

## **Teaching Social Justice in Dangerous Times: Practices of hope**

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### **Acknowledgments**

It is wonderful to be here. I feel humbled to share this time with you all. I'd like to express my gratitude for the invitation to visit the traditional, ancestral and unseeded territory of the Musqueam (x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əyəm). Born in Québec to a Palestinian, refugee, and immigrant father, and Québécoise mother with settler ancestry, we emigrated to the United States when I was 10 years old. I am here today as a guest and visitor to this land, and I humbly accept the responsibility to learn from and give respect to the long history of indigenous peoples on this land.

I also want to thank the University of British Columbia, The School of Social Work, Dean Bains and, the 90th Anniversary Fellowship Selection Committee. I'm so excited to be here.

As I begin, I want to acknowledge all those who do this work, the teaching and doing of social justice and decolonisation. I want to acknowledge how grossly underappreciated, exhausting this work can be, as well as the ways the work requires an abundance of emotional labor. I want to state clearly and unequivocally that I appreciate you!

### **Introduction**

One year ago today, I returned to Aotearoa/New Zealand where I lived with my family for close to two years beginning in 2012. During our time there, I was on staff at the

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university of Otago, and taught and did research in the Department of Sociology, Gender, and Social Work, on the South Island, in Dunedin. One year ago, almost to this day, I was returning to teach a two-week course at the University. As the plane was flying into Dunedin, I couldn't have foreseen the intensity and depth of experience I would have during the brief stay.

Towards the end of my 5<sup>th</sup> day of teaching, March 15, 2019, an Australian born, white male, with white supremacist beliefs and a deep hatred of 'others', Muslims in particular, slaughtered 51 people in two mosques in Christchurch, while they worshiped.

March 15<sup>th</sup> now serves as a significant temporal, emotional, and social marker for the country's history. The notion of Aotearoa/New Zealand (inside and outside of the country) as a safe heaven, one of the safest places on earth some thought, was shattered for many. Though not for everyone... because you see, feeling safe in a country, a classroom, a workplace, depends on some combination of lived experience, claimed and perceived social identity, and the relationship between lived experience, identity, power and the State.

I spent the weekend with friends, colleagues and people all over the two islands gathering outside of mosques to sing, pray, grieve, hug, weep, serve as human shields as people returned to prayer, and mostly though to sit in community and solidarity.

Returning to class on Monday would signal our first time being together since learning of what happened on Friday (March 15<sup>th</sup>). As a visitor and guest, I was overwhelmed with the feeling of responsibility coupled with a deep sense of 'not knowing' (what to do, how to support students (as a guest) to navigate a national and in some cases personal tragedy in their own country). I chose to lean on what bell hooks has taught us through *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), and previous efforts to support students through the aftermath of hate and violence (a murder-suicide in my faculty in the U.S., Trump's election, the 'Muslim ban', deportations of undocumented immigrants, killings of black people by police in the U.S., and all the intimate partner violence in students' lives). What felt paramount on this day was to find a way to be fully present for whatever would emerge in the classroom, as well as find a way to build a container for all of us to hold our experiences.

The students in my class included Māori, Pākehā (white New Zealanders), and international students from the Middle East, Canada, and India. Their reactions, thoughts and feelings were as diverse as they were, culturally and individually. While all of us

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were grieving and stunned, students' respective experiences and expressions of grief were layered onto and woven through other emotions. We began the day with a process to check in and support one another. I invited students to share their feelings, thoughts, whatever they wanted in that moment.

- As we began to process, a younger, white, Pākehā student begins by sharing that she's never thought of white supremacy or white privilege before this moment. Her grief accompanied with guilt, shame, confusion.
- A middle aged Pākehā woman follows by saying, "I keep hearing about white privilege in the news, but I'm not privileged... I grew up poor, we had to work hard." Her grief accompanied by an awakening of racial consciousness and intersectionality.
- A younger Māori student rolls her eyes in exasperation as the previous woman speaks... her grief accompanied by annoyance and irritation.
- Next, a very quiet Pākehā woman (who hardly spoke on most days) begins to shake with anger, "this isn't us" she exclaims, "this isn't New Zealand!" Her grief perhaps folded into a type of race to innocence.
- Immediately followed by a Māori female elder, "THIS IS US!" she says forcefully. "THIS IS US!" reminding the class that white supremacy and racism in Aotearoa is NOT new nor novel, putting the March 15th massacres in context by reminding students of the historical killings of Māori at different times since 1642, and throughout colonisation. Her grief deeply rooted and felt in historical trauma, exhaustion, and anger.
- One of the international students from India broke down in tears saying she never felt welcome or that she belonged in NZ, and she shared a painful story of being chased by boys in a park when she was much younger. They pulled at her traditional dress and head covering because she was a foreigner, and implored her to 'go home.' Her grief also situated in experiences of othering, racism, and islamophobia.

