

# ANTI-COLONIAL BOOK CLUBS CREATING A DIFFERENT KIND OF LANGUAGE FOR A NEW CONSCIOUSNESS

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Article abstract

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## ANTI-COLONIAL BOOK CLUBS: CREATING A DIFFERENT KIND OF LANGUAGE FOR A NEW CONSCIOUSNESS

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**Abstract:** What possibilities does reading anti-colonial and counternarrative fiction have? By “plugging in” Coloma’s constitutive subjectivities, Anzaldúa’s new consciousness, and Sumara’s embodied action, I share the possibilities with the explanation of an anti-colonial book club. Part of a larger research project conducted with a feminist Deleuzian methodology, this paper focuses on one of the “hot spots” that arose during the reading processes of two participants in the book club. Through their self-reflection during their reading processes, the counternarrative and anti-colonial fiction gave the women a different kind of language which allowed them to build a stronger trust in themselves, their subject positions, and their experiences of marginalization outside of a white settler colonial discursive lens. This building of trust by creating a different kind of language to explain their subject positions and experiences of marginalization created a new consciousness that allowed them to continue subverting simplified white settler colonial understandings of who they are.

**Keywords:** anti-colonial; book club; white settler colonial discourse; new consciousness; racialized women; Indigenous women

What are the possibilities of reading anti-colonial counternarrative fiction? Many of the bestsellers and canonical literature have and continue to be written through a white, Eurocentric, heterosexual, male perspective (Jayesh, 2014). Research has shown time and again the negative impacts of reading this literature that is often non-representative of subject positions and experiences outside of the dominant perspective (Al-Shalabi, Salameh, Thebyan, & Umari, 2011; Blackburn, 2012; Blackburn & Buckley, 2005; Lewis & del Valle, 2009; McCarthy & Moje, 2002), but what are the possibilities of reading a specific kind of anti-colonial counternarrative fiction and creating a space to discuss the literature? This article will show the effects of reading this specific, political, fiction in an anti-colonial book club through a research project.

The purpose of this article is to explain a research project which examined how reading anti-colonial and counternarrative fiction in an anti-colonial book club enabled a space for participants' deep self-reflection to take place which helped to create a "new consciousness" (Anzaldúa, 1987) of their subject positions and experiences of marginalization. The anti-colonial book club was part of a dissertation project and included myself, from the positionality of a white settler, five racialized women, and one Indigenous woman. This description of the women is much too simplified, but because of space constraints, I will explain only two of the six participants at length in this article: Kiara and Samantha (all names and identifiers have been changed to protect the participants' identities). Focusing on their reading processes, I explain how their self-reflective processes enabled "putting into words" their subject positions and experiences of marginalization which they did not access before reading this fiction. By plugging in (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013) Coloma's (2008) constitutive subjectivities, Anzaldúa's (1987) new consciousness, and Sumara's (1996) embodied action, I share what happened in the anti-colonial book club through the methodology that paid attention to the affective intensities or hot spots (MacLure, 2013) in the book club space.

Before going too far, I must start by explaining that the foundation of this research was built on the understanding that colonization was not an event, but a process that continues through institutions today (Wolfe, 2006). Through white settler colonial discourses, a specific history and imagination of Canada and who belongs in Canada was purposefully created which oppresses Indigenous, racialized, and non-binary peoples on stolen land (Kovach, 2009; Morgensen, 2015). I understand discourses as "the way in which meanings and ideas are produced, mediated, and embodied in forms of knowledge, cultural experiences, social practices, and cultural artifacts" (Giroux, 2001, p. 209). It is through dominant discourses, which are based on the white settler colonial history of Canada, that specific hierarchies, power relationships, and oppression are normalized (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). The anti-colonial book club was one way to create a space that subverted

these dominant white settler colonial discourses through reading and discussing anti-colonial and counternarrative fiction.

As a white settler educator, I bring to the research specific experiences based on my unearned privilege and will never be innocent in colonial processes due to my positionality. I chose to do this specific research because the alternative was working with white people and centring white experiences. Much of the research on book clubs centre the experiences of white settlers, and I did not want to contribute to that conversation. Although I continuously reflected on my positionality and tried my best not to centre my experience or viewpoint in the book club and in this article, my intention is not to be seen as the “good” white person (Macoun, 2016). I have and continue to make mistakes, but this will not immobilize me in doing this necessary, anti-colonial work. It is through this project that I wanted to “start to move beyond a simple acknowledgement of privilege to place words into real, anti-colonial, transformative, and pedagogical action” (Cannon, 2018, p. 178). The book club was not aimed at collecting marginalized experiences or documenting the horrors of colonialism, but was a purposeful and productive example of how persistence and anti-colonial action through reading fiction can be enacted and the possibilities in doing so.

