

# Decolonizing Equity

Edited by

Billie Allan

V.C. Rhonda Hackett

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# PEDAGOGIES OF DISSENT

## Meditations on Decolonial Disruptions

*Foreword by OmiSoore Dryden*

The essays in this necessary and urgent book detail the importance of building trusting and deeply caring relationships as a cornerstone of decolonizing equity with a commitment to decolonial equity. With this shift in gaze, we engage new meaning, deeper meaning, not quite yet finished or completed meaning, as a way of engaging with the destabilizing practices of radical equity. In this text we are pushed to explore why we are happily committed to a “diverse workplace,” when that diversity seems to only serve to maintain the status quo, thus maintaining white settler colonialism and logics.

By centring the tenets of colonialism, including the afterlife of slavery in this region currently normatively known as “Canada,” this text explores how slavery and genocide continue to linger in spaces and places we cannot yet fully understand. Tiffany Lethabo King writes in her seminal text, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*, “Genocide and slavery do not have an edge. While the force of their haunt has distinct feelings at the stress points and instantiations of Black fungibility and Native genocide, the violence moves as one” (King, 2019, x). And this violence moves as one into normative white settler practices of equity, diversity, and inclusion.

*Decolonizing Equity* incites us to understand that equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) practices will remain much the same—tools to maintain the status quo — until we are ready to take action and to en-

gage more fully with the disquieting, eccentric, bizarre, puzzling, extraordinary, mysterious, uncommon, and unconventional opportunities that will result in the substantive structural change demanded by social justice undertakings.

## PEDAGOGIES OF DISSENT

As I write this, I am located in Kijipuktuk/Halifax, the traditional unceded territory of the Wəlastəkewiyik (Maliseet) whose ancestors along with the Mi'kmaq / Mi'kmaw and Passamaquoddy Nations signed Peace and Friendship Treaties with the British Crown in the 1700s. Yet we must not forget that these treaties were signed roughly 140 years before the end of slavery in this region now called Canada. Halifax was imposed upon Kijipuktuk in 1749 and enslaved African peoples were used to dig out roads and build the city — including much of the citadel. On the southern shore of the Bedford Basin, Mi'kmaq people shared land with Black people, and this allowed Africville to be founded in the mid-1800s. Africville was, as we know, later demolished by the city government in the 1960s — bulldozed to the ground in the middle of the night. In this acknowledgement, I honour Indigenous and Black Peoples who continue to be here; and who continue to fight against genocide and the afterlives of slavery. I respectfully acknowledge our collective ancestors — Indigenous, Black, queer, trans, genderqueer, and Two Spirit — who collectively were born here, forced here, and continue to make home here.

Between 1992 and 2004, I worked in the Centre for Race & Ethnic Relations at York University (the traditional territory of many Nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples) in a shared office space with the Sexual Harassment Education & Complaint Centre. I was the Advisory on both Race & Ethnic Relations, and Sexual & Gender Diversity, and brought with me into this dual role the excitement and power of student activism. I was committed to disrupting how anti-Black racism manifested within the university. Our commitment to anti-racism meant finding creative and strategic tools that would urge the university to move beyond minimum requirements (as outlined by provincial human rights legislation, and internal protocols) and engage in maximum efforts to disrupt racism. But more so, our commitment to lessening harms caused by systemic racism on Black, Indigenous

Peoples, and people of colour was our primary concern. The work was to hold the university accountable to make the sites of working, learning, and living, safe/positive spaces. It is important to note that at the time, I did find my work in the Centre exciting and filled with possibilities.

However, university systems (similar to other colonial systems in Canada) claimed commitments to objectivity, “colour-blind” frameworks, neutral assessments — all of which are embedded in white supremacist logics of fairness and ultimately uphold the doctrines of colonialism. These deeply flawed and false logics often begin with the belief that everyone is treated equally and that by not directly naming colonialism and anti-Black racism, by not specifically identifying Indigenous and Black people, one is actually doing the work of equality. Yet, it is impossible to be unaffected by colonial systems of oppression, which, of course, include the afterlife of slavery.