I too had lots of feelings. Feelings about being a visitor and guest, an outsider during this time of national tragedy and pain. My own racialised and colonised history, connections to displacement, occupation, belonging and not belonging, coupled with my own settler and white passing privilege were activated and tender.

I debated whether or not to bring this story into this talk, as I have not yet spoken nor written about my experiences, in part because of the rawness of the emotions. Also, I believe that some stories and experiences sometimes feel too sacred, too delicate to speak.

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I've chosen to weave this experience into my talk however, because of the lessons for me, and perhaps others, around the transformative potential of grief and sorrow within social justice and liberation work, as well as the relationship between grief and hope in this experience.

## **Epistemology Matters**

Over the course of 20 years of learning and teaching social justice, I have learned that without practices of hope, both in and out of the classroom, my students and I become easily frustrated, impatient, we feel powerless to affect change. We /I've learned this same lesson as the daughter of a Palestinian refugee living in the diaspora, I've learned this as an immigrant, a queer cis-woman, as someone with access to multiple forms of privilege engaged in anti-violence movements for decades. I've arrived at these practices of hope by muddling and stumbling (I've got the teaching evaluations to prove it) through learning how to teach social justice content to social work students, while being complicit and implicated myself in systems of oppression as a social worker, service provider, as an academic and beneficiary of systems of oppression. I owe my lessons to systems of formal and informal accountability to students, colleagues, and a range of communities where the feedback and correction I've received has often been uncomfortable and difficult.

Like many of us in academia, despite going to a wonderful institution for my education, I was never taught *how* to teach during my PhD program. Rather, I learn(ed) by doing (still) with shifting and relative success. My own teaching of social justice and decolonisation has certainly shifted over the course of 20 years, as has my pedagogy. One of the more significant modifications revolves around the ways I engage power and epistemology in the classroom. Whereas I used to not teach BSW and MSW students about epistemology, now I do. I've shifted to teaching future practitioners about epistemology because thinking about 'how they know' (about racism, oppression, freedom, gender etc.) is critical to developing a nuanced power analysis. Without a nuanced power analysis (i.e, power is everywhere), we've focused, sometimes exclusively, on categories and identity politics, sometimes inadvertently reinscribing positions of dominance and marginality in the classroom as a result. The addition of post-structural and post-colonial projects and theories has also facilitated more expansive and creative discussions around resistance and liberation in the classroom.

The influence of more modernist or structural approaches to social justice in social work

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is not without critique, specifically, the essentialism of the subject, the inadvertent subjectivism or writing out of the social, and the reproduction of dominant social discourse as limitations to an overreliance on categories that foster binary thinking and grand narratives (Brown, 2012). Some of the limitations of grand narratives employed by social justice curricula such as Marxism, feminisms and critical race theory include the ways they can foreclose counternarratives or analyses. Whereas, modernist notions of power tend to rely on power as dominant, coercive and imposed from above (Brown, 2003; Fook, 2002), post-structural notions of power, towards which my own theorising and teaching has pivoted, regard power as exercised rather than possessed, power as both repressive and productive, moving through subjects.

While some have written about the strengths and limitations associated with varying epistemologies for teaching social justice to social workers, very few in social work have made a case, yet, for teaching about epistemology within the context of these courses. Whether we teach social justice, oppression, and privilege from a post-positivist, constructivist, critical theory, or post-structural paradigm, we should be able to lead students to consider ‘how we know’ about power, oppression, privilege and liberation as a mechanism for fostering enduring lessons, reflexive and critical praxis, and for navigating insider/outsider tensions that frequently surface in classrooms focused on these issues.

When we ask students to consider ‘how do you know?’ we acknowledge that knowledge is mediated and subjective, and that knowledge is constructed by an interaction between the subject and the world. When we facilitate the examination of our own knowledge formation processes and those of our students around colonisation, privilege and oppression, for example, we develop or strengthen habits of critical thinking, and the questioning of authority that may lead us to new possibilities, rather than guide us down well-worn paths of understanding and meaning.

## **Practice of Hope**

The focus of my talk today revolves around some of the practices of hope I’ve learned through my own journey of teaching about social justice and settler colonialism to social work students. Specifically:

- 1) Interrupting extreme othering
- 2) Seeking and holding complexity and complicity

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- 3) Collective grieving
- 4) Imagining together.

