler says—but who's also not Native—says: "I'd like to thank the people who are lending us our land." It creates some sort of level of recognition in the room. But then some people just roll their eyes. It is like recycling—it makes us all feel better while it's actually still destroying the planet. (13/02/07, Transcript 13, p. 10, Toronto, ON)

Robert's narrative illustrates that queer organizations—specifically service providers of colour—are taking appropriate steps to adequately name the land as contested and "thank" Indigenous peoples for the land. While these declarations of the land do create some sense of recognition, some audience members typically "roll their eyes" in reaction to such a gesture. Yet, the deeper meaning attached to Robert's story involves the audience's reaction to the rolling of eyes when someone is honouring the land and thanking the local nation and community. Robert's narrative also provides the context in which to consider how thanking Indigenous peoples for the land within the context of queer organizations may not be sufficient in adequately addressing the disparities LGBTQ and two-spirit Indigenous peoples experience as a result of ongoing white settler colonialism.

The inclusion of Indigenous peoples within normatively white queer organizations typically occurs through white LGBTQ providers asserting their power and control over Indigenous peoples and communities through the guise of methods and models of inclusion. The whiteness of queer organizations was made to appear through some of the criticism offered by Josh. And despite this criticism, white LGBTQ service providers are re-inscribing the project of sexual modernity as a project of whiteness—further disconnecting the pressing concerns of both people of colour and Indigenous peoples within queer organizations, while also ensuring that the whiteness of the institutional walls are uninterrogated.

While it is clear that white settler colonialism continues to constrain how Indigenous peoples can be meaningfully included within queer organizations, the

stories below provide a more detailed account of how Indigenous exclusion manifests itself. In particular, I take up the stories of white LGBTQ service providers as deflections of responsibility—as justifications for service providers to not include or address Indigeneity within their respective organizations.

### **Deflections of Responsibility**

Some participants demonstrated how white LGBTQ service providers can remain complicit in white settler colonialism through acts of deflection. Ronald, a 32-year-old white gay cisgender man, talked with me about his uncertainty around knowing how queer organizations could be culturally appropriate and relevant for Indigenous service users.

Q: Do you have Aboriginal service users at your agency?

A: I do not know if I know enough about the specific needs of Aboriginal peoples who are accessing community services. I would hope that the shape that they would take would be one that represents those very specific needs. I am sure a lot of it would look very much the same. (13/02/09, Transcript 14, p. 6–7, Toronto, ON)

Ronald illustrated that he did not have enough knowledge of the “specific needs” of Indigenous peoples in Canada to be able to imagine queer organizations differently. Although Ronald indicated that he did not have the appropriate or necessary knowledge of Indigenous peoples and their needs, he was able to articulate his feeling that the organization’s overall structure would not need to change significantly in meeting those needs. In his expression of “not knowing,” Ronald’s narrative acts as a deflection of his responsibility in ongoing white settler colonialism. Thus, his narrative provides an opportunity to consider his and others’ complicity in ongoing white settler colonial projects through a seemingly innocent admission regarding not having enough knowledge.

Similarly, Aaron, a 24-year-old white queer cisgender man, discussed his own trepidation around engaging with Indigeneity within the queer work he did. As he shared with me:

If something comes up that I can read or educate myself on, it [Aboriginal issues] is always something that I try to tackle. It is also something that I would feel ... is an experience that I definitely could not describe in all of the complications that come with it. I am not close to anyone who identifies as Aboriginal or who has come from that background, so it is not even something I can say that I know someone who has had this experience. It is something that I really am interested in and also that I am hesitant, completely hesitant to speak to. (13/04/23, Transcript 36, p. 5, Toronto, ON)

Aaron talked about his hesitation in speaking to Indigenous issues within the work he did. Although he worked to educate himself, due to identifying as non-Indigenous, he was uncomfortable with taking on Indigenous issues. Aaron also spoke of the lack of connection he had to Indigenous peoples within his personal life, which, in his estimation, was another reason why he was uncomfortable with addressing and including Indigenous content in his work. Aaron’s narrative illustrated an active

manifestation of complicity in white settler colonialism, particularly in his exclusion of Indigeneity as an appropriate topic of discussion for himself and within the work that he did. Not speaking to or addressing Indigeneity can easily naturalize the notion that Indigenous peoples only exist in the past—and, if they are seen to be present, their existences become unworthy of meaningful inclusion and disconnected from white queer organizations (Greensmith, 2016).

