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## Seeds of Decolonial Practice: An Autoethnographic Study of Settlers Working in Indigenous Communities Ébauches d'une pratique de décolonisation : étude auto-ethnographique de colons travaillant au sein de collectivités autochtones

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### ABSTRACT

This autoethnographic study explores the process of cultivating a culturally safe and critically reflexive counselling practice in Indigenous contexts, an orientation that is imperative for settlers to work ethically with Indigenous clients, families, and communities. Any other approach risks recreating experiences of colonial violence in subtle or overt ways and eroding the therapeutic relationship. Research data generation included reflexive writing and interactive interviews with one female counselling therapists (aged 28) who, as a settler, has worked in multiple Indigenous communities. The analysis involved triangulation and using critical reflection and an understanding of cultural safety to interpret and learn from the data. Becoming unsettled is an emotionally evocative experience, but reflecting critically on discomforting emotions, reactions, and experiences is an essential component of personal transformation. Settlers cannot engage theoretically in decolonizing but rather must experience it first as individuals and then as ethically responsible citizens willing to challenge dominant cultural narratives and to help foster a more just society.

### RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude auto-ethnographique explore la démarche qui consiste à favoriser une pratique de counseling autocritique et culturellement adaptée dans des contextes autochtones; il s'agit là d'une orientation que doivent adopter les colons pour pouvoir travailler de façon éthique auprès des clients, des familles, et des collectivités autochtones. Toute autre approche risquerait de recréer discrètement ou ouvertement les expériences de violence coloniale et d'éroder la relation thérapeutique. Les données de recherche proviennent notamment d'exercices de rédaction réflexive ainsi que d'entrevues interactives avec une femme thérapeute en counseling (de 28 ans) qui, à titre de personne appartenant à la culture colonisatrice, a travaillé dans plusieurs collectivités autochtones. L'analyse a fait appel à la triangulation, à la réflexion critique, et à la compréhension de la notion de sécurité culturelle lorsqu'il s'agit d'interpréter les données et d'en tirer un savoir. Le sentiment d'instabilité est une expérience

évocatrice sur le plan émotif; toutefois, le fait de mener une réflexion critique sur des émotions, des réactions, et des expériences déstabilisantes est un aspect essentiel à la transformation personnelle. Les colons ne peuvent pas s'engager dans une décolonisation théorique. Il faut plutôt en faire l'expérience d'abord sur le plan individuel, puis en tant que citoyens éthiquement responsables et disposés à remettre en question les discours culturels dominants, tout en contribuant à favoriser une société plus juste.

One morning 5 years ago, a Nishinaabeg Elder and traditional healer stood before our Grade 7 class and offered the Eeyou<sup>1</sup> students a story. As their teacher, I was also invited to receive his teaching. He shared a series of sacred prophecies known as The Seven Fires and we sat captivated by his story, one that is not mine to tell. I will borrow only a few words from Nishnaabe-kwe scholar Simpson (2008) to convey an element of the story relevant to this research:

According to the prophecy, the work of the Oshkimaadiziig<sup>2</sup> determines the outcome of the Eighth Fire, an eternal fire to be lit by all humans. It is an everlasting fire of peace, but its existence depends upon our actions and our choices today. (p. 14)

His telling of the story articulated the collective responsibilities of the Oshki-maadiziig, but I was left questioning how I could contribute to the Eighth Fire of peace and friendship. It was only after reading words by Okanagan writer, educator, and activist Jeannette Armstrong that the first steps I might take became clear. Armstrong (1990/2005) wrote:

Imagine how you as writers from the dominant society might turn over some of the rocks in your own garden for examination. Imagine in your literature courageously questioning and examining the values that allow the dehumanizing of peoples through domination.... Imagine writing in honesty, free of the romantic bias about the courageous "pioneering spirit" of colonialist practice and imperialist process. Imagine interpreting for us *your own people's* thinking toward us, instead of interpreting for us, our thinking, our lives, and our stories. (pp. 243–244)

This study focuses on members of the settler society who work as counsellors with Indigenous clients and questions how world views rooted in Canadian settler society affect the ability of counsellors from the dominant culture to establish a culturally safe practice with Indigenous clients. While the contextual emphasis