### **Trust Ourselves**

We are taught  
not  
to trust ourselves  
but  
I learned a lot of things  
about me  
and  
I was so right  
I was SO right  
I should have trusted myself  
I saw the pattern  
that’s what the learning did  
that opening of eyes  
I need to trust myself

This poem was created by the words of Aadhya, who was the oldest of six participants, using an untreated “found poetry” approach (Butler-Kisber, 2012, p. 146). The poem was sent to Aadhya to make sure she felt okay with me sharing her words in this format. She approved the poem and other writing I completed. I share this poem before analysis or theory, to allow you to experience the data in a different, affective way. Although short, these words show the deep self-reflection that took place in the anti-colonial book club. The conversation that included these ideas came from Aadhya in our first book club meeting and set the tone for the remaining book club meetings. The anti-colonial feminist

space that was created and the trust that was developed in the first meeting allowed the women to share their experiences while reading the fiction. Although each person had particular ways of negotiating their own processes of reading, I show how two of the women shared in the process of building trust in themselves by putting into words their subject positions and experiences of marginalization. I will then explain how this building of trust through putting into words their subject positions and experiences of marginalization created a new consciousness (Anzaldúa, 1987), which helped develop this trust in their subject positions outside of the white settler colonial discourse. Lastly, I explain how this new consciousness outside of the white settler colonial discourse creates opportunities to subvert white settler colonial discourse and helps to persist and thrive in spite of it.

## Plugging in Theories

The overarching theory and methodology used for this article is based on Jackson and Mazzei's (2013) plugging in, which was developed through the use of Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) work on plugging in. This methodology allowed me to open up the data, while also calling attention to the endless truths and multiple ways one can analyze data. There is no objectivity in research, as it is always through the researcher's lens that the research is conceptualized, collected, analyzed, and represented. I do not intend to remain objective, but embrace the idea that objectivity is impossible. Instead, I focus on the way the fiction opened up the stories, theories, and politics that were shared in the anti-colonial space; however, I make note that this is one version of the events, through my white settler lens.

Using Jackson and Mazzei's (2013) concept of plugging in allows me to think with theory to plug in "ideas, fragments, theory, selves, sensations" (p. 262). Plugging in is a process of making and unmaking, arranging and rearranging, and organizing data and theory to consider different possibilities. I paired this with the methodology, explained below, to understand the hot spots or spots that glowed within the data (MacLure, 2013). By plugging in the theories below with the hot spot of self-reflection, I show the constitutiveness of the data and theory and create something new, and of course partial and never final (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013). Plugging in the theories below decentres both the theory and data to show "how they constitute or make one another" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013, p. 264) through a specific anti-colonial lens.

I plug in ideas from Coloma (2008), Anzaldúa (1987), and Sumara (1996), to make "nonsense" of the data (Mazzei, 2013), or to complicate or uncover what is not being said in the data. Through Coloma's (2008) theory of constitutive subjectivities, I looked through the data to understand how the participants' acts of self-reflection through their reading processes are constitutive of the contexts they are in and the ways each person is "simultaneously speaking-for herself and being-spoken-of by others" (p. 11). Through Coloma (2008), I understand the ways in which these self-reflective processes are part of

the process of subjectification, which incorporates this speaking for themselves and being spoken of by others, through “visible and non-visible indices of difference and is mediated through the citation of socio-historical discourses” (p. 12) and “is implicated in power relations” (p. 20). This helped me understand and theorize the trust described in the above poem through the particular socio-historical context and how reading a work of anti-colonial or counternarrative fiction allowed the women to put into words a new understanding of their subject positions outside of the white settler colonial discourse.

The trust built by each individual member and between the members of the book club is a specific, contextual, politicized trust. It is not white trust and is not a trust that depends upon white settler colonial discourse. The trust developed through the reading of the two works of fiction allowed new language to be learned that explained their subject positions, feelings, and experiences that the women did not access before through spoken or written language. Through Coloma (2008), I understand that by reading *Native Speaker* for Kiara, and *The Marrow Thieves* for Samantha, a putting into words subject positions they could not access before was enabled and allowed for a deeper sense of trust in their own positionalities. Coloma’s (2008) theory also enabled me to examine the in-between spaces, as this theory “offers a way out of debilitating dichotomies that bisect one’s subjectivities, and instead provides a potential to construct a tentative and jagged coherence out of seemingly contradictory and competing positions” (p. 21). This putting into words helped the women trust their in-between subject positions and experiences of marginalization as being valid.

