

## **Cultivating a Racialized Practitioner Ethic: A Guide for the Human Services**

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### **Abstract**

In this article, we ask critical questions and reflect upon ethics and praxis for racialized practitioners working alongside Indigenous communities in the human services field. Acknowledging the lack of scholarship across the human services focusing on experiences of racialized practitioners, we include literature from Indigenous and decolonizing studies, social work education, child and youth care (CYC), critical race studies, and women's and gender studies. This article traces the journey of two racialized, women of colour practitioners in their development of a set of decolonial ethics for working alongside Indigenous peoples and communities. With a focus on the lived implications for racialized practitioners who face ongoing ethical dilemmas in their human services work alongside Indigenous peoples, we look to collaborative and critical conceptualizations for more just and ethical praxis. Core concepts explored include: notions of embracing risk, troubling allyship, and cultivating a decolonial love ethic.

*Keywords:* racialized practitioner, ethics, praxis, human services, Indigenous

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### **Racialized Practitioner Ethics and Praxis: A Beginning**

This article explores ethical questions and challenges encountered by practitioners who embody both oppressor and oppressed roles in their professional engagement with marginalized peoples. More specifically, we wish to explore how racialized practitioners whose histories and current lives are shaped and reshaped by racism and colonial intervention, negotiate ethics and praxis—or ways of “knowing, doing, and being” (White, 2007)—when working alongside Indigenous and racialized communities across the colonial state of Canada. This interest stems from frontline practice, unsettling queries, and ethical dilemmas as women of colour who navigate public spaces as marked bodies, one who is queer, both of whom are practitioners, researchers, and second-generation immigrants on unceded Indigenous lands. We explore the mechanics of systemic racism and colonial human service practices that separate and divide Indigenous and racialized communities across Canada. Through these lenses we explore questions and actions for racialized practitioners who wish to develop ethically grounded and politically engaged approaches for human service work that also attends to the lasting impacts of colonial violence. Simultaneously, we seek to trouble colonial logics and situate a whole-hearted commitment to developing a set of ethics for working alongside Indigenous communities and moving toward decolonization.

We include an analysis of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (2015) Calls to Action that directly engage human service practitioners, focusing on racialized practitioners and the roles we hold within the lives of Indigenous and racialized children, youth, families, and communities. Through exposing how certain ethical commitments—such as attendance to diversity through the valuing of difference—materially function to uphold the white settler state, we unpack core concepts that comprise the ethos of human service work while implicating our professional codes of ethics and standards of practice. Finally, this article looks to collaborative, innovative means of working with and alongside Indigenous, racialized, and marginalized communities. Through consideration of concepts such as troubling allyship, embracing risk, cultivating a decolonial love ethic, and developing a commitment to relational solidarity, we invoke our own unique positionalities in order to reckon with our collective complicity in oppression as simultaneous insider-outsiders in research and practice with marginalized communities. In an attempt to begin this exploration in a good way, we turn to the powerful words of Métis scholar Natalie Clark (2016), who asked, “Who are you and why do you care?” (p. 48). In the following section, we reflect on her question by critically locating ourselves and grounding our experiences as racialized women living and practicing within an ongoing settler colonial state.

### **Who Are We and Why Do We Care?**

#### **Shantelle's Story**

I am a working-class, mixed-race, queer woman of colour who has been living on Songhees, Esquimalt, and WSÁNEĆ territories for almost 15 years. Many of these years have been spent as a student at the University of Victoria and because of this experience, I acknowledge the disproportionate privilege I hold as a graduate student in the School of Child and Youth Care. I lean into the tensions of embodying this educational privilege, while also recognizing that my educational experiences, which form the theoretical and practice-based underpinnings of this article, have undoubtedly influenced my complex ethical becoming. My university education has also led me to some of my biggest passions including: my career as a counsellor, my work as a research facilitator with Sisters Rising ([sistersrising.uvic.ca](http://sistersrising.uvic.ca)), and my role as a teaching assistant in the School of Child and Youth Care. I am honoured to be co-writing this article with Mandeep, who has been a pivotal force in my graduate school journey as a mentor, professor, and source of guidance and support.

I was born and raised on Musqueam and Tsleil-Waututh territories to young immigrant parents who left their homelands as a direct result of violent conflict and economic devastation. My father, who was born in Chile, is of mixed Spanish and Mapuche Indigenous ancestry. He immigrated to Canada in the early 1980s, fleeing U.S.-backed civil wars in both Chile and Argentina. My mother was born in Suva, Fiji, and is of Indian descent. Her family has lived in Fiji for generations as a result of British-initiated labour programs in which tens of thousands of Indians were forced to work as indentured servants and labourers, primarily on sugar cane

plantations. Following India's independence, many Indo-Fijians remained in Fiji, having lost all familial ties to their homeland. My mother came to Canada in the early 1960s with her family, who were brown-skinned, practicing Hindus, at a time when anti-South Asian immigrant sentiments were rife. I share these histories to highlight the reality that colonization and its many functions cause deep-rooted cultural and geographic diasporas. For many mixed-race individuals like myself, the concept of a homeland is a layered and complex question with no easy answers.

Although I was raised in a culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse city, the omnipotent presence of white settler dominance was undeniable. Like many of my racialized peers, I grew up trying to blend into the mainstream Euro-white culture that wrote the rules that we all played by. Despite this, my family continually attempted to instill traditions, language, and values in the ways they knew how—through food, music, literature, and teachings from their respective families—while also giving me the space and freedom to try and fit into the narrow western mould that was never meant for mixed-race bodies like mine.