1 Eeyou means "the people" in Eastern James Bay Cree.

2 Oshkimaadizig means "new people" who will revive traditional languages, knowledge, ways of knowing, as well as political and economic traditions.

is on counselling, I also draw upon experiences negotiating ethical relationships within the teaching profession. Socially just pedagogy<sup>3</sup> and other helping professions that seek to nurture individual growth are similarly grounded in a trusting, respectful relationship. Research consistently cites the therapeutic relationship as the most essential factor contributing to positive outcomes in psychotherapy (Arnow et al., 2013; Bachelor, 2013; Corey, 2008; Miller et al., 1995). Positive relationships are the foundation on which a counselling practice is built and are an essential quality in ethical practice (Cash et al., 2013; Josewski, 2012). Learning to recognize dominant world views, to examine them critically, and to foster an ability to accept truths that many settlers are not yet able to see are essential in establishing culturally safe relationships.

Numerous Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars assert that colonialism is sustained not only through systemic structures such as health, education, and legal institutions but also through discourse, world views, and practices of everyday life (e.g., Alfred, 2005, 2009; Regan, 2010; Simpson, 2008; Smith, 2012). Furthermore, power relations conditioned by colonialism, both pervasive among and invisible to most Canadians of settler origins, are frequently triggered when Indigenous and non-Indigenous people enter into relationships (L. Davis & Shpunniarsky, 2010). Transforming these relational dynamics requires an understanding of the colonial landscape in which such relationships are situated, an excavation of the imperial forces continually shaping these spaces, and a deconstruction of world views privileged by settler discourse. I suggest that critical self-reflection and a willingness to engage in a decolonizing struggle are essential for settler counsellors to engage respectfully in a collaborative and culturally safe relationship with Indigenous clients; any other approach risks recreating, in subtle or overt ways, a paternalistic approach that is very familiar in Indigenous communities. Additionally, learning how to engage differently in relationships is one way settlers can contribute toward building the Eighth Fire.

### **Critical Reflection, Cultural Contexts, and Counselling**

Critical self-reflection involves a substantial analysis of the links between individually held beliefs, socially imposed beliefs, and the ways power is exercised through practice. Furthermore, it requires an examination of hidden assumptions that are embedded in individuals' practice (Fook & Askeland, 2006). It is an essential component of ethical practice. Counsellors are not neutral agents; the people they engage with respond to their actions, presence, assumptions, beliefs, and ways of being. Critical reflection exposes or unsettles dominant ideas, values,

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3 This form of pedagogy involves teaching in a manner that respects and honours diversity, fosters inclusion, nurtures students as whole beings, and provides an environment where learning is empowering, engaging, meaningful, critical, and holistic.

biases, and assumptions people hold; it offers the possibility to challenge and transform personal beliefs and the dominant power relations present in therapeutic, professional, and social contexts (Collins et al., 2010; Fook & Askeland, 2006). Critical reflection is a fundamental aspect of establishing working alliances in multicultural counselling (Collins et al., 2010). Offering Indigenous clients a supportive and authentic space in which to explore the narratives of their lives, to negotiate evolving identity, and to create change requires that settler counsellors willingly explore how colonialism's influential narratives, power relations, and constructed identities have shaped them. Settlers cannot theoretically engage in decolonizing; rather, "we must experience it, beginning with ourselves as individuals, and then as morally and ethically responsible socio-political actors in Canadian society" (Regan, 2010, pp. 23–24).

### **Lived Memory and Experiences of Injustice**

A decolonizing struggle includes learning to see more subtle forms of violence that continue to infuse Indigenous–settler relations, including privilege, power, racism, poverty, cultural domination, cultural appropriation, paternalism, and a refusal to honour treaties and land claims. Systemic and institutional violence evokes powerful lived memories in Indigenous communities (Smith, 2012), and settler individuals who work with Indigenous people frequently perpetuate this colonial relationship (L. Davis & Shpuniarsky, 2010). Brave Heart (1998) argued that the history of colonial violence has created an accumulation of emotional and psychological trauma both across generations and throughout the lifespans of many Indigenous community members; she identified this experience as historical trauma. Duran's (2006) concept of the "soul wound" describes the effects of intergenerational grief and trauma as well as the cumulative and widespread effects of systemic violence and oppression. Duran identified "domestic violence and dysfunction, community dysfunction and violence, institutional violence and dysfunction, tribal/political infighting and violence, spiritual abuse and violence, and epistemic violence" as some of the many manifestations of the internalized soul wound (p. 22).

