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Journeying Toward Decolonial Child and Youth Care

Indigenous Child and Youth Care: Weaving Two Heart Stories Together (Cherylanne James, 2023)

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Article abstract

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Journeying Toward Decolonial Child and Youth Care

A Review of *Indigenous Child and Youth Care: Weaving Two Heart Stories Together*

Lois Boody

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Indigenous Child and Youth Care: Weaving Two Heart Stories Together *by Cherylanne James is discussed in this review as a critical contribution to child and youth care education in Canada. James's Indigenous feminist orientation invites child and youth care students to unlearn colonial narratives, to instead center Indigenous approaches to care. The reviewer highlights the effectiveness of James's approach in engaging in "difficult knowledge" with learners to foster relational accountability, and shares how this approach models "journeying," moving from deficit-centered orientations toward Indigenous-led, desire-based approaches for decolonial care. The text guides child and youth care students to reflect critically on their role in supporting Indigenous futurities.*

Key words: *Indigenous, child and youth care, decolonial, CYC education, journeying*

Cherylanne James's *Indigenous Child and Youth Care: Weaving Two Heart Stories Together* (Canadian Scholars Press, 2023) is a critical contribution to child and youth care (CYC) education in Canada. Exuding passion, love, and kindness throughout her writing, Anishinaabe author Cherylanne James welcomes readers at all stages of their education—whether CYC students, practitioners, or faculty—to embark upon a journey of learning and unlearning toward a decolonial practice of care for Indigenous children, youth, and families. James asserts that a decolonial practice necessarily "positions all spaces as Indigenous" since "there are Indigenous children, youth, and families everywhere" (p. xx). James's orientation disrupts the pervasive "colonial scripts of erasure" within education (Sabzalian, 2019, p. 4) and centres resurgence instead to reclaim space within child and family care practices. In this way, the book is of crucial relevance for all CYC practitioners and scholars of the field, including any who may not consider Indigenous children and youth to be part of their demographic.

With the recent February 2024 Canadian Supreme Court decision affirming the inherent right of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples to exercise jurisdiction over their own child and family services, and the responsibility of the federal government to support these processes (Québec v. Canada, 2024 SCC 5), this book is a critical and timely guide for CYC practitioners to understand the ways in which they can meaningfully uphold this legislation through their practice. The supported statute, An Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis Children, Youth, and Families (2019), demands that the best interests of the child be considered first and foremost, prioritizing the child's kinship relations and preserving connections to their culture. CYC workers therefore have a legal obligation to understand what "best interests" implies from Indigenous perspectives. This book serves as an excellent starting point for CYC students in this learning. Faculty and current CYC practitioners will likewise find that the book is a helpful resource to reference frequently.

James invites readers to engage intentionally and reflectively with the book's material, committing to a "heart-to-heart practice" that "connect[s] to the humanity of everyone involved" (p. xiv). This practice fosters genuine relationships with oneself and with the children, youth, and families one works with. Sharing the way her story is tied to that of her mother—a Sixties Scoop survivor who grew up in state care—James grounds her knowledge and passion for this work in her familial story and lived experience. Through an Indigenous, feminist, and antiracist framework, James likewise invites the CYC practitioner into a reflective relationship, encouraging them to critically assess their own motivations for entering CYC work. She encourages reflection on positionality, power, and privilege, and she encourages the cultivation of a reflective practice around notions of interconnectedness, antioppression, and relational accountability (Wilson, 2008). Moreover, James asserts that colonialism is a root cause that needs to be understood for genuine decolonial care to take place. Given the continued overrepresentation of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children and youth in care—an impact of the imposition of Western, patriarchal family values—James's book contributes to a necessary mental shift within CYC practice that is reflexive and attuned to Indigenous futurities.