Over the last decade, I have had the privilege of being exposed to a range of Indigenous and racialized scholarship, albeit through my own fraught engagement with Euro-western academia. This scholarship has included feminist, post-colonial, critical race, and Indigenous literature that has required me to lean into the many ways of being in this world that are vastly different from my own. Through these teachings, I have become keenly aware of a deep and seemingly intentional silence—a critical gap—in scholarship exploring the tenuous relationship between racialized bodies and our settlement on stolen Indigenous lands. Through personal exploration and the intentional cultivation of meaningful relationships with other Indigenous, Black, and racialized people, I have committed myself to exploring the vital connections between land/place/space and my own personal and professional ethical responsibilities. I have been particularly impacted by Indigenous scholar Rachel Flowers (2015), who reminded us that working in solidarity requires that we “[de-center] ourselves, in order to engage productively in the unknown and ‘in-between’ spaces of resistance, and [confront] the impulse to claim to know or have authority over a struggle” (p. 35). With this in mind, I carefully situate my connection to the lands where I was born and the lands where I have had the choice to settle as a racialized person. I continually reflect on the ways in which colonial forces disenfranchise Indigenous communities worldwide, which has irrevocably affected the global diaspora. This reality requires that I (as a woman of colour living on stolen Indigenous lands) begin the work of reckoning with my complicity in the ongoing displacement and dispossession of Indigenous peoples and communities. More so, it requires that I develop and live a decolonial ethic in my everyday personal and professional interactions with others.

It matters to me that I engage thoughtfully, critically, and reflexively with my own complex histories without making moves to innocence in Canada's settler project. It matters to me that I attempt to work in solidarity alongside Indigenous, Black, and racialized communities while inviting critical feedback and accepting that I will not always get it right. It matters to me that I actively work to cultivate

meaningful relationships with other Indigenous, Black, and racialized communities experiencing political silencing and erasure from their lands. It matters to me that I live and enact my own nuanced and shifting ethics in ways that are intimately connected to the lands, places, and ancestral spaces that I inhabit. It is imperative in my work as a counsellor, researcher, teacher, and practitioner that I wholeheartedly offer my political, social, emotional, physical, and material efforts toward Indigenous resurgence and sovereignty.

### **Mandeep's Story**

As I write this piece, I sit on unceded Lekwungen, Songhees, Esquimalt, and WSÁNEĆ territories as an assistant professor in the School of Child and Youth Care. I am the first in my family to pursue and achieve post-secondary education, so entering this space means questioning where I am and what limitations contribute to being part of a small yet growing community of racialized professors in this university, as well as in universities across Canada. Post-secondary institutions did not always imagine Indigenous, Black, brown, racialized bodies on its campuses, as the land was cleared of the Indigenous people, plants, and trees to create what is now called the University of Victoria. When I consider Clark's probing question, I begin with my individual and collective responsibilities and where I come from, in order to understand what my caring can do to shift and challenge the human service fields of social work and CYC.

I was born and raised on the traditional unceded territory of Tsu-baas-aht Lake Cowichan tribe on Vancouver Island, in what is named "British Columbia" on colonial maps of Canada. I have distinct childhood memories of my father's unwavering voice asserting that we were visitors to this land and would always be visitors. He maintained that we should never be too comfortable here, that we could never call this land our home, as our land and home would always be in the village of Guluwa, in the province of Himachal Pradesh, India. I was born a second-generation Punjabi Sikh, brown-skinned, marked body in a very white working-class town. My childhood experiences were confined by blue collar white families that used our racial and cultural differences as their source of humour and scapegoating. My father was a labourer at the local lumber mill, as were most of the Punjabi and Muslim families that lived in our town. I witnessed the burden this work had on my father every time I caught sight of his calloused hands and the anger he carried when he returned from his long shifts at the mill. This was the only employment that the immigrant community could attain to provide sustenance for their families, yet this space was never created with equality or diversity in mind. Labour work was hard, but if you were an immigrant with an accent, you could almost never move "up" in this space, counter to the capitalist colonial dream that is sold to immigrants. Perhaps my father's daily encounters with racism and oppression shaped his unwillingness to call this space and land home, perhaps it was the ongoing displacement he had lived from birth, as a child born at the brink of Independent India, and the 1947 Partition of India (Mucina, 2011). Nonetheless, I have come to appreciate the discomfort he instilled in us as children, to question who we are, and how we arrived.

I share these particular parts of my story, which are only a small slice of the larger story,<sup>1</sup> to situate my early willingness to question settlement on stolen Indigenous land. Growing up I did not realize that I was participating in the displacement of Indigenous communities and benefitting from the kinds of violence that were enacted on my ancestors; “postures of innocence” (Amadahy & Lawrence, 2009) have shaped my lack of understanding of Indigenous histories and fight for sovereignty. Often, I wonder if the Indigenous community that I grew up with in Tsu-baas-aht and the Punjabi community that lived in their territories had shared our histories and struggles, what could have been possible?

Decolonizing my miseducation, particularly around the violence and colonial history of genocide against Indigenous communities across Canada, began with my entry into the human services. I started my undergraduate degree in CYC, and soon after graduation I found myself immersed in the child welfare context, working as a child protection worker on an Aboriginal family services team. A large part of this experience shaped my understanding of, and resistance against, colonial structures in child protection work. My passion for social justice work was fueled by the limiting structures that I was working within and the stories I was encountering on the frontline. I went back to university to complete my Master of Social Work program, yearning for further knowledge and practice that could support allied, accomplice, social justice work as a racialized, cisgender, brown body navigating and witnessing the ongoing colonial violence aimed toward Indigenous peoples. Research also became a space in which to have critical conversations among other allies and accomplices committed to engaging in intersectionality, anti-colonial, critical race analysis of social work practice and community-based work. During my doctoral program, I pursued education and research in which I engaged in critical conversations with racialized, migrant women and girls who encountered gender-based violence from structures and institutions, as well as from within their families and intimate relationships. My theoretical framework emerges from these profoundly experiential spaces, offering a lens through which to view the world from discursive frames including critical race analysis, intersectionality, and anti-colonial theory.

I come to this conversation with Shantelle as a racialized woman who has navigated the social service field and post-secondary education system that holds up the narrative of the “helper” as embodied primarily by white, middle class, cisgender, heterosexual women. What happens when you transgress this embodiment and challenge the social location of the helper beyond white frames? Both Shantelle and I discuss how we have found ways to transgress these frames or expectations, yet want to begin a new conversation in which we can unpack the binary that constructs decolonization and reconciliation as a project between unified Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people, which largely speaks to the work of white settlers. Questions that emerge for me as a racialized practitioner working with Indigenous students and communities include: How can racialized peoples have conversations about Truth

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<sup>1</sup> See my earlier work from my dissertation (Mucina, 2015).

and Reconciliation when we may not have been imagined as a necessary part of these conversations?