To further understand what was happening in this in-between space, I draw on Anzaldúa’s (1987) theories of borderland and new consciousness. Drawing from Coloma’s (2008) understanding of “being both/and – also mean[s] being neither one completely” (p. 24), I understand Anzaldúa’s (1987) borders and borderlands as similar to the ways in which the women felt their own in-betweenness. Through Anzaldúa (1987) I understand that “Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*” (p. 25). Through this understanding of borders and borderlands and drawing on Anzaldúa’s (1987) new consciousness, I examine the ways the women broke down the attempted binaries placed on them, which try to force them “to be only one or the other” and instead, trust this in-between space through their reading process. However, it is important to note that Anzaldúa’s (1987) theory cannot simply be transposed onto this research project in the context of a large city in Canada with five of the six women not a part of the complicated histories of mestizaje.

I borrow from Anzaldúa’s (1987) work to show that although differently experienced, these complicated, colonial histories are interconnected, as they aim to marginalize groups of people in order to maintain power structures. Anzaldúa’s (1987) powerful work also helps to understand the ways in which the women trusted themselves and how this trust developed a new consciousness outside of the white settler colonial discourse. The self-

reflection allowed for a non-binary, ambiguous new awareness, and each participant was “no longer the same person [she] was before” (p. 70). Explained by Anzaldúa (1987), “Knowledge makes me more aware, it makes me more conscious” (p. 70), and instead of seeing the in-between or liminal space as a space of unknown or deficit, Anzaldúa (1987) helps to frame the process in a way that fosters a “plural personality... nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does [the person] sustain contradictions, [they turn] the ambivalence into something else” (p. 101). I show how the development of a new consciousness helped the women trust themselves and this helped them to subvert white settler colonial discourse and persist and thrive in spite of it.

Through these theories of Coloma (2008) and Anzaldúa (1987) I draw on Sumara’s (1996) theory of embodied action to understand the ways that reading fiction are constitutive of the reader’s subject positions and subject positions are constitutive of the reading process. Put another way, subjectivities “mediate and are mediated by the texts they read, write, and talk about” (Moje & Luke, 2009, p. 416). As the women connected to and related to the fiction, they were drawing on their past from their present contexts and positionalities (Sumara, 1996), which points to the ways in which there is no truth or reality, but constructions of experiences based on the unstable and fluid language available (Lather, 2016).

## Methodology

This paper is one part of a larger dissertation research project. The overall project had two main goals: 1) examine how reading anti-colonial fiction can help facilitate the negotiation of subjectivities and 2) examine how reading fiction that is not white settler colonial in nature can create generative spaces for people to thrive and persist. In order to achieve these goals, I recruited racialized and Indigenous women and gender non-conforming people to join an anti-colonial book club. Through advertising on Facebook and physical posters at a large university in Ontario, five differently racialized women (Asian/Korean, Vietnamese, Canadian Indian (from India), Canadian Persian, and Latinx from Venezuela) and one Cree-Italian woman (all self-identified) joined the project from September 2017 to April 2018. The women all attended or were attending a graduate program during the research project. Although not a focus of this paper, this is also representative of the conversations that were had in the book club space.

Creating a book club as a research project allowed for a collective sense-making process, which allowed for group discussions that would not be possible during one-on-one interviews (Kovach, 2009). The book club was also an anti-colonial feminist choice, which is counter to rigid, colonial, extractive forms of data collection. As a white settler researcher initiating this project, it was important that I create a project where the racialized and Indigenous women I worked with had agency and would also gain something from the

project in the short and long term. The participants collectively selected two anti-colonial counternarrative fiction books (Giroux, et al., 1996), and we met five times as a group. Data was also collected from journals submitted by the participants during their readings, where I encouraged them to freely write, draw, paint, or collage to examine their feelings and reactions to the books; five women wrote in prose and one created audio journals. I also met with the women after each of the books in one-on-one meetings to discuss the “hot spots” of the research to help develop the analysis collaboratively.

The larger data set was collected and analyzed through a feminist Deleuzian methodological framework (MacLure, 2013; Ringrose & Coleman, 2013). This methodology allowed me to focus on the affect or hot spots within the data by creating rhizomatic concept maps (Alvermann, 2000; Ringrose & Coleman, 2013). To focus on the hot spots meant to focus on the gut feelings, and unsettling/uncomfortable or intense moments, where the concentration was on what happened in those moments. Hot spots are inseparable from affect, which can be explained as those moments that cannot be named and the in-between processes of what emotions do (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). I paid attention to those “things that gradually grow, or glow into greater significance than others, and become the preoccupations around which thought and writing cluster” (MacLure, 2013, p. 175); however, always going back to the data in a different time, with different experiences will allow for the creation of different items of interest, or hot spots.