This violence must be understood within an accurate historical context rather than located within individuals and communities. Settler counsellors working with Indigenous clients are tasked with cultivating a space where clients feel safe to explore issues inevitably rooted in some way in colonial trauma and colonial violence. This is an intricate task considering that many Indigenous people understandably possess a deep mistrust of dominant societal systems of which counselling is a part and question the ability of a mainstream model to assess and support their well-being. Ultimately, it is important to honour this experience and to seek an understanding of the context in which it has evolved.

## Culturally Safe Counselling Practice

Many settler and Indigenous researchers and professionals, as well as many Indigenous clients, agree that mental health services provided to Indigenous people often are inadequate and inappropriate, lack congruence with traditional practices and beliefs, do not approach health from a holistic and interconnected perspective, and do not acknowledge the healing value of spirituality, relationship, community, culture, and language (Duran, 2006; McCabe, 2007; McCormick, 2009; Vukic et al., 2011). Additionally, mainstream psychological and counselling approaches neither legitimize nor acknowledge Indigenous knowledge, world views, and experiences; instead, they privilege models and theories rooted in Western ideology, emphasize cognitive therapies, hire and retain staff lacking cultural competence, and undervalue the work of Elders and traditional healers (Duran, 2006; Hill et al., 2010). This approach will never serve the diversity of human experience and has not served members of Indigenous communities who access mental health services less than members of settler communities and frequently choose to terminate these services early (Duran, 2006; Oulanova & Moodley, 2010).

The concept of cultural safety originated in New Zealand during the 1980s among Maori nurses (Arieli et al., 2012; Cash et al., 2013; Josewski, 2012; McEldowney & Connor, 2011). Cultural safety is a practice that enables individuals and families from a culture other than the dominant one to feel safe when receiving care; unsafe cultural practice involves any action that diminishes, demeans, or disempowers the cultural identity and well-being of an individual (Nursing Council of New Zealand, 2005/2011). The concept moves beyond cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity, which recognize and appreciate difference but do not ask counsellors to acknowledge conflicts, history, oppression, bias, assumptions, contexts, or their own cultural locations (Arieli et al., 2012; Cash et al., 2013; Josewski, 2012; McEldowney & Connor, 2011).

Culturally safe practice is composed of several interconnected and co-occurring components that all counsellors working cross-culturally must follow. Initially, counsellors must take responsibility for exploring and understanding their own cultures and the effects, both subtle and unconcealed, that those cultures have had on other populations. Following moments of uncertainty, disruption, or discord, counsellors should engage in critical and structured reflexivity and reflective practice; the goal is to use new understandings and greater awareness to transform practice actively (McEldowney & Connor, 2011). This process shapes the context of care that counsellors can offer.

## The Process of Decolonizing

In learning to accept, honour, and engage with a diversity of world views, settler counsellors begin to open themselves up to the possibility of decolonizing.

For settlers, decolonization involves the unsettling task of confronting a colonial mentality—a culture of denial, unequal power relations, and historical indifference that has characterized settler relationships with the original inhabitants of this land (Regan, 2010). Settler counsellors who seek culturally safe therapeutic alliances with Indigenous clients must reorient their gaze, place themselves under scrutiny, and experience the unsettling discomfort that accompanies this process of critical self-reflection. Learning to change is a deeply reflexive, emotional, and heuristic process. Boler (1999) found emotional responses such as anger, grief, disappointment, and resistance surface in people as they engage in the process of altering their world views through critical inquiry. These emotions, when combined with challenging one's cognitions, initiate the move beyond one's comfort zone; this is where potential transformation lies. Moving into the unfamiliar space of not knowing requires that settler counsellors bear the gift of humility.