In addressing the silencing of Indigenous content within queer organizations, Lisa, a 46-year-old mixed-race lesbian cisgender woman, spoke to the fact that people of colour and diasporic people, when accessing newcomer services more generally, are rarely educated on Indigenous issues. As she shared:

When I first came to Canada, I knew nothing about Aboriginal folks. Most of what I learned sort of by the way, and to this day if you were to ask me to speak to the difference between Metis, for instance, and Inuit, I would not know what you are talking about. I educated myself. As a newcomer, it is safe for me to say that there are not many programs that taught me about who was here before I was here. (13/01/15, Transcript 9, p. 1, Toronto, ON)

Within the context of her own experiences and as a queer service provider of colour providing services for LGBTQ diasporic people and LGBTQ people of colour, Lisa pointed out that when she landed in Canada, she did not have a strong understanding of Indigenous peoples here, and as a result, had to educate herself. While Lisa was merely a consumer of immigration policy, it cannot be denied that the forces of white settler colonialism seep into immigration policy, making this seeming erasure of Indigenous peoples ever more real. As Lisa illustrated, white queer organizations rarely educate newcomers about Indigeneity, let alone about the effects of white settler colonialism in Canada. Upon coming to this realization of Indigenous exclusion within queer organizations, Lisa spoke with me about taking it upon herself, in the work that she did, to provide LGBTQ service users of colour and queer and trans diasporic service users with more information surrounding two-spiritedness. Lisa chose to act against the erasure of Indigenous peoples and include two-spiritedness within her workshops, so that LGBTQ service users of colour and queer and trans diasporic service users could not claim that they did not have knowledge of the Indigenous peoples here in Canada.

Finally, Candy, a 27-year-old South Asian genderqueer person, illustrated that a desire to include Indigenous peoples remains among white LGBTQ service providers and in the white queer organizations in which they work. As they explained:

I think we need to talk about colonialistic intent ... moving programming toward what the colonialistic queers want ... I think Aboriginal-specific programming can be great, [but] I wonder what the place would be of [organization name removed]? I think the knee-jerk reaction for us is, “Yes, we have to, we have to do that because of inclusion and all of the other.” Yet, as a QPOC [queer person of colour] I would say that sometimes the deal is that you give money to places that are already doing work with two-spirited people. There is 2-Spirited [People of the 1st Nations]. But, 2-Spirited [People of the 1st Nations] has no funding, they



have no money, and this is the most highly funded LGBT organization in the world. (13/01/15, Transcript 8, p. 11, Toronto, ON)

Candy's narrative illustrates how there is often a desire coming from white LGBTQ service providers to invite diversity and difference into queer organizations. For normatively white queer organizations, the inclusion of Indigenous peoples would make the organization appear more inclusive. However, Candy also directed such a notion of inclusivity toward a "colonialistic intent" that subsumes Indigenous difference within queer organizations. Candy thus offered a queer-of-colour critique to queer organizations that would not require Indigenous peoples accessing services to do the work, suggesting that organizations, such as the one they work for, could provide smaller Indigenous-led organizations like 2-Spirits with more money in order to better serve their own population. Instead of including for the sake of including, Candy suggested that the best way to aid Indigenous peoples is to support already existing organizations that are financially struggling. Candy's narrative points to the barriers posed to normatively white queer organizations and its providers insofar as endeavours of solidarity aim to bring Indigeneity into an already normatively white system. Providing financial support to smaller Indigenous-led organizations would, in effect, challenge the normativity of white settler colonialism embedded within queer organizations.

The narratives offered by the research participants provide a context in which to consider how white peoples can deflect their responsibility in white supremacist and settler colonial processes, practices, and projects, all of which their organizations sustain. The structure of queer organizations warrants further investigation—as a structure that condones Indigenous difference being included and yet simultaneously excluded (Greensmith, 2016). Some queer service providers of colour showed how their practices within queer organizations work toward rupturing the normativity of whiteness within queer organizations. Following Thobani (2007), I argue that larger processes and practices of white settler multiculturalism in Canada encourage white LGBTQ service providers to invite difference into queer organizations while effectively erasing it. In this way, white service providers are often scripted into (often unknowingly) sustaining the logics of white settler colonialism through their attempts to foster inclusivity and diversity within queer organizations. As a result, I call attention to the (proclaimed) innocence of white LGBTQ service providers as an act of deflection that diverts much needed attention away from an analysis of white settler colonialism within the context of queer organizations.