During the book club meetings, one-on-one meetings, and during transcription and data analysis, I journaled which also became part of the data. I blended these different forms of data to make connections, in order to understand the multiple ways in which the women negotiated their subjectivities and subverted normative subject positions through reading anti-colonial counternarrative fiction. Starting with the hot spots that arose, I went back and forth between what was said in the meetings and journals, what I felt/explained in my field notes, how I felt going through the data, as well as the theories explained above. I brought the hot spots to the participants to confirm that they also felt this was a significant point in their process. This experimental way of mapping the data allowed me to put the theories to work, allowed for an analysis that was non-linear and non-hierarchical, and allowed me to examine the *middles* (Alvermann, 2000), while always checking in with the participants’ view of the hot spots.

Not coding the data was a purposeful, anti-colonial feminist act, as understanding the world as being able to be coded enacts an imperial power (St. Pierre, 2016; Weaver & Snaza, 2016). Although I did not code the data, I chose which data to include which *glowed* and were representative of the hot spots. Of course, this is problematic in that I have chosen and put these affective experiences and subject positions into language, and I could never capture these experiences fully. I purposefully remained self-reflective during the research process and always went back to the theory, my political commitments, and to the women in the book club. In addition to my own self-reflection, I asked the participants to share their



own understandings of their affective knowledges and interpretations of the hot spots throughout the research process. This helped to ensure it was not only my own interpretations of the hot spots, but included multiple lenses; however, it is still through my own writing that this research is reported.

There were two works of fiction that we read in the anti-colonial book club. The first book was *Native Speaker*. It was chosen collectively by the six participants as an anti-colonial counternarrative fiction. *Native Speaker* was written by Chang-rae Lee who immigrated to the United States when he was a young child from South Korea. The novel followed the main character and narrator, Henry Park, who was born in the US, but whose parents were born in South Korea. The narrative explained Henry's life in the US and the many ways he aimed to assimilate into American society to become a "true American" or "native speaker." Henry shared many life events related to his subject positions and the complicated issues of assimilation and racism throughout his childhood and adulthood as a spy. His tactics of assimilation were always met with the realization that although he was almost a "native speaker," he would always be seen as Other. Near the novel's close, Henry left his job as a spy but before doing so shared information with the spy organization which resulted in hundreds of people being deported. The way he did the colonizer's work, along with the way he spoke about women throughout the book, was a tension brought up in the book club and is the reason some described this as counternarrative fiction, but not as anti-colonial fiction. As it was a genuine portrayal of immigrant life in the US and all its complexities, the group thought the book was an important counternarrative fiction. However, as not everyone could connect with the text and couldn't agree that it was in fact an anti-colonial fiction, we tried another text the group chose and felt was more anti-colonial, *The Marrow Thieves*.

In *The Marrow Thieves*, author Cherie Dimaline who is a member of the Georgian Bay Métis Nation, wrote an Indigenous science-fiction, in a post-apocalyptic future. Throughout the book club, many conversations surrounded the way that although the story was fiction, it was not too far from reality. The narrative followed Frenchie, who was on the run from recruiters,<sup>1</sup> along with all the other Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island. Because of the intense environmental degradation, the white settler colonial population lost their ability to dream which caused them to suffer from mental health issues and they began turning on each other, as a person "without dreams is just a meaty machine with a broken gauge" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 88). The white settler colonials realized that the key to their survival was the hunting and killing of Indigenous peoples in order to harvest their bone marrow, which was the key to being able to dream. The story followed how a group of Indigenous peoples from different nations escaped the recruiters who were hunting them for their bone marrow and the ways that they became a family, as well as their incredible care, survival, and persistence. This book created a lot of conversation around colonialism and even encouraged one of the participants, Min-seo, to learn more about settler colonialism in Canada through external events and research. Unfortunately, I only have the space to

explain two participants' processes, and I have chosen the participant Kiara, who connected most with *Native Speaker*, and Samantha, who connected most with *The Marrow Thieves*.

## Being In-Between

One of the most significant hot spots within the book club was the process of self-reflection, which allowed some of the women to reflect on being in an in-between/liminal space. Although in a much different context, some of the experiences of *living in-between* were similar to Anzaldúa's (1987) theory of *la mestiza*, where the participants' explained feeling as though they were living in-between two worlds. According to Anzaldúa (1987), those that occupy the borderlands are the ones who are in-between, hybrid, and who are expected to abide by the expectations of "both sides." The women in this book club were not in this context, so the theory of *la mestiza* cannot be transposed onto their experiences, but many of the ideas explained by Anzaldúa (1987) reflected the women's descriptions of feeling in-between two cultures. Throughout the book club, this feeling of being in-between and "neither one completely" (Coloma, 2008, p. 24), continued to arise in the book club conversations.