### **Cultivating Racialized Practitioner Ethics in Human Service Work**

By grounding who we are, we seek to illuminate how we walk and practice in the world. As second-generation immigrant women of colour, we acknowledge and trouble the privileges Canadian citizenship has afforded us at the expense of sovereign Indigenous nations. Simultaneously, we navigate and work as brown bodies who are read and marked by our race in dominant white spaces. We have been racialized as perpetual outsiders in the eyes of white settlers, while remaining minorities in the context of practice in the human service field. We also recognize the distinct ways in which Black people are racialized that are not part of our everyday experiences and resist the generalization that can come from naming all racialized practitioners as having similar encounters. Critical race scholarship (see Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 2005; Maynard, 2017; Walcott & Abdillahi, 2019) has challenged generalizing terminology (such as *people of colour* and *racialized people*) that conflates the experiences of Black people with people of colour. This conflation effectively serves to silence the distinct and pervasive anti-Black racism that shapes policies, laws, and practices across Canada. Pon, Gosine, and Phillips (2011) defined anti-Black racism as “the particular racism experienced by Black people in Canada, which is rooted in the history of slavery and the colonial period” (p. 389). Acknowledging the distinct realities faced by Black people in Canada, we recognize that our voices do not capture the everyday encounters of anti-Black racism that occur in micro and macro contexts within the fabric of this colonial nation. Actively working in the field as racialized practitioners, we have noticed the lack of diverse racialized voices that offer a critical race lens in human service work, and this reality has an even more profound silencing effect on Black voices and experiences. How do we find a space in which to recognize these specific histories and encounters in practice contexts, as we constantly confront the Indigenous/non-Indigenous binary when engaging in decolonial human service work?

Over the last decade there has been growth in scholarship exploring white settler ethics written by white scholars and practitioners (Regan, 2010; Reynolds, 2008, 2012; Saraceno, 2012). Saraceno (2012) explicitly discussed whiteness and white privilege as a CYC worker, confronting white supremacy in the field. She argued that the “socio-historic context [of white settlers] has significantly shaped [white people’s] thinking about social problems and helping” (2012, p. 255) in ways that perpetuate and reinforce the othering of Indigenous, Black, and racialized bodies. Social worker Vikki Reynolds (2012) offered an “imperfect ethical stance for justice-doing in community work” (p. 21) that critically addresses power from the perspective of whiteness that she herself holds. While there are implications for practitioners of all backgrounds, Reynolds was clear about the relevance of owning her whiteness and taking ongoing responsibility for her unearned white privilege. She also explicitly urged the “calling in” of fellow white people when noticing the enacting of racial violence. Many of the authors discussing whiteness in human service work have been overt about their intentions in writing *to* and *for* white

practitioners seeking to engage in the transformative personal work that is necessary in order begin to make changes in praxis with racialized and Indigenous clients (Gerlach, Browne, Sinha, & Elliott, 2017; Newbury, 2018).

In contrast, relatively little has been published conceptualizing racialized practitioner ethics in working with Indigenous children, youth, adults, and communities (Amadahy & Lawrence, 2009; Dua, 2007; Lawrence & Dua, 2005; Razack, 2002). Most of the literature focuses on the necessity of anti-racist movements backed by racialized people to include tangible and material commitments to Indigenous sovereignty (Lawrence & Dua, 2005). Scholars Amadahy and Lawrence (2009) wrote from their perspectives as Black and Indigenous women, tracing the intimate connections of colonial displacement within their respective communities. They ask ethical questions such as “Where do racialized settlers fit in the vision of Indigenous sovereignty?” (p. 130) that explicitly situate entry points for Black people in the work of decolonization. The most common thread among these debates situates sovereignty, nationhood, and land as inextricable to the work of decolonization. Despite this work, there continues to be a noticeable silence around racialized practitioners in decolonial work specific to the human services context.

We are disrupting this silence by speaking to our experiences as practitioners who are brown, women, queer, and second-generation immigrants. We recognize that this article is limited by our framework and social locations and does not encompass the complexities of all people who are racialized or sit within the acronym BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of colour). We cannot speak for all racialized practitioners, so we come to this term with hesitation. We see this article as starting a conversation that we hope continues beyond our frames of reference, in which BIPOC practitioners can create spaces in which to speak to their distinct experiences and decolonial ethics. We use the terms *BIPOC* and *racialized practitioners* throughout this article to argue that racialized people have a specific entry point to decolonization work that is tied up in a fight against a mutual oppressor—the settler colonial state and capitalist white supremacy that is inseparable from the colonial project. We do not claim to speak for other racialized practitioners and hope that our push against the silence will open up a dialogue that has centered white practitioners for far too long.

Similarly, we recognize that by using the word *Indigenous* to encompass incredibly diverse communities of First Peoples across Canada, we unwittingly contribute to homogenizing a pan-Indigenous identity. In human service practice, we work alongside urban, rural, on-reserve and off-reserve, status and non-status Indigenous peoples. Within these there are First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities. We cannot speak to the specificity of each community and their needs. However, we can speak to the ethics that shape how we, as practitioners, demonstrate decolonial ethics with individuals, families, and communities that have been ruptured by colonial violence throughout multiple generations. With that intent, we venture into this article with caution and use the term *Indigenous* to encompass

the First Peoples of this nation, whose many diverse communities continue to fight for access to their lands in the face of ongoing colonial dispossession.

