Using collaborative critical autoethnography to decolonise through "seeing" and doing: Social work, community engagement, and ethical practice

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: This article reports on a collaborative critical autoethnographic study that we, two white settler social workers, conducted about our engagement with Inuit youth in Nunavut.

APPROACH: We facilitated three digital storytelling projects with youth living in three different Nunavut communities. By engaging in a collaborative critical autoethnography study, we were able to attend to the ways in which we were entering into communities, paying particular attention to the ways in which white supremist colonial thought has impacted our training and our locations within larger structures—shaped by colonising histories with consequences that mould day-to-day life and opportunity for the Inuit youth engaged in the digital storytelling.

FINDINGS: Through collaborative critical autoethnography, using individual research memos and guided dialogue, we considered the ways in which commodification was structured into our relationships, how these structures continue to be colonising, and consider the impact of the past and current colonisation. We also encountered the many strengths and resistances of the Inuit of Nunavut.

IMPLICATIONS: By bringing these considerations to light, we hope to enter into relationships with Inuit communities with fewer of the biases and assumptions that underlay and rationalise the structures that we have critically examined.

KEYWORDS: Collaborative critical autoethnography; decolonising social work; community engagement; ethical practice

Critical autoethnography (Graeme, 2013; Whitinui, 2014) can be an effective method of self-examination for social workers. This is a particularly important method for social workers in our commitment to socially just, equitable, and empowering practices. This article reports on a collaborative, critical autoethnographic study that we, two white

settler social workers, conducted about our engagement with Inuit youth in Nunavut. We facilitated three digital storytelling projects with youth living in three different Nunavut communities. By engaging in a collaborative critical autoethnography study (guided by critical questions about power, expectations, and relational conduct in our

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personal memos and dialogue), we were able to attend to the ways in which we were entering into communities. With critical reflexivity, we paid particular attention to the ways in which white supremist colonial thought has impacted our training and our locations within larger structures that are shaped by colonising histories with consequences that mould day-to-day life and opportunity for the Inuit youth engaged in the digital storytelling. In our collaborative, critical autoethnography practice, we were faced with the ways in which commodification and, thus, dehumanisation, of others was being structured into our relationships. Dehumanising commodification also characterised how many of the structures we were located within continue to be colonising, impacting the day-to-day experiences of the youth we were building relationships with. We hope that by bringing these considerations to light, we will be able to enter into relationships with Inuit youth with fewer of the biases and assumptions that underlay and rationalise the structures that we were critically examining.

Our role in this community project was to facilitate the creation of digital stories with these youth. Catherine Guzik is an MSW placement student and Trish Van Katwyk is her placement supervisor. While a large part of the project was planned to be conducted virtually, the climbing numbers of Covid-19 cases in Nunavut resulted in the entire project becoming virtual.

We initiated this digital storytelling project to support interested Inuit youth living in the North to access digital storytelling training and funds. Van Katwyk participated and provided training in digital storytelling processes; Guzik used her graduate studies placement to learn more about the digital storytelling process in the context of social work practice. We built partnerships in three communities in Nunavut with community members, artists, support service providers, and government agencies.

A local government-funded film company provided funds to pay for equipment, space rental, professional training in film production, childcare, Elder support, and other costs related to the creation of the digital stories. We did not request or receive funds for our participation. The purpose of the fund is to build skills and to develop an Inuit film-making community in Nunavut. The film company offers an ongoing series of workshops and film-making opportunities throughout Nunavut, and this project also became an opportunity for participating youth to build a connection with the company and its resources. Film production training was conducted virtually through an Iqaluit-based filmmaker. We used virtual platforms to meet and engage with the youth since neither of us lives in the same communities as the youth.

As the project progressed, it became apparent to us, in multiple ways, that deeply flawed colonial systems were creating unjust barriers for these youth. As settler social work practitioners/students/educators seeking to decolonise our practices, we felt it would be important to explore our *own* conduct, biases, colonized training, and settler privileges in the context of the relationships we were building with the youth. We wanted to gain understanding about the work involved in decolonising our practice as social workers, as well as the ways our training, social positioning, and unearned privileges could serve to further colonise the relationships we were engaging in.

