9 “Please Call Me by My True Names”

A Decolonizing Pedagogy of Mindfulness and Interbeing in Critical Social Work Education

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In writing this chapter on an embodied and decolonizing pedagogy of mindfulness, I begin with my bodily experience in this moment: the sensations of each in-breath and out-breath as the air enters and leaves the nostrils, the chest, the abdomen; of the fingertips touching the keyboard as I type these words; of the contact between the body and the chair and between the feet and the floor; of the sensations and the energetic field in the body as the mind is searching for words to express the thoughts and experience in this moment.

But let us pause for a moment. Notice any bodily sensations you might be experiencing and any feelings or thoughts that are passing through your mind in this moment as you are reading this paragraph. What is your breathing like? Is it long or short, deep or shallow? Is your mind leaping to control the breath? Let it be. Simply let the breath come to you, just as it is. How does your body feel in this moment? Is there tension in the body? Do you wish I could move on quickly to talk about the “real” stuff, instead of “wasting” time to be with the bodily experience in this moment?

What do you notice in this pausing?

Originating in the teachings of Siddhārtha Gautama (or Gautama Buddha; c. 563 BCE/480 BCE–c. 483 BCE/400 BCE), mindfulness is about being fully aware of what is going on in the moment with equanimity. In Pali, the language in which early Buddhist texts were recorded, the word
for mindfulness is *sati* (Sanskrit: *smṛti*), meaning “recollecting” or “remembering.” As Thich Nhat Hanh (1999, 64) says, “Mindfulness is remembering to come back to the present moment,” Bhikkhu Bodhi (2011, 25) asserts that in the Buddha’s teaching *sati* has acquired a new application based on the older meanings. Bodhi argues that mindfulness is best characterized as “lucid awareness,” which includes recognition of objects pertaining to the past and awareness of present happenings. The English translation for mindfulness is misleading since it explicitly points us to the mind, but we can be present only when we are grounded in the body. The body anchors us in the here and now, while the mind often takes us into the past or the future (Chödrön 1997, 2; Nhat Hanh 2006, 34). The Chinese character for mindfulness is 念, also meaning “remembering.” The upper part of this character (今) means now and the lower part (心) means heart-mind: that is, the heart-mind in the now. It is not uncommon to hear Chinese people say: “My heart thinks”; or ask “What is your heart thinking?” This reflects the conception of a nonseparate heart-mind. In *Discourse on the Establishments of Mindfulness* (the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*), one of the Buddhist texts on mindfulness, mindfulness of “the body in the body” (*kāya-sati*) is the first of the four “establishments” of mindfulness, followed by mindfulness of “the feelings in the feelings” (*vedanā-sati*), “the mind in the mind” (*citta-sati*), and “the objects of mind in the objects of mind” (*dhammā-sati*) (Nhat Hanh 2006, 13–14). It is important to note that the third establishment, mindfulness of the mind in the mind, is awareness of “mental formations” (Nhat Hanh 1999, 73), which include both emotions and cognition. In Buddhist psychology, emotions and cognition are all part of the *citta*. Thus, mindfulness is about being present with the unity of body, heart, and mind to the full range of experience and the fullness of life in the moment. It is an open and direct awareness of the fluidity of the experience of the present moment. It disrupts the habit of the mind to react, categorize, and control our experience of the world and of life (Wong 2004).

When we are present to what is going on, without our habitual reaction of judgment or preference, we are able to see more clearly. And the more clarity we have in our awareness of what is within us, the clearer we can be about what is outside of and around us. As we develop this awareness, we also begin to see that what is inside and what is outside are not separate, just as the air coming in and out of the body when we breathe is not
separate from the air around us. As Thich Nhat Hanh (2000, 40) explains, the forests are our lungs. If they do not breathe, there will be no oxygen for us to breathe. Similarly, I would add that the cars which produce pollution in the air around us are also our lungs. Thus, the forests, the cars, and the air around us are constitutive of and interconnected with each other; that is, we, “inter-are” (Nhat Hanh 1991, 95–96).