By reading a counternarrative fiction that was not reflected through the white settler colonial discursive lens and which understood this in-between space, Kiara could especially relate to *Native Speaker's* main character Henry and embrace her own feelings of being both/and. Kiara was the youngest in the group and identified as heterosexual, Canadian/Western and Persian. In all the book club and one-on-one meetings, Kiara touched upon how reading the books helped her reflect on her own present and past subject positions and actions. One of the main ways this occurred was through Henry's narrative of assimilation.

Although Henry was Korean, he was also born in the settler colonial context, similarly to Kiara. Kiara's parents immigrated to Canada in the mid 1980's from Iran illegally during the revolution and Henry's immigrated from South Korea. Kiara explained her parents' experience of fleeing Iran by paying smugglers to help them travel at night through the mountains, across the Pakistani border. Reading about a character who had similar subject positions as a second-generation, bilingual immigrant, allowed Kiara to deeply self-reflect on her own subject positions and the ways Henry and herself both navigated the settler colonial context and worked hard to be unseen, or not seen as Other.

Kiara often compared Henry's assimilation tactics based on his context to her own. In one meeting, she explained,

I felt like I'd been leading a double life for a really long time, and that was when I was a child, where my household was completely Persian in every way possible, and then I would leave and go to school and it was completely Canadian, and it was just like I would adapt based on where I was. But any time, which was rare, those two things

came together, it was just so weird for me. I didn't really know how to behave and it was hard. I felt like I was acting in my own life and not actually living it for a long time. So I definitely was able to relate to a lot of his experiences trying to navigate that.

Through my lens and the lens of the three theorists explained above, I argue that reading these similar subject positions and actions in fiction which were like Kiara's, allowed for this self-reflection process to create a new trust for her subject positions and actions and helped the process of creating a new conscious awareness outside of the white settler colonial discourse.

Through not only seeing herself but considering how she is seen by others (Coloma, 2008), Kiara reflected on how she often changed her behaviour because of how she was interpreted by others in the settler colonial context. Plugging in theory here can help explain how being reminded that she isn't white in the school environment is part of the purposeful discourse which reproduces specific stereotypes and understandings of the Other (Thobani, 2007). Kiara did not want to be Other in her own Persian house or within her white friend group or classroom, so she changed parts of herself to blend in. Kiara explained, "I feel like I'm a bit of a chameleon, and I try to kind of pass unnoticed," very similarly to Henry in *Native Speaker*; however, when she read the experience of Henry, who she explained was also "acting in [his] own life and not actually living it," she related to the behaviour in a deep and affirmative way.

Kiara often spoke of trying to blend into white spaces, but as she continued getting older, this willingness to adapt to what she viewed as desirable started to shift. As Kiara was able to have the space and language to reflect on her subject positions and the power structures that continued to mark her body as Other, she was more conscious of these acts of assimilation. Kiara explained that "I really was distancing myself from the intricacies of my identity and I don't think that I was ready to dive in, whereas now I am." Through the process of reading fiction with similar subject positions and actions as her own and of course other life experiences such as her graduate degree, Kiara developed the confidence to reflect on herself and she started to come to terms with her position in the in-between space (Anzaldúa, 1987; Coloma, 2008). She began to understand that her individuality is a strength and started to question her acts of assimilation through this new consciousness (Anzaldúa, 1987).

Kiara's process of reflecting on her "double life" (Kiara's words) was aided by the putting into words and making connections to Henry, who had similar subject positions and experiences of marginalization. She explained,

Being introduced to stories that are not Eurocentric whether or not they relate directly to your own culture, reminds you that there are other different people around you and

that we're not all just trying to pass as Europeans (laughs). You shouldn't do that to the point where you lose yourself.

Kiara often felt she was leading a “double life” where she had to be one or the other, but the way she viewed these experiences when she read a book that was not Eurocentric, such as *Native Speaker*, shifted and gave her trust in herself and her “plural personality” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 101).

Plugging in Coloma (2008) helps to show that this push to lead a double life comes from a way of thinking that understands subject positions as “compartmentalized within an either-or framework” (p. 14), but this white settler colonial way of thinking about subject positions are essentialist and fixed and do not take into account the fluidity and the ways that one is both/and neither one entirely (Coloma, 2008). As she became older and was able to connect with these subject positions that validated her own, her reading process shifted (Sumara, 1996), and Kiara was able to build trust in herself and develop a new conscious awareness, which took into account this understanding of *both/and*. She explained,

It made me feel better reading the perspective of someone who also felt like they didn't belong anywhere properly and hadn't figured it out yet... and I felt better, that I haven't figured it out yet and it has been a problem for so long. That I'm not just some weirdo who doesn't understand herself, but that cultural tension and not knowing where you fit and feeling like you don't belong in most places is okay, and that other people experience it as well.

