



# The Politics of Allyship with Indigenous Peoples in the Canadian Refugee-Serving Sector

Chizuru Nobe-Ghelani<sup>a</sup> and Mbalu Lumor<sup>b</sup>

## ABSTRACT

What does it mean for the refugee-serving sector to be an ally to Indigenous Peoples? This is the entry point to our reflexive journey on Indigenous–refugee relations. In this conceptually orientated article, the authors seek to consider decolonizing praxis in the refugee-serving sector in the context of settler colonial Canada. The article examines the politics of the refugee-serving sector and argue that for it to meaningfully establish allyship with Indigenous people, we must continue to decentre the whiteness that has constructed and organized our sector. The authors highlight the tensions that exist in allyship between Indigenous and refugee communities and discuss ways to work with those tensions. Three concrete approaches are suggested that may lead to decolonizing praxis in the refugee-serving sector: critical reflexivity, settler responsibility, and renewing relationships with local Indigenous communities and lands.

## KEYWORDS

Indigenous-refugee relations; allyship; settler colonial Canada; refugee-serving sector

## RESUMÉ

Que signifie pour le secteur des services aux réfugiés d'être un allié des peuples autochtones? C'est le point de départ de notre parcours réflexif sur les relations entre autochtones et réfugiés. Dans cet article d'orientation conceptuelle, les auteures cherchent à examiner la praxis de décolonisation dans le secteur des services aux réfugiés dans le contexte du colonialisme canadien. L'article examine la politique du secteur des services aux réfugiés et soutient que pour qu'il établisse une alliance significative avec les peuples autochtones, nous devons continuer à décentrer la blancheur qui a construit et organisé notre secteur. Les auteures soulignent les tensions qui existent dans l'alliance entre les communautés autochtones et réfugiées et discutent de manières de gérer ces tensions. Trois approches concrètes pouvant mener à une praxis de décolonisation dans le secteur des services aux réfugiés sont suggérées: la réflexivité critique, la responsabilité des colonisateurs et le renouvellement des relations avec les communautés et les terres autochtones locales.

**HISTORY** Published 28 April 2022

## CONTACT

<sup>a</sup> (Corresponding author) ✉ [cnghe1@yorku.ca](mailto:cnghe1@yorku.ca)

School of Social Work, York University, Toronto, ON, Canada

<sup>b</sup> ✉ [mlumor@ccvt.org](mailto:mlumor@ccvt.org)

Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture, Toronto, ON, Canada

## INTRODUCTION

Canadian flags, faces painted red and white, and community events are a quintessential scene on July 1, also known as Canada Day, a national holiday. This day marks the anniversary of Confederation in 1867, when the British North America Act came into effect and Canada became a self-governing dominion of Great Britain with four provinces: Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Ontario, and Quebec. For many Canadians, Canada Day is an occasion for celebration, with many festivities organized across the country. Refugee-serving organizations also typically celebrate Canada Day as part of their integration programming as well as an opportunity to celebrate clients who have recently attained Canadian citizenship. However, in the context of truth and reconciliation with Indigenous communities,<sup>1</sup> Canada Day celebrations raise some critical questions: Should Canada's "birthday" be an occasion for celebration considering that Canada is founded on stolen land? What histories are we reproducing and erasing by celebrating Canada Day? What does it mean to reframe Canada as "stolen land" for a refugee-serving sector that is primarily funded by the government?

We begin this article with the imagery of Canada Day celebrations because it reveals the very tension that is often unrecognized within refugee-serving organizations—the humanitarian work we do, welcoming and helping refugees, operates on the land that was and is violently taken away from Indigenous Peoples. The purpose of this article is to critically engage with this tension by unpacking the politics and colonial prac-

tices embedded in the refugee-serving sector and consider decolonizing praxis that may lead to respectful allyship between Indigenous and refugee communities. The paper is grounded in critical scholarship as well as the co-authors' experiences as migrants to Canada and as refugee-serving professionals. First, we present a brief overview of the refugee-serving sector in Canada in order to contextualize the way in which mundane nationalism—what we call **Canadianizing**—operates in the everyday practices of refugee organizations. We follow with a discussion on the politics embedded in the contemporary refugee-serving sector, drawing on critical race and settler colonial scholarship. Next, we draw on existing critical scholarship on Indigenous–refugee relations to highlight the tensions within and possibilities of allyship. Finally, we conclude with suggestions on decolonizing praxis for the refugee-serving sector to consider what may lead to more meaningful allyship with Indigenous Peoples.

## CONTEXTUALIZING THE CANADIAN REFUGEE-SERVING SECTOR

The refugee-serving sector includes service provision by organizations that aim to support refugee populations and their integration into Canadian society.<sup>2</sup> Many are community-based organizations, primarily funded by different levels of government (i.e., federal, provincial, and municipal). Refugee-serving organizations offer services such as employment support, housing, English as a second language support, mental health counselling, and host pro-

<sup>1</sup>Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established in 2008 to inform all Canadians about what happened in Indian residential schools. In June 2015, the TRC released an executive summary of its findings along with 94 "calls to action" regarding reconciliation between Canadians and Indigenous Peoples (TRC, 2015).

<sup>2</sup>To be clear, this paper does not deal with grassroots organizations that primarily work on refugee advocacy issues. Though grassroots organizations do important work with regard to refugee rights, they have a different relationship to the Canadian nation-state.

grams where individuals are paired with volunteers. Some organizations offer a Resettlement Assistance Program that is specifically designed for government-assisted refugees, while the majority of the organizations provide services to refugees as part of broader settlement provisions for all newcomers. Though small in number, some organizations work with refugee claimants to gain their legal status in Canada. Due to the diverse nature of the refugee-serving sector, its scale is unknown; however, the [Canadian Council for Refugees \(2020\)](#) reports that it currently has over 180 members across the country.