### **Toward A New Future: The Practice of Decolonization**

In light of the very real ways in which white settler colonialism comes to elevate the concerns of white LGBTQ peoples and uphold the power of the normatively white organizations within which they work, I suggest that decolonization can be practiced within queer organizations in Canada. Decolonizing, as a means to end white settler colonialism's grip in Indigenous communities, means for social work and service provision a radical divestment in their current regimes. It also means that social workers might have to give up their privilege (and even their jobs) in order to work against existing white settler colonialism, which social work

readily sustains. For Walia (2013), “decolonization is a generative and prefigurative process whereby we create the conditions in which we want to live and the social relations we wish to have—for ourselves *and* everyone else” (p. 274 ). Walia argued that decolonization occurs both on imaginative and material levels, whereby all non-Indigenous peoples, by virtue of their connections to the land, can challenge the hegemonic power structures (including the organizations in which we work) as one way to work toward effectively ending the global oppression that derides Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty. For Nagy (2013), a practice of decolonization acts to “support and reinforce more acute, immediate processes of healing and renewal while also keeping justice in the foreground as a condition of ‘never again’ inflicting oppression and violence on [Indigenous peoples]” (p. 72). Working toward decolonization within the particular context of queer organizations has both its rewards and consequences. For white LGBTQ service providers, this move toward addressing longstanding white settler colonialism both within the institution and within the above-mentioned evocations of (white) queerness is fraught with difficulty and discomfort.

A practice of decolonization, however, can result in slow but growing changes to larger institutional and societal practices—from which even the field of social work can benefit. At an institutional level, queer organizations can begin to create meaningful partnerships with Indigenous and two-spirit organizations; this might mean filtering existing resources and funds to Indigenous-led organizations and engaging in partnerships that do away with conventional power structures that privilege white settlers. These partnerships—ones that are founded on a coalitional politic that addresses the survival and resilience of Indigenous peoples and nations—should reflect a deep desire on the part of non-Indigenous LGBTQ peoples to work on (at both interpersonal and institutional levels) actively dismantling the white settler colonial conditions that continue to shape queer organizations. It is in this way that decolonization can provide an opportunity to move away from the discursive regimes of white settler multiculturalism and invite possibility, potential, and nuance to an already broken system.

Simultaneously, it is important to look to the subversive attempts of LGBTQ people of colour, such as Josh, Lisa, and Candy, as transcending both white supremacy and settler colonialism within normatively white queer organizations in already-existing attempts to decolonize. Here, white LGBTQ peoples can learn from the risks that LGBTQ people of colour are taking within queer organizations, and begin to take their own active steps to ensure that the death and disappearance of Indigenous peoples, communities, and nations is halted. For white LGBTQ service providers, a practice of decolonization might start with opportunities on individual levels to know, unlearn, give up, or in some ways realize their own roles in white settler colonialism in order to think and act differently. Within the white walls of queer organizations, this might mean naming white supremacy and settler colonialism within the programming, services, and educational initiatives offered—a risky move, since this would likely decrease the amount of (government and private) funding accumulated through private and public donors. In 2017, Pride Toronto’s

funding decreased when the organization banned uniformed police from marching during the annual festivities (Fox, 2017).

In the long term, a practice of decolonization might mean that the entirety of queer organizations is to be challenged, reworked, and possibly dismantled. Yet, until that time comes, moving toward decolonization ensures that non-Indigenous LGBTQ social workers and service providers take risks and make active attempts to decolonize their work so that the power and consequence of white settler colonialism can be named and worked against. It is my hope that a practice of decolonization can be imagined as a process, rather than an outcome, so that non-Indigenous LGBTQ service providers can start to consider how their everyday investments in queerness and in queer organizations can be challenged, as an avenue by which to pave the way for real change and to no longer place the sole responsibility to address white settler colonialism onto the backs of Indigenous peoples.

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### Author Note

Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to Cameron Greensmith, Department of Social Work and Human Services, Kennesaw State University, Prillaman Hall, Room 3309, 520 Parliament Garden Way NW, Kennesaw, GA, 30144, U.S.A. Email: cgreensm@kennesaw.edu