### **Situating Our Foundations**

*Ask the colonial ghosts if they live in your bones. Ask the colonial ghosts what they took.*

— Spoon as cited in Shotwell, 2016, p. 23

### **Settler Colonialism in the Human Services**

In our attempt to explore a messy, complex, and often confounding hybrid existence—that of both oppressed (as racialized subjects and marked bodies embedded within a white nationalist project) and oppressors (as uninvited immigrants on unceded Indigenous lands), we critically consider the implications that this position holds for racialized human service practitioners who struggle to understand their complex professional identities and engage in ethical action, practice, and research. We have chosen to broadly use the terms *human services* and *human service work* to encompass our diverse educational experiences and practice histories in the human and social development field including: CYC, social work, education, and women’s and gender studies. We also embrace literature from related disciplines such as nursing, public health, and counselling psychology and in doing so, acknowledge the interconnected nature of these fields which serve to support the holistic well-being of children, youth, adults, families, and communities.

Social work, like other human service fields that have been granted validation by Euro-western academia, has been shaped by and through colonialism. As racialized practitioners who reside in an ongoing settler state, it is imperative that we implicate our chosen fields of study with the ongoing legacies of colonial intervention and control in the lives of Indigenous, Black, and racialized peoples. For us, this entails critically and reflexively engaging with literature and practice models from within our chosen fields of study (CYC and social work) as well as with related fields. Loiselle, de Finney, Khanna, & Corcoran (2012) exposed the colonial roots of human service work in Canada by examining state policies over First Peoples which have included:

... scientific experimentations; deliberate infection with lethal diseases...; forcible removal of entire communities from their homelands to allow European immigrants to access desired territories...; and incarcerating thousands of Indigenous children in residential schools where they were subjected to physical, spiritual, sexual, emotional, and cultural abuses, (p. 181)

among other violent and dehumanizing acts. Many of these atrocities were enacted under the guise of beneficence and care, framing European ways of life as superior to Indigenous knowledge and existence. These classifications inscribe European power over Indigenous peoples as a foundational basis for Canada’s settler project. In order to ensure the flourishing of the settler state, colonial policies and practices displace, assimilate, and outright attempt to exterminate Indigenous communities to “ensure that Indigenous peoples ultimately disappear *as* peoples, so that settler nations can

seamlessly take their place” (Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 123). Encompassed within this settler framework, the seemingly progressive discourses of diversity and multiculturalism have also been established at the expense of Indigenous histories, lived experiences, and current violations.

Across the human services, racialized practitioners are tasked with learning and integrating the foundational theories of our specific fields into everyday praxis. Jennifer White (2007) described CYC as “holistic, strengths-based, context sensitive, developmentally informed, collaborative, and committed to social justice and diversity” (p. 227), while simultaneously acknowledging the complexities of practice which require “a new form of agility, responsiveness, and accountability... grounded in the knowledge of particular places and histories, governed by an awareness of global realities and settler-colonial relations” (White, 2015, p. 511). Compounding these times of increasing complexity is the fact that many human service agencies are dominated by white settler bodies, with “many of the core sectors of practice, such as schools, residential care, treatment and hospitals, based on a field that in North America developed within an almost exclusively white social context” (Gharabaghi, 2017, p. 6). Gharabaghi troubled the whiteness of CYC by exposing the reality that the

original writers of the field were and continue to be predominately white people and to the extent that others try to join in with different perspectives reflecting different lived experiences, we find them interesting but then immediately question their credentials. (p. 6)

He speaks to the multiple, overlapping barriers that racialized practitioners face in frontline practice, rubbing up against systems that marginalize and discredit racialized knowledge, much in the same way that Indigenous ways of knowing are devalued and/or erased altogether. Critical CYC scholar Skott-Myhre (2017) unpacked whiteness within the human services by critiquing the narrative that white supremacist attitudes have been emboldened by our currently right-winged and conservative-minded political times. He argued “nothing ... white people achieve materially under the current economic system of capitalism would be possible without slavery and colonialism” (p. 13).

The policies that direct our practice and ethics with Indigenous peoples are built on settler colonial violence and genocide. Indigenous communities continue to encounter the lasting impacts of these colonial policies: ongoing acts of violence, denial and complacency, inequitable access to health care and mental health services, reserves with substandard living conditions, residential schools, Sixties Scoop, and the disproportionate number of Indigenous youth incarcerated and in government care, which has been highlighted as a “humanitarian crisis” and termed the “millennium scoop” to reflect its undeniable link to historical child removal practices (Blackstock, 2009; Gilchrist, n.d., as cited in Sinclair, 2007, p. 67).

Along a similar vein, racism against communities of colour can be directly traced back to Canada’s history of slavery and continues structurally in the everyday lives of Black people as they navigate systems that mark them as violent, mentally ill, and criminal while concurrently denying slavery and maintaining systemic anti-

Black racism (Maynard, 2017). The current migration of racialized communities is often a result of forced displacement—from the internment of Japanese and Jewish Canadians respectively, to the historical practices embedded in immigration policies that prevented a boat of South Asian and Asian migrants from docking in Vancouver—these policies continue to be sustained through the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (2001), the Indian Act (1985), and the Child, Family and Community Service Act (1996). Such policies have been created with a colonial imaginary, an ideology that protects and upholds white supremacy while policing Indigenous, Black, and racialized peoples (Maynard, 2017).

As human service practitioners we often find ourselves moving through these policies, and even acknowledging their limitations as they apply to a white Canada; but do we recognize the colonial structures on which they are built and sustained? Pon et al. (2011, p. 389) effectively summarized the history of settler colonialism in Canada as: “policies and practices that secured a white supremacist nation state along with a legacy replete with deadly relations with its racial Others (Razack et al., 2010).” For racialized peoples who come to these lands as migrants, colonialism has intentionally engaged us in a power struggle within a white settler state that gives Indigenous, Black, and racialized communities few options for survival. As a result, we remain in a perpetual state of crisis, enmeshed in a colonial system that polices, punishes, and persecutes marked bodies. As Amadahy and Lawrence (2009) contended, “The colonial project threaten[s] the very existence of both Black and Indigenous peoples” (p. 127). Yet, in our continuous attempts to move out of crises, we are rarely given a chance to see our struggles as connected to a larger colonial system designed to divide, conquer, and reach for approximations toward white supremacy. By understanding the specific roles that Black, Indigenous, and racialized people play in upholding the system, we can begin our work towards decolonization.