Although, in this work, I have watched the framing change. More radical notions of justice and accountability morph into (are set aside for) multiculturalist notions of employment equity and increased diversity, “political correctness” (Wilson 1995), unconscious bias, and bullying — ultimately evacuating the difficult realities of decolonial/anti-colonial anti-racism. I resisted and bristled against the spoken and unspoken pressure and expectations to soften the work and to operate as a gatekeeper that protected the university from complaints of harassment and discrimination. If systems are only able to address discrete “symptoms,” the underlying social structures remain untouched and the complexity of meaning and representation is occluded. I began to think seriously about the effectiveness of equity, diversity, and inclusion, especially as I was watching the more progressive elements of the work slowly being eroded, morphed, into a systems-management type of endeavour. I’m reminded of Mohanty (2003) who argues that “cultures of dissent must work to create pedagogies of dissent rather than pedagogies of accommodation” (216).

I venture that there is an overlap between the desire to claim, “I don’t see colour” (colour-blind objectivity) and the colonial Canadian claims of “all are welcome here.” To operate in this realm is to continue to entrench white supremacist/settler colonial logics which are established as the norm/standard. Canada’s enduring national narrative of multiculturalism makes it difficult to address colonialism and difficult to understand that anti-Blackness is endemic to, and within the fabric



of, the colonial nation. In the article, “Resisting Inclusion: Decolonial Relations between Peoples of Afrikan Descent and Original Peoples,” Moyo Rainos Mutamba (2014) states,

History shows how the white supremacist colonial state of Canada strategically desires our inclusion at times, to further its colonial agenda, only to exclude us to sustain its racist, anti-black agenda. To be included in the nation-state is to be in a colonial relationship with Original Peoples of this land, and inclusion necessarily comes at the expense of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. (n.p.)

In this way, there is recognition that inclusion (as it is normatively operationalized) is not freedom, and sameness is actually a social injustice. Inclusion continues to be promoted as the antidote to many of the oppressions that hinder our material well-being. It is believed to be a corrective philosophy that finds its support in the basic belief that oppression happens exclusively through means of exclusion. However, the questions are the following: Into what are we being included? Who defines the terms of this inclusion, and under what conditions? For example, fighting for inclusion within the framework of a Canadian colonial and anti-Black state, the presumption is that the Canadian state is legitimate, stable and will/should always exist.

The use of “diversity” is a strategy that serves to manage normativity, harmony, and civility but ultimately does not facilitate a disruption of systems of oppressions (Ahmed, 2012; Mohanty, 2003). The baseline in the work of diversity remains the maintaining of the status quo. Diversity work produces a culture of silence (Alexander, 2005; Mohanty, 2003) and, in effect, gestures to more diversity than actually exists.

How does one manage being positioned as unruly or uncivil when mentioning these realities when the practices of racism, sexism, homophobia are left unexamined and unexplored? Inclusion is not a promise extended to all who attend the academic institution (including faculty). Sara Ahmed (2012) details this failure when she states

we can note how commitments to antiracism can become performances of racism: as if to say “you are wrong to describe us as uncaring and racist because we are caring and committed to

being antiracist.” When antiracism provides a discourse of organizational pride, then racism is not recognized and is enacted in the mode of non-recognition. (145)

One response to systems of “non-recognition” of white settler colonial practices, the afterlife of slavery, and institutional equity practices is a turn to mutual aid and social justice.

## MUTUAL AID

Mutual Aid is collective coordination to meet needs of the community, without relying upon current state systems to provide this care. COVID-19 has resulted in a number of community mutual aid interventions in Indigenous and Black communities across Turtle Island. While we may now call this mutual aid, we have always had systems of community care — be it sharing of food, expanded child minding, or supports for purchasing school uniforms, ride shares and/or supporting families who may be out of work, on strike, or precariously employed. Mariame Kaba, community organizer and abolitionist, says of mutual aid that it

is premised on solidarity and not charity, and that’s really important. It rejects saviorism. It rejects hierarchy and authoritarianism...it marries community service with political education and political activism that’s actually focused on challenging power and oppressive systems. (qtd. in Alkhafaji 2021, n.p)

The Black Panther Party exhibited the transformative outcomes of connecting community service with political education and activism. In 1972, they included health as part of their radical mission — the Ten Point Program — calling on the government to “provide, free of charge, for the people, health facilities which will not only treat our illnesses” — most of which have come about as a result of continued colonialism and anti-Black racism — but to develop preventive medical programs. In addition, the Black Panther Party *called on researchers* to provide Black people with access to “scientific and medical information, *so we may provide ourselves* with proper medical attention and care” (Fullilove 2016: n.p.; original emphasis). This demand for health and wellness for all becomes a foundation of a more just and equitable world (Basset