By critically studying our own conduct, we hoped to be able to see the impact of a colonial mindset. We anticipate that such critical study, both individually and collectively in dialogue, will support an *un*learning process that will enhance our efforts to practise in ways that are just. We hope that such unlearning will support more empowering ways of being in relationships. We also hope that such unlearning can support our actions to bring transformation to our work and our professional settings.

Literature review

One method of decolonising social work, research, and scholarship is to resist citation politics in our training and our writing. Citation politics are used to sustain inequitable distributions of power and Eurocentric White supremacy through methods of surveillance and exclusion (Deerchild et al., 2018; MacLeod, 2021). "Who scholars cite, how scholars cite, and what sources are considered authoritative to cite can validate and legitimize knowledge or oppress knowledge. Frequently, Indigenous ways of knowing (oral teachings and histories in particular) are delegitimized in academia by citational politics" (McKie, 2020, para. 3). In this article, we have paid particular attention to the knowledge that has been shared by Indigenous, racialized, and activist knowledge keepers and scholars.

Social work is a structure nestled within, and tied into, multiple structures, all of which carry a history of colonisation that continues to shape knowledge, practice, and worldviews/perspectives (Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019; Kennedy-Kish et al., 2017). From the training social workers receive in postsecondary institutions, to the research that disciplinary knowledge has been built upon, to the multiple systems within which social work practice occurs, the profession is intricately bound up in structures that were built by, and for, colonisers (Penak, 2019; Rasool & Harms-Smith, 2021). To consider a decolonising social work, we must acknowledge and scrutinise our context so that we can implement what Fanon describes as a "complete disorder [that] cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content" (Fanon, 1963, p. 36).

In a consideration of the colonial context, social work education deserves some scrutiny. The social work discipline requires extensive postsecondary training to meet regulatory standards for the profession. Educational institutions have been closely criticised for their privileging of Euro-Western worldviews, and the many processes by which Indigenous worldviews, knowledge, and philosophies are invalidated (Grande, 2018; Tuck, 2018; Van Katwyk & Case, 2016). As such, the educational structure is a powerful colonising tool. Success and opportunity are granted according to the extent to which learning and development aligns with the Euro-Western centre, thus perpetuating ongoing colonisation of the mind and the body (Quijano, 2000). Social work education is similarly founded upon Euro-Western worldviews that disregard both the knowledges and experiences of Indigenous peoples while imposing Euro-Western definitions of civilization with scarce notice of colonial violence and its consequences (Mathebane & Sekudu, 2018; Rasool & Harms-Smith, 2021).

Much of the learning that is provided within educational structures is based upon research that is shaped by Euro-Western approaches to science (Van Katwyk & Case, 2016). Research has been interrogated for the multiple harms that research methods, scientific assumptions, and commodified versions of knowledge have perpetrated upon the lives of communities and individuals (Bhattacharyya, 2013; Van Katwyk et al., 2020). Colonising practices shape an extractive interpretation of research that leaves communities without benefit, bereft of agency to influence how they are seen, heard, and supported (de Leeuw & Hunt, 2018; Penak, 2019; Ninomiya & Pollock, 2017). Much of the resistance that *over-researched* communities have activated is a refusal to be misrecognised (or misinterpreted) by deficit-informed researchers (Grande, 2019; Tuck, 2018).

Social work itself is a discipline whose history and current condition is tied in with State and Church (Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019). Social work practices often partner with the work of police, child welfare, and health services, guided by Euro-Western

prerogatives of normalisations that uphold an ideology of "Other" to disproportionately disadvantage Indigenous and other marginalised groups already impacted by the ongoing processes of colonisation (Adjei & Minka, 2018; Arbel, 2020; Blackstock, 2009). Such ongoing processes have been conceptualised as neo-colonisation, where the depth of the impact of colonisation as it has shaped, displaced, extracted, and replaced is understood to be an enduring structure that permeates social, economic, environmental, and political life (Pryor, 2018).