Important debates have emerged among Indigenous peoples and racialized researchers and thinkers, complicating the notion of who, exactly, is considered a settler (see also Amadahy & Lawrence, 2009; Lawrence & Dua, 2005; Phung, 2011; Sharma & Wright, 2009; Snelgrove, Dhamoon, & Corntassel, 2014; Vowel, 2016; Wynter, 2003). Snelgrove et al. (2014), articulated the complexities of settler colonialism, unpacking the various debates that focus on the word *settler* and the multiple, deconstructed concepts surrounding the term. For example, Lawrence and Dua (2005) called out racialized scholars for failing to engage with Indigenous peoples, the dispossession of land, and colonialism in anti-racism discourses. In a response to this work, Sharma and Wright (2009) argued that Black people and racialized immigrants are not settlers, due to the political and colonial contexts under which they have moved to the Americas, including transatlantic slavery and indentured servitude. These arguments have been further challenged by Indigenous scholars who have suggested that Sharma and Wright’s arguments called to question Indigenous peoples’ relationships to their lands. This debate has continued as other people of colour activists (Walia, 2013), researchers, and academics (Bhatia, 2013; Dhamoon, 2015; Patel, 2012) have contributed to the queries of who can claim the label *settler* and how migrant communities can deeply reflect on their relationship to

Indigenous lands and Indigenous peoples. We recognize that these debates have followed various veins leading racialized immigrants, Black people, and Indigenous peoples to question our relationships to each other, while colonialism and white supremacy continue to shape and construct how and when we speak to one another. Ultimately, we were drawn to Chelsea Vowel's (2016) conceptualization of the term *settler*, particularly focusing on dominant socio-political structures of European origin. Vowel pushed back against the binary of non-Indigenous as encompassing all people who move to Canada and settle here. Vowel broke down this term and offered the term *non-Black people of colour* (p. 17), recognizing those who have migrated as a result of colonialism outside of Canada that has "created conditions that have given many peoples little choice but to seek homes elsewhere—including Canada" (p. 17). She also effectively articulated the importance of rejecting the use of the term *settler* for African descendants who were enslaved and brought to the Americas. We follow Vowel's lead by encouraging the deconstruction of settler colonialism, while recognizing the lack of attention in academia and beyond focused on examining relationships between Indigenous peoples, Black people, and people of colour.

We hope to give some attention to these complex relationships by asking: Who are we speaking to? Could it be that we are tasked to speak back to whiteness? If we are to embrace true, decolonizing work—as Black, Indigenous and racialized people—we must see that our mutual liberation is tied up in the struggle for decolonization.

We argue for the importance of disrupting colonial divisions that force us to focus primarily on our individual survival. We aim to move toward dismantling and holding accountable the constructs that sustain these imposed divisions. We sit in contemplation of what could be possible if Indigenous, Black, and racialized communities could speak to and hear each other through the colonial chatter. As practitioners who are expected to rely on colonial policies and frameworks, developing our racialized practitioner ethics requires that we confront ideologies and policies that are inherently harmful, and practice in a way that actively and intentionally disrupts settler moves to innocence (Tuck & Yang, 2012). We implore other racialized practitioners to examine our deep-rooted and collective responsibility to resist complicity from within human service fields that are culpable in the vast over-representation of "diverse" peoples as clientele in our service provision (i.e., BIPOC, LGBT2SQ+, [dis]abled, poor, and so on; de Finney, Dean, Loiselle, & Saraceno, 2011; Gharabaghi, 2017). This knowing leads us to wonder, in what practical ways we can enact our racialized ethics to refute dominant, white settler discourses that focus on highly individualized, pathologized, decontextualized, and apolitical interventions for Indigenous, Black, and racialized communities (White, 2015)? How might we take up the ethical task of pushing against systems founded in white supremacy, slavery, and colonialism, even as these same structures attempt to marginalize and silence us? How do we resist the pull to live the innocent settler dream that many of our families sacrificed and struggled to bring to fruition? How do we find common ground in our experiences as people of colour, while acknowledging our settler privilege and actively working against such threats to the promise of decolonial futurity? This is the very real, innovative, and necessary work of our times—seeking alternatives, consciously engaging in politics

of refusal and collective resistance, and walking in solidarity with one another through potentially risky and unpredictable territories.

### **At Odds with Our Ethics, At Odds with Ourselves?**

*After all, everything we are afraid of has already happened.*

— Simpson, 2017, p. 50

Many human service practitioners believe that the heart of this work lies in relational practice, in which “the nature of the relationship people have with those who provide support to them is central to their well-being” (Yuen & Contexte, 2013, p. 364). With this relational practice in mind, how do racialized practitioners grapple with the reality that much of our work continues to be focused on diverse clients, without any recognition or distinction of what diversity means. De Finney et al. (2011) discussed the epidemic numbers of marginalized youth in care, specifically “[those] with special needs and disabilities, and those with Indigenous, racialized minority, low-income, queer and gender-nonconforming backgrounds [who] are disproportionately present[ed] as clients within the child welfare and residential care systems when compared to the dominant population” (p. 366). Our racialized practitioner ethics must motivate us to consider the salient factors creating and maintaining the dynamics that these authors describe.

In addition, it is imperative that we attend to the ample research exposing the disproportionate number of Indigenous families involved in child welfare—evidenced by the fact that Indigenous youth are almost 10 times more likely to be removed from their homes and placed in foster care than their non-Indigenous counterparts (de Leeuw, Greenwood, & Cameron, 2009). We all hold a sacred responsibility to educate ourselves not only on the historical factors that contribute to the disenfranchisement of Indigenous peoples, but also on the current realities that impact whole communities, acknowledging the deeply embedded impact of colonization and linking its force with interrelated systems of power including settler domination, hetero-patriarchy, capitalism, neo-liberalism, settler law enforcement, and the violence of the resource extraction industry (Allooloo, 2017; Coulthard & Simpson, 2016; de Finney et al., 2011).