In this chapter, I discuss a graduate course I taught using a mindfulness-based pedagogy to engage students in embodied critical reflection for social work practice and social justice work. A number of students in this course experienced, through mindfulness, a process of decolonization from the Eurocentric consciousness that separates and elevates the mind above the body, heart, and spirit, as well as from the essentialist, dualistic, and individualistic construction of self as separate from others and from all things. Feedback from these students illustrated how mindfulness promotes the healing of body, heart, and spirit—healing that many Indigenous and anticolonial scholars and educators have increasingly been calling for in recent years in our efforts toward decolonization. As they transformed from within, these students experienced the restoration and burgeoning of the creative inner life force that goes beyond the binaries and categories of identities. They then extended this creativity outward in their participation and action in the world. In the following pages, I discuss my journey to a mindfulness-based pedagogy and then focus on the decolonizing effects of mindfulness on three students in the graduate course, effects that they experienced not only in their professional lives as social workers but also in their efforts to support healing among their people.

Who Am “I”? A Decolonizing Journey to a Mindfulness-Based Pedagogy

In “Critical Perspectives in Social Work,” a graduate course that I taught for nine years, from 1999 to 2008, I asked students, in the second class, to bring an object that they felt best represented and introduced them to their peers. The objective of this class was to increase students’ awareness of how our personal experiences within social, cultural, and structural contexts and the deep-seated assumptions we have about ourselves, others, and the world are embedded in histories of power relations (Fook and Askeland 2007),
histories that inevitably implicates us in the reproduction and/or subversion of power as we work towards social justice.

I, too, participated in this exercise with the students. What follows is my self-introduction in those years:

Water can best represent me, fluid and ever-changing. Water makes up 75 percent of my body. I am the water I drink, manifesting in many different forms—vapour, cloud, rain, snow, ice, dew, river, lake, ocean, and many more. I am the cloud that becomes rain watering the vegetables, rice, and wheat that I eat. I am the farmer who grows the rice, wheat, and vegetables. I am the truck driver who transports this produce to the market. I am both the family corner store owner and the entrepreneur who owns superstore chains where I do my grocery shopping. I am the cheap labour on the farms and in the supermarkets in this country and many parts of the world.

I am my parents who were from poor peasant families in southern China and who later became low-income manual labourers in garment factories, the British navy, hotels, and hospitals in Hong Kong. The name my parents gave me, Yuk-Lin (玉蓮 ‘jade lotus’), represents the Chinese and Buddhist symbol of purification and awakening through and from the mud of life. I am the British colonizer who established the Hong Kong colonial education system, in which I grew up and thrived. The name Renita speaks of this colonial history, as I was required to pick an English name on my first day at the missionary school where I completed my secondary school education (the equivalent of junior high and high school in North America). I am all of my cultural and spiritual ancestors, from whom I have inherited the teaching of my/our “interbeing” with the Earth and all sentient beings.

I am more than what you see and think. As water, I manifest in different forms and cannot be contained in any one form, such as the form of a woman, a Chinese person, a person of colour, or a teacher. When you see (or read) me in one or all of these forms, they may elicit assumptions and some of your past experiences with people who seemed to share my ‘traits.’ I invite you to become aware of these assumptions and ask yourself: How did you come to know these concepts, assumptions, or knowledge? Where did they come from?

Seeing (or reading) me in the form of a person of colour, some of you may feel uncomfortable when I talk about race. If discomfort
arises in you, I invite you to allow yourself some quiet moments to
greet your discomfort with a friendly smile, say hello, and ask: “My
dear friend discomfort, can you tell me where you came from? Is
there something you want to teach me that I have yet to learn?” In my
experience, discomfort has been my best friend, offering me many
rich learning moments. It pushes me to reflect and grow. I have been
made uncomfortable around issues of ableism, heterosexism, and
even racism. And I am grateful for these learning moments because
they have made me confront my implication in power and privilege
and renew my commitment to inclusivity and social justice.

Inspired by Thich Nhat Hanh’s (1991, 74–75) poem “Please Call Me by
My True Names,” this self-introduction has evolved over the years, based
on mindful contemplation of who “I” really am. When I turn inward and
bring mindfulness to the everchanging internal process of the mind and
body, I see directly the coming and going of thoughts, feelings, and somatic
experiences that make up “me” or “my” experience. I see how they affect
each other and the conditions that produce them. Mindfulness calls for
an open and humble heart and a fierce commitment and willingness to be
present to what shows up in the moment, even when it is not pleasant. With
mindfulness of the flow and fluidity of moment-to-moment experience, I
can see no fixed or solid identity that I can call “me”: Chinese, woman, or
person of colour. Nor can I draw a clean line between the colonized and
colonizer, consumer and capitalist, oppressed and oppressor, human and
nonhuman, or good and bad, and simply place myself in the first group
within each of these dualistic constructions.