Social work that aims to decolonise seeks to disrupt the influences of multiple structures that embed the profession and social workers. The goal is to unsettle the colonisers' belief that they are spiritually, culturally, intellectually, and technically superior to those that they colonise, thus imposing a hegemony—a dominating, single reality (Hiller, 2016; Tamburro, 2013). Decolonising social work pays critical attention to the person of the social worker, in order to gain a critical consciousness about what we bring to our practice. Alternatively, unexamined expectations, assumptions, and values inform practice that re-colonise through the imposition of a hegemony. Shawnee social work educator, Andrea Tamburro, states:

> Social Work, as a profession has been part of this hegemonic belief system, with an emphasis on charity instead of empowerment, and imposing other Eurocentric social structures, and belief systems on the Indigenous peoples of North America. (Tamburro, 2013, p. 6)

Decolonising practices, in a wide range of disciplines including social work, seek to access and privilege experiences and knowledges that may be easily erased through the hegemonic process. Such hegemonic erasure has been described as "epistemic violence" (Brunner, 2015; de Leeuw & Hunt, 2018; McTaggart et al., 2017;

Penak, 2019; Simonds & Christopher, 2013; Spivak, 1988).

The purpose of this study was to engage in critical self-study in our goal of decolonising our community-based social work practice. We collaborated in a process whereby we looked at ourselves with critical reflexivity, looking, as de Montigny (2005) evokes in his description of critical reflexivity, at ourselves looking in the mirror. By looking at one's self looking in the mirror, we move away from a simple mirror reflection, in order to see the context within which the self is located, and to see the ways in which a body and an identity are situated by that context.

We identified the context as a complex colonial design. We carefully considered our conduct, expectations, and assumptions as extensions and outcomes of our colonial landscape. Our purpose for engaging in this critical research process is in alignment with the conviction that knowledge production must include critical disruption and social change that is just (de Leeuw & Hunt, 2018; Denzin, 2019; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Gubrium & Turner, 2011). Furthermore, this is a critical research process that can be a praxis of critical consciousness raising, necessary as a part of the social transformation work where social workers disentangle themselves from deeply embedded colonial dynamics (Rasool & Harms-Smith, 2021).

Research design

Autoethnography is a type of writing and research practice (Graeme, 2013; Whitinui, 2014). Its central focus is on "Self" and how the personal, as in "Me", is connected to socio-cultural environments (Kainamu, 2012). Critical autoethnography is based on self-reflexive explorations (McCall, 2016) and a research method that allows for interrogation of self in relationship, context, profound connection, and political/power consciousness (Graeme, 2013). Using methods of self-recognition can invite the

reflexivity that is required for the settler consciousness to understand more deeply the responsibilities of being an ally with Indigenous communities (McCall, 2016).

Critical autoethnography involves critical self-reflexive explorations, where the researcher interrogates themselves in relationship and in the context of structures and systems, ideologies, assumptions, and norms. In looking at oneself in context, profound connections can be made, and political/power consciousness can occur. Self-reflexivity is not about self-reflexivity alone but is used to support and guide collective/mutual relationships rather than exploitative, encroaching, and dominant (colonising) relationships. Self-reflexivity, in other words, is done in the name of relationship (Hallenback, 2015).

Critical autoethnographic research can help pave the road to decolonisation which is defined by Sium et al. (2012) as the removal or undoing of colonial elements to allow for Indigenisation—the addition or redoing of Indigenous elements into our society and systems. Decolonisation requires study, conversation, and practice; it is an unlearning. Being accountable to the process of decolonisation can require us to locate ourselves within the context of colonisation, to understand the complicated ways in which we are complicit (Walia, 2014). Critical reflexivity can challenge researchers to consider whether their actions and decisions reflect an Indigenous methodological approach, thus encouraging them to be reflexive while opening both their mind and the research process to decolonisation (Graeme, 2013). Critical autoethnography, as self-recognition, is premised upon action, responsibility, self-determination, and self in relationship, deeply connected to the political, the cultural, and the social: critical autoethnography is a research method that is political, uncomfortably reflexive, and resistant (McCall, 2016). By doing our critical autoethnographic work in collaboration, we used dialogue to enhance the critical exploration that we were engaging in.