## **1. Extreme Othering**

While we live in dangerous times, the times have always been dangerous for somebody, some people. When I think of danger, I think of structural violence and all its manifestations (white supremacy, settler colonialism, rape culture, capitalism, lack of affordable housing, lack of decent work). And while structural violence is not new, nor unique to this moment in time, I do think that one marker of the danger in this moment within the context of structural violence is profound othering.

John Powell from the Haas institute states that “the other is always imaginary, there is no natural other, there is no natural community”. He writes and talks about there being two ways to work with ‘imagined others’ (people who don’t fit or aren’t perceived as fitting into the social groups that are considered normal/normative- i.e., dominant social identity groups), bridging and breaking. Bridging invites a sense of empathy, compassion, deep listening. Breaking sees the other as a threat, the other as someone to be feared, and/or attacking who *we* are. Many of our practices are of ‘breaking’- defining ourselves in opposition to the other, even those of us engaged in social movements to resist colonisation and oppressions in all their forms.

### **Three Types of Profound Othering in This Moment**

I’d like to name three types of profound othering that I believe are relevant to teaching social justice to social workers at this moment in time.

#### ***Other People as Dangerous.***

What happened in Christchurch on March 15, 2019 is not only an example of extreme othering, but what othering within structures of settler colonialism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy can facilitate. Other examples include the brutal occupation and systematic dehumanising of Palestinians, the anti-Chinese racism associated with Covid-19, the United States ‘Muslim ban,’ anti-Black racism, and the forced removal of the Wet’suwet’en from healing camps associated with the resistance movement to the building of the Coastal GasLink pipeline here in Canada.

#### ***The Climate Crisis.***

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Another current and relevant form of othering that has profound social justice and equity implications for people all over the world, is the current climate crisis. I propose that we think of the climate crisis as a form of ‘othering’ where people separate themselves from the earth, and imagine its resources as separate, an imagined other- through structures of capitalism, colonisation, globalisation.

To understand this type of separation and othering we must do what Alexis Shotwell (2016) and others have called for, which is “remember for the future” (p. 23), that is, remember to stop forgetting. How did land become other, that is, property, specifically property of the State and commercial enterprises? How did land and water become entwined in “legal fictions that have material effects?” (Shotwell, 2016, p. 51). How did land, water and resources become a commodity to be stolen, traded and desecrated for its resources, rather than a signifier of place... place as relationship (Shotwell ponders)?

Shotwell quotes Sioux theologian and writer, (2016, p. 51) Vine Deloria who wrote about land as an ontological framework for understanding relationships:

... Seen in this light, it is a profound misunderstanding to think of land or place as simply some material object of profound importance to Indigenous cultures (although it is that too); instead it ought to be understood as a field of “relationships of things to each other.” Place is a way of knowing, of experiencing and relating to the world and with others; and sometimes these relational practices and forms of knowledge guide forms of resistant against other rationalizations of the world that threaten to erase or destroy our sense of place. (Glen Sean Coulthard, 2014, p. 61).

### ***Epistemological Othering.***

The third marker of these dangerous times I’ll note right now is epistemological othering. Epistemology refers to how we know. What is knowable, what is truth? I’d say that ‘these dangerous times’ are marked by increasing marginalisation of certain ways of knowing, specifically place, body, relational, and interpretive ways of knowing. We see evidence of this through the privileging in academic and institutional spaces of evidence that is quantifiable and measurable, often exclusively. Additionally, through privileging in the discourses of evidenced based practice, we see it in the silencing and erasure of indigenous and traditional ways of knowing, in addition to the othering of raced, classed and racialised analyses of knowledge production. We explicitly witnessed epistemological othering through recent attacks on critical and postmodern journals and scholarship (see grievance studies hoax of 2019).

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Reading from an editorial I co-authored, Park, Bhyuan, & Wahab, 2019:

The central claim against critical scholarship or research—whether feminist, queer, post structural or otherwise—has always been that it is subjective, political, biased, and thus invalid as a basis for knowledge. This truth-claim, founded upon the assumption that neutrality, objectivity, and universality are not only possible but necessary to legitimacy, is I would argue epistemic violence. The claim, which occludes the reality that all research and scholarship have always been partial and political, has long served as the foundation for distinguishing the legitimate from the illegitimate: the rational man from the hysterical woman, the civilizing settler from the savage indigene, the industrious North from the slothful South, the enlightened West from the barbaric East. Grand narratives built upon the claims of objectivity and universality, in other words, have undergirded the violence of all colonial, indeed all genocidal, enterprises” (Park et al., 2019, p.1).