### Anti-Colonial Autoethnographic Research

When Armstrong (1990/2005) invited writers from the dominant society to “imagine interpreting for us *your own people's* thinking toward us, instead of interpreting for us, our thinking, our lives, and our stories” (p. 244), she was asking settler writers to dramatically alter the colonized discourses and research practices frequently imposed upon the First Peoples of Turtle Island.<sup>4</sup> Her words suggest a critical examination of the privileged positions from which unexamined and uninformed opinions are cast and a profound questioning of the colonial mentality from which those world views have arisen. Armstrong's ideas provided me with a starting point for my writing; as a way of honouring her words, I chose to engage in the process of critical reflection and personal decolonization through autoethnography.

Informed by postmodern, feminist, and postcolonial theories and methods, autoethnography seeks to describe, examine, and analyze personal experience to understand broader social, cultural, and political experience (Ellis, 2004; Ellis et al., 2011; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Locating the research within the culture of which one is a part is congruent with Armstrong's suggestion, as is my desire to recognize and examine critically world views rooted in Canadian settler society. The intention of this autoethnographic research was to document and interpret lived experiences of settlers working in Indigenous communities and to learn from personal challenges and transformations. The hope is to become a counsellor who has learned to listen with a decolonized ear. Regan (2010) asserts that “learning from rather than about” and engaging “from ‘an unfamiliar space of not knowing’” are essential in anti-colonial approaches to research (p. 27). Exploring my process of decolonizing through autoethnography is ultimately congruent

4 Turtle Island is a Haudenosaunee term for North America derived from a creation story in which the Earth is created on a turtle's back.

with the broader Indigenous research agenda to support decolonization and self-determination and to confront theoretical research paradigms that privilege objectivity and non-involvement over subjectivity, partnership, and engagement (Regan, 2010; Smith, 2012).

This autoethnographic research utilized existing literature, personal, reflexive writing, and an interactive interview with one participant to generate data that were then triangulated within the data analysis.<sup>5</sup> Data generation began with identifying emotionally evocative, troubling, or profoundly unsettling events. I then wrote reflexively about these experiences from memory using emotional recall. I selected memories that were vivid, that affected me emotionally, and that resulted in lingering questions or thoughts. Portions of this writing are included in the section below entitled “Reflecting on the Stories Told.” This process provided me with an opportunity to reflect critically on these experiences more thoroughly than I had and to form new insights, connections, and understandings about those experiences.

After recording my story through reflexive writing and analyzing the data for themes, I engaged in interactive interviews with two participants who, as members of settler society, live and work as counsellors in Indigenous communities in Canada. Interactive interviews are useful when researching personal or emotional topics and issues of reflexivity or subjectivity (C. S. Davis & Ellis, 2008/2010; Ellis, 2004). They can be thought of as collaborative processes that evolve as researcher and participant interact and explore a shared experience (Ellis, 2004). A story one participant shared with me is included in the section below called “Reflecting on the Stories Told.” Data analysis began once my story had been recorded through reflexive writing, after which it was ongoing and concurrent with data generation. The writing was instrumental in the analysis; the entire process involved significant critical reflection and meaning making.

### Reflecting on the Stories Told

*Trust takes time*, *guidance is a gift*, and *negotiating moments of uncertainty* are the dominant themes that emerged from each of the three pieces of reflexive writing and the data gathered during interactive interviews. *Trust takes time* offers narratives of relationship building within Indigenous communities. The analysis explores the process of relinquishing control, moving through discomfort, surrendering expertise and agenda, engaging honestly and vulnerably, and allowing Indigenous communities to change ways of being. The theme of *guidance is a gift* looks at embracing the learning offered by those who have chosen to teach guests in their communities. As they learn to listen to Indigenous narratives and to

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5 This research was conducted for a master's thesis (Fullerton, 2014), which included interactive interviews with two participants. Only one participant is referenced directly in this article.

examine critically their conditioned colonial thinking, settlers are offered opportunities to learn about the diverse world views, values, experiences, local knowledge, and stories from those with whom they live and work. *Negotiating moments of uncertainty* considers cultural misunderstandings, miscommunications, colonial encounters, and missteps settlers experience as they seek to establish culturally safe relationships in Indigenous communities and how settlers might cultivate the vulnerability, humility, and willingness to learn from Indigenous people.