Critical autoethnography also can run the risk of inauthentic self-discovery, as the critical reflection can occur in a bubble where "claims to innocence" (Tuck & Yang, 2012) can intercept honest and critical consideration. Critical autoethnography is designed to bring discomfort and transformation as the researcher interrogates their own power and privilege, and, thus, their own complicity in the inequity, racism, and colonisation that emerges in critical research explorations. In this study, we used guides to facilitate the reflexivity. We also used dialogue with guides, as an opportunity to challenge one another to deepen the critical reflections that were being shared. Because of our positions as white settler social workers, however, there would have continued to be blind spots that exist with such privilege.[1] We suggest that critical autoethnography can be a process where critical consciousness raising can occur that can inspire an ever-evolving capacity to recognise and shift blind spots, biases, assumptions, and oppressive practices.

Critical self-reflections

Our collaborative critical autoethnographic research involved three critical self-reflection dialogues which were based on the personal journaling that we had been doing throughout the project. We were journaling about our interactions with the youth and the various events of the project. We used dialogue to deepen these critical self-reflections.

Critical self-reflection – Dialogue 1

One of our critical self-reflections focused on our reactions to the domestic violence in one participant's household which led to her temporary withdrawal from the digital story project. Our role with her was as project coordinators, not as therapist or social worker. We were concerned for this participant's wellbeing and offered support. At the same time, we experienced a plethora of other reactions as white settlers who

are intrinsically part of colonial systems. One of our first self-reflective discussions focused on the ideas of expected chaos and commodification, and we spent time in our dialogue questioning their white supremacist roots. We then examined the structures that we work within that make the expectation of chaos and the commodification of other lives so possible and easy.

> 1– "I found myself almost downplaying…. the extent of this assault…it just it's intense…and I was feeling relieved that [they] hadn't been charged…so I was…exploring those feelings and I kind of worried about [my reactions] as social worker and a project coordinator. I thought…have my needs to have a project participant become greater than…what happened on the ground? And so, I just was very curious about that relief."

> 2– "Yeah, and I don't know if this is also another bias, but because I lived there before, and worked there [before]…I [have] seen worse things…I felt like…this isn't so bad…because I've seen…so many worse situations, and that may not be a good reaction…and then in terms of her not being available for the project, I also was relieved [she was still involved in the project at that time] thinking…'I'm so glad that this isn't also going to affect our project' and that's interesting, because, I mean, she's a person…not a project."

In this excerpt, we realise that we were at risk of dehumanising the youth that we were building relationships with by conceptualising them as projects rather than persons. Our realisation led to a discussion about the impact of commodification as a colonial system. Our project partner included her social worker and community members, so we were aware that there were important support systems in place. We were concerned about this youth's withdrawal from the project because we believed, along with her supports, that finishing the

project would be of benefit to her. At the same time, we were feeling an obligation to the corporate funder to finish the product/project. In our academic context, we can commodify knowledge, research participants, and many community members that we engage with (Van Katwyk & Case, 2016). The production of knowledge becomes an initiative to serve corporate needs rather than community well-being (Battiste, 2018; Cernat, 2011). We considered Stuart Hall's critical analysis of how neoliberal, colonial mechanisms such as commodification are sustained and reproduced. Hall refers to social work and other health, education, and law professions when he writes, "State-led 'social engineering' must never prevail over corporate and private interests. It must not intervene in the 'natural' mechanisms of the free market, or take as its objective the amelioration of free-market capitalism's propensity to create inequality" (Hall, 2011, para. 3)

Commodification also places high value on outcomes, professional accountability, and productivity. This caused us to reflect on the structures we are working within that make it possible to start commodifying people. The multi-layered colonial context of our lives brings forward the question about whether it becomes easier to commodify people who are marginalised, such as the Inuit youth. Certainly, social work is a discipline that is distinguished by its professional mission to engage with people who are most excluded and oppressed by neoliberal colonial structures, policies, and normalised action (Cowden & Singh, 2015).