So, where is social work and social justice work and efforts amidst all this profound othering?

I’d like to propose, as have others, that we are inside the othering, inside the danger. As Amy Rossiter and Barbara Heron, among others have noted, there is no place of innocence within helping work. In fact, ‘we’ (social workers), often perpetuate and inadvertently hold up these systems of dominance and technologies of oppression through our attempts at ‘helping’. How can we not, given that most of us operate and, are dependent on the State and institutional systems born of colonisation and categorising people, even for our forms of resistance. Social work and others concerned with freedom and justice must consider our complicity in systems of oppression and domination.

## **2. Complexity and Complicity**

So, what does it mean to consider that we are inside the danger as social justice advocates and practitioners of justice and liberation? It means we must be for complexity and complicity. It means we must assume that we are most likely not innocent when it comes to holding up some system of domination or oppression, but rather, because of the interconnectedness of all things and systems, we are likely complicit with the systems we work against, in some capacity. I noted a powerful engagement with this type of complicity and complexity as I read the University of British Columbia’s President Santa J. Ono’s apology in 2018, to indigenous people across Canada for the University’s

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involvement in supporting the operations of Indian residential schools, and for not doing enough to stop them. Also, noted in The Canadian Association for Social Work Education's, *Statement of Complicity and Commitment to Change* (2017), and the Child Welfare League of America's apology for participation in child removals and adoptions in 2001 (2001).

In her book, *Against Purity*, Alexis Shotwell (2016) writes:

Consider. Many of us are settlers living on unseeded native land, stolen through genocidal colonial practices. We feed domestic animals more food than starving people lack, and spend money on the medical needs of pets while eating factory farmed meat and spraying our lawn with pesticides that produce cancer in domestic animals. We pay for cosmetic surgeries in a time when many people can't access basic health care. We recycle but take plane trips to Alaska. We worry about global warming and turn on the air-conditioning. We think slavery is wrong but eat chocolate and fish produced in contexts that meet every definition of nonchattel slavery. We believe that people deserve good working conditions but buy clothing produced in sweatshops and maquiladoras because we couldn't afford equitably sourced clothing even if we could find it. We cannot look directly at the past because we cannot imagine what it would mean to live responsibly toward it. We yearn for different futures, but we can't imagine how to get there from here." (p. 6).

And while Shotwell and others argue that we are all complicit in systems of domination, complicity carries differential weight; that is, we aren't complicit in the same ways, nor do we benefit from our complicity in the same ways.

Holding this type of complexity forces us to move slowly, to think before we cancel or call out. To look for and forge relationships, including difficult ones. Holding this type of complexity also requires creativity, perhaps imagining that which doesn't exist yet, and it definitely calls for collaboration, for working in collectives and coalitions for recognising our social and ecological interdependence. It also requires that we care about each other, that we care about relationships and don't view each other as disposable. It calls for doing very difficult and often slow relational work. The problem of purity projects or notions of innocence in our social justice work is that these positions forgo human interconnectivity in favor of narratives of separation and disconnection.

Embedded in the practice of holding complexity, looking for complicity, is an expression,

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perhaps a practice of hope.

### 3. Collective Grieving

When I reflect on my experience in Aotearoa/New Zealand last year, as well as many other moments in and out of the classroom, I'm reminded of a key ingredient or element of hope- that is connection, be it connection with the earth, or connection among people.

While the students in the classroom in Aotearoa/New Zealand expressed so many strong and varied emotions and perspectives, they did it together, and they remained present with each other. There was room for people to be shocked and stunned. There was room for critical awakenings, anger, frustration, and deep grief. There was even room for theorising as social practice (hooks, 1994). How do we as social workers, committed to justice, strengths-based practice, self-determination, and hold the value of all beings having worth, work with people who have committed such great harm? I believe that a requirement is complexity; that is, the ability to hold a complex idea, that is, humans are capable of all the things, all the evil, and all the love. It all lives inside of us. Starting here creates a pathway for connecting and bridging, a liberatory praxis in the classroom.

...[t]he academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom. (hooks, 1994, p. 207)

As a guest in Aotearoa during this time, it felt like an honor to be there with and for colleagues, friends and students. It was an honor to hold truths and realities of extreme othering, violence, disbelief, grief, shame, confusion, AND it was an honor to feel the love, connection and solidarity across Māori, Pakheā, Muslim, Christians, Jews, and all groups. The experience(s) of holding complexity, in community, cultivated hope through connection. Hope in the sense of a horizon, that together, we could decide the next steps, even if we believed and felt differently about the meaning of what had happened. I felt it. An interdependence. I feel it now as we all try to find our footing and way forward through a global pandemic.

