Recognizing More-Than-Human Relations in Social Justice Research

Gesturing Towards Decolonial Possibilities

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Abstract

In this article we share our study in teacher education that engages both the human and more-than-human as fundamental to matters of social justice. In the first part of the article we focus on ecocritical scholarship that raises concerns about the omission of the more-than-human in educational research and practice through Western modernist discourses. We connect these concerns to insights from decolonial scholarship that emphasize the role of colonial power in structuring the imaginative limits of Western modernity. In the second part of the article we present the context and design of a framework informed by decolonial and critical scholarship we engaged in a research project in teacher education that considers the human and more-than-human in matters of social justice. We offer this framework as an example of how different analyses can be combined to shed light on complex issues related to the normalization of colonial practices in educational research. In our conclusion, we highlight the need for research practices that gesture towards possibilities for decolonial futures, while recognizing our shared systemic complicity within enduring colonial institutionalized practices.

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Introduction

Scholarship and practices in the area of teacher education and social justice often prioritize the perceived needs and experiences of social groups on the margins of dominant social positions. In our location in the Canadian settler nation-state, we see this as an extremely important focus in a context of exacerbated wealth concentration, entrenched privilege and disparate access to opportunities within an unstable capitalist system. Research across disciplines in North America attests to the fact that inequalities are endemic and institutionalized in society (see for example Gallagher, 2016; Levin, 2013; Puchner & Markowitz, 2016; Statistics Canada, 2011). The prominence of recent resistance movements from 'Standing Rock' to 'Black Lives Matter' operating on both sides of the Canada/United States border speaks to the demand and desire for greatly needed societal change regarding long-standing and intensifying human injustices. While we recognize the importance of addressing injustices experienced by human beings, we also appreciate the fundamental need to engage the more-than-human relations within social justice concerns. Our related practices in research are informed by land-based, non-anthropocentric teachings gifted by Indigenous communities, and they influence our recognition that the existence and well-being of the more-than-human and human are enmeshed.

Ecocritical scholars and educators highlight the problematic omission of the more-than-human in educational research and practice focused on social justice. In the field of education, ecocritical educators are drawing attention to the inter-related nature of the human experience of societal violences and declining capacity for healthy eco-systems (Bowers, 2007, 2010; Lowenstein, et al. 2010; Lupinacci & Happel-Parkins, 2016). They argue that these inter-related injustices are upheld by logics of domination and that Western models of schooling problematically naturalize Western discourses of individualism, anthropocentrism and consumerism. Plumwood (2002) argues that the ecological crisis and related disregard for the more-than-human has emerged through dominant forms of Western rationality. She argues that dominant Western rationality denies ethical relation and responsibility to both the human and more-than-human Others. Similarly, Bowers (2010) argues:

> The problem today is that most of us have been educated in western style educational institutions and thus have been socialized to think and communicate in the metaphorical language framed by analogs settled

upon by earlier western thinkers who were unaware of environmental limits. (p. 21)

Bowers points out that words and phrases such as progress, critical thinking, property, tradition, etc. carry forward prejudicial narratives of earlier Western thinkers that are now taken for granted (p. 25). In our view, ecocritical scholars draw needed attention to the inter-related injustices for the human and more-than-human that are supported through modernist epistemologies and related metaphors.

We recognize the shared commitment in ecocritical scholarship to engage the more-than-human in matters of social justice and the critique of modernity, and connect these concerns to insights from decolonial scholarship. Decolonial scholarship emphasizes the ways the colonial encounter frames the imaginative limits of modernity, especially the restrictions imposed by universal reasoning grounded in desires for engineering the social world (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo 2011). In our view, an explicit consideration of colonialism illuminates matters of social justice in the context of the Canadian settler nation-state in which we live. We recognize that we are in a society immersed in settler narratives that invisibilize colonialism and related violences, justify/naturalize the occupation of Indigenous territories, and support elite inter-sectional positionalities (Donald, 2009; Mackey, 2005; Thobani; 2007). As such, we are focused on working towards decolonial research practices in teacher education. Drawing on Latin American scholars, in this article, we characterize decolonial research as research that attempts to visibilize and destabilize the colonial logics and narratives that are entangled with modernity. We then share an overview of the decolonial theoretical conversations that influence our research toward the possibility of decolonial futures, and share the design and theoretical framework of our recent research study in teacher education. We believe that this study gestures towards decolonial possibilities in theorizing and enacting research that recognizes the ethical interdependence and mutuality of human and more-than-human well-being and social justice. We conclude with some thoughts on the complexities and inherent limitations of this research project and of decolonial practices in general.