The second consideration that emerged from this discussion centred around the idea of anticipated chaos. Some of the anticipated chaos is based on lived experience working with Indigenous youth who are living with many complexities and obstacles, but we also asked ourselves if this is based on a white supremacist bias. We discussed how often Indigenous peoples have been described through a Eurocentric white supremist

lens as being "primitive", "chaotic", and "dysregulated", thus requiring outside authoritarian intervention, with profound impact on encounters with child welfare, corrections, and health services (Baldry et al., 2016; Blackstock, 2009, 2011; McGuire & Murdoch, 2021). Descriptors such as "primitive", "chaotic", and "dysregulated" reflect white supremacist ideas about the *right way* to live a life, the *right way* to organise a life, and the *right way* to conduct oneself with others. In other words, white supremist approaches rely upon a deficit-based model of interpretation and practice. We asked ourselves: Is this anticipation of chaos, then, a continuation of that white supremacist ideas about *right living*? As social workers, how much of our work is guided by white supremist ideas about right living, and how many of our responses are guided by what has been determined to be *wrong living*? Such questions trouble the claims to innocence that we grappled with in our reflections, with dialogue serving a particular helpful function of extending our capacity to engage with the discomfort.

Critical self-reflection – Dialogue 2

The second part of our self-reflections focused on continuing colonisation and the inequities in social and structural determinants of health in the North as a chaos that has been created by colonial impact. Our discussion was about the systemic inequalities that became apparent during the process of implementing the digital storytelling project. We decided to engage in learning that was guided by the critical reflections from our first dialogue. Our goal was to gain a clearer vision of the structural, colonial structures impacting the experiences of the youth we were building relationships with. An example of some of our further exploration was a podcast with the recent Inuk MP Mumilaaq Qaqqaq (Palmater, 2021). Qaqquq is a strong advocate, focusing on Inuit youth and inequities for Inuit Nunavummiat. In addressing Inuit youth suicide, she

has described the impact of colonisation: "We are put into and now live in foreign systems that do not work for us" (Qaqqaq, 2017). We learned a great deal from this podcasted interview between Qaqqaq and another strong Indigenous advocate, lawyer activist Pamela Palmater (2021). We also returned to the literature, listened to various presentations about the colonial histories of Nunavut, and studied the curriculum offered at Nunavut Sivuniksavut, an Inuit-led school programme.

> 1– In terms of power and control…I'm just having a thought (about how) you go into a territory. You totally mess it up, pillage so that every structure has been dismantled (and) all connections have been significantly messed with. And then you go away. But you promised to take responsibility. So, to take responsibility for an area that is now in a place of chaos. Because of what you've done to it, you've actually created the chaos. And then you go away, and you're going to take responsibility for it. And you do so by imposing all sorts of authorities. And so that's a story of power and control.

> 2– And that's confusing…also disempowering…very disempowering.

We needed to learn more about colonisation of the Inuit, and the ongoing impact of this history, including current colonial structures. We learned about the significant housing issues, lack of access to affordable food, and a health care system that does not address the serious and significant mental health needs of the community. Inequities in social and structural determinants of health in Inuit Northern communities continue to be substantial and extensive work remains to address underlying conditions that influence Inuit health outcomes (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2014). Through recognising the colonisation and white supremacy that has built and sustains inequity, we encountered an embedded systemic racism. We also recognised that social work is both complicit

and accountable in its location within multiple structures, including health, social service, and education.

There is a high turnover rate of mental health workers, no residential addiction recovery centres, and very few mental health services for youth (Government of Nunavut, 2019). Internet is a complicated and expensive resource. Even travelling from one community to another is difficult and involves significant commitment and challenge. Some 85% of the people living in Nunavut are Inuit. For 65% of Inuit in Nunavut, Inuktut (a general term for Inuit languages) is the mother tongue, spoken at home (Lepage et al., 2016). Despite the Inuit Language Protection Act and the Official Language Act, with goals to protect, promote and revitalise Inuktut in schools, at work, and in public and private sector services (Brown, 2019), 75% of the teachers in the schools do not speak Inuktut and have transferred in from outside the territory to teach. With such little education being offered in Inuktut, future teachers are not taught the Inuktut proficiency that would be necessary to use it as a language of instruction (Brown, 2019). Additionally, Inuit students do not see themselves represented in the people who are their teachers.