### **Trust Takes Time**

He was so resistant for weeks on end. But, on the ninth session [after 9 weeks], when I went to pick him up, he was ready to come with me. He jumped up and ran to the door; he knew where we were going.... He was playing with some blocks, and he looked up at me, and he said, "I know you now—you're Louisa. I know you now." Then he said, "Do you want to help me build this?" ... [That] was such a significant moment for me. It just shows me how much patience you need to build relationship, and if the intention is there to want to build relationship, and to want to connect, and you show up, and you're present, eventually it's going to happen. (Louisa, age 28)

Louisa's story of cultivating a therapeutic relationship with a young student in a school counselling setting illustrates the value of patience, humility, and intention. In this portion of the interview, Louisa spoke about her experience of moving to an isolated Indigenous community, and the first year she worked as a school counsellor at the community school. Prior to this session when Louisa arrived at this student's classroom to walk with him to his counselling session, either he declined to come or he came but engaged very minimally with her. As a guest in an Indigenous community, a settler counsellor's role is not to direct the process of establishing relationships and also not to set their own agenda. It is to be willing, curious, patient, present, accepting, and mindful. Louisa respected the pace this young student set as he decided whether he would enter into a therapeutic relationship with her or not. Macro-influences shape the context within which Indigenous-settler relationships function (L. Davis & Shpuniarsky, 2010). Many settlers and other non-Indigenous people have come to Indigenous communities before. Some people have come to Indigenous communities with intentions to colonize, to exploit, to impose, to judge, and to "fix." Trust has been broken in the past and often continues to be broken in the present. As L. Davis and Shpuniarsky (2010) have asserted, "Mistrust of non-Indigenous people is ever-present due to a long history of broken promises, racism, and lies" (p. 338). This is something settlers who wish to work in Indigenous communities must accept. The ongoing colonial violence perpetrated by settler-colonial forces and individuals is something settlers must seek an understanding of to appreciate the dynamics of relationship building in the present.



Overcoming their collective history as colonizers is a difficult endeavour for individual settlers. I continue to feel both humbled by and grateful to those who have offered me the opportunity to work toward this end by inviting me into relationships. It is a privilege I am offered and it must not be thought of as a form of entitlement. As L. Davis and Shpuniarsky (2010) note, “We have learned that there is no simple recipe for respectful relationships, no ‘best practices’” (p. 347). What is essential is a commitment to an ongoing process of relationship building and awareness, along with an acknowledgement that relationships are fluid and always evolving. In the absence of a genuine desire to connect with people and to learn from them, cultural safety is simply not possible (McEldowney & Connor, 2011). As guests in Indigenous communities, settlers are tasked with revealing their worthiness of trust, cultivating the patience to allow relationships to develop in time, setting aside their agendas, and engaging with their entire beings. This is an essential step settlers must take in their commitment to working with cultural safety.

### **Guidance Is a Gift**

George is a tremendous storyteller who holds so much knowledge, though if you ask him for a story, he’ll laugh and change the subject! You have to be willing to take them as they come. The topic of residential schools was in the air that autumn; perhaps it always is, I don’t know. I had only been in the community for a few months. That autumn, the community hosted lawyers who listened to survivors’ stories, several guest speakers were invited into the school to speak to the youth about residential schools, and the government made settlement payments in the hopes of “moving forward.” Unaware of the context at the time or the foolishness of the term “moving forward,” several stories of survival and resilience in the context of residential schools found their way to me then. George’s was the first, to begin with, “They found a graveyard under the school, eh.” He points to the top left corner of the room. I understand that to mean in a northwest direction. I tilt my head and wait for clarification. (Author’s reflexive writing at age 34, February 2014)

Learning how to have conversations about colonial violence is an ongoing process, and it is an essential one for settler counsellors. These narratives are difficult to engage in because they bring settlers face to face with the violence that settlers have a collective responsibility to acknowledge. They provoke unsettling emotions, challenge cherished world views, and, if settlers are truly listening to what is being shared, can offer opportunities for settlers to re-examine their identities as settlers. I continue to engage in these conversations as a willing listener, to honour those who trust me enough to share their experiences, because I realize this is an integral part of learning historical counter-narratives. There is no obligation or responsibility that lies with community members to educate settlers; instead,

settlers must commit to educating themselves. If settlers are fortunate, individuals from Indigenous communities may choose to take on the time-consuming role of teaching and mentoring settlers who work in their communities. If settlers are offered these opportunities, they receive valuable insights into history, world views, values, knowledge, and protocols; these stories allow settlers to develop their understandings of the cultural contexts in which they are immersed. In these moments, the role of settlers is to listen with their entire being; in doing so, they are offered treasured opportunities to learn, to reflect critically, and to transform.

When settlers embrace opportunities to learn, they start to redefine how they engage in colonial relationships. Rather than impose their ways, world views, values, and beliefs, they learn about Indigenous ways of being and knowing. It is precisely because the personal is political that settlers must choose to engage differently than the generations of colonizers, governments, and individuals who have refused to listen, acknowledge, and honour Indigenous experiences, knowledge, and narratives. As willing listeners committed to examining discomfiting emotions critically, settlers should honour the people whose invitations are extended and whose stories are shared. The guidance settlers are offered by those who choose to teach them are gifts; how settlers honour those teachings is an expression of their gratitude.

### **Trips and Stumbles: Negotiating Moments of Uncertainty**

“Heeeey—regalia, not costume. It’s not Halloween! Mwee costume—geez, Meaghan!” I felt embarrassed; how could I have made that mistake! I knew I would never make that mistake again, and I learned not to substitute words to name something I knew nothing about. Overwhelmingly, I felt grateful for the correction and for the humour that carried it. Carson was very forgiving and immediately started telling me about the regalia he and his family had been making for him to wear as a dancer in future Powwows.

In that room with the fancy lady and her books, we didn’t address all the ways the carved statue was problematic and how it represented settlers’ ongoing misinterpretations, objectifications, and ignorant generalizations of North American Indigenous peoples and their cultures. I’m not sure if that was the space to do so or how we could have addressed it; however, because silence perpetuates privilege and colonial ways of thinking, I believe it should have been addressed. Perhaps that was what Ellen was doing. (Author’s reflexive writing at age 34, February 2014)

Language and actions often betray assumptions, biases, and blind spots. As settlers begin to negotiate new cultures, they are bound to stumble, to make mistakes, and to find themselves feeling uncomfortable once they realize they are in the midst of faltering. How settlers navigate that space matters. What they learn and how they address their mistakes also matter. These moments of

uncertainty offer settlers opportunities to reflect on the colonial world views that have shaped their knowledge, discourse, and ways of being. Most settler Canadians associate colonial violence only with assimilationist policies like residential schools, the sixties scoop, or the banning of traditional ceremonies, but I question if settler Canadians are capable of recognizing the unchanged colonial mindsets that persist today and the subtle ways they are frequently imposed. The losses resulting from colonial violence live on in the collective memories of individuals, communities, and nations; consequently, when these memories are triggered by missteps, misunderstandings, and mistakes rooted in colonial assumptions and world views, emotional responses may occur. Individuals who are engaged in successful relationships are often able to move past these difficult incidents (L. Davis & Shpuniarsky, 2010). Working through situations with each other and reconciling on a personal level can also help prepare settlers to do so on a larger scale. Settlers seeking culturally safe relationships with members of Indigenous communities and nations must consider how to acknowledge these moments as opportunities to challenge their colonial assumptions; to do this, they must bear a willingness to engage critically and reflexively and with honesty and vulnerability.