A Decolonial Paradigm:
Understanding Contemporary Colonial Injustices

Latin American scholars articulating and developing decolonial theory provide a crucial lens for the work carried out in our study in teacher education (See for example: Grosfoguel, 2007, 2008; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo, 2002, 2009, 2011, 2012; Quijano, 2007; Walsh, 2012).

Through their specific analysis of coloniality, these scholars provide a thoughtful lens through which we understand ongoing global injustices that emerged with and through modernity/coloniality. As Maldonado-Torres (2007) clarifies, drawing on the work of Quijano (2001), colonialism and coloniality are different. Whereas colonialism denotes a political and economic relation between a 'nation' and an 'empire'; coloniality "instead, refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations" (p. 243). In this way, colonial systems of power continue to engineer dominant social relations beyond the existence of formalized colonial relations. As Grosfoguel (2008) explains, colonialism is not just a violent system of labour and capital that has ended, but a complex world system established through the embodied arrival of "a European, capitalist, military, Christian, patriarchal, white, heterosexual, male" human being in the late 1400s who "established in time and space several entangled global hierarchies" (Grosfoguel, 2008, p. 5). Grosfoguel (2008) argues that this embodied perspective "allows us to understand the continuity of colonial forms of domination after the end of colonial administrations, produced by colonial cultures and structures in the modern/colonial capitalist world-system" (p. 8). The coloniality paradigm theorizes coloniality as a pervasive structural phenomenon—rather than an historical event (Grosfoguel, 2007; see also Wolfe, 2006).

Mignolo (2011), also drawing on the work of Quijano (2001), considers the nature and effects of what they term the modern/colonial imaginary, and theorizes how colonialism created a structure of domination that is entangled with Western modernity and perpetuates ongoing patterns of global injustice. As Mignolo (2011) articulates, hidden behind Western modernity is the agenda of coloniality (p.1). In this way, coloniality is constitutive of modernity—there is no modernity without coloniality - and yet, at the same time, for modernity to continue to exist it needs to hide its colonial violence. Mignolo refers to modernity as modernity/coloniality in order to make visible the fact that it is the beings who experience the violence of coloniality that subsidize modernity—the / between modernity and coloniality marks their inseparable relation and is "the open wound where modernity grates against coloniality and bleeds" (Mignolo, 2011, xxi). Social discriminations emerging through colonialism that are later codified as 'racial', 'ethnic', 'anthropological' or 'national' are produced through this power structure of modernity/coloniality (Quijano, 2007, p. 168).

Insights from decolonial scholarship highlight that colonial logics continue to structure systemic intersecting injustices in societies across

the globe and are upheld by modernist epistemic practices. Mignolo (2011) suggests that the key to maintaining the invisibility of this structure of domination and oppression is the *hubris of the zero point*. Mignolo argues that the *zero point* is the epistemological location that places a privileged knowing body as occupying a detached and neutral point of observation, who from this neutral place "maps the world and its problems, classifies people, and projects what is good for them" (Mignolo, 2011, p. 118). Grosfoguel adds to this through noting that a particular Western modernist view of knowledge is able to dominate by masquerading as universal knowledge and present itself as the god-like view of truth—"It's a point of view that conceals itself as being beyond a point of view" (Grosfoguel, 2007, p. 214). As Quijano (2007) argues, the European paradigm of rational, abstract knowledge not only grew in the context of colonialism, but was also a foundational part of the power structure of domination (p. 174). Decolonial scholarship informs our work through engaging with a more detailed consideration of the colonial encounter on our thinking, ethical responsibilities and logics in our research design and practices related to social justice priorities in teacher education.