Inuit youth do not see themselves represented in many of the professional providers of health and social services in Nunavut. With low high school graduation rates and high non-attendance rates (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2020), many Inuit youth are not attaining the education they need to receive post-secondary training in health, social, education, and other needed professions in Nunavut. Instead, professionals from outside of the territory provide these services, either as transferred-in residents, as occasional and/or temporary service providers, or as service providers at locations outside of Nunavut that Nunavummiats must travel away from their homes and communities to work with (Arnold, 2012; Marchildon & Torgerson, 2013).

The health care system in Nunavut is the costliest system in Canada, in part because of the necessity of hiring outside of territory and having many services available only outside of the territory (Marchildon & Torgerson, 2013). There are also many costs incurred by the fact that there are no roads connecting the 25 widely dispersed communities throughout Nunavut, which creates a reliance on air travel and, only when it is warm enough, water transport. Nunavut is the coldest of all the provinces and territories in Canada, with a winter that lasts 9 months.

Nunavut's colonial history has created many of the current-day experiences. It is important to begin this discussion with a recognition of the self-determination and cultural control that have characterised many of the developments that are occurring in Nunavut today. The Inuit have lived in this area of the Arctic for a millennium and thrived as strong communities in close connection to the land. When traders, whalers, missionaries, and then the Federal government began to impose values, rules, and mechanisms of control onto the Inuit, from enforced settlements that obstructed the Inuit's lived attunement to the seasons and cycles of their lands, to numbered name tags and renaming with non-Inuit names, to disease and imposed treatments, to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), social work, Church, and residential school interventions, to the slaughter of *qimmiq* (sled dogs) and the criminalisation of polar bear hunts[2], the power and autonomy and ways of wellbeing of the Inuit people of the Arctic north were attacked. However, the Nunavut land claim agreement of 1993 is the largest Indigenous land claim in Canada and demonstrates the strength with which the Inuit are reclaiming their land and cultures.

Yet, the impact of colonisation has created an economy that is significantly dependent upon transfer payments from the Federal government. Economic hardship, food insecurity, intergenerational trauma,

and homelessness are ongoing issues of concern that can be directly connected to the displacements and devastations of Nunavut's colonial past. Ongoing structural anti-Inuit racism is demonstrated by the inequities in the distribution of resources and opportunities (Arnold, 2012). For example, for Inuit Nunavummiats, medium yearly earnings are $17,700, but for non-Indigenous the figure is $77,000 (Talaga, 2018). Almost 70% of Inuit households in Nunavut are deemed to be food insecure, over eight times higher than the Canadian average (Newell & Doubleday, 2020; Nunavut Food Security Coalition, n.d.). Inuit in Nunavut have the highest suicide rate in the world and research demonstrates the likelihood of suicide amongst the Inuit to be strongly related to the adversities a person is living with (Affleck et al., 2020). Housing and homelessness are significant concerns in Nunavut, with Inuit families of multiple generations living in unacceptable conditions and a Nunavut Housing Corporation that is inadequately funded to improve housing situations (Qaqqaq, 2020).

Even with the significant challenges of living in remote communities, 73% of Inuit live in Inuit Nunangut (Stats Canada, 2019; Talaga, 2018), with just 27% living elsewhere. We asked ourselves why Inuit would stay in these remote communities, or return, despite all the many challenges we encountered in our learning about Nunavut, as well as in the life stories the Inuit youth participants were sharing with us. The resilience and strength of community is such that people stay and thrive despite the challenges they are faced with. Until the progressive arrival of Westerners in the 20th century, many Inuit communities were what can be described as "isolates": cut off from the rest of the world, yet economically self-sufficient, relying on themselves and natural resources to survive. Inuit populations remain strongly attached to their culture, which is very closely linked to community and the Arctic environment (Mussat, 2016). We realised that we needed to learn more about colonisation of the Inuit,

and the ongoing impact of this history, including current colonial structures. As an aspect of critical reflexive work, we suggest that social workers learn about colonial histories to more fully understand and know the individuals and communities they are building relationships with, both the colonial harm and the extraordinary capacity for resistance.

Critical self-reflection – Dialogue 3

Our third critical self-reflection continued to focus on colonising structures, health inequity and disparity. One of the themes in our third dialogue was our process of becoming aware of colonising structures, our place within these colonising structures, our relationships to the community and what we needed to do for change to happen. We discussed the importance of becoming more familiar with colonial history and making connections. We gave ourselves questions to reflect upon: Once we see the structures, how can we take action? How does this work inform action? What is the action of "seeing"?