Even though “the person in the book was not a middle eastern straight woman,” as Kiara explained, she “was like wow, why am I resonating with this man so much (laughs).” Reflecting on these experiences of living in these in-between spaces, Kiara felt more secure knowing that other people, especially someone older than her, had similar subject positions and had similar feelings of being in-between. This also extended into the relations with the other book club members, who also shared their experiences of marginalization and feelings of being in-between.

Through connecting with narratives outside of the white settler colonial discourse in the book club, Kiara reflected on her experiences in a more productive or positive view. Kiara explained,

I think [*Native Speaker*] helped me realize how multidimensional I actually am... Being able to look back on things that I've done and patterns of behaviour and seeing that it wasn't because I'm a bad person who doesn't deserve good things. I spent most of my life hating myself and I think a big part of that was that I thought I was alone in what I was doing. And reading this book and especially sitting around the

table and talking about what's happening in the book, and what has happened in other people's lives made me realize that I shouldn't hate myself as much as I do.

Throughout Kiara's life, and especially her schooling experiences, she felt different and alone in these feelings of being a "chameleon." Growing up in a predominantly white neighbourhood, Kiara was embedded within specific "socio-historical discourses that regulate positions and meanings" (Coloma, 2008, p. 21). Plugging in Thobani (2007) helps to understand that Kiara's environment was constitutive of the white settler colonial discourses she had access to, which affected the way in which she viewed her experience of being *in-between*. Through Thobani (2007), we can see how the white settler colonial discourse subjectifies those who are not white as part of the reproduction of the white settler colonial discourse that ensures white privilege remains intact. Growing up in a predominantly white community and school, Kiara was embedded in white settler colonial discourses that had a static, simplified version of her as "cultural stranger" (Thobani, 2007, p. 145).

Through putting into words these experiences of marginalization and the feelings of living in-between through fiction and sharing stories of marginalization in the book club space with other women who had similar experiences, Kiara was given a new way to imagine her liminal space, where instead of seeing herself as a "bad person," she could understand her "plural personality... nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 101). Through this new consciousness that understands and appreciates the differences and contradictions within her both/and subject positions (Anzaldúa, 1987; Coloma, 2008), Kiara continued to build the trust she has for herself and her experiences through her reading process (Sumara, 1996).

This new consciousness was possible because as Kiara explains, I am not ignoring [my subject positions] anymore... It wasn't as much of an anomaly as I thought it was. I wasn't just this one weird awful person, trying to exist in two worlds and lying and hurting the people around me to make that happen. I found that really comforting and it's made it easier to go back and understand why those things have happened.

Plugging in Anzaldúa, Coloma, and Sumara through my lens helps to understand that viewing her past experiences with new language, with a new consciousness, allowed Kiara to bring a strength and understanding to her life that wasn't available before reading counternarrative fiction and participating in the book club. Through this lens, we can see how putting into words these experiences of being in-between brought comfort, strength, and confidence to Kiara that could help bring trust to her experiences of marginalization and living in-between two worlds.

## A New Consciousness to Subvert White Settler Colonial Discourse

Through Kiara's experiences above, it is evident that she really connected with *Native Speaker* and its narrative of experiences outside of the white settler colonial norm, the immigrant narrative, and the way in which the book understood and portrayed this in-between, liminal space of *both/and* within the settler colonial context. However, as explained in the methodology section, the narrative was problematic in that it was quite colonial. The only participant in the book club with Indigenous ancestry in the so-called Canadian context was Samantha. As a Cree-Italian, Two-Spirit woman, she had a much different experience reading the two books, as she did not connect to the immigrant narrative in *Native Speaker*, like the other five participants did. In her first set of audio journals, Samantha explained, "Does the author just hate women?... It's just the way that he writes about them. There's no way to like them as people... It's shit... I hate this book... I hate the way that he writes about women." In her last audio journal, she concluded, "okay, so the official verdict is that I hated this book." This process of rejecting *Native Speaker* and her deep connection and self-reflection with the subject positions in *The Marrow Thieves* were two significant hot spots within the research process that was confirmed by not only myself and Samantha, but other members of the book club as well.

In some ways, Samantha could relate to Henry, but in other ways the character frustrated her so much that she "ended up having to switch to an audio book because [she] physically could not read through the book anymore" (Samantha). She explained further, even though I didn't really like the book in pretty much any other kind of way, it was just cool to see a character that embodies a lot of the same sort of defence mechanisms that I have about the world, that already sort of embodies the emotional distance... Which is really interesting because I was like, wow I probably would've reacted the same way in that situation, and I wonder if that's how people view me when I do those kinds of things, and so it sort of made me do a lot of internal reflection.

Samantha did find some ways to connect to the book and reflected on her similar defense mechanisms as Henry and how they are perceived by others (Coloma, 2008); however, plugging in Sumara (1996), we can see the embodied nature of reading and physically not being able to continue reading the book says a lot about the emotional labour required to read a book with these sexist and colonial elements.

When speaking about the experiences of reading *The Marrow Thieves*, the tone in Samantha's voice changed, which was also recognized by other book club members. Instead of a feeling of tension and struggle to find ways to relate to the book, Samantha could not contain the excitement she felt about *The Marrow Thieves*. Her connection to *The Marrow Thieves* changed the affect in the book club space. When she spoke about the book, the energy in the room shifted. For example, Min-seo (explained earlier as one

participant who learned more about colonialism outside of the book club because of the book) was really working through her understandings of oppression and colonialism and explained,

It never really hit me until I read this book, so I think it's so significant that we've picked this book and actually reading this and talking about it, and I think it's really incredible that we have you talking about your experience and how that relates to the book (looking at Samantha).

Min-seo shared her appreciation of having Samantha's knowledge and experience in the book club in a genuine way that Samantha later explained did not feel like it tokenized her, and Min-seo sincerely appreciated Samantha's connections to the book.

Samantha's reading of *The Marrow Thieves* also extended to her own everyday life in deep ways and she spoke often about bringing the readings or reflections of the reading process or language into her everyday life, which could be explained as the process of becoming more aware and conscious through knowledge (Anzaldúa, 1987). Samantha explained in her audio journal, "This book is giving me the language to describe feelings and thoughts that I've had for a very long time, but like in a very interesting narrative, so it seems more realistic than idealistic." She went on to explain,

Being Cree and seeing how the main characters were coming to their own identity formations at different points mirrored my own in a number of different ways... and there is something very empowering about that... Yes, I feel powerful and I feel strong and I feel slightly less sad, but also sad and also angry.

Seeing the ways the characters grew and learned about themselves and their histories allowed Samantha to reflect on the way in which she learned about herself and her family's Plains Cree histories. Reading *The Marrow Thieves* made Samantha feel empowered, powerful, strong, sad, less sad, and angry. Plugging in Coloma (2008), we can see how these complicated feelings highlight the ways that she was both/and through the reading process and was able to reflect on her subject positions that were shown in the narrative through the characters, which I argue allowed Samantha to trust in herself and her feelings of marginalization and settler colonial trauma.

Samantha had a difficult time coming to her subject position as Indigenous or Cree. Growing up in Ontario, in elementary school she quickly learned that being "Indian" was not favourable. She described the complicated process of "coming out as Indian in Grade 3 after reading about savages in class." After this, she was teased by classmates about her "Indianness." It wasn't until her undergraduate experience when the Aboriginal Student Association at her school reached out to her that she started to learn more about her culture. She explained that,

Not ever having read any books where Indigenous people were represented as anything other than savage or some sort of hunter gatherer, past, dead, feature of time. I mean, first of all being known as a savage in elementary school when I did come out as Native was already weird enough but then not having any representation in books meant that I had no desire to actually seek out that knowledge because I didn't see the benefit or the point.

Through the discourses available to Samantha at the time, plugging in Coloma (2008) can help understand that she lacked a desire to learn more about her Indigenous ancestry because everything “spoken-of by others” about her ancestry was negative (p. 11). Reading positive, empowering representations of Indigenous peoples in the geographical context that she was living in and being able to speak about it in the book club space, gave Samantha new ways to imagine her subject position and experiences through a new consciousness (Anzaldúa, 1987). With this knowledge, through Anzaldúa (1987), we can see that she grew trust in her subject positions as a Cree, Two-spirit woman and developed new language to describe and understand them.

Samantha explained how reading *The Marrow Thieves*, especially after experiencing fierce discriminatory comments in elementary school about Indigenous peoples and her identity, made her feel a sense of pride in who she is. She explained,

There's a reason that [the Indigenous characters are] being targeted the way that they're being targeted. That's because of a cultural aspect... now that I'm proud to be, I am proud to be, but the book again gave me a different kind of language a different kind of feeling of pride.

She went on to explain,

I would say I've gotten to a place in my life where I'm now, I would say pretty comfortable and pretty confident in my own skin. But it was really interesting reading that book because it gave me such an amazingly strong surge of pride in one part of my identity, and almost just a general excitement to see what I'm going to do next... just how other Indigenous people, First Nations, Métis or Inuit people are gonna change the world, how we're gonna continue to resist and then I wonder how I'm gonna continue to resist, and honestly, *The Marrow Thieves* was one of the catalyst forces for me deciding to go for my own PhD.

Anzaldúa (1987) can help us understand that reading *The Marrow Thieves* changed Samantha's life and gave her a “new language” to describe her subject positions, feelings of marginalization, and settler colonial trauma. Through reading anti-colonial fiction and reflecting on her own life in the book club, Samantha found more ways to resist against



white settler colonial discourse. The narrative in *The Marrow Thieves* engaged Samantha in such a deep way that it helped to propel her into her new life in a doctoral program, working with other Indigenous women.

This act of taking the reading into her life was spoken about in a couple of different ways. Samantha explained that reading *The Marrow Thieves*, “made me more self-protective and has made me in the future want to be more careful about who I share certain parts of my identity with.” Drawing on the book, Samantha explained she developed a healthy fear in sharing her knowledges. This thinking was shared in *The Marrow Thieves* by the character Miigwans,

At first, people turned to Indigenous people the way the New Agers had, all reverence and curiosity, looking for ways we could help guide them. They asked to come to ceremony. They humbled themselves when we refused. And then they changed on us, like the New Agers, looking for ways they could take what we had and administer it themselves... They asked for volunteers first... Soon, they needed too many bodies, and they turned to history to show them how to best keep us warehoused, how to best position the culling. That’s when the new residential schools started growing up from the dirt like poisonous brick mushrooms. (Dimaline, 2017, p. 88-89)

Reading the book also made Samantha think about an apocalyptic future,

I’m gonna learn how to garden this summer, that’ll be my first step... I might not have those survival skills necessary to survive in this kind of environment or context where people are hunting you down and you’re being chased. But I do have a certain level of sass and wit that is paralleled by very few... Those are skills in of in themselves and that book kind helps me recognize that.

I argue that this self-reflection while reading the book, created a new narrative, a new consciousness for Samantha. Reading *The Marrow Thieves* helped Samantha thrive and persist in new ways. It gave her new language to navigate her environments and gave her more power to trust herself more and her subject position as a Cree, Two-spirit woman. Of course, similarly with Kiara, it couldn’t just be only the book or the book club that created this, but it allowed for a space and words that described these feelings deep within. As explained by Samantha in the book club, reading this book and sharing experiences in the book club space “gave me more fuel to that fire.”

## **The Possibilities of Anti-Colonial Book Clubs**

I borrowed theories and thoughts to plug into the data to understand the effects of reading a specific, political, anti-colonial and counternarrative fiction in an anti-colonial book club space. This is one version of complicated navigations of reading anti-colonial and

counternarrative fiction. It is also my version, as a white settler researcher, who can never fully understand what it means to be marginalized due to race or Indigeneity. However, it is my responsibility as a white settler researcher to do research that focuses on conversations of anti-colonialism and futures beyond white settler colonialism and discourse. I focused on hot spots within the research through a desire-based lens (Tuck, 2009), not to collect marginalized experiences, but to understand how these women are subverting white settler colonial discourse and thriving in spite of it. I did not include my own transformations, trust-building, and in-betweenness because I do not wish to centre whiteness or the white experience. I am responsible to my participants and sharing their experiences in the anti-colonial book club space that was developed. The findings I shared in this paper are just one small part of what happened in the space and, of course, my participation and hand in the research is constitutive of what happened. However, what I want to highlight in this paper are the possibilities of reading anti-colonial and counternarrative fiction in an anti-colonial book club space for those marginalized by white settler colonial narratives and discourse.

I wondered if other Indigenous and racialized women could develop a trust for themselves through reading anti-colonial fiction, and I asked Carolina, one participant who identified as a Latinx woman who immigrated to Canada from Venezuela because of political reasons, if this would be possible. Carolina explained,

first we would have to have main characters that were like us, that were women or women of colour, and that so rarely happens already (laughs)... If we could see ourselves depicted as human then maybe, then we could trust ourselves... we could see ourselves as capable and as valid holders of knowledge.

This ability to trust one's self and its links to representation and self-reflection was powerful in this anti-colonial book club. Putting their experiences into new language allowed the women to reflect in the book club space on their own subject positions in new and empowering ways, which allowed them to develop a deeper trust for their own subject positions and experiences of marginalization outside of white settler colonial narratives and discourses. Building this trust in their subject positions and experiences of marginalization as being valid created a new consciousness outside of the white settler colonial discourse, which aims to simplify their complex subject positions. This re-narrating their own experiences through a new consciousness created opportunities for the women to subvert dominant white settler colonial discourse through new language and helped in the process of persisting. Anti-colonial book clubs and anti-colonial fiction offer a world of possibilities beyond white settler colonial imaginations and we should add these works to our bookshelves, classrooms, and syllabi.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Recruiters are people that hunted and brought the Indigenous peoples to the “schools,” similarly to Canada’s history of residential schools.