A Research Study in Teacher Education:
A Gesture Toward Decolonial Possibilities

We share as an example a current research project that we have completed as a way to engage and illuminate for educational researchers the possibilities of designing research in teacher education that engages the enmeshed nature of the human and more-than-human in relation to social justice concerns. Furthermore, we highlight how that research also engages theoretically with contemporary colonial encounters and the narratives that support and justify ongoing injustices. With this in mind, we share glimpses of our research project in efforts to introduce and explain the theoretical framework behind the kind of research possibilities that exist when ecocritical priorities are extended to include decolonial possibilities. Specifically, we focus on: the ways that such a framework engages the ethical concerns of ongoing injustices in society for both humans and more-than-humans; the dominant modes of thinking and imaginaries that support these injustices; the localized narratives in the Canadian settler nation-state that justify and naturalize these injustices; and the colonial context—which we theorize is fundamental to these injustices.

This research project attempts to map dispositions of teacher candidates as they participate in a learning cycle as a part of their teacher

education program in relation to concerns of social inequalities for the human and more-than human members of our communities. The objective is to deepen understandings of diversity and community engagement in the context of education. The learning cycle consists in a pre-survey, workshop, videos, three-week community field placement (local or global) and post survey. The pre- and post-survey questions elicit responses related to inequitable societal processes, uneven power relations, unfair economic systems, dominant modes of knowledge production, and ecological justice. The broader concern of the learning cycle and this study is preparing future educators to face the complexity, uncertainty and diversity in the world so as to address local and global inequalities that are reflected in and mobilized through education.

The notion of dispositions in this study draws on the work of Andreotti, Biesta, and Ahenakew (2015); specifically, we draw on their conceptualization of dispositions for global mindedness, where dispositions are seen as habitual patterns of action that emerge in complex ways which are dependent on shifting and multi-layered contexts. Unlike capacities or competencies, dispositions are non-linear, and can become latent or manifest with differing degrees of commitment. Dispositions are also not like developmental stages, but instead one can enact multiple and contrasting dispositions within one event. Teacher candidates' dispositions were studied as they progressed through the learning cycle facilitated by their education course. The surveys are meant to both map changes in dispositions to multiple forms of societal inequalities at the beginning and end of the learning cycle, and also to map the types of narratives that teacher candidates use to frame engagement with societal inequalities in their work as educators. The first section asks teacher candidates to rate their degree of (dis)agreement with certain statements related to the identified themes. For example:

> What is the biggest challenge to sustainability?
> > There is no challenge. How we are living now is perfectly sustainable.
> > There are too many people who do not value the environment.
> > We cannot agree on a common definition of sustainability.
> > Our current thinking prevents us from seeing the planet as a living entity.

The second section consists of short answer questions that provide opportunities for teacher candidates to articulate their response as an educator to a young student in a defined positionality. These questions allow us to identify narratives that may be at work in teacher candidates' ways of framing inequalities. The following are the specific questions from the survey for the second section:

In a teaching placement, imagine you are asked the following questions by an eight-year-old child. You don't have time to respond at length. What would be your *immediate short* response (max 3 sentences)?

1. [from a child recently arrived in Canada]
Why is it that some people have so much and others have so little?

2. [from a visible minority child born in Canada]
Why is it that more teachers and bosses are white?

3. [from an Aboriginal child]
My grandma says the salmon are the spirit of our ancestors. Is that true?

4. [from a child of high socio-economic background]
If people keep cutting down forests and polluting the water, we will not be able to survive. Why are adults still doing that?

A Decolonial/Critical Theoretical Framework

Our conceptual framework for the design of the study and analysis of the survey responses combines decolonial and critical theory, aware of incommensurabilities between these orientations and attentive to the limitations of the framework itself. We have designed and named our conceptual framework the AWEsome conceptual framework (see Figure 1). The framework works on a macro/abstract and localized level and draws together the concerns of the human and more-than-human in matters of social justice in a way that shows these concerns as enmeshed. The 'AWE' frames the broader analytical lens we metaphorically envision as a triangle through which the study is designed and responses analyzed. The three core concepts of Autoimmunity (Derrida, 2005), Willful Ignorance (Alcoff, 2007) and Enlightenment Epistemology (Grosfoguel, 2007, 2008; Mignolo, 2002, 2011, 2012; Quijano, 2007) are seen as mutually reinforcing. The 'some' in this AWEsome framework relates specifically to the discursive practices in the Canadian settler nation-state, and is elaborated through Donald's (2009) (s)ettler narratives; our own work in (o)bjectivity in educational contexts (Andreotti, 2011, 2012, 2015, 2016; Kerr, 2011, 2014; Kerr & Parent, 2015); Mackey's (2005) (m)ulticultural innocence; and Thobani's (2007) (e)xalted subjects.