> 1– One of the things…that we have to remember…[is]…to keep asking ourselves about…these structures…they sort of cleared [and] became visible…the fog was cleared. So we now can see how structured our conduct, way of treating each other, and way of engaging with others is. So we've kind of seen these different structures that are impacting that. And so now that we can see them… the next (thing) that we can ask ourselves is…what are we going to do about it?

> We kind of think about the type of action we want to take, with guidance from Paulo Freire. He said, "realization is a burden" (2005, p. 121)…So, critical consciousness is very important. It also becomes a call to action…now that we can see the structures, what are we going to do about it? I was thinking how important it is for you and I to

understand the history of colonisation in these three different communities. Colonisation is this finely crafted machine, whose purpose was to, you know, devastate huge groups of people… And it made me think about how you and I are also operating from within… these systems…it feels like that's an important exploration that you and I need to be a part of…just to fully grasp how all of our systems are designed to erase and kill and displace.

2– I am depending on them as well [the youth]. So, there is still this kind of two-way interaction, I'm depending on them. They're depending on me so we are working together and you as well so I mean there's, it's not just me saying, Come on, go do this, it's has to be a two way process...So, I just try to do the best I can, from where I am, but it's hard. It's hard to keep those relationships, and with the youth, it has to be the relationship that really is helping us move forward.

In our building awareness about colonising structures and interpretations, we were provided the opportunity to see strength and capacity. We were able to see "around" chaos, in order to appreciate the self-determination and reclamation work of the Inuit in Nunavut. We encountered a history that shows the trajectory of Inuit colonialism. The trajectory shows a strength and resistance that is being activated and the kinds of resistances that we can focus on in our relationships and connections to Inuit community members. We could see and admire a steadfast commitment to language protection, land and cultural reclamation, food sovereignty, community wellbeing, and more.

Summary of self-reflections 1, 2 and 3

The three collaborative, critical autoethnographic reflections were cyclical and connected (Figure 1). Our first critical

dialogue centered around structured commodification and anticipated chaos: how our relationships were being shaped in ways that could lead to the commodification, dehumanization, and imposed control of the youth we were engaging with. This led to the connected issue and consideration of colonising structures that created social/structural determinants, disparities, and inequities. This then cycled into issues and considerations about fragmentation, trauma and erasure, as well as resistance and reclaiming, as they were playing out in the lives of the youth we were building relationships with.

This diagram has helped us reflect on how action can be used to disrupt. One action is to refuse colonising ways of relationship—how do we remain focused first and foremost on our relationships with the youth (and with community members)? How do we conduct ourselves in ways that are humanising, respectful, empathetic, strength- and capacity-focused? Through critical reflections we are more able to stay connected to this relational commitment by problematising, interrogating, and critiquing the colonial systems that would shape other kinds of relating; that would commodify and
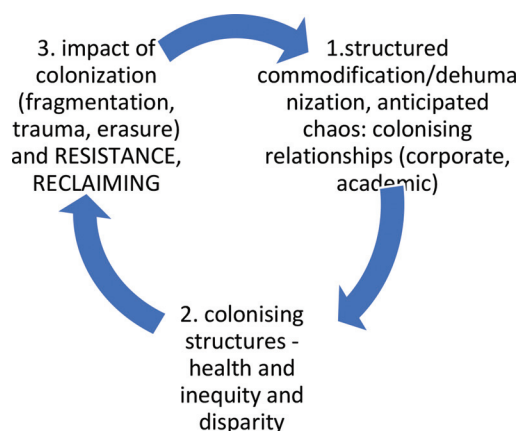

Figure 1 Cyclical and Connected Critical Autoethnographic Reflections

Note: An illustration of our critical process of collaborative autoethnography: Reflection #1, #2, and #3.

pathologise human lives and communities. A refusal to colonise ways of relationship can only occur when we can actually *see* the colonisation, by becoming conscious of the structures and their colonising impact, as well as the ways in which colonisation is refused / resisted.