While differences exist in focus and type of organization, the primary goal of the sector has historically been to set refugees on a path towards full integration and citizenship. Put another way, a key function of the refugee-serving sector, as we argue, is to “Canadianize” refugees, a role that can be traced back to the postwar period. [Iacovetta’s \(2006\)](#) analysis of European immigrants in postwar Canada, many of whom came as refugees, shows how settlement workers and social workers, among other professionals, played a key role in transforming European newcomers into productive and democratic citizens. In the context of Cold War politics, the superiority of Western capitalist countries was emphasized through the discourses of individualism, freedom, opportunities, and consumerism that were often used in settlement work. The challenges that European newcomers faced—wartime trauma, the migration process, unemployment and underemployment, language difficulties, family separation, gender inequality, and so on—were believed to be solvable through education and access to Canada’s expanded social welfare service provisions. However, the incorporation of newcomers into the Canadian welfare state was not simply about providing basic needs or supporting their integra-

tion into Canadian society. Rather, it functioned to foster a sense of social conformity, loyalty, and obedience on the part of newcomers ([Iacovetta, 2006](#)).

The historical function of Canadianizing refugees is carried forwards in the everyday practices of the contemporary refugee-serving sector. Ambivalent meanings of **integration** remain unchallenged, and service provisions are designed to produce citizens who “fulfill the image of a good settler” ([Cahuas, 2020, p. 210](#)). As former and current professionals with decades of combined experience in the sector, we have become painfully aware of the ways in which our work reproduces racial and settler colonial scripts of Canadian citizenship. So much of what we do in our sector—for example, the way we design and carry out our services, the way we understand successful integration, and how funding deliverables are conceptualized—is shaped by racial and settler colonial scripts of Canadian citizenship as we elaborate in the following section.

We are also aware, as first-generation racialized immigrants to Canada, how deeply our own immigrant subjectivities are shaped by the white supremacy embodied in Canadian citizenship. Even before migrating to Canada, like many of our clients, coming to Canada was one of our “dreams.” We knew little about its colonial history, Indigenous presence, or racism. It has been a challenging journey to realize how our own integration process completely dismissed the Indigenous Peoples of this land. In the words of Potawatomi-Lenapé scholar [Susan Dion \(2007\)](#), we had become “perfect stranger[s]” (p. 330), in that we were trained to distance ourselves from Indigenous issues through our own settlement and integration processes. Through our work in the refugee-serving sector, we have spent our energy on Canadianizing other newcomers, making

them “perfect strangers” to Indigenous Peoples and settler colonialism in Canada.

We are committed to disrupting this pattern in the sector. We are committed to challenging the taken-for-granted idea of “refugee integration” by asking the following questions: What does refugee integration mean in the context of settler colonial Canada? What does it mean to welcome refugees on stolen land? We contend that such questions have not received enough attention within the refugee-serving sector. This article seeks to deepen the critical conversations about Indigenous–refugee relations within the refugee-serving sector.

### CANADIAN CITIZENSHIP AS A SOCIAL GOOD, CANADIAN HUMANITARIANISM, AND TRANSNATIONAL WHITENESS

As the first step in disrupting the racial and settler colonialist scripts within the Canadian refugee-serving sector, we interrogate three key discourses at play: Canadian citizenship as a social good, the contemporary operation of Canadian humanitarianism, and transnational whiteness.

#### Canadian Citizenship as a Social Good

It is common practice for refugee-serving organizations to organize small celebrations when our clients receive Canadian citizenship. Understandably, gaining Canadian citizenship is a positive experience for many refugees, a milestone in their migration journey. Attaining Canadian citizenship is often viewed as the promise of a better life, safety, and prosperity. The risk of deportation, in most cases, is diminished. The notion that attaining Canadian citizenship is fundamentally a positive outcome is deeply ingrained in the refugee-serving sector, even though we know that our clients will continue to face

many challenges as they make their home in Canada. Poverty, racism, under- and unemployment, mental health issues, family separation, and trauma do not disappear with the attainment of Canadian citizenship. Yet we continue to believe in Canadian citizenship as a social good. [Bosniak \(2006\)](#) calls this a “habit of citizenship romanticism” (p. 1), the tendency to perceive citizenship as the most desired of conditions, as an ideal state of democratic belonging and inclusion. [Bosniak \(2006\)](#) argues that the habit of citizenship romanticism obscures the deeper challenges that the concept of citizenship poses: “Citizenship as an ideal is understood to embody a commitment against subordination, but citizenship can also represent an axis of subordination itself” (p. 1). This contradiction can be easily observed through many forms of marginalization and oppression, but for the purpose of this paper, we focus on the subordination of Indigenous Peoples via our investment in Canadian citizenship as a social good.

It has long been argued that Canadian citizenship is founded on the ongoing colonization of Indigenous land, history, and people ([Alfred & Tomkins, 2010](#), as cited in [Anderson, 2014](#); [Battell Lowman and Barker, 2015](#); [Mackey, 2002](#); [Sharma, 2006](#); [Simpson, 2014](#); [Thobani, 2007](#); [Walia, 2010](#)). Citizenship in Canada therefore originated through the dispossession of Indigenous Peoples, transforming Indigenous insiders into foreigners on their own territories while at same time turning settler outsiders into Canadian citizens ([Thobani, 2007](#)). While the violent colonization project has been under way since the first contact between settlers and Indigenous Peoples (e.g., intentional transmission of smallpox disease; [Lawrence, 2002](#)), an aggressive settler colonial project took shape in concert with the emergence of the Canadian nation-state. Through a

wide range of policies and legislation—the Act for the Gradual Civilization of Indian Tribes (1857), the Civilization and Enfranchisement Act (1859), the Dominion Lands Act (1872), the Indian Act (1876), the Peasant Farming Policy (1889), and the Numbered Treaties (1871–1921)—Indigenous lands and resources were systemically appropriated (Battell Lowman & Barker, 2015; Coleman, 2006; Furniss, 1999). The Indian residential school system was further designed to erase Indigenous languages, cultures, and spiritual practices. The violence authorized through these policies and institutional practices was aimed at eliminating Indigenous Peoples' land-based relationships to assert the sovereignty of the Canadian nation-state on Turtle Island. It is in this context that Alfred and Tomkins (2010, p. 3, as cited in Anderson, 2014) articulated the colonial nature of Canada as follows: "The invasion, seizing control and exploitation of Indigenous land and populations by successive generations of non-Indigenous Peoples, and the institutionalizing of this situation into a form of government and law define what is called 'colonialism' in Canada."