AWE—Autoimmunity, Willful Ignorance and Enlightenment Epistemology

We draw on Derrida's (2005) conceptualization of autoimmunity from his later work on democracy. This part of the triangle connects to the societal narratives that normalize inequalities that teacher candidates

Figure 1
The AWEsome graphic is a visual of the conceptual framework combining decolonial and critical theory used in research analysis by the authors.
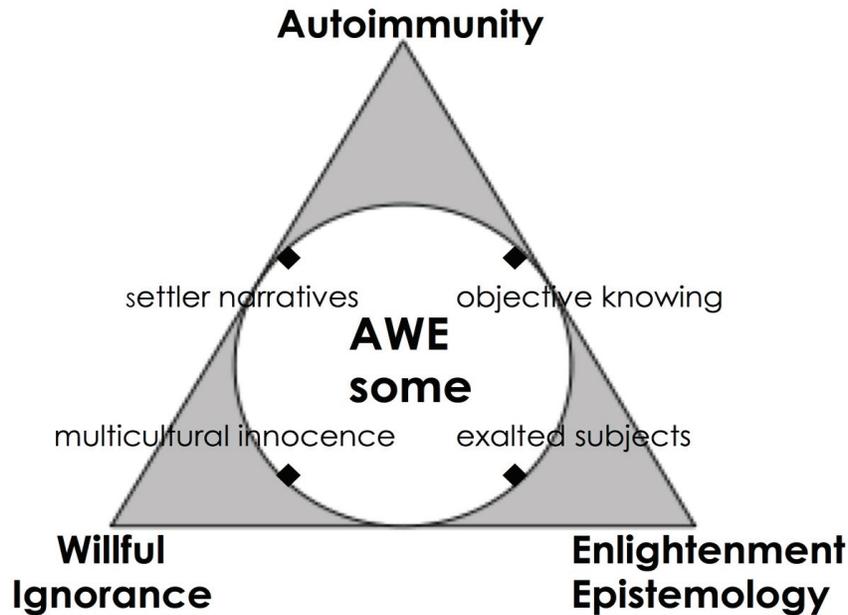
may draw upon in relation to everyday experience in a contemporary liberal democracy through nation-state authority. Drawing on the biological metaphor, where the body's own immune system turns against and destroys itself, Derrida's conceptual work questions the limits of democracy to extend beyond nation-state borders, citizenship and the pre-eminence of humans, which suggests exclusions to immigrants, Indigenous peoples and non-humans within nation-states (2005, p. 53). For Derrida, there is an internal contradiction to the idea of democracy that is governed by a difficult "autoimmune logic" (2005, p. 36). This problematic logic is realized in times where "democracy protects itself and maintains itself precisely by limiting and threatening itself" thus expelling democracy now to protect democracy for the future (Derrida, 2005, p. 36). An example would be exclusions to immigrants for voting. Such a denial of democratic participation would, by auto-immune logic, be necessary to protect the democratic nation-state – thus requiring the rights of immigrants to be put-off. Or ignoring the rights of the more-than-human to life in their ecosystem when an area is stripped of foliage for border protection. As we see it, these constraints are related to systems of

power, and have inequitable effects on those that are marked and named within society—those whose rights within a democracy can be "*sent off*" (Derrida, 2005, p.36). Derrida particularly notes the role of objective reason to sustain narratives that support these exclusions (2005, p. 127). For our purposes, we consider the ways in which responses of teacher candidates reveal dispositions to position themselves in relation to self-preserving dominant narratives and frames of reference of the nation state and human that exclude consideration of the Other or more-than-human.