Another action is to learn about communities through a decolonising lens. Decolonisation is typically understood as "taking away the colonial" (Laverty & Berish, 2019, Sl. 14); the "colonial" is how we implicitly or explicitly adopt Western European ways of thinking as the norm and reject Indigenous perspectives as less worthy and even violently attempt to eliminate them (Laverty & Berish, 2019). Decolonisation "seeks to reimagine and rearticulate power, change, and knowledge through a multiplicity of epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies" (Sium et al., 2012, p. 3). A *lens* describes how we see things; a channel through which something can be seen or understood (Merriam-Webster, 2021). Therefore, a *decolonising lens* implies a new way of seeing without the restraints of colonisation.

Learning through a decolonising lens is not just a metaphor, philosophy, or abstract concept. There must be a movement from theory to action or we risk becoming complicit in a settler colonial state. A decolonising lens is a new way of seeing that entails active learning about Indigenous community leaders, history, social issues, strengths, challenges, resources, gathering spaces, community members and demographics, outdoor spaces, and indoor spaces. We can ask: How do our explorations center community members? How do our interpretations and understandings privilege Indigenous worldviews? As described by Sium et al. (2012, p. 11), "decolonisation and the Indigenous future deepens and contextualizes theory, teaches humility and cooperation, and brings a sense of immediacy and materiality to theoretical work".

Conclusion: Implications for action

This is not a story to read passively; it demands a response and an acknowledgement of responsibility. This is the responsibility of critical autoethnography (McCall, 2016). Critical consciousness is pursued in the name of action. The action is informed by a contextual and critical awareness of the ways in which individual lives are shaped by the inequities of structures and systems of governmentality, a governmentality that sustains and reproduces inequity. Critical autoethnography and collaborative critical autoethnography are both approaches to research that hold the researcher accountable to change, and the research project as one whose overriding aim is to facilitate social justice.

We engaged in critical autoethnographic study, individually and collaboratively, to position ourselves and then to interrogate the ways in which white settler social workers can support change or reproduce inequity. From personal critical reflections about our responses to the Inuit youth we were involved with in a film project, we considered the systems and structures that were influencing our responses. We considered how these structures could influence a relationship that imposed a power dynamic on these relationships whose result would be the commodification and dehumanisation of the youth we were engaging with. We then considered the impact of colonisation, and the ways in which the current structures and systems were both sustaining colonial oppressions, as well as the ways in which colonising processes were being resisted. We were able to identify essential areas for action, accountability, and relationship building:

1) The critical positioning of self became an important action, as such an interrogation intervened with the automatic assumptions and ideologies about Inuit communities, community members, and youth that white supremacist structures are founded upon.

2) In dialogue, we deepened our interrogation of our positions within these white supremacist structures.

3) What emerged from our critical dialogue was a summoning to learn about the colonisation history of Nunavut in general, as well as the communities we were engaging with, through a decolonising lens.

In our exploration of the history of colonisation of Inuit territory, we began to see the important connections to the current experiences of the Inuit community members we were building relationships with. We became clearly aware of the history, and impact of that history, on the educational, health, social service, and even arts and culture structures that the Inuit youth were wrestling with and claiming alternative narratives for, built upon the strength of their ancestors, their connections to land, and their commitments to health and wellbeing. Too often "decolonisation becomes reduced to efforts to decolonize the mind" (Tuck & Yang, as cited in Sium et al., 2012, p. 5). The process of learning and unlearning is not enough; decolonisation must involve "bridging the divide of action vs. theory" (Sium et al., 2012, p. 9). Action, thus, becomes an approach to relationship building that sustains full humanity and resists disempowering *chaos* narratives that both individualise challenges to well-being and normalise colonial interference. There will be further action that can flow out of these, and the action will be responsive and iterative. Our ongoing commitment to the relationships we have built will continue to guide these actions, coming from a commitment to empowering and critical decolonising engagement.

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Notes

1   It is noteworthy to acknowledge a publishing process that brings others into the critical autoethnography project as peer reviewers of the written study. This can be, then, an opportunity for further challenge, where reviewers may identify and question any blind spots/white settler privileged evasions or assumptions.

2   The Qikiqtani Truth Commission has detailed this history and its impact.

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