Essential to the settler colonial project was the discourse of civility, in which Indigenous Peoples were constructed as uncivilized vis-à-vis civilized European settlers (Coleman, 2006). Thobani (2007) asserts that Indigenous Peoples have come to be constituted as the "other" in relation to white Canadians, or what she called "exalted subjects." Historically, the Europeans perceived Indigenous Peoples as "uncivilized," "not fully human" non-Christians with no recognizable legal system and thus lawless. In this way, Europeans were able to strip away the humanity of Indigenous Peoples and erase them from the landscape. She contends that "the sovereign institutionalized the subjugation

of Aboriginal Peoples, and the nation's subjects, exalted in law, were the beneficiaries of this process as members of a superior race" (Thobani, 2007, p. 61). Such presumed racial superiority, Thobani argues, was then extended to immigration policies that continued to produce a racialized structure of citizenship. She succinctly summarizes the nature of Canadian citizenship:

Canadian citizenship emerged with the clear intention to produce racial divisions among the populations within the territorial bounds of the nation-state, divisions which remain significant to this day and which continue the project of all racial states to produce national/racial homogeneity in the face of actual heterogeneity.

(Thobani, 2007, p. 102)

Razack (2002) similarly argues that Canada, as a white settler society, was established on and continues to be structured by a racial hierarchy. In the national mythologies of Canada, Indigenous Peoples were presumed to be mostly dead or assimilated, and Canada was believed to be "developed by hardy and enterprising Europeans settlers" (p. 3). People of colour were imagined as late arrivals who came to Canada long after much of the development had occurred. These mythologies justified the positioning of European settlers as the original inhabitants who were entitled to the rights and entitlements of citizenship. Razack (2002) further contends that such national mythologies were deeply embedded in contemporary laws and social practices and thus continue to reproduce racial hierarchies in Canada.

Bannerji (2000) also argues that a racial hierarchy continues to structure policy changes around multiculturalism in Canada and to organize the identity of white Canada. She states that the federal government's policy on multiculturalism was introduced as a way of managing diverse immigrant

demographics. It was a “coping mechanism for dealing with an actually conflicting heterogeneity, seeking to incorporate it into an ideological binary which is predicated upon the existence of a homogeneous national, that is, a Canadian cultural self with its multiple and different others” (Bannerji, 2000, p. 37). Multicultural policy has therefore functioned to “reduce immigrant communities to the position of ethnic others marked only by “symbols of religions [or] so-called tradition” that must be tolerated by white Canada (p. 45). Bannerji (2000) further argues that such an emphasis on symbolic identities allowed the state to dismiss larger questions of social justice issues such as unemployment, and racism.

These scholars point to how Canadian citizenship is founded on whiteness and the continuation of the settler colonial project. Through the lens of Indigenous, critical race, and settler colonial scholarship, Canadian citizenship does not represent the conditions for universal equality, democratic inclusion, or social justice claims but rather functions to erase and reproduce settler colonial histories and practices. These bodies of scholarship disrupt Canadian citizenship as a social good and elucidate how the dynamics of invisibilized settler colonialism and racial hierarchy mark the organization and institution of Canadian citizenship.

### Operation of Canadian Humanitarianism

In addition to Canadian citizenship as a social good, the discourse of Canadian humanitarianism is a key discourse at play in the refugee-serving sector. As McGrath and McGrath (2013) argue, “Canada’s provision of settlement support for refugees has been a part of what is viewed as its humanitarian tradition” (p. 2). Canada has prided itself as a humanitarian leader of refugee resettlement since the Indochinese refugee migration of the

1970s (Nobe-Ghelani & Ngo, 2020). Canada’s humanitarian response through private and public partnerships led to the resettlement of over 120,000 people by the end of the late 1980s (Canadian Council for Refugees, n.d.). More recent examples can be found in Canada’s resettlement initiatives for Syrian refugees. The Canadian public eagerly responded to this crisis when the body of three-year-old Alan Kurdi was discovered on a Mediterranean beach in September 2015 (Nobe-Ghelani & Ngo, 2020). A total of 44,610 individuals were resettled between November 2015 and November 2019 under Canada’s Syrian refugee resettlement commitment; of these, 18,920 were resettled through the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2020).

The attention given to the plight of refugees among Canadian policy-makers and the general public was indeed positive in both cases; however, critical scholars have raised important questions about the implications of these seemingly humanitarian responses. Refugee resettlement has been an important element in the construction of Canada’s identity as a humanitarian nation. For example, Ngo’s (2019) work on Vietnamese communities in Canada traces how the discourse of humanitarianism in the Indochinese refugee rescue mission was fundamental to the production of subject positions of the “model” refugee, one who remains grateful to the Canadian state. Ngo (2019) argues that when the discourse of humanitarianism dominates the way that Indochinese refugee migration is represented, it minimizes the complex Cold War politics behind this refugee movement and instead privileges a storyline of Vietnamese victims and Canadian saviours. The discourse of humanitarianism functions similarly in representations of the Syrian refugee

“crisis.” Although the Canadian government and public were minimally interested in the plight of Syrians at the beginning of the conflict, a sudden surge of interest took place after the death of Kurdi. [Molnar \(2016\)](#) suggests that the recirculation of “emotionally charged stories” such as that of Alan Kurdi can lead to “disastrous misapprehensions and dangerous conflation” when they are repeatedly done (p. 72). Canada’s Syrian refugee resettlement efforts addressed neither the complexity of conflicts that produce refugee migration nor its complicity in the conflict; instead, they simply reaffirmed Canada as a humanitarian nation ([Nobe-Ghelani & Ngo, 2020](#)).

As current and former refugee-serving professionals, we cannot deny the material benefits of refugee resettlement and the refugee-serving sector. Canada’s refugee resettlement efforts do provide safety for many who are fleeing persecution, and the border must remain open for refugees.<sup>3</sup> However, refugee resettlement is a matter of justice, obligation, and responsibility and should not be framed as a humanitarian response. The legal scholar Catherine [Dauvergne \(2005\)](#) makes an important point when she argues that “humanitarianism is not a standard of obligation, as justice would be, but rather of charity. Humanitarianism defines us as good when we are able to meet the standard, and justifiable when we are not” (p. 72). [Dauvergne \(2005\)](#) further argues that the performance of humanitarianism requires reinforcing the difference between “us” and “them.” This relationship is not founded on the values of equality or mutuality but rather is a product of the othering process. This othering process con-

tributes to defining the identity of the Canadian nation. Thus,

part of our humanitarianism is about ... applauding ourselves. When humanitarianism is used in immigration laws and discourses, it tells us something about ourselves as a nation—that is, the extent of our aspirations to goodness—and something implicit about our national identity.

*(Dauvergne, 2005, p. 73)*

Drawing on [Dauvergne \(2005\)](#), we suggest that the discourse of Canadian humanitarianism positions Canada as a saviour that brings civility to people’s lives vis-à-vis refugee-producing countries that are uncivilized, making it unlikely to address Canada’s role in inducing migration from the Global South (e.g., through military interventions in the Middle East and Africa, mining company operations in Latin America and Africa, etc.). As Canada’s status as a humanitarian nation-state is reconfirmed, it makes historical and contemporary racism, imperialism, and settler colonialism less visible ([Nobe-Ghelani, 2019](#)). The refugee-serving sector reproduces this humanitarian discourse—for example, when we (as professionals) plead for Canada’s generosity and its humanitarian reputation in our advocacy letters to grant a refugee client immigration status, or when our refugee clients repeat their gratitude and indebtedness with phrases such as “Canada saved me and my family” and “I thank Canada for welcoming me.” When we enact this Canadian humanitarianism discourse in everyday practices and construct Canada as a saviour, it becomes difficult to imagine Indigenous Peoples and their lands to be the host. In other words, we cannot have relationships built upon respect with Indigenous Peoples and their lands when

<sup>3</sup>Other precarious migrants also deserve protection. We recognize that the distinction between formerly recognized refugees and other precarious migrants is not straightforward; however, a deeper discussion on migration status and how precarious migrants relate to Indigenous Peoples is beyond the scope of this paper.

they are excluded from the imaginary of humanitarian Canada.

### Transnational Whiteness

Another key discourse at play in the refugee-serving sector is what [Arat-Koç \(2012\)](#) has called “transnational whiteness.” In the context of the refugee-serving sector, transnational whiteness is manifested in the ways in which migrants, us included, often hold a particular image of Canada—beautiful, peaceful, democratic, and prosperous—prior to arriving in the country. For those who come as refugees, additional conceptions of safety and protection are also attached to Canada’s image. Where do these mystical images of Canada come from? Drawing on critical whiteness studies, [Arat-Koç \(2012\)](#) argues that the current context of neoliberal globalized capitalism made it possible to enact a new form of “whiteness” outside Europe and European settler colonies. This whiteness, [Arat-Koç \(2012\)](#) argues, is linked to a transnational bourgeois identity, one in which new consumption patterns, aesthetic choices, and lifestyle patterns in non-European countries are modelled after Western values and norms. Whiteness has been transported and reconfigured via historical and local relations of power and has become part of the social identity that informs the world view and politics in non-European and non-white contexts. For some potential migrants, refugees included, such whiteness becomes the aspiration and standard of goodness. Drawing on the work of [Arat-Koç \(2012\)](#), [Jafri \(2012\)](#) suggests that the national identity of Western states, Canada included, is re-whitened in accordance with an imagined set of common civilizational markers, such as democracy, modernity, and liberalism, particularly after 9/11. These markers have become synonymous with Western/Canadian values, which are generated

transnationally and ingrained in us even before we set foot on this land.

What is more, these images of Canada are reproduced through migrants’ everyday stories. [Nobe-Ghelani’s \(2019\)](#) doctoral dissertation on social workers who work with non-citizen migrants found that while many social workers with a migration background might critique the Canadian immigration system, they rarely critique the life they or their family have attained once in Canada. The narratives of social workers with migration histories are filled with their own or their families’ stories of hard work and subsequent achievements. It is not uncommon for migrants to unintentionally reproduce the uncivilized image of their countries of origin (e.g., “hard life back home,” “repressive government”) in comparison to life in Canada (“better opportunities here,” “more freedom”). These stories are not simply about their or their family’s migration but also about how they construct a migrant settler identity: they represent how migrants are recognized and how they belong in the Canadian nation-state. Transnational whiteness is enacted prior to, during, and after migrants settle, informing the way we conceptualize our integration and sense of belonging on this land. Indigenous Peoples are excluded from migrants’ stories of integration or belonging to Canada. Transnational whiteness affirms settler Canada as the generous host, displacing the original inhabitants outside the imagined civilized land.

### CONTESTED ALLYSHIP

The previous section addressed three key discourses within the refugee-serving sector: Canadian citizenship as a social good, Canadian humanitarianism, and transnational whiteness. The discussion above is



intended to disrupt the racial and colonial script of Canadian citizenship within refugee-serving organizations in order to move towards respectful allyship between Indigenous and refugee communities. But what does allyship really mean in the context of Indigenous–refugee relations? While the literature on Indigenous–refugee allyship/relations remains scarce, in this section, we draw from scholars who engage with Indigenous–people of colour/racialized migrant relations.

Fifteen years ago, Bonita Lawrence and Enakshi Dua (2005) made an important intervention in their essay “Decolonizing Antiracism” with regard to relationships between Indigenous Peoples and people of colour. They argue that Indigenous Peoples and their perspectives are excluded within anti-racist theories and practices, and accordingly, it is difficult for Indigenous Peoples to see people of colour as allies. Sharma and Wright (2008-09) responded to their intervention, raising concerns about conflating all migrants into the category of settlers since some migrants come to Canada due to the impacts of colonization elsewhere. They also question the implication of “naturalizing an ethnicized, racialized and nationalized relationship between people and with land” (p. 121) in the discourse of decolonization.

Phung (2011) takes up both arguments and grapples with the question: Are people of colour settlers too? She understands that not all migrants are economic migrants who come to Canada to seek better jobs or business opportunities, and not every migrant or refugee would be privileged and fortunate enough to choose or be allowed to enter Canada. Further, some refugees are Indigenous themselves on the land they came from, and this heritage may even be the reason for their migration to Canada. Amadahy and Lawrence (2009) make an important

point about the unique relationship of Black communities with Indigenous Peoples because the presence of Black people in Canada is intimately related to the history and legacy of the enslavement of African people. However, Phung (2011) finds it useful to use the term **settler** in talking about Indigenous–people of colour relations because it acknowledges people of colour’s role and complicity in the building of a nation that is founded on the ongoing displacement and dispossession of Indigenous Peoples, regardless of the lack or presence of colonial intent or military and legal participation in obstructing Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. Similarly, Jafri (2012) contends that although most people of colour do not enjoy settler privilege (considering systemic inequities, underemployment, and the racialization of poverty), as settlers on this land, they are still complicit in an ongoing colonizing process. As Battell Lowman & Barker (2015) argue,

It is entirely possible—and in fact quite common—for communities of marginalized Peoples to buy in to the structures of invasion, to identify strongly with settler Canadian myths and narratives, and to participate in systemic dispossession of Indigenous Peoples, all the while struggling against their own marginalization or oppression (p. 72).

Tuck and Yang (2012, citing Fellows & Razack, 1998) have warned that as non-white settlers, we can move ourselves to the assumption of innocence in settler colonial dynamics via colonial equivocation, the claim that we are all from oppressed communities that are affected by Western imperialism and colonization.

We build on these arguments and contend that the refugee-serving sector, made up of mainly racialized professionals and client base, has been mostly silent on Indigenous struggles and unaware of its complicity in settler colonialism. While some organizations

have voiced their concerns for Indigenous struggles, meaningful change that addresses settler colonial dynamics at the sectoral level are yet to be seen. We have unintentionally moved ourselves to the site of assumed innocence as we address refugee struggles.

How, then, is it possible for the refugee-serving sector to meaningfully engage in allyship with Indigenous communities? In her discussion of Indigenous–non-white settler relations, Lee (2016) offers a potentially transformative conceptual space. She critiques the centrality of white settlers' perspectives and experiences in contemporary social movements and argues that social justice efforts may be transformed if the foundations of political engagement are built on Indigenous and non-white settler world views and realities instead of those of white settlers. Lee (2016) argues,

There is no space to tell different stories of relations with indigenous peoples. When all conversations center on white settlers' experiences, non-white settlers' realities in the colonizing process—equally important for critical unpacking—are pushed to the margins. There is a pressing need for social justice organizations wishing to decolonize through alliances to center the voices of marginalized and indigenous groups who have been pushed aside to advance white centrality and ascendancy (p. 16).

Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2011) articulates that intentionally turning away from whiteness as a universal reference point constitutes a deliberate act of decolonization. Indeed, this is no easy task. Yet the refugee-serving sector is perfectly positioned to bring together diverse stories of colonization, displacement, resistance, and world views to create a space of meaningful engagement with Indigenous Peoples because our sector is made up of populations who come from different parts of the world. When we let go

of our investment in whiteness, the refugee-serving sector might find a potentially transformative site for Indigenous–refugee allyship.

## DECOLONIZING PRAXIS IN THE REFUGEE-SERVING SECTOR

Cahuas (2020, p. 212) asks, "If implicated or complicit, how can racialized migrants enact an alternative kind of politics or citizenship practice that refuses white settler citizenship in Canada? And in what ways can racialized migrants work towards decolonization?" How do we move away from normalized whiteness that has constructed and organized the refugee-serving sector, and how can we consider decolonizing praxis for meaningful allyship with Indigenous Peoples? Tuck & Yang (2012) remind us that decolonialization must move out of the metaphorical realm, which requires concrete action that leads to repatriation of land and Indigenous sovereignty. We have no definitive guidance or answers as to how the refugee-serving sector can move towards decolonization. However, some positive initiatives are taking place within the sector: the Canadian Council for Refugees has increasingly engaged the topic of Indigenous–refugee relations in its resources and annual consultations, and the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants has been vocal about advancing Indigenous sovereignty and rights. Individual refugee-serving organizations are also engaging in educational programs such as Kairos blanket exercises to deepen their knowledge about Indigenous histories. To expand on these positive initiatives and inform more systemic, everyday changes in the refugee-serving sector, we suggest three approaches that we believe are foundational to achieving concrete action: critical reflexiv-

ity, settler responsibility, and renewal of relationships with local lands.

### Critical Reflexivity

First, we suggest critical reflexivity as an approach to decolonizing praxis. Critical reflexivity is about examining how power relations operate in a given context and how we become complicit in the process of marginalization and oppression as we conform to pre-existing discourses (Nobe-Ghelani, 2018). In the context of Indigenous-refugee relations, critical reflexivity may lead to greater awareness of how the refugee-serving sector has become attached to racial and settler colonial scripts of Canadian citizenship (e.g., through language curricula) and, in turn, has been complicit in the erasure of Indigenous Peoples. We suggest that this reflexive practice must take place at both the sectoral and the individual level. Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) has stated that decolonization is a process that engages imperialism and colonialism at multiple levels, not simply at a structural level. Similarly, Bradfield (2019) argues that decolonization cannot remain as an institutionalized project or academic discipline: "Decolonization is not merely an undoing of the colonial and political apparatuses that maintain its authority, but rather a reflexive engagement with one's participation in colonization's continuing existence" (p. 7). For Asher (2009), decolonizing

entails not only our self-reflexive efforts to get past binaries of self and other, colonizer and colonized but also the commitment to transformation in social and educational contexts. In other words, the work of decolonization needs to occur in both the inner/individual and outer/systemic realms (p. 10).

Those who work in and with the sector must engage with difficult questions about how

we as individuals are complicit in settler colonialism as we migrate to, live on, and work on this land. The idea of being a settler is indeed uncomfortable, uneasy, or even unfitting, particularly for those who had to flee from persecution (such as refugee populations). Yet, we cannot embody assumed innocence (Fellows & Razack, 1998) in the settler colonial dynamics in Canada. We cannot equate the struggles and oppression of refugee communities with that of Indigenous Peoples of this land (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Here it may be helpful to learn from Jafri's (2012) suggestion that we "think about settlerhood not as an object that we possess, but as a field of operation into which we become socially positioned and implicated" (para. 10). This means that critical reflexivity of our settlerhood is not merely about examination of privilege, complicity, or oppression (or the question of whether you are settler or not) but also about attending to broader processes through which we are socially positioned. Wong (2008) offers a conceptual shift in unpacking our settler subjectivity:

What happens if we position Indigenous people's struggles instead of normalized whiteness as the reference point through which we come to articulate our subjectivities? How would such a move radically transform our perceptions of the land on which we live? (p. 158).

Building on Wong (2008), we suggest that the refugee-serving sector engage in critical reflexivity that centres the settler colonial violence and colonial dynamics that produced refugee migration. This is not to equate the struggles of Indigenous Peoples and refugee communities; their struggles are different and should not be conflated. But it is important to understand that the operations of colonialism in different places and contexts are interrelated and interwoven, producing a particular settler subjectiv-

ity. Practically, it is about posing the question: How do we relate to the land we come **to** and how do we relate to the land we come **from**? This line of questioning in critical reflexivity may allow us to see how our settlerhood is constructed via multiple colonial dynamics and open up a space for productive dialogues. In practice, such questioning can be incorporated in staff orientation and training at the organizational level.

### Settler Responsibility

Critical reflexive practices must be accompanied with the consideration for settler responsibility. Settler responsibility, simply put, is a responsibility that comes with being a settler on this land. [Walia \(2013\)](#) discusses four concrete steps required in the undertaking of settler responsibility:

- understanding ourselves as complicit within settler colonialism;
- taking up the responsibility to educate our communities about Indigenous histories on the lands we reside on;
- prioritizing active support for Indigenous self-determination; and
- steering away from seeking greater recognition from a colonial system and go beyond demanding citizenship rights from a settler state.

We suggest that refugee-serving organizations engage in conversations about what concrete steps can be taken in their own contexts.

Mohawk scholar Ruth [Koleszar-Green \(2018\)](#) makes a useful conceptual distinction between **settler** and **guest** and offers her perspective from the point of Onkwehonweh people. According to [Koleszar-Green \(2018\)](#),

a settler is an individual who states that they are on stolen land. They might know whose “traditional territory” they are on, and they might wish to be a good ally, but usually a settler’s intentions stop

there! A Guest, on the other hand, understands through a reflexive process that as a Guest they have responsibilities to learn about rematriation of the land (including for example, stewardship and possession are foundational to environmental revitalization). The Guest learns the history and current story of the land that they are Guests on! They politicize that understanding. Finally, they listen to and learn protocols which do not appropriate but unsettle the privilege of ignorance. The Guest is an active and respectful individual who recognizes their privilege and uses that privilege in a way that does not centre them self but centres the community (p. 174).

[Koleszar-Green’s \(2018\)](#) articulation of settler and guest subjectivities offers helpful direction to the refugee-serving sector about how it may take up responsibility to and on this land. In practice, this may mean more inclusion of topics on settler responsibilities as well as truth and reconciliation at the organizational and sectoral professional developments and training.

### Renewing Relationship with Local Lands

The final approach we propose centres the importance of land in Indigenous–refugee relations. Since the 2015 TRC recommended ways forwards to reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples, land acknowledgements have become common practice in Canadian society, including in the refugee-serving sector. But the practice of acknowledging the land in itself does not lead to decolonizing praxis. Métis scholar Chelsea [Vowel \(2016\)](#) argues that in some spaces, land acknowledgements have lost their disruptive power through repetition. [Vowel \(2016\)](#) suggests settlers go beyond just making a land acknowledgement to learn about what expectations local Indigenous nations have for guests and hosts. It is not simply about knowing whose territories we are on but engaging more deeply with local Indigenous communities and lands.

We suggest that in order to have deeper relationships with local Indigenous communities and lands, we need to reconceptualize the meaning of land through Indigenous epistemology and ontology. From an Indigenous perspective, the land is understood not as a source of resources or as private property but as “a system of reciprocal social relations and ethical practices” (Wildcat et al., 2014, p. ii). Settler colonialism has attempted to destroy this Indigenous understanding of and relationship with the land through various colonial policies and practices (Battell Lowman & Barker, 2015). It is critical to renew this relationship with the land that has been dismissed via settler colonialism. Several scholars have argued that land-based education that is grounded in Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies can be a direct contestation of settler colonialism (see, e.g., Haig-Brown and Dannemann, 2002; Leduc, 2018; Simpson (2014), 2014; Tuck et al., 2014; Twance, 2019; Wildcat et al., 2014). Land-based education is a pedagogical approach that centres the importance of land and place, where learnings and knowledge are produced through the interaction with and observation of the natural world (Twance, 2019). We contend that the refugee-serving sector could implement this pedagogical approach—learning about and from land—in reconceptualizing the meanings of settlement, integration, and citizenship that decentre whiteness. In practice, this could mean implementing land-based education in professional development as well as settlement programming and newcomer education that centres local

Indigenous histories and land relations. If appropriate, organizations could consult or hire Indigenous knowledge holders to facilitate the learning.<sup>4</sup>

When we deepen our appreciation towards the lands that have welcomed us, we may develop a clearer understanding of how to be a good guest and ally to Indigenous Peoples.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, we have considered decolonizing praxis within the refugee-serving sector in the context of settler colonial Canada. We argue that for the refugee-serving sector to meaningfully establish allyship with Indigenous people, we must continue to decentre the whiteness that has constructed and organized our sector. We highlight the tensions that exist in allyship between Indigenous and (racialized) refugee communities and discuss ways to work with those tensions. We argue that pathways to decolonizing praxis require three concrete approaches—critical reflexivity, settler responsivities, and renewed relationships with local Indigenous communities and lands.

We would like to emphasize that this paper does not offer definitive pathways to Indigenous–refugee allyship. Our journey is ongoing, and we are committed to continuously reflecting on our relationships with Indigenous Peoples and lands that are meaningful to both Indigenous and refugee communities. Further, we argue that the decolonial praxis we have suggested must be accompanied by structural changes and

<sup>4</sup>Indeed, we (the authors) are currently conducting a land-based education project with a Toronto-based refugee serving organization, the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture (CCVT). The CCVT has been serving refugee communities, particularly survivors of torture and war, since 1977. While the CCVT’s key mandate is to support the well-being of survivors of torture and war, it has identified the immediate need to consider Indigenous histories and presence in their service delivery in order to respond to the TRC calls to action. The project honours Indigenous epistemology and ontology of the land and engages Indigenous knowledge holders and decolonizing scholars. Through land-based education and circle sharing, CCVT staff members and clients are learning about local Indigenous histories, presence, and knowledge systems and reflecting on their role in truth and reconciliation with Indigenous communities. For more information about this project, please contact the authors.

supports given that the sector is already stretched thin. While the recent revision to the Canadian citizenship oath that recognizes Indigenous rights is a positive step, more changes are needed, including but not limited to an overhaul of the citizenship test guide to acknowledge and centre diverse Indigenous histories, presence, and knowledge system across Canada and more funding for the refugee-serving sector, specifically for initiatives that support reconciliation efforts.

In conclusion, we would like to come back to the discussion of Canada Day celebrations we shared at the beginning of this article. If we were to centre Indigenous struggles as reference instead of normalized racial and settler colonialist scripts of Canadian citizenship, how could we rethink Canada Day celebrations so that they remain meaningful to refugee clients? Could Canada Day be a day to reflect on our migration stories and our responsibilities as settler/guest on this land? Could we have a dialogue with local Indigenous communities to share our relationship to the land (where we come from and where we came to)? Would it not be liberating to imagine what refugee integration might look like if we centre Indigenous histories, presence, and knowledge systems? Such imagining might have a transformative effect on Indigenous–refugee relations.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

*Chizuru Nobe-Ghelani is a sessional instructor at the School of Social Work at York University. She can be reached at [cnghel1@yorku.ca](mailto:cnghel1@yorku.ca).*

*Mbalu Lumor is a Senior Manager Programs and Newcomers Services at the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture. She can be reached at [mlumor@ccvt.org](mailto:mlumor@ccvt.org).*

## REFERENCES

- Amadahy, Z., & Lawrence, B. (2009). Indigenous Peoples and Black people in Canada: Settlers or allies? In A. Kempf (Ed.), *Breaching the colonial contract: Anti-colonialism in the US and Canada* (Explorations of Educational Purpose series, vol. 8, pp. 105–136). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-9944-1\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-9944-1_7)
- Anderson, B. (2014, January). *Exclusion, failure, and the politics of citizenship*. (RCIS Working Paper No. 2014/1). Ryerson Centre for Immigration & Settlement. [https://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/centre-for-immigration-and-settlement/RCIS/publications/workingpapers/2014\\_1\\_Anderson\\_Bridget\\_Exclusion\\_Failure\\_and\\_the\\_Politics\\_of\\_Citizenship.pdf](https://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/centre-for-immigration-and-settlement/RCIS/publications/workingpapers/2014_1_Anderson_Bridget_Exclusion_Failure_and_the_Politics_of_Citizenship.pdf)
- Arat-Koç, S. (2012). A transnational whiteness? New middle classes, globalism and non-European “whiteness”. In N. Falkof, & O. Cashman-Brown (Eds.), *On whiteness: Critical issues: Imaginative research in changing world* (pp. 59–68). Inter-Disciplinary Press.
- Asher, N. (2009). Writing home/decolonizing text(s). *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 30(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596300802643033>
- Bannerji, H. (2000). *The dark side of the nation: Essays on multiculturalism, nationalism and gender*. Canadian Scholars' Press.
- Battell Lowman, E., & Barker, A. J. (2015). *Settler: Identity and colonialism in 21st century Canada*. Fernwood Publishing.
- Bosniak, L. (2006). *The citizen and the alien: Dilemmas of contemporary membership*. Princeton University Press.
- Bradfield, A. (2019). Decolonizing the intercultural: A call for decolonizing consciousness in settler-colonial Australia. *Religions*, 10(8), 469. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10080469>
- Cahuas, M. C. (2020). The struggle and (im)possibilities of decolonizing Latin American citizenship practices and politics in Toronto. *Society and Space*, 38(2), 209–228. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775820915998>
- Canadian Council for Refugees. (n.d.). The resettlement of Indochinese refugees in Canada: Looking back after twenty years. <https://ccrweb.ca/sites/ccrweb.ca/files/static-files/20thann.html>
- Canadian Council for Refugees. (2020). CCR member organizations. <https://ccrweb.ca/en/members>
- Coleman, D. (2006). *White civility: The literary project of English Canada*. University of Toronto Press.
- Dauvergne, C. (2005). *Humanitarianism, identity, and nation: Migration laws of Australia and Canada*. UBC Press.
- Dion, S. (2007). Disrupting molded images: Identities, responsibilities and relationships—Teachers and Indigenous subject material. *Teaching Education*, 18(4), 329–342. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10476210701687625>
- Fellows, M. L., & Razack, S. (1998). The race to innocence: Confronting hierarchical relations among women. *The Journal of Gender*, 1, 335–352. [https://scholarship.law.umn.edu/faculty\\_articles/274/](https://scholarship.law.umn.edu/faculty_articles/274/)
- Furniss, E. (1999). *The burden of history: Colonialism and the frontier myth in a rural Canadian community*. UBC Press.
- Haig-Brown, C., & Dannenmann, K. (2002). A pedagogy of the land: Dreams of respectful relations. *McGill Journal of Education*, 37(3), 451–468. <https://mje.mcgill.ca/article/view/8649>
- Iacovetta, F. (2006). *Gatekeepers: Reshaping immigrant lives in Cold War Canada*. Between the Lines Publishing.
- Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. (2020). Canada—Admissions of Syrian refugees under Canada's Syrian Refugee Resettlement Commitment by province/territory of intended destination, gender, age group and immigration category, November 4th, 2015–November

- 30th, 2019 [Data set]. <https://open.canada.ca/data/en/dataset/01c85d28-2a81-4295-9c06-4af792a7c209>
- Jafri, B. (2012, March 21). Privilege vs. complicity: People of colour and settler colonialism. *Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences Blog*. <https://www.ideas-idees.ca/blog/privilege-vs-complicity-people-colour-and-settler-colonialism>
- Koleszar-Green, R. (2018). What is a guest? What is a settler? *Cultural and Pedagogical Inquiry*, 10(2), 166–177. <https://doi.org/10.18733/cpi29452>
- Lawrence, B. (2002). *Real" Indians and others: Mixed-blood urban Native Peoples and Indigenous nationhood*. University of Nebraska Press.
- Lawrence, B., & Dua, E. (2005). Decolonizing antiracism. *Social Justice*, 32(4), 120–143. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29768340>
- Leduc, T. (2018). "Let us continue free as the air": Truthfully reconciling social work education to Indigenous lands. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 54(3), 412–425. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2018.1434445>
- Lee, J. (2016). Non-white settler and Indigenous relations: Decolonizing possibilities for social justice. *Lectora*, 22, 13–26.
- Mackey, E. (2002). *The house of difference: Cultural politics and national identity in Canada*. University of Toronto Press.
- McGrath, S., & McGrath, I. (2013). Funding matters: The maze of settlement funding in Canada and the impact on refugee services. *Canadian Journal of Urban Research*, 22(1), 1–20. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26193923>
- Molnar, P. (2016). The boy on the beach: The fragility of Canada's discourses on the Syrian refugee "crisis". *Contention: The Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Protest*, 4(1-2), 67–75. <https://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/contention/4/1-2/cont040106.xml>
- Ngo, A. (2019). *The entanglements of Canada's national identity building and Vietnamese Canadian community conflicts: Racial capitalist democracy and the Cold War neoliberal multicultural subject* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. York University.
- Nobe-Ghelani, C. (2018). Learning through a reunion of mind-body-emotion-spirit: Experience of mindfulness-based reflexive practice in critical qualitative research. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 11(4), 413–431. <https://doi.org/10.1525/irqr.2018.11.4.413>
- Nobe-Ghelani, C. (2019). *Tracing invisible borders of Canadian citizenship: Critical analysis of social work with non-citizen migrants* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. York University.
- Nobe-Ghelani, C., & Ngo, A. (2020). In search for ethical relations in social work with refugee communities: Reflections on the Syrian refugee "crisis". *Canadian Social Work Review*, 37(1), 63–79. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069982ar>
- Phung, M. (2011). Are people of colour settlers too? In A. Mathur, J. Dewar, & M. DeGagne (Eds.), *Cultivating Canada: Reconciliation through the lens of cultural diversity* (pp. 289–298). Aboriginal Healing Foundation. <https://www.ahf.ca/downloads/cultivating-canada-pdf.pdf>
- Razack, S. (2002). Introduction: When place becomes race. In S. Razack (Ed.), *Race, space, and the law: Unmapping a white settler society* (pp. 1–20). Between the Lines.
- Sharma, N. (2006). *Home economics: Nationalism and the making of "migrant workers" in Canada*. University of Toronto Press.
- Sharma, N., & Wright, C. (2008–09). Decolonizing resistance, challenging colonial states. *Social Justice*, 35(3), 120–138. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29768504>
- Simpson, L. B. (2011). *Dancing on our turtles back*. Arbeiter Ring Publishing.
- Simpson, L. B. (2014). Land as pedagogy: Nishnaabeg intelligence and rebellious transformation. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 3(3), 1–25. <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/22170>
- Smith, L. T. (2012). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (2nd ed.). Zed Books.
- Thobani, S. (2007). *Exalted subjects: Studies in the making of race and nation in Canada*. University of Toronto Press.
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). *Honouring the truth, reconciling for the future: Summary of the final report*. [http://www.trc.ca/assets/pdf/Honouring\\_the\\_Truth\\_Reconciling\\_for\\_the\\_Future\\_July\\_23\\_2015.pdf](http://www.trc.ca/assets/pdf/Honouring_the_Truth_Reconciling_for_the_Future_July_23_2015.pdf)
- Tuck, E., McKenzie, M., & McCoy, K. (2014). Land education: Indigenous, post-colonial, and decolonizing perspectives on place and environmental education research. *Environmental Education Research*, 20(1), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2013.877708>
- Tuck, E., & Yang, W. (2012). Decolonization is not a metaphor. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1(1), 1–40. <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/18630>
- Twance, M. (2019). Learning from land and water: Exploring mazaabikiniganan as Indigenous epistemology. *Environmental Education Research*, 25(9), 1319–1333. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2019.1630802>
- Vowel, C. (2016). *Indigenous writes: A guide to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit issues in Canada*. Highwater Press.
- Walia, H. (2010). Transient servitude: Migrant labour in Canada and the apartheid of citizenship. *Race & Class*, 52(1), 71–84. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396810371766>
- Walia, H. (2013). *Undoing border imperialism*. AK Press/Institute for Anarchist Studies.
- Wildcat, M., McDonald, M., Irlbacher-Fox, S., & Coulthard, G. (2014). Learning from the land: Indigenous land based pedagogy and decolonization. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 3(3), i–xv. <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/22248>
- Wong, R. (2008). Decolonization: Reading Asian and First Nations relations in literature. *Canadian Literature*, 199, 158–178. <https://canlit.ca/article/decolonization-reading-asian-and-first-nations-relations-in-literature/>



This open access work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

This license allows for non-commercial use, reproduction and adaptation of the material in any medium or format, with proper attribution.