

White Benevolence: Racial and Colonial Violence in the Helping Professions

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Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

White Benevolence: Racial and Colonial Violence in the Helping Professions

Edited by Amanda Gebhard, Sheelah McLean, and Verna St. Denis

Fernwood Publishing, 2022, 280 pages

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In this edited collection, Amanda Gebhard, Sheelah McLean, and Verna St. Denis compile a breadth of examples from contemporary scholarship that deconstruct the ways in which white settler colonialism is reproduced through the roles of professionals in the “helping professions” and the systems within which these professions occupy (e.g. social work, health care, education, and criminal justice). The editors frame the discussion around what they describe as “white benevolence,” a phenomenon that intersects with settler colonial logics and is upheld by “paternalistic racism that reinforces, instead of challenges, racial hierarchies” (p. 1). They conceptualize white benevolence as a characteristic of “white settler professionals who often profess to support Indigenous Peoples yet reproduce colonial narratives that uphold white supremacy” (p. 1). This timely and much-needed criticism of the ways in which education, healthcare, and criminal justice services in Canada continue to reproduce and perpetuate ongoing colonial violence imbued with anti-Indigenous racism. Drawing from contemporary scholarship, the editors set out to disrupt the colonial scripts that reproduce paternalistic relations of settlers as “helpers” and Indigenous peoples as those in need of “help,” and demonstrate how these binary power relations have left helping professions and the professionals that work

within them unexamined and unquestioned in their attempts to “do good.” This edited collection both acknowledges and attends to these often-uncontested institutions with nuance, signifying that colonial resistance is, in and of itself, an ethic of care.

The editors specify that while white benevolence is reproduced by many forms of colonialism and results in colonial violence experienced by all racialized communities in Canada, white settler colonialism is the focal point of the book. They describe that white settler colonialism is distinct from other forms of colonial violence in that it is “motivated by access and control over territory, accomplished through the process of constructing white supremacy in relation to Indigenous superiority” (p. 2). In particular, the research featured in this collection is primarily situated on the Canadian prairies, a geographical location that is particularly imbued with land-based tensions that are entangled with nation-building narratives with a strong history of dispossessing Indigenous peoples, imposing health and social services as a means to control Indigenous communities (e.g. via Indian Residential Schools, Indian hospitals, etc.), but also a vibrant history of Indigenous resistance to systemic state repression. The authors featured in this collection provide razor-sharp analyses of the ways in which the concept of white benevolence manifests on the prairies, making this collection both a unique and much-needed contribution to the field of humanities and social sciences in this specific context.

While the book does not contain explicit sections, the organization of the contents and chapters of this book are effective. Without being situated within a particular section, the editors demonstrate how settler colonialism is reproduced across disciplines, and emphasize that “whiteness does not work in isolation within institutions” (p. 12). To this end, a number of arcs are evident throughout the book, and the fluidity in which the chapters flow invites readers to imagine the ways in which white benevolence blends, intersects, and folds into one another across constructions of individual professional identities, professions, institutions, and systems.

The first four chapters highlight the first arc which demonstrates the ways in which settler colonial logics and power relations are broadly systemic and produce subjects that both reproduce and resist colonial violence at home (“Living My Family Through Colonialism” by Verna St. Denis), in schools (“Toxic Encounters: What’s Whiteness Doing in a Nice Field Like Education?” by Sheelah McLean), within the healthcare system (“How Indigenous-Specific Racism Is Coached into Health Systems” by Barry Lavalley and Laurie Harding) and criminal justice systems (“Within this Architecture

of Oppression, We Are a Vibrant Community’: Indigenous Prairie Prisoner Organizing during COVID-19” by Nancy van Styvendale). The next arc is comprised of three chapters which elucidate how colonial violence is reproduced within “helper” identities, namely, white women (“Tracing the Harmful Patterns of White Settler Womanhood” by Willow Samara Allen), teachers (“Policing Indigenous Students: The School/Prison Nexus in the Canadian Prairies” by Amanda Gebhard), and police officers (“The Stories We Tell: Indigenous Women and Girls’ Narratives on Police Violence” by Megan Scribe). The third arc spans the next five chapters and troubles the ways in which colonial violence and anti-Indigenous racism is deeply ingrained in the constructions of whiteness and white settlerhood, often going unquestioned and unnamed (Frankenberg, 1993) in institutions assumed to serve the common good. This arc examines how constructions of whiteness and settlerhood in Canada reproduce as truth power relations through normalized colonial dispossession in the K-12 education system (“Colten Boushie and the Deadly Articulations of Settler Colonialism: The Origins and Consequences of a Racist Discourse” by Timothy Stanley), in higher education (“What Can ‘Settler of Colour’ Teach Us? A Conversation on the Complexities of Decolonization in White Universities” by Shaista Patel and Nisha Nath), in nursing education (“Unmasking the Whiteness of Nursing” by Sharissa Hantke), through the values of individualism (“Am I a Settler?: Considering Dominance Through Racial Constructs and Land Relationships” by S. J. Adrienne Joyce), and through the myths surrounding universal health care in Canada (“Whiteness of Medicine” by Jaris Swidrovich). The last arc, which is taken up in the last four chapters, looks to anti-racist and anti-colonial framings to disrupt systemic anti-Indigenous racism. The authors within this arc discuss expressions of agency as counter-stories (Madden, 2019b) through social media (“A Circle of Rocks: Cannibal Culture, Kinship and Indigenous Youth in the Saskatchewan Public School System” by Jas M. Morgan), caucusing (“White Entitlement in Antiracism and Anticolonialism” by Jeff Halvorsen, Régine King, Liza Lorenzetti, Adrian Wolfleg, and Lemlem Haile), transformative research (“An Interview with Dr. Alex Wilson: Queering the Mainstream” by Alex Wilson and Sheelah McLean), and by naming and resisting the signifiers of white privilege (“Permission to Escape” by Heather Carter).

The research in this collection highlights some of the implications for how the helping professions are constructed in the discourse of the Canadian imagination and in relation to the lived experiences of Indigenous individuals and communities. It builds

on and extends the work of Sunera Thobani's (2007) theorizing of "exalted subjects" in Canadian national discourse, and echoes Regan's (2012) call to take seriously the systemic harms that are perpetuated when settler colonialism goes unexamined in the helping professions. This collection underscores what Madden (2019a) described as "de/colonizing," a hybrid term that captures the ways in which both colonizing and decolonizing effects are produced simultaneously and often in contradiction. Madden suggests that de/colonizing acknowledges the complexities of the helping professions, institutions and systems that exceed binary categories such as colonizing/decolonizing, harming/helping, helper/in need of help.

White Benevolence is an important contribution to better understanding the ways that decolonization and reconciliation commitments and competencies are urgently needed to mitigate ongoing harms that exist within the helping professions in Canada. Alongside other texts that support emerging and established professionals to understand the ongoing effects of colonial violence on Indigenous individuals and communities in the areas of healthcare and criminal justice, within the field of education this is a necessary book for pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, school counselors, administrators, teacher educators, and educational consultants working within institutions.

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