Recognizing the various debates and conversations occurring in theoretical circles including anti-racism, anti-colonial, and feminist circles, as racialized practitioners we are concerned with the ways in which we teach front-line service providers and practice within Indigenous, Black, and racialized communities ourselves. We ask: Could our work go beyond what is generally expected from all non-Indigenous practitioners? The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has laid out 94 Calls to Action that do speak to all settlers and do so by using the language *Indigenous* and *non-Indigenous* to diversify how these Calls are read and engaged (2015).

Yet, the question of who embodies the identities of Indigenous and non-Indigenous is rarely deconstructed in practice circles. Since the TRC’s Calls to Action were released, many spaces have heeded the call by replicating this binary in

policies, action plans, and best practices that have focused on including a decolonizing lens to their work. When we (the authors) read these Calls to Action, we see where and how we are implicated in practice, yet we also find our migrant identities not fitting neatly beside our white practitioner counterparts. Black and racialized people navigate their everyday lives as marked bodies, are read and read the world through this marking, which shifts and shapes their practice as they respond to racist and colonial encounters within white institutions and in practice. Harjeet Badwall (2014) examined the ways in which racialized social workers navigate practice through racist encounters from clients and the institutions they work within, highlighting the contentious navigations racialized practitioners must traverse in their professional lives.

Pushing against the Indigenous–non-Indigenous binary, we (educators, practitioners, researchers) need to cultivate spaces in which we can see ourselves reflected in the practice and education we espouse. These spaces might allow us to speak freely to dynamics of being both racialized *and* practitioners attempting to work with anti-colonial and anti-racist frameworks in predominately white (structured and staffed) institutions. What does this look like? As we contemplate the many possibilities, we recall how these scenarios play out in classrooms where we have been either students or instructors. These spaces are often primarily filled with white bodies, with a few BIPOC students who are sitting on the edge of their seats anxiously waiting for the microaggressions, racism, and settler complacency to undoubtedly emanate from classroom discussions. *If* there are discussions about race, it is likely that racialized students are expected to contribute in a significant way, forced to act as the spokespeople for their races and cultures. How can we complicate these encounters and diversify narratives that move beyond binaries and speak to the ways in which racialized practitioners embody power, privilege, and oppression in complex, intersecting ways? What can racialized practitioners do with these knowledges, especially as we navigate the challenges of being intimately impacted by racism and simultaneously imbued with power in our roles as human service workers? Can we look to professional codes of ethics, standards of practice, and ethical decision-making models to guide us toward a decolonizing praxis that honours Indigenous knowledge and upholds Indigenous sovereignty? While the answers for these inquiries will be different and nuanced for individual Black and racialized practitioners, we believe that such questions lay the foundation for ethical and politically engaged praxis. For us as authors of this article, these questions beg for answers.

### **Diversity Language in Human Service Work**

Most racialized practitioners are held to professional codes of conduct or mission and value statements that tout diversity, when we stand alone as the sole racialized people within our agencies and/or educational institutions. For both of us, conversations with fellow peers and colleagues have been the most obvious yet confounding opportunities to discuss the inequities present for Indigenous, Black, and racialized children, youth, and families. Often, it is during these conversations that diversity policies and frameworks are invoked by white practitioners, despite the

glaring inequality present within our own organizational structures and university classrooms.

At a basic level, diversity can be described as the awareness and/or encouragement of difference. Often, diversity is used to describe a valuation of human differences, particularly as they relate to socially constructed identities such as race, gender, ability, sexual orientation, class, and so on. Diversity can also be used in an institutional sense, as Sara Ahmed (2012) highlighted,

The language of diversity certainly appears in official statements (from mission statements to equality policy statements, in brochures, as taglines) and as a repertoire of images.... “Diversity” can be used as an adjective, as a way of describing an organization, a quality, or an attribute of an organization. (pp. 51–52)

What is not as obvious within these notions of diversity are the ways in which differences manifest themselves within the lived experiences of those marked by “diversity” and how larger socio-political and economic systems may or may not seek to mitigate and control these differences. As racialized practitioners, we have intimate, first-hand knowledge of what it means to embody difference, of living and being the diversity that is so proudly written about and spoken of. We walk through these professions as marked bodies that are token knowledge keepers of our brownness. We believe that this embodied knowledge bears on our ethical responsibilities as practitioners and in our ongoing work alongside Indigenous, Black, and racialized families. Many times, instead of focusing on our race as the space in which to differentiate our diversity, there is a focus on culture as it is read through our skin, becoming what Gordon Pon (2006) has defined as *new racism*, shifting away racial exclusionary practices based on biology to those based on culture (p. 60).

In CYC, diversity is framed through socially constructed identities within our provincial professional code of ethics, highlighting the responsibility of practitioners to “respect the unique difference in culture, religion and race of each child, youth and family” (Child and Youth Care Association of British Columbia, 2017). Similarly, the Canadian Association of Social Workers (2005) has outlined their standards of practice stating: “Social workers do not discriminate against any person on the basis of age, abilities, ethnic background, gender, language, marital status, national ancestry, political affiliation, race, religion, sexual orientation or socio-economic status” (p. 3). Indeed, as Ahmed (2012) noted, the “language of diversity is today embraced as a holy mantra across different sites. We are told that diversity is good for us. It makes for an enriched multicultural society” (p. 51). While the inclusion of diverse peoples is crucial to the work that we do, the (over)use of diversity language within the human services often leads to tokenization and inaction in situations of systemic injustice, particularly when working in complex Indigenous contexts.

Racialized practitioners are tasked to consider the ways in which diversity policies are enacted as proof that practitioners are holistically and critically addressing diverse clients. Realistically, we have come to believe such policies are empty placeholders for the dedicated work that needs to be done by white settlers to

meet the complex needs of Indigenous populations. Such dilemmas are becoming the defining parameters of our work, with the lived realities of Indigenous communities providing a stark contrast to the respected, encouraged notions of diversity touted within our codes of ethics and service provision policies.