Engaging difficult knowledge for social change

In the book's introduction, James writes: "This text seeks to challenge CYC practitioners to self-locate and reflect on their own power and privilege, and learn how this can be used to advocate for change … or hinder well-being" (p. xix). Within mainstream CYC education and practice, colonial ideologies continue to structure many of the field's objectives (White et al., 2017). James asserts that unless these ideologies are addressed as root issues, positive social change will not be possible. Her use of a verb like *challenge* is then notable: She pushes her readers to maintain an open mind as they acquire knowledge of colonial violences that may be new and/or difficult. As author, she takes on the role of a guide into a learning process that, while challenging, is ultimately essential for CYC students to understand if they aspire to enact positive change in their profession.

In this way, James's writing demonstrates a keen understanding of the educational complexities of sharing "difficult knowledge" (Britzman & Pitt, 1996) with learners, as she engages in a critical pedagogical approach based in "kinship, love, decolonial care, interconnectivity, and resurgence-based approaches" (p. xiii). Further grounded in Anishinaabe theories and Indigenous feminism, James attends respectfully to her relationship with a wide range of readers, recognizing that the material she shares may evoke strong emotional responses, yet challenging readers with kindness to witness the beauty and strength of broadening one's understandings. For instance, she writes, addressing the reader: "You must approach the uncomfortableness of unlearning and learning. You are growing and learning to stretch your mind. That is a positive and beautiful thing" (p. 61).

Kanien'kehá:ka scholar Jennifer Brant (2023) theorizes a similar approach through Indigenous maternal pedagogies. As she explains, when engaging with difficult material, educators must "acknowledge and honour the emotional and affective aspects of the learning process" (p. 257) to create space for vulnerability. It is precisely this environment of vulnerable and ethical engagement (see Ermine, 2007) which Brant argues can "[plant] seeds for rebirth and renewal so that students might imagine their roles in creating social change (Brant, 2023, p. 260). Just as Indigenous maternal pedagogies reflect a resistance-oriented standpoint which opposes colonial and patriarchal norms within education, James's text offers a counternarrative to the narrow, paternalistic Western conceptions of family and care. She models through her writing the kind of empathy and care that CYC faculty can show their students and that CYC practitioners can show children and youth in similar moments of difficult learning.

James does give a caution, however, that this book is *not* meant to replace the critical role of Indigenous courses taught by Indigenous faculty members. Instead, it is intended as a supportive text for those courses. Faculty, in particular, will then find *Indigenous Child and Youth Care* to be an excellent resource for engaging in critical discussions on difficult topics relevant to child and youth care in the classroom. Indeed, a powerful method for teaching the difficult knowledge of traumatic histories, as explained by Aparna Tarc (2011), is through “slow, arduous textual work” (p. 355). This approach can help learners move their emotional responses into knowledge and understanding over time, fostering “heart-to-mind” learning (Brant, 2023).

James’s thoughtfully structured text is well suited for this work. In addition to the rich breadth of information shared throughout the book’s 13 chapters, James includes a series of “Reflection Practice” questions in each chapter. Moreover, at the end of each chapter, she shares a series of opportunities for continued learning: “Overarching Questions” are offered for reflection across various topics, an activity that can be completed either by individuals or groups that encourages research and engagement, and myriad additional resources divided into “Listen,” “Watch,” “Read,” or “Act” encourage ongoing exploration of the chapter’s themes. This intentional curation of resources and thoughtful design toward facilitating learning can move learners toward transformational engagement (Brant, 2023).

Additionally, the text is made accessible to a wide range of learners. While James does not pause in her writing to define terms such as *settler colonialism* or *assimilation*, many terms like these are bolded and compiled in a glossary at the back of the book. The glossary serves a pedagogical purpose wherein the onus is placed on readers to look for the meanings of any words they are unfamiliar with. This kind of engagement incites curiosity and encourages readers to pause and develop their vocabulary for social change while working through the information in each chapter.

From deficit to desire: Journeying toward decolonial care

James’s approach of guiding learners intentionally through the material, and the way it is taken up by readers, can be further understood through the Indigenous methodology of journeying. Kanien’kehá:ka scholar Sandra Styres (2017) writes that journeying “is an expression of movement from one place to another by making a conscious and deliberate decision to move into unfamiliar territory while maintaining an observing and reflective frame of mind” (p. 8). She writes that journeying “may lead us to shifting and transforming the landscapes of our paradigms and philosophies” (p. 8).