We draw on Alcoff's (2007) concept of willful ignorance to understand the nature of dispositions to ignore and naturalize the inequity and suffering experienced by the Other through systemic practices. For Alcoff (2007), one of the effects of oppressive systems is to produce willful ignorance through the inculcation of patterns of belief-forming practices that allow (and ultimately encourage) individuals and institutions to systematically ignore inequality and suffering experienced by the Other. These patterns rely on dominant societal narratives that represent or conceptualize inequality or exploitation as "just or fair, or at least the best of all possible worlds" (p. 49). Despite regular evidence of injustice, dominant narratives are employed that allow the "countervailing evidence" to be dismissed (p. 49). Alcoff (2007) elaborates willful ignorance within the politically positioned concept of white racial privilege via Mill (1997), and points to a cognitive dysfunction wherein whites are unable to understand their position of dominance in the world that they have made, and within which they exert dominance (p.49). She elaborates this 'cognitive dysfunction' as a psychological phenomenon that is reinforced by prejudicial societal narratives: where meritocracy and individualism are used to explain structural (dis)advantage; where ideals of thinking are seen as starting within European modernity; and where discussions of poverty are disconnected from Western wealth. Similar to Derrida's conception, Alcoff (2007) argues that these societal narratives are supported by forms of rationalism, which she suggests relate to the rationality of corporate capitalism (p. 53). We engage willful ignorance in our design and analysis to understand the epistemic and embodied ways that teacher candidates' engagement with the inequalities experienced by the Other (created through racialization, nation-state norms, or status as more-than-human) is recognized, avoided, challenged or denied.

Our triangle is brought together with Enlightenment epistemology as informed by decolonial scholarship as cited in earlier in this article. The concept of Enlightenment epistemology draws together the particular mode through which dominance is exerted within autoimmunity and willful ignorance. As both Derrida and Alcoff find, processes of rationalization are central to their theorizations of social domination.

Decolonial scholarship similarly points to epistemic practices based in rationalization, but calls particular attention to the relation of these processes with colonialism, providing an historic connection to contemporary inequitable structures. We engage the concept of Enlightenment epistemology in this research to highlight processes by which teacher candidates relate to specific epistemic practices in education that reaffirm a Eurocentric orientation to knowledge making. We recognize this as disavowing non-Western knowledge practices, which is often done by framing them as cultural belief, and denying ethical responsibility and relation with the more-than-human.

The 'some' in AWEsome:
Narratives in the Canadian Settler Nation-State

In our research, we prioritize practices that highlight the context in which abstract theoretical concepts such as Autoimmunity, Willful Ignorance, and Enlightenment Epistomology find meaning in our local context. While there are innumerable discursive patterns at work in teacher education in our Canadian context, in this study we chose to work with four particular pervasive narrative structures that relate to our theoretical concepts. These narrative structures are: settler narratives, objective knowing, multicultural innocence and exalted subjects. We chose each of these narrative structures as they are common narratives in Canadian society that serve to justify inequalities to the Other and more-than-human, and in our experience, emerge in teacher education classes in our local context. The narrative structures that we draw upon are not isolated from each other, but weave through and reinforce each other.

Settler Narratives

Donald (2012) draws our attention to settler narratives through his analysis of the fort as a mythic symbol that is part of the Canadian frontier imaginary. In his analysis, the fort signifies the teleological dream of 'civilization,' with the effect of positioning Indigenous peoples and knowledges as "outside accepted versions of nation and nationality" (p.100). In this sense, Indigenous peoples and knowledges become outsiders in society, and this view is upheld through the fort mythology. Donald exposes how settler narratives justify the occupation of Indigenous territory, and disregard Indigenous peoples' experiences, perspectives, knowledges, and relationships to land, people and the more-than-human. In the study, the question that presents the child asking a teacher if it is true that her community comes from the salmon was designed

to elicit responses that would challenge and/or reproduce the frontier imaginary described by Donald.

Objective Knowing

We both take this theme up in our work as we critique the assumptions of universal knowledge and abstraction, and related practices in Canadian educational contexts that promote Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism. We analyze discursive productions emergent through Cartesian subjectivities. In these productions, the world is only known to the unrelated human subject, and a posture of being objective is seen as working toward more credited forms of knowledge. Indigenous ways of knowing the world and relation to the more-than-human are discredited as cultural belief within an anthropocentric, objective, Cartesian subjectivity (Andreotti, 2011,2012, 2015, 2016; Kerr, 2011, 2014; Kerr & Parent; 2015). In our survey, statements that were grounded on the search for, or enactment of, epistemic certainty were used as evidence of investments in objective knowing, e.g. "we cannot agree on a common definition of sustainability" or "how we are living now is perfectly sustainable."

Multicultural Innocence

Mackey (2005) draws our attention to discursive practices around multiculturalism and innocent subjectivities. In Mackey's work, she argues that pervasive multicultural ideology of equality of all cultures in the Canadian nation-state actually serves to reinforce a dominant white, Western, liberal cultural centre – thus privileging and marginalizing subjects based on cultural affiliations. In this line of thought, we analyze narratives that position the centrality of the white, Western liberal subject as the defender and purveyor of rights to the Other, justified through narratives of meritocracy that disregard systemic privilege. Questions that elicited responses related to immigration were used to evaluate participants' investments in multicultural innocence. For example, asking teacher candidates' position in relation to the statement 'immigrants should fit into the culture of the country they are in.' or asking for a response to a child that is a recent immigrant with the question "why is it that some people have so much and some have so little?"

Exalted Subjects

Thobani's (2007) critique of Canadian citizens' self-positioning as exalted subjects also informed our study design and data analysis.

Thobani draws our attention to the popular narrative of the inherent goodness of white Canadian nationals and the Canadian nation-state, and the Other as the racialized and Indigenous Others who are at once suspect, yet on the receiving end of goodness. These innocent/exalted subjectivities are created through dominant narratives in ways that deny complicity in systemic racism and colonial violence, and actively work to avoid or deny any evidence to the contrary. In the survey, the short answers section was designed to challenge the discourse of Canadian exceptionalism and to provoke responses that could denote participants' investments in exalted subjectivities.

Taken together these narratives provide guidance in constructing the survey questions, and analysis of teacher candidate's pre-and post-survey responses.

Conclusion

In this article, we have sought to share an example of research in teacher education that attempts to meaningfully engage the colonial context of injustices for the human and the more-than-human as fundamental to matters of social justice in a situated decolonial and critical framework. We are also attempting to engage complex theories that critically engage social inequalities for the human and more-than human into our research and teaching. We are grateful to Indigenous communities and knowledge holders whose insights and practices have helped us to appreciate the magnitude of the task of learning that is before us, and have shaped our recognition that the existence and well-being of the more-than-human and human are enmeshed. Through engaging insights from ecocritical scholarship and Latin American decolonial studies we attempted to articulate a recognition of the limits of the imaginary of Western modernity with regard to matters of social justice, and brought an overt consideration of the ways colonialism is entangled with modernity. We shared in greater detail a decolonial and critical theoretical framework that informed our research project to illustrate how these complex theories and priorities can be put into research form in the field of teacher education and perhaps influence social justice priorities in education. We recognize this as a gesture towards decolonial possibilities without guarantees.

In reflecting on our research study, we conclude by acknowledging the complexities in research on social (in)justice in teacher education and decolonial work. We recognize our own systemic complicity in the concerns that we investigate—that this is unavoidable as scholars in the academies that participate in the intellectual and affective problematic economies that we critique. We are a part of the colonial society,

institutions and systems that we work to change. We believe that, given our modern socialization, we tend to assume the intelligibility and universality of our ontological and epistemological frames of thinking within our work as researchers, often forgetting the social, cultural and historical embeddedness of our assumptions. Our decolonial orientation helps us to remember our embeddedness, but does not release us from the frames of reference that reproduce the injustices that we are trying to address in our work. We are critiquing from within colonial institutions, using the same intellectual tools that we critique. Under these circumstances, we try to attend more carefully to conflicts and incommensurabilies between different intellectual orientations and to maintain awareness of the limits, paradoxes and contradictions of our own frames of reference. We share our work with a spirit of humility for its inherent limitations.

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