### **The Realities of Truth and Reconciliation**

The largest call to action that has focused on creating change for Indigenous communities in their historical and ongoing encounters with oppression and violence is the TRC's report created in 2015. Resulting from a national call to action is the push for every institution across Canada to take up the recommendations and begin processes of decolonization. The work of the Commission has been commended, while also challenged on multiple levels, which we do not have the capacity to explore at increased depth in this article (see Million, 2013). It is imperative that our conversations as racialized practitioners consider how the TRC report speaks to Black and racialized communities across Canada. There is a distinction made between Indigenous peoples, the diversity of Indigenous communities, cultures, languages, and spiritual practices, and many of the Calls to Action are directed toward non-Indigenous settlers. However, what remains unspoken is how the TRC defines *non-Indigenous*. There is very little reference to the definition of non-Indigenous, yet in reading the report there is a strong sense that European and/or white settlers are the intended audience—the ones tasked to take the up the Calls to Action.

Importantly, many of the institutions called to change their practices and decolonize their work will have Black and racialized practitioners working with Indigenous children, youth, families, and communities. How do we recognize the intersecting identities of practitioners working with Indigenous peoples, particularly in spaces where racism at all levels (individual to systemic) is a lived reality for practitioners of colour? It stands to question whether or not it is in the interest of the colonial government to encourage critical conversations among Black, Indigenous, and racialized groups who have been deeply and adversely impacted by similar oppressive, controlling, and overtly racist governmental policies and practices over decades. In the Canadian government's ongoing attempt to support and promote white settler nationalism, it seems unlikely that sovereignty and material reparations for oppressed Indigenous, Black, and racialized communities would be prioritized. We believe the binary framing of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in the TRC's report is a subtle yet direct attempt to erase distinctions between Black and racialized groups and white settler society. By creating a false sense of equality for Black and racialized practitioners who continually experience racism, xenophobia, racial profiling, and cultural/linguistic assimilation, among many other forms of colonial violence at the hands of so-called non-Indigenous people (i.e. white settlers), the colonial government is able to strategically discourage meaningful relationships between Indigenous peoples and people of colour. Black and racialized practitioners must ask themselves whether white settler society is truly ready and able to uphold and honour their diverse ways of knowing, being, and doing.

## Implicating Ourselves: When Our Actions Become Our Who We Are

*Speaking about difference ... is not going to start the revolution.*

— Razack, 1998, p. 166

In the province of British Columbia, *The B.C. Handbook for Action on Child Abuse and Neglect* (2017) has outlined the responsibilities of human service workers to be attuned to and vigilant for signs of possible child abuse or neglect, directing “anyone who has reason to believe a child may be at risk—[where] the child’s parent is unwilling or unable to protect the child—[as having] a legal duty to report” (p. 22). As practitioners, not only are we privy to the hardships that families face; but we are also frequently in positions of institutionalized power over our clients and sometimes over their circumstances. In these instances, the ethics of respect for and encouragement of diversity are at odds with laws that position practitioners as overseers and implementers of normative discourses such as “‘the healthy child’, ‘the productive citizen’, and ‘the successful, functioning family’” (White, 2015, p. 501). In this way, duty-to-report legislation wields power over all practitioners, situating us as surveyors of difference and consequently as constructors of deviance.

Imagine a situation in which a racialized practitioner is employed within a school setting in which most students are Indigenous. The school is situated in a low-income neighbourhood, where many families struggle with food security and lack of safe, affordable housing. A child arrives chronically late to school, with no food, inadequate clothing, and presents behavioural challenges in the classroom on a consistent basis. There is no current address or working phone number on file for the family, and the child walks herself to and from school each day. Though some practitioners might contextualize this pattern as a by-product of poverty (and more broadly, of settler colonialism), the settler worker’s surveillance role within child protection legislation is clearly defined. Neglect is defined as

failure to provide for a child or youth’s basic needs ... [This] may include failure to provide food, shelter, basic health care, supervision, or protection from risks, to the extent that the child’s or youth’s physical health, development or safety is, or is likely to be, harmed. (Province of British Columbia, 2017, p. 25)

While codes of ethics guide human service practitioners to be non-discriminatory on the basis of race, culture, and class, child protection legislation (also functioning under discourses of settler colonialism) situates each occurrence as an individualized, isolated incident. Diversity fails to position Indigenous families within the context of the larger social, cultural, political, and economic systems that create and benefit from their marginalization—effectively allowing for systemic injustice to be framed as neglect and furthermore, for blame to be placed on individual families for their circumstances, ultimately harming the child and the family unit. How do our ethics as racialized practitioners guide us, above and beyond the ability of any decision-making model or code of ethics that we are bound to? Is it ethical to push against the policies and procedures that underlie our chosen professions?

Critical scholar Alexis Shotwell (2016) asked, “What is the experience of recognizing ourselves as impossibly situated in interdependent relationships of suffering?” (p. 107). Put differently, are we ever outside of the structures and systems that cause heartache and harm to others (and often, to our own Black and racialized communities)? We believe that living our ethics requires us to emotionally, relationally, and spiritually attend to our implication in settler colonialism, while refusing to be immobilized by the complex intersections of our experiences as racialized peoples with those of Indigenous peoples. It requires that we think critically, that we invest in heart-and-soul fulfilling relationships with other Indigenous, Black, and racialized people, and that we act in accordance with the values that brought us to this work to begin with.

### **Moving Toward a Decolonial Ethics**

*We are compromised and we have made compromises, and this will continue to be the way we craft the worlds to come, whatever they may turn out to be.*

— Shotwell, 2016, p. 5

We cannot solely circumvent blame to hegemonic systems while sitting idly by and waiting for change to occur. Social worker Vikki Reynolds (2012) contended that it is “most important that we enact our ethics, as it is in the doing that ethics are revealed” (p. 22). With this in mind, we are compelled to carve out avenues that support racialized practitioners to switch the script—to call out systems of oppression that marginalize diverse Others—and take action to “resist the individualization of injustice and the privatization of pain” (Richardson & Reynolds, 2012, p. 6) that affects Indigenous clients and ourselves, when we choose to remain silent about what the issues really are. We must call upon our intersecting privileges in ways that thoughtfully, carefully, and collaboratively influence our actions and decision making, moving in alignment with the expressed needs and desires of the Indigenous families that we work alongside. Most importantly, as Razack (2015) highlighted, we must resist “focus[ing] on our individual histories of dispossession and migration...thus handily avoid[ing] the question of what it means to live in a settler colonial state” (p. 27). Rather, she encouraged “people of colour and white settlers alike [to] confront our collective illegitimacy and determine how to live without participating in and sustaining the disappearance of Indigenous peoples” (p. 27). Racialized practitioner ethics cannot be born out of a professional code or an organizational mission statement, but rather, they are fluid, evolving, collective, attuned, and responsive to the children, youth, families, communities, and contexts in which we find ourselves.

Looking toward the uncertain future of human service work is an uncomfortable and unsettling process. As practitioners, we are taught to mitigate risk, utilize our relational skills, and call upon our theoretical knowledge to inform our practice. However, these complex times also require that racialized practitioners look toward the uncertain, unknown future with hope, heart, and spirit, embracing “a knowing-in-the-bones that *our* work matters” (Reynolds, 2012, p. 24, emphasis

added). Despite the overwhelming whiteness and homogeneity of our agencies, systems, and field of study, racialized practitioners have an integral role to play in cultivating solidarity with those who also face oppression and systemic injustice, particularly with Indigenous peoples and communities. Indigenous scholars Coulthard and Simpson (2016) urged us to navigate a solidarity that aids “marginalized subjects and communities [to] work across their micro-specificities to align more effectively against macro-structural barriers to freedom and self-determination” (p. 250). Solidarity speaks to the interconnectedness of “our struggles and our sites of resistance” (Reynolds, 2012, p. 22) as marginalized peoples; and as such, we must ground ourselves, as racialized ethics demand, in collective accountability by openly acknowledging and carefully navigating the power and privileges that we carry as individuals and as groups of racialized practitioners working across diverse contexts. Critical self-reflexivity around the ways that our practitioner privilege permeates our relationships with Indigenous peoples is a key tenet of ethical praxis that must be supported by self-driven education and collaborative work with Indigenous communities. Jaskiran Dhillon (2016) implored us to “attempt to think through what it means to embody the practice of ‘standing with’ Indigenous peoples” (p. 3), so that solidarity is not merely academic or imagined, but is intentionally enacted in our everyday interactions with Indigenous children, youth, and families.

### **Risking Ourselves**

*Allies take up space, accomplices take up risk.*

— Packnett, as cited in El-Mekki, 2017, para. 1

The concept of risk also strongly informs our racialized practitioner ethics. Terms such as *ally* are frequently co-opted by neo-liberal rhetoric that is more invested in self-righteous individualism, capital gain, and maintaining “feel-good” politics than in situating our collective implication in colonial oppression or engaging in emotional labour for marginalized communities. Allyship can now be taught in university classrooms and private workshops that fuel a growing activism industry (“Accomplices Not Allies,” 2014), rendering *ally* “an identity, disembodied from any real mutual understanding of support” (“Accomplices Not Allies”, 2014, para. 7). This moves us to consider collaborative, relational, and spirit-engaged ways of working alongside Indigenous peoples in the struggle toward decolonization, resurgence, and sovereignty. We are committed to developing ethical stances as *accomplices* who “take up risk” (El-Mekki, 2017, para. 1), implicating ourselves as complicit and compromised individuals who are a part of a collective of racialized practitioners who risk tangibly of ourselves—emotionally, politically, economically, materially—by actively working against colonial structures and ideologies. How might an ethic that invests in risk rather than allyship change the way that we engage within our current institutions and structures?

## Decolonial Love

While embracing a more relational ethical praxis is a starting point, we must also work toward action against the socio-political, economic structures that frame the circumstances of human service work as largely reactive and intervention-based, overly concerned with the individual, and often depoliticized. By situating our practice as socio-politically engaged (White, 2015), and conceptualizing love—or a decolonial love ethic—as the foundation of our work (Allooloo, 2014; hooks, 2000; Richardson & Reynolds, 2012; Ureña, 2017), we may be able to “become more than what the dominant system tells us we are” (Skott-Myhre & Skott-Myhre, 2015, p. 591). Critical race scholars hooks (2000) and Ureña (2017) framed love as a willingness to cultivate our own spiritual development alongside another’s (hooks, p. 6), grounding decolonial love as “an active, intersubjective process” (Ureña, p. 87) that intentionally works against hegemonic imperialist systems perpetuating violence and oppression against Indigenous and racialized subjects (Ureña, 2017). Similarly, hooks asserted that “to live our lives based on the principles of a love ethic (showing care, respect, knowledge, integrity, and the will to cooperate), we have to be courageous” (2000, p. 101). Indeed, courage is a necessary ethical ingredient in approaching the uncertain future of social work, CYC, and human service work.

We cannot continue to look to outdated, apolitical models to represent the hybrid multiplicities of our diverse clients or to protect marginalized peoples from experiencing oppression. Instead, we are tasked to embrace a more nuanced, contextualized, heart-centred, and ever-changing praxis that places the needs, desires, holistic growth, and sovereignty of Indigenous, Black, and racialized children, youth, and families at its core. We are also responsible for intentionally educating ourselves: to read; research; and build friendships, relationships, and community across difference while fanning the flame of our decolonial love ethic. Inuk/Taino writer Siku Allooloo eloquently described her understanding of decolonial love by stating,

Indigenous societies are built upon love that lifts up, that replenishes and acts to strengthen the vitality of our relations, including ourselves. Intentional relationships of mutual care, respect and nurturing are intrinsic to our values, laws and protocols... I advocate for love because it is the most powerful, life-giving force and it is our greatest strength. (2014, para. 10–11)

There are no quick fixes or guarantees in grounding our intentions, integrity, heart, and spirit into our racialized ethics and everyday human service practice. But by firmly situating openness; commitment to continual expanding; and unwavering belief in the potential for ethical growth, relational learning, and spiritual healing, we may begin to grow more deeply in community, cultivating an ethic of decolonial love and Indigenous futurity with one another.

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