James’s invitations and challenges to readers, then, seen through the perspective of journeying, speak to her intent to inspire an epistemological shift within CYC practice—moving the field from a place of pervasive deficit-centered narratives toward a more decolonial place, where desire is centered. Unangax̂ scholar Eve Tuck (2009) defines a desire-based orientation as an antidote to damage-centered frames, noting that desire “yes, accounts for the loss and despair, but also the hope, the visions, the wisdom of lived lives and communities” (p. 417). Within the field of CYC, a desire-based approach recognizes that any challenges Indigenous families face must be understood contextually against the backdrop of historic and ongoing colonial violences. Journeying from a deficit-centered orientation toward this recognition is essential to spark resistance to these systems. In addition to recognition, action is required so that decolonial care can attend specifically to the hopes and dreams of Indigenous children, youth, and families.

James’s structuring of her book encourages this steady mental shift toward desire-based understandings. She invites readers to journey through the 13 chapters by first providing context, then outlining relevant challenges, and, finally, pointing out alternative opportunities. In Section 1, “Context for Indigenous Child & Youth Practices,” James outlines the important historical context of CYC in Canada and invites readers into a reflection on their own identities to understand the ways that colonialism and assimilation have been and continue to be enacted through policies and practices. It is only with this background information firmly in place that she then moves into

Section 2, “Challenges.” Here, she deepens her discussion of background context by pointing to the ways Canadian child welfare policy continues to negatively impact numerous Indigenous children, families, and communities. She also shares critical topics around intersectionality and the impacts of trauma on well-being, and she points to relevant legislation and policy to ensure that CYC practitioners are aware of avenues they can take to advocate for appropriate care for those they work with. Finally, in Section 3, “Child, Youth, Family, and Community Approaches,” James shifts the discussion toward the desires of Indigenous children, youth, and families, focusing on various resurgence-oriented approaches. Alternative examples of care are shared, including Indigenous healing and justice frameworks; support for kinship; community wellness; and fostering resurgence and resistance through storytelling, art, culture, and spirituality.

This intentional design, along with the reflective questions at each stage, encourages deep learning around each topic. Important to note, however, is that while James encourages a decolonial approach to care, she also cautions against “band-aid fixes” where decolonization is only used as a metaphor for surface-level changes (Tuck & Yang, 2012). As she argues, decolonial care is not about simply “alleviating” the impacts of colonization, but rather about identifying the systemic and institutional barriers at the root. It is a continued reflective practice that must incite action. She explains, “a decolonial approach is about Indigenous Peoples living their lives as Indigenous Peoples, free from oppressive colonial systems” (p. 61).

Centering relational accountability

Journeying is more than just an individual epistemological shift; it is also about learning to reflect on the self in relation to others. As Styres (2017) describes, journeying is “a spiritual and relational process where our stories become interwoven with other stories, creating new patterns, telling new stories” (p. 8). Within this context, CYC practitioners are invited to journey and reflect throughout the book on the ways that their own stories are, or will be, interwoven with the stories of the children, youth, and families they work with. With this understanding comes a responsibility to understand the impact that they can have.

Indeed, James calls on the term *relational accountability* to illustrate the importance of interconnectivity and responsibility from an Indigenous lens. Described by Opaskwayak Cree scholar Shawn Wilson (2008), relational accountability implies working in ways that are rooted relationally in a community context, and in ways that demonstrate respect, reciprocity, and responsibility through a commitment to action (see p. 99). James, engaging Wilson’s work, notes that in the context of child and youth care, relational accountability represents “a responsibility to ethically engage in an informed way … by engaging in Indigenous approaches and anti-oppressive and anti-racist work” (p. xiv).