This direct seeing is a critical moment of decolonization. It ruptures the
Eurocentric colonial knowledge and essentialist construction of a self sep-

arate from the other, and it disrupts separation of the mind from the body,
human from nonhuman. Rather, it reflects an ontology of “interbeing” (Nhat
Hanh 1991, 95–96), the interbeing of my life with all lives and all things, and
it highlights my ethical responsibilities in all my relations. According to De
Lissovoy (2010, 280), “decolonial theory” confronts, challenges, and undoes
“the dominative and assimilative force of colonialism as a historical and
contemporary process, and the cultural and epistemological Eurocentrism
that underwrites it.” In Memmi’s words (1991, 152), the colonized “must cease
defining himself [sic] through the categories of colonizers.”
It is important to note Tuck and Yang’s (2012) assertion that “decolonization is not a metaphor” and that it must address repatriation of land; it does not stop at developing a critical consciousness or at freeing the mind from colonization. For people of former colonies who have been displaced and/or have migrated to North America, the legacy of colonization is entrenched in the entire fabric of life as well as in the psyche and the mind. Many have become permanently “unhomed” (Bhabha 1994, 9), whether they have stayed in the territories that have been returned to them or are living in their new host country. The impact of colonization continues after the repatriation of land and return of sovereignty and the departure of colonizers from occupied territories. To decolonize, therefore, we, the colonized, need to unsettle the Eurocentric ontological and epistemological positions that have governed how we see and experience who we are in the world, while also recognizing the Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island and our own implication in white settler colonialism. Drawing on the work of Anzaldúa (1987), Bhabha (1994), and Trinh (1989), Nina Asher (2010, 398) argues that “the self, implicated as it is in the colonizer-colonized relationship, is split.” It is thus “by acknowledging one’s implicatedness and recognizing that one is ‘at the interstices’ that one can engage in both the intellectual and the psychic/emotional work of decolonization.”

My self-introduction above was also a response to my students’ perceptions, assumptions, and expectations of me as an Asian female professor. Not only did I interrupt the assumptions they would normally attach to the constructed identities of “Asian woman”; I also hoped to prepare them for the challenge and discomfort they would experience when their own self-identities and implications in power imbalances were deconstructed in the course. Indeed, this was what first brought me to a mindfulness-based pedagogy: I needed to sustain my spiritual, emotional, and mental well-being if I were to continue teaching critical social work (Wong 2004). Instead of promising students a “safe space” in which to explore issues of identities and power, I felt that it was more important to support them in staying with and learning from their discomfort, with openness and kindness, just as a mindfulness practitioner would do in the face of difficult experiences.

Furthermore, in my years of teaching critical social work, I have found the emphasis on the discursive-conceptual mind in conventional critical pedagogical methods limiting. As well, its binary framing of oppression
and anti-oppression implies the moral categories of “bad” and “good.” Such erroneous dualistic conceptions of oppression and anti-oppression allow those who self-identify as anti-oppressive (and morally “good”) or as the oppressed to claim innocence and to avoid examining their own implication in oppression along the multiple axes of power (Wong 2004). It can also result in those who are deemed privileged becoming defensive, frozen, or guilt-stricken. At worst, students may become further separated from each other in their constructed identities instead of coming together to work toward an inclusive and socially just world.

Moreover, in the early years of teaching this course, when I used conventional critical pedagogical methods, I commonly found that students gradually deflated into despair or paralysis, since they felt trapped in the pervasive power relations in their personal and professional lives. When I asked students what they aspired to for a “better world,” many could only envision it in negative terms, such as “a world without oppression” or “without injustice.” While critical analysis helped them deconstruct power, the dominance of the discursive-analytical mind had stifled their inner life force of hope, creativity, and imagination. It offered little support for healing from territorial, cultural, or epistemic colonization and injustice; restoring their humanity (of both the “oppressed” and the “oppressor”); reconnecting them to the spirit that sustained or elevated them and their communities to see what gives life (Longboat 2009); or imagining and creating what is possible (Shahjahan, Wagner, and Wane 2009, 70–71).