2016). Moya Bailey and Whitney People (2017) also make this assertion. They argue that “health and wellness [must be seen] as an integral part of social justice labour” (2). They provide us with a reminder of the full meaning of Fannie Lou Hamer’s statement that she is “sick and tired of being sick and tired” (Bailey and People 2017, 2). Many of us — Black and Indigenous women (cis and trans), Black and Indigenous Two Spirit and queer folks — have repeated this phrase in response to the relentless white supremacy, anti-Indigenous and anti-Black racism, homophobia, lesbophobia, and transphobia. However, Fannie Lou Hamer was also speaking to her very literal sickness. Hamer’s declaration that she was sick and tired was not simply a metaphor for activist fatigue; it was a declaration of literal pain, illness, and physical exhaustion. Physical and mental health remains a metric for understanding both the process and impact of oppression in our lives, which is why it is significant that in this text, we are reminded that *wellness as resistance* is a necessary response/intervention to inequity.

As COVID-19 has reminded us, anti-Indigenous and anti-Black racism continues to shape institutions and social interactions including those related to health care. Claims of cultural and racial neutrality, particularly in the fields of medicine and health, hamper and obstruct our ability to fully realize better health outcomes. I too believe that the management of our health would look different if we centred and then deployed decolonial/anti-colonial social justice as our guide. And as Audre Lorde (1984) reminds us: “Revolution is not a one-time event. It is becoming always vigilant for the smallest opportunity to make a genuine change in established, outgrown responses” (140).

Mutual aid as a cornerstone of decolonial equity would require that we participate in collective decision making. This is not always easy as the relationships between Black and Indigenous people are mediated through the interlocking violence of genocide and slavery. As Tiffany Lethabo King (2019) outlines: “The terms of survival — or, said another way, the circumstances under which you as a Black or Indigenous person lived — were often tethered to the death of the Other” (xi).

Decolonizing equity demands radical relation making which then underscores and supports our collective multi-voiced decision making. Instead of placing our trust in the system, we place it in the transformative process of decolonial equity. Believing and then simply stating that “all are welcome” does not do the work of actually making a

space welcoming, nor does it address the concerns of our communities. There is a rupture between incorporating intersectionality within the institution and the continued presentation of people being simplistically constituted — where women are “just” women, Black people are “just” Black, queer people are “just queer,” and Indigenous people are “just” Native. This is a very effective tactic that continues to perpetuate the precarity of our presence while occluding our complex identities, experiences, and modes of thought. I remain appreciative of the work of Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Audre Lorde, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Audra Simpson, the book *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981), and the Black Feminist Statement as written by the Combahee River Collective (1983) which states,

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. (272)

This book guides us on the ways to be daring when engaging the colonial and anti-Black foundations of systemic racism in which decolonizing equity requires us to engage. And we need to be daring. Our lives depend on it. Not for survival in the system — universities, and others — but something different, something based in wholistic mutual aid, transformative justice, care of the mind, body and spirit, the critical engagement with accountability in our communities, for our selves. This book's focus on Indigenous and decolonizing thought, critical race theory, Black feminist/queer thought is instrumental in creating a text that is both insightful and inciting.

## DECOLONIAL DISRUPTIONS

The process of grappling with different ways of moving through our various complicated experiences incites different contemplations which in turn facilitates building anew. Perhaps through this process, something transformative will be created and animated. However, we must take note

of the cautions offered in the book, especially one from Dr. Kathy Hogarth in Chapter 3, where she states “Not all colonized subjects are treated equitably in the decolonizing discourse” (76\*\* Page number to be updated here after typesetting. This quote currently appears on pg 76 of this manuscript\*\*). If all subjects are not treated equitably, and this is a clear distinction and departure from equality arguments, then have we decolonized or have we in fact re-inscribed another version of colonization?

To be incited to think anew, to engage what is unknown and currently unthought, is to simultaneously create an internal rupture and one that also causes rupture within sites where we are precariously situated. Turning toward each other in response to harmful white supremacist systems, colonial and anti-Black systems, will guide us to greater well-being.

The pedagogies offered within take us through a tapestry of multiple spaces where knowledge is produced. It asks us to enter in the difficult work of liberation. Decolonizing equity demands that we refuse hegemonic bargains that continue to support the very system in need of change and disruption — and assures us that, in doing so, we will collectively create spaces of health and wellness.

*Adupe. Ase-O.*

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