An understanding of relational accountability within CYC education can be further elaborated through a discussion of Land education (Tuck et al., 2014) and the settler colonial project of replacement (Tuck & Gaztambide Fernandez, 2013). Land education recognizes the conditions of settler colonialism and questions any educational approaches that “justify settler occupation of stolen land or encourage the replacement of Indigenous peoples and relations to land” (p. 8). Land education, as an Indigenous approach, is in turn fundamentally accountable to Indigenous futurities, and works to counter these attempts at settler replacement. James, throughout her text, weaves the understanding that child apprehension, as a colonial assimilation tactic, has largely been about land—disconnecting children from their families was a way to loosen the links and claims Indigenous Peoples have, not just to family and community, but to the Land. As James writes, “when we start to recognize that the places we love are Indigenous lands, it starts to shift our understanding of the responsibility all peoples have to the land and the importance of giving land back” (p. 5). In this way, CYC practitioners are called upon to disrupt this settler colonial project of replacement and to work with relational accountability toward the aims of land repatriation and Indigenous futurities.

“Weaving two-heart stories together:” Reflecting on relational world making

As a settler Canadian educator and a student of Indigenous education and decolonization, I found James’s text to be an invaluable resource for guiding readers through the unlearning of mainstream colonial narratives toward orientations that center Indigenous resurgence. Reading through the reflective questions and activities provided in each chapter, I considered the ways that I have pondered many of these questions over the past few years, seeking to ethically engage with Indigenous perspectives from my positionality as a white settler. From working in education with Indigenous children and youth, to now supporting an Indigenous research centre at the university, I have come to realize that, as James writes, reflecting on decolonial approaches is a lifelong practice that is continuously evolving.

I recall my initial unlearning of the colonial narrative as a rupture—it was a rapid unravelling of the stories I had come to believe of Canada, but prior to understanding, it first brought emotion. The learning brought grief, confusion, and anger, and I often questioned, as many do, “why wasn’t I taught this?” This kind of (un)learning process then involves a sticky detangling of the truth of colonial violence from the fables Canada likes to tell about itself—but it is ultimately a crucial endeavour for those striving to support social change. What is required is time, and persistence, to bridge the gap of heart knowledge and the mind. In this way, for CYC practitioners, James’s book is a gift. It offers empathy and care for readers who may be encountering similar feelings, and invites slow and steady reflection to encourage readers to push through discomfort. Students are invited through this process to learn about ethical and relationally accountable ways to better support the Indigenous children, youth, and families that they work with.

The book then makes clear why “weaving two heart-stories together” is essential within CYC practice in Canada: For reconciliation, there must first be truth, and for truth to emerge, as James writes, one needs to first engage with their own personal truth. Learning to engage justly with oneself throughout the learning process is what will allow CYC workers to engage justly with those in their care. James’s heart-to-heart approach, rooted in love and an affirmation of shared humanity, offers a didactical glimpse into the kinds of relationships necessary for working to support Indigenous children, youth, and families and their dreams and aspirations. Working together to acknowledge and resist the stories colonialism tries to tell then becomes a relational world-making practice (Nxumalo, 2021) where Indigenous futurities can prosper. James, for one, shares her own dream: “I see the world through vivid colours and images and visualize a future that is deeply rooted in Indigenous voices. A world where there is no more colonial violence and harm experienced by Indigenous children, youth and families.... In this world, they experience unconditional love” (p. xxi).

Similarly, Indigenous child welfare advocate Cindy Blackstock, responding to the Supreme Court decision in February 2024, shared that in the world she dreams of, there will not be words like “overrepresentation,” “at-risk,” or “vulnerable” to describe First Nations, Métis, and Inuit youth, but instead, “healthy,” “proud” and “having their rights recognized” (CBC, 2024). However, Blackstock also asserted that “it will only be a dream without a reality unless the governments *act* in a way that honours this decision” (CBC, 2024). CYC practitioners hold power to support Indigenous children and youth in visioning for their futures by advocating for change. Within the fraught contexts of ongoing settler colonialism, globalization, racial injustices, and a worsening climate crisis, supporting unconditional love and a radical imagination (see Alfred, 2009) for youth—toward worlds beyond colonialism—is critical for fostering hope for more just futures; James’s text serves as an important place to begin this journey.

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