Watching Jacinda Ardern, the Prime Minister of Aotearoa/ New Zealand choose to lead the country from a place of grief rather than anger (grief brings/brought people together)

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was stunning and a profound lesson of hope. As an American citizen all too familiar with the hopelessness associated with gun violence, the sense of possibility New Zealanders and their Prime Minister nurtured through collective grieving, grief in leadership, created hope, and has me reflecting on social movements that have come from grief- Black Lives Matter in the United States, the Great March of Return in Palestine, and the Sisters in Spirit movement in Canada.

**{After thoughts on collective grieving 2 weeks after the keynote}**

[March 25, 2020] In fact, I can't stop thinking about collective grieving during this unprecedented moment in time when the entire planet is struggling with a pandemic that attacks the lungs- our place of breath. Is the human suffering of this pandemic an expression of the earth's inability to breath amid the extreme othering that has facilitated our disconnection and separation from the earth, water, air, and resources?

## **4. Imagining Together**

So, we can draw from, even create hope through our connections with each other, through building bridges across movements, through recognising our interdependence, through decentralising our power and organising. Dr. Angela Davis repeatedly has stated that as "isolated individuals we will always be powerless, we will never have the means of which to even imagine justice. But as communities we can achieve anything".

We can also draw hope from the planet and its ecosystem's as Adrienne Maree Brown (2017) urges us to do through her notions of *Emergent Strategy*. She leans on Nick Obolensky's (2014) definition of emergence as "the way complex systems and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions" (p. xx). She studies how mycelium grow underground in thread-like formations, gaining force through the connections of their roots. She notes how ants and starlings work together en masse to respond to their environment by respecting simple local rules. She admires the extreme resilience of dandelions, and their ability to prosper and multiply despite being uprooted and trampled on.

We can draw hope from science fiction. Science fiction as means of exploring new frontiers. Walidah Imarisha from Portland State University, and co-editor of *Octavia's Brood: Science fiction from social justice movements and another world is possible*, has said, "all social justice work is science fiction".

Science fiction, Afrofuturism, Arabfuturism, and Indigenous futurisms shows people of

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colour and indigenous people as innovators, creators, inventors. It gives us alternative frameworks for dealing with every-day problems. Science fiction can be a fabulous medium for expressing realities and truths that are heavily censored and dangerous to be uttered (see *Palestine + 100*). Science fiction engages and forces imaginative muscles that embolden and practice our capacity to vision and imagine together.

Dr. Angela Davis spoke at my university a few years ago. She spoke, as she frequently does, about a world without prisons, a world where police are demilitarised. Energised, motivated and excited after her talk, I shared with my young sons and partner her thoughts and words. My 9 year old looked at me puzzled and confused and kept asking, “but mom, how would that even work? How can we have no prisons? What would we do about the dangerous people?”. I realised right then and there just how powerful Dr. Davis’ invitation was/is, that is, the act of imagining that which doesn’t even exist yet as a radical practice.

## **Conclusion**

Practices of hope (through collective grieving, connection, dreaming, imagining, emergent strategies) will support us to work together to repurpose (la paperson, 2017) settler colonial and oppressive systems and machines for decolonizing and libratory purposes.

I’d like to leave with this poem my friend and colleague Dr. Anaru Eketone from the University of Otago wrote a couple of weeks after March 15<sup>th</sup>. Reflecting on our days outside the mosque, there were four of us together, we “were Israeli, Palestinian, Christian, Jewish, Indigenous, British, American, Canadian, Kiwi, Māori”. He told me, “we have a tradition of defiant haka in the face of adversity and that is the space this is coming from” (personal communication, 2019).

## **Te Hunga ora**

He whakaaetangate utu.

He manawanui te inoi.

He aroha te patu.

He hohou i te rongu te pou roa.

## **Those of us who remain**

Acceptance of others will be our revenge and retribution.

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Tolerance will be our creed.

Love will be our weapons.

Peace will be our legacy.

In conclusion, I'd like to thank the people of the Musqueam (x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əyəm) band, Dean Bains and UBC for this incredible invitation and opportunity. I want to thank all of you who engage in this difficult and crucial work, and I hope we can strengthen our bonds to one another so that we might envision that which doesn't yet exist as a practice of hope. Hope as will, way, horizon and action. Hope as possibility.

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