### **Conscientiously Considering the Colonizer**

Colonialism is a pervasive theme that is intricately interwoven into every aspect of this research. It remains a looming presence in relationships between settlers and Indigenous people and has shaped the context within which all interactions occur (L. Davis & Shpuniarsky, 2010). Settler colonial governments continue to represent a legacy of ongoing colonial violence, paternalism, lies, broken promises, and oppression, and the colonized history settlers are taught has decontextualized and disconnected them from the intentional and active process of colonization. Indigenous voices and experiences have largely been omitted from settler discourse. Traversing this landscape, which is so heavily burdened with experiences of colonial violence, is possible but it requires settlers to examine honestly their colonial identities and the entire colonial project. Collectively in Canada, settlers are the privileged beneficiaries of the colonial project but are overwhelmingly uninformed and not nearly critical enough in their thinking about colonization, marginalization, systemic oppression, power, and privilege. As Alfred (2005) wrote, “The enemy is not the ‘white man’ in racial terms, it is a certain way of thinking with an imperialist’s mind” (p. 102). He described a mindset that continues to influence government policy, public discourse, and corporate practice; the faces change, but behind new facades, colonialism lurks.

It is possible for settlers to contribute meaningfully to alliances with Indigenous people, but to do so, settlers must first conscientiously consider their positions as individual and collective colonizers. Critical reflection is a fundamental component of this process. Deeply unsettling feelings may arise when settlers attempt to

work through something as intense and painful as colonization, especially when confronting their involvement and the inequitable government policies that have privileged many settler Canadians.

According to L. Davis and Shpuniarsky (2010), for many non-Indigenous people working in coalitions with Indigenous communities, “awakening to their own personal, family, and community histories” has been a significant learning opportunity (p. 341). Settlers can become allies, but this is possible only through a lifelong engagement with Indigenous peoples and with Indigenous knowledge, through a relinquishing of colonial advantage by coming together on Indigenous terms, and through challenging and transgressing deeply embedded colonial structures and racial ideology (Fitzmaurice, 2010). Because settlers’ relationships with Indigenous peoples cannot be defined as predominantly peaceful, just, or honest, Regan (2010) suggested that “deconstructing our identity and history necessitates a rethinking of what constitutes violence as well as a closer investigation of its more nuanced forms” (p. 5). So as not to engage from the perspective of “colonizer,” settlers seeking relationship with Indigenous people must be willing to engage in the transformative process of deconstructing their identities as settlers.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Holcomb-McCoy (2008) wrote, “I believe it is time [for counsellors] to recognize their immersion in the historical and social practice of counseling, and in the language, behaviors, attitudes, and culture which constitute and perpetuate oppression” (p. 368). I argue that any settler who is working in an Indigenous context should do the same. Settlers frequently do not want to hear stories that unsettle their identities and shatter their cores, but this is where potential transformation lies. All members of this profession can challenge hegemonic structures, engage in a transformative process of critical inquiry, and support change; as counsellors and workers in helping professions, we are ethically obligated to do so. Settlers seeking to work with Indigenous people and in partnership with Indigenous communities must commit to engaging differently, through a lens of cultural safety, to acknowledge the effects of privilege and power and of colonial trauma, to question their own involvement in colonialism, to deconstruct the history of colonial violence that has been waged in settlers’ names, and to examine critically their unsettling emotional experiences. As willing listeners and learners seeking relationships based on trust and mutual respect, settlers need to embrace vulnerability and humility and to challenge settler-colonial assumptions, world views, and discourse sincerely.

This research is a small offering I share with the hope that it will contribute to ethically responsible transformative dialogues of reconciliation and peace, to more equitable counselling practice, and to conversations seeking to confront in creative ways hidden colonial forces and the divisive and pain-filled legacies of

the shared history of colonial peoples. These ideas are some of the seeds I have discovered under the rocks in my garden; they represent some of the most fundamental ways settlers can contribute to the Eighth Fire of peace, friendship, and reconciliation. Regan (2010) reminds us what is most important in “a life-long commitment to anti-racism is the willingness to continuously face our mistakes and take the actions necessary to make amends on personal and political levels” (p. 23). The challenge for settlers who seek to be allies is to listen reflexively with humility and vulnerability, to bear witness, to accept responsibility for making change, and to commit to the ongoing struggle for social justice.

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