Over the years, it has thus become increasingly crucial for me to support students in learning ways to engage with their emotional reactions to power or holding with gentleness their rage or their wounds from colonization and social injustice, which might be reopened in class discussion. As Asher (2010, 399) writes, “We need to think and feel our way out of oppression and colonization” (emphasis in original). When allowed the space to connect to their hearts, which had been closed off in the conventional academic analytical classroom, students were often eager to express their yearning for healing and the restoration of spirit. This is the “decolonizing learning space” that George Dei (2010, 8) advocated for in the classroom after reading Frantz Fanon’s work on decolonization and education. Fanon (1967) showed us that the violence of colonization lies not only in the occupation of geopolitical space but also in the colonization of the psychic space. Thus a
“decolonizing learning space” needs to address “the spiritual and emotional harm” of colonization (Dei 2010, 9). Decolonizing, then, also involves “a process of healing” from “the spiritual, cultural and mental alienation of the self that creates a sense of hopelessness and despair” and a regaining of “our lost humanity” (Dei 2010, 3). Many Indigenous and anticolonial educators and scholars have also emphasized healing and the restoration of spirit as integral to their personal, intellectual, and collective journeys of decolonization (e.g., Asher 2003, 2010; Graveline 1998; hooks 2003; Longboat 2009; Shahjahan, Wagner, and Wane 2009; Smith 1999).

Shauna Butterwick and Jan Selman (2012), Randee Lawrence (2012), and Roxana Ng (2000) further argue that the body is a critical site of decolonization and healing. According to Butterwick and Selman, “processes of colonization separate mind and body” (64). To decolonize, we therefore need to return and reconnect to the body (Ng 2011) to release and heal the psychic colonization housed in the body and to liberate and revive our inner life force. Many studies have shown evidence for the presence of an ongoing body-mind dialogue that creates emotional maps in our consciousness, as well as for the interconnectedness of mind, body, and personal transformation (Damascio 1999; Forester 2007; Pagis 2009; Siegel 2010). Candace Brunette-Debassige’s chapter in this collection speaks powerfully of this process, as does the chapter by Alannah Young Leon and Denise Nadeau.

In recent years, as I began to bring students’ attention closer to their sensory experience through mindfulness exercises, some students came to an awareness of their bodily existence in relation to all beings and all things and awakened to their interconnectedness and ethical responsibilities in the world, processes that did not occur to the same degree and depth through conventional critical pedagogy (Wong 2013, 2014). Other educators who have attempted to go “beyond the educated mind” (Bai 2001) through contemplative or mindfulness-based pedagogies in their teaching of environmental and global justice have had similar results (see also Kahane 2009).

**Spirituality and Critical Social Work**

In May and June 2010, I taught a graduate elective course titled “Spirituality and Critical Social Work.” The course provided a space for both contemplation and action and for an integrated bodily-emotive-mental-spiritual...
knowing for critical reflection in social justice work and critical social work practice. Core to critical social work is the deconstruction of power in practitioners’ relationships with clients along relations of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion/spirituality, age, and dis/ability. Critical social work addresses the discursive construction and systemic conditions of social and individual problems.

**Class Format and Learning Activities**

Students sat in a circle in all the classes. The first hour of the class normally began with a ten- to fifteen-minute mindfulness exercise, such as mindful breathing, mindful eating, mindful walking, or loving-kindness meditation. Going around the circle, students then shared their experiences of the exercise. They could pass if they wished. In one class, students spent thirty minutes in solitude, listening to trees.

The fifth session was a six-hour silent retreat on a Saturday. Both the retreat and its preparatory assignment were adapted and expanded from a similar learning activity developed by Teresa Macias, who had taught the course two years before. Students submitted a two-page plan prior to the retreat to identify one area of their spiritual journey on which they would like to reflect or a question they would like to explore on their spiritual journey. In the retreat plan, they specified contemplative practices or texts they would use to guide their reflection. Three readings were recommended to help students plan their retreat (hooks 1996; Kabat-Zinn 2005; Nouwen 1975). On the day of the retreat, students first met in class for a twenty-minute mindfulness meditation to allow the body-heart-mind to settle. They were then encouraged to allow the flow of the day and the moment to guide them, even if that meant not sticking to their retreat plan. Students then found a spot on campus to conduct their contemplative practice in solitude. They came together at midday to share a silent meal together. At the end of the retreat, they shared briefly their experience of the day.

Every week, students wrote two to three pages in their ungraded reflective journals on their daily centring practice and class readings. Students were asked to engage in a ten- to twenty-minute daily centring practice of their choice, such as a mindfulness exercise introduced in class or a contemplative practice that helped them stay centred and grounded. While mindfulness was the foundational practice shared in class, it was important to honour
the diversity of spiritual traditions that students brought to the classroom. Many students chose mindful breathing, walking, and/or eating, along with other contemplative practices such as prayer, Bible reading, quiet time in nature, gardening, poetry, calligraphy, painting, yoga, mountain biking, and music. Students reflected on what they noticed during the practice and how it helped them relate to themselves, others, and the world differently. For their weekly journal writing, students were also asked to reflect on a sentence or a longer excerpt from two or three of the weekly assigned readings, excerpts that opened their heart or inspired their spirit, raised a question of significance for contemplation, or invited them to practice critical social work differently. These readings included authors from various cultural and spiritual traditions and topics on ecology and social justice, Indigenous knowledges and decolonizing social work practice, spirituality, and social activism.

**Interviews**

In February 2011, almost one year after the completion of the course, I invited all of the twenty-one students who had taken the course to participate in an individual, semi-structured, in-depth interview of approximately an hour to talk about their experience of the course’s contemplative pedagogy and its impact on their personal life and critical social work practice. I was not teaching any of the students at the time. Some of them had graduated the previous year, while some expected to graduate in June 2011. Two students could not be reached, since their email contact information was no longer valid. Ten of the remaining nineteen students volunteered to participate in the interviews, which took place from March to July 2011. It was a time when graduating students were preoccupied and overwhelmed with the completion of their practicums, course work, and Major Practice Research Paper, and many were involved in job searches.

I make no attempt to present a comprehensive analysis of all ten interviews in this chapter, choosing instead to focus on the experiences of three students—Juana, Daphne, and Wanda (pseudonyms)—all of whom experienced a decolonizing process in their personal and professional lives through the mindfulness-based pedagogy.
Grounded in the Body, Rooted in Interconnectedness

When asked in the interview what parts of the course had stayed with her, Juana was very quick in her response: “The word interconnectedness really stays with me.” It was like a “flashlight” in every class for her. More specifically, it helped her see the “bigger picture” of the “webs of relationships” in the different contexts of her life. Not only did she begin to ask how she was interconnected with her surroundings, her relations, her work, and her passion, but she also wanted to learn more about the histories and stories of the clients with whom she worked and to understand their interconnections. Most importantly, the course took her back to certain questions: Who am I? What is my history? How am I connected to my roots? How am I connected to the bigger picture of those roots?

Listening to my self-introduction in class, especially with regard to my names, Juana was struck by the realization of how her name represented the colonial history and the associated Catholicism forced upon her people. Her Spanish surname was the colonial name “pressed upon” her ancestors. Since completing the course, she had tried to learn more about the history of her family, her people, and their community in Canada. “That has been very challenging,” Juana said, “I have this longing to find out where my ancestry is . . . but I can only know so much, because after a certain point, my history has been erased, has been changed.” Although Juana yearned to connect to her roots, her lineage, her ancestry, and the history of her people “amidst the Spaniards, the Americans,” she struggled to express her desire: “There are so many layers I have to uncover, not to find the truth, cause I don’t think there is a truth to it; trying to find where my people, um, not started, cause I don’t think we started.” Her articulation of what she is not trying to find speaks poignantly of the violence of colonization. There is no beginning or “truth” of her ancestry to be found, since it has been erased or altered, and has “always been a question mark.” Who she is can now only be located among the multiple constructed identities of the colonial past and present.

Not being able to trace her ancestry, Juana turned to rooting herself in “the interconnectedness of all my relations.” It was very important for Juana to be rooted and grounded; she pictured a tree that could “easily be swayed” or “easily fall down” if not rooted. “If you are not rooted,” she asked, “how do you regenerate, how do you grow?” Being able to anchor herself in the interconnectedness of her relations helped Juana develop a wider
perspective of her origins, of “what’s important” and what her passion and mission is. It helped her believe that her “life has had meaning.”

I asked Juana what it was in the course that had led her to anchor herself in interconnectedness. She talked about “the silent time” in the mindful eating exercise, which helped her “declutter, taking away the noise or the systemic chatter” that kept her from being grounded or understanding her interconnectedness. The term *systemic chatter* was introduced in the course by Jana Vinsky, a guest speaker in one of the sessions. It refers to “the dominant narratives, which are both informed by and support the structures found within our society. Systemic Chatter shows up within our internal and external dialogue reflecting inherited power relations within historical and contemporary conversations” (Prevatt-Hyles and Vinsky 2005).

In the mindful eating exercise, students were asked to take the time to bring their full presence and all their senses to the experience of eating a tangerine and several grapes: to see the different shapes and colours of each piece of fruit, to smell the subtle scents, to feel its weight and texture through the sensation of touch in their fingers and hands, to hear the sound of the fruits, and to chew them slowly, one by one, at least ten times to fully taste them. At the time of the interview, Juana continued to maintain this mindful and silent eating practice in her daily life, especially at breakfast:

> When I’m eating, I will remember to just stop myself . . . to have that silent time, and that grounding. Before, I would be, like, what’s the next thing to say, or we can do something more productive with our time than just being silent. But now . . . that exercise allows me to slow down and centre and ground myself, and [be] a lot more aware of my physicality.

This grounding and awareness of her physicality was pivotal to bringing Juana back to herself and the wholeness of her being—physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. To Juana, her wholeness is her interconnectedness. The mindful eating exercise quiets the Enlightenment discourse that elevates the mind above the body. While she found that all the other courses in the program challenged her intellectually, they pushed her “to the limit” of “mental and physical exhaustion” from “staying up at night drinking coffee” in order to complete the coursework and then going to placement the next day. She said, “Your course brought me back to myself, to listen
to myself again, and not just listen to all those intellectual voices.” This listening to herself included attending to her bodily needs rather than letting the intellect take over her life. She would tell herself, “Hold on, Juana, you need to eat; Juana, you need to rest. . . . If I was tired, I’m not going to push myself. If I was hungry, I’m not going to continue, pressing on, be unkind to myself. I’m kinder to myself now.”

The neglect of the body that Juana mentioned was not uncommon among the students in the course—and, I would also add, among academics and professionals in our increasingly competitive and fast-paced world. Daphne, a student of Asian descent, also reconnected to her wholeness—all the elements, people, and histories that made her who she was—through the slow sensory experience of the mindful eating exercise:

The meditative eating, eating slowly, tasting everything, feeling everything; thinking back about where the tangerine came from, all the people involved. . . . So I am aware of these particular things that have helped me become who I am. That’s my wholeness. . . . Yes, all these things help to develop who I am today, all the experiences, the history, events.

This wholeness is bigger than her individual self.

**Quieting the Mind, Listening to the Heart**

Slowing down was instrumental for Daphne to turn inward and become aware of who she was in her wholeness. Along with the mindful eating exercise, Daphne also talked about what the silent retreat in the course brought her: “just finding myself again, who I am and what completes me.” When I asked her to describe her image of wholeness, she immediately said, “My heart, my heart, just the image of my whole physical body coming into view as if my heart [was] pumping in blood to all extremities. . . . I start at my heart and become more who I am when I see my blood rushing everywhere in my veins; that creates the whole picture of me.” And she added, “Wholeness in my heart, when I experience it in my heart, it’s like love. At first, I wanted to say a lack of pain, but that’s not totally true, because sometimes love includes pain. I think to be able to express myself in emotions and feelings—that is what I feel makes me whole.”
So the body, the heart, and the mind are inseparable to Daphne. Her image of wholeness starting at her heart—like love that sometimes includes pain—reflects bell hooks's vision of spiritual self-recovery in relationship to the political self-recovery of oppressed and colonized peoples. hooks (1999, 117) asks: “What is the place of love in this recovery?” To hooks (1996, 289), love is a foundation that “takes us more deeply into practice as action in the world.” It defies the dualistic identity construction of good or bad, right or wrong in “a culture of domination” and colonization. hooks urges us to dissolve these dualities and “to identify anchors to hold on to in the midst of fragmentation, in the midst of a loss of grounding” (289). She identifies her anchor as “love,” which calls for a capacious seeing. “It is life-sustaining,” she says, “to understand that things are always more complex than they seem. . . . Such understanding is more useful and more difficult than the idea that there is a right and wrong, or a good or bad, and you only have to decide what side you’re on” (289).

For Daphne, the silent retreat helped her rediscover what invigorated her body, mind, and spirit, which reconnected her to her heart: “I feel like my heart was shining. You couldn’t see the heart. I just see bright light. . . . I felt connected.” Inside this heart was herself, or a “little lady” who “illuminates in my heart” and “speaks softly.” Daphne had to be quiet in order to listen. She explained, “I guess the metaphor is listen to your heart; listen to your inner teacher; listen to that wholeness that is there.” This listening is a quieting of the dominant academic and colonial chatters that exclude the body and the heart and that promote self-alienation and disavowal among colonized and marginalized bodies (Dei and Simmons 2010).

This quiet listening connected Daphne to the life force and the love within her—her heart and blood, she said, “rushing everywhere in my veins that creates the whole picture of me.” This “whole picture” is fluid: “I can only see my whole body as the blood comes out, and it doesn’t come out, like, solid; it goes in and out.” This sense of fluidity and ongoing movement and nonseparation came from Daphne’s own history of having gone through many phases in her life, including her teenage raving phase with drugs, and of recognizing all the big and small things and people that had impacted her and made her who she is today.

While Daphne did not talk about colonization and oppression or identify herself with these terms, she spoke passionately about her teenage clients.
who were confined within the professional and medical labels of “operational defiance” or “mentally ill” and were not allowed a voice. She felt connected to them, saw them beyond their labels, listened nonjudgmentally to their stories and wholeness, and supported them in finding their voice. “The course helped me realize that everything is connected, fluid, and ever-changing,” Daphne said, “and everything makes an impact on something else, whether big or small.” Extending her quiet inward listening outward, she recognized the ever-changing nature of people and trusted that a small act of nonjudgmental listening could go a long way. She said, “Even the small positivities can be impactful because things are connected.” This listening with acceptance, to self and others, is love. It requires one to see the interconnectedness of all things and all lives within a person’s being, and it breaks down an essentialist and fragmented construction of people.

Juana experienced a similar process of reconnecting to her heart, or what she called her “aura” and “inner guide,” as she attended to her body and grounded herself in her physicality. This “aura” and “inner guide” represents to her a deeper meaning of life that is rooted in her community and her interconnectedness with all things. This reconnection took her beyond “the ego” based in individual accomplishments that she had worked hard to build up and took pride in for some time; she realized that her ego was “not rooted in anything” when life fell apart. Juana had been an improviser and had written with much “heart and emotion.” Academic study had separated her from this heart connection, and her writing had become intellectual and cold. The “aura” that had emerged in the course was still “shy,” Juana said, but it was getting stronger. During the course, she added, “the silent time really helped.”

Her “inner guide” prompted Juana to ask how she could move outward to the life around her and to her community, now that she had begun to experience her interconnectedness with all things and all lives. “If I am connected to you, and you are suffering,” she asked, “what can I do in this life, in this world, to alleviate that suffering? How can I continue going on and see the suffering and injustice in your life and not do something about it, because I am connected to you?” This is an ontology and an ethic of interbeing, and it contrasts sharply with the Eurocentric and individualist way of being in the world. As De Lissovoy (2010, 283) notes, the hallmark of Eurocentric colonialism is the “partitions and divisions of the world” and the conceptual
separation of self and others. Juana’s awakening to her interconnectedness with all things and all lives, from the vanity and rootlessness of the life focused on individualist pursuits that she had previously led, is a significant decolonizing shift of consciousness and way of being in the world.

Seeing the discord in her community as a result of the colonial injustice her people had carried, Juana particularly hoped to bring her people together, to inspire that aura of “light, warmth, love, compassion, and togetherness” in her community. Furthermore, she aspired to support the youth in her community to come back to “their centre” and to “nurture that aura”—that is, to “give them a space where they can be who they are” and not live in fear of being excluded. She wanted to “give them that room to just be, whatever they may be . . . to bring up that wholeness in them, and help them to be grounded in something more than themselves, more than this oppression.” Early in her life, bell hooks (1999, 116) became “determined to live a life in the spirit.” And when we bring this spirit to our discussion about race, gender, and class, we are called not only to name the injustice and oppression but also to “understand that I’m more than that, and understand that I can be more than that with others” (124).

**Recognizing Multiplicities, Reclaiming Wholeness**

Another student, Wanda, also commented on her name, which she said carried “a huge story.” Until she heard the stories behind my names, it had not occurred to her to remember and tell hers when she introduced herself in class. She said, “I don’t often associate all the history behind my name [with] what I go by” because “there is a disconnect between that and what my name is.” This “disconnect” permeated her family, who “hid and didn’t talk about” the Indigenous ancestry in the family history. “It was not the part that we celebrated,” Wanda said. For a long time, she was afraid to claim that part of herself; since she had not been raised with a recognition of being Indigenous, she “was afraid of being, like, a faker” and “being rejected as somebody who didn’t deserve to have that connection.” When she was asked about how the course had impacted her, Wanda said that the contemplative silence, the reflective time in nature, and the mindfulness exercises—breathing, walking, and eating—helped her reconnect to that hidden and uncelebrated part of herself and her heritage.
In the mindful walking exercise, students were invited to go outside the school building, which was surrounded by tall trees and spacious lawns. Mindful walking is meditative practice in motion. Students were asked to bring their attention gently to the sensations of contact between their feet and the ground, the soil, the grass, and to feel the motion of their body as they walked. They were also invited to coordinate their breathing with their steps. Using the instructions about mindful walking often given by Thich Nhat Hanh in his dharma talks, I suggested to the students that they could say silently to themselves: “Breathing in, I take one step. Breathing out, I take another step.” Or students could silently say “arriving” as they took one step and “here and now” as they took the next step. In walking meditation, we are not walking in order to go somewhere. We are simply arriving in the here and the now with each step. Most often, when we walk, we walk with projects in our head, with anxieties or worries about the future or regrets about the past. Mindful walking brings us back to the present moment with each step. It helps the mind come back to the body, to quiet down, and to gain clarity of what is here.

At the time of the interview, Wanda continued to practice mindful walking (though not as slowly) while walking home from work, mindful eating during lunch outside the office when the weather was favourable, and mindful breathing when working with clients in difficult situations. These practices all helped Wanda come back to her centre. Since “colonial domination and oppression materialize in the here and now of the processes and practices of our everyday lives” (Tejeda, Espinoza, and Gutierrez 2005, 16), Wanda’s consistent mindfulness practice while going about her day is significant in loosening the colonial grip of her being in the world.

Wanda reported that in feeling more “grounded, more present, and more aware” in her body through mindfulness in contemplative silence, she began to recognize “all the pieces of what make me,” including her Indigenous heritage. Even though she was not raised in it, she began to see that it was “still a huge part of me.” Wanda began to feel more comfortable “honouring” the deep connection she had felt since childhood with Indigenous spirituality and mythology. This internal recognition of who she was did not need any external validation. “I don’t need from the government that I qualify to be Indian,” she said, adding that she felt no need to prove that her maternal grandmother was Indigenous. She did, however, need to come to terms
with the materiality of her inability to connect to the Indigenous community because of her family’s denial of and separation from their Indigenous heritage.

I asked Wanda what image came up for her when she recognized all the different pieces of herself. She said, “It is almost like a column of light housing in my body. . . . When the pieces of myself are out there, the light is dim. When they come together and are pulled back into the centre, that light has the space to grow.” This column of light grew as she grounded herself in and cared for her body and as she connected with nature, all her relations, and her Indigenous ancestry. When the pieces of herself were back in her centre, fueling the column of light, she felt “calm, grounded, present, strong,” and “very powerful and large, in a good sense.”

Wanda talked about how this “stronger sense of self” helped her challenge oppression: “When I’m feeling comfortable in my skin, . . . when you have that strong rooted sense [of who you are], I feel I’m in a better position to challenge it, and to find the strength to stand up and advocate for people, and demand people’s rights to be honoured.” This stronger rooted sense of self, she said, supported her in standing up for a client against pressure from the medical staff to discharge her before a suitable placement could be arranged. This client was experiencing mental health challenges and had no home and no one to return to. Wanda recognized that she needed time to think through the different scenarios and sort things out for the client; she would not have an answer for the medical team on the same day of their discharge decision. In the past, Wanda would have been concerned about how not having an immediate answer would reflect on her as a professional. But after the course, in which she “worked on taking the time, slowing down, really reflecting on things, and being more secured in who I was,” she felt more confident in herself and in her own judgment. In that incident, instead of speeding forward with hasty solutions to appease others, she felt the confidence to slow down, to take the time, to be aware of herself and the reasons for the decision she was making. Wanda said, “Awareness is at the root of being whole.” Her re-embodiment of her heart, mind, and spirit through the mindfulness exercises and reconnection to nature set in motion a process of self-reclamation (Dei 2010, 18) and freed her to act with strength, for self and others, from her centre.
(Not a) Conclusion

The writing of the first draft of this chapter spanned ten months, during which I had two episodes of acute neuropathic pain running from the base of my neck through the right shoulder, down my arm, and into my fingers. It was debilitating. Both times, I only needed a few more days to complete the first draft, but then I stopped writing to allow the body to heal. This might have been a coincidence, but I could not help wondering whether the body was screaming and releasing the unattended pain of a lifetime of colonization. The surfacing of pain is often necessary for deep healing to take place. It is a cleansing process that calls for mindfulness—awareness with gentleness and loving kindness—in our care of and listening to the integrated wholeness of body, heart, mind, and spirit on our journey of decolonization. The stopping and slowing down of the writing process was a mindful response. Through mindfulness, I stopped negating my body and spirit; the dominant mind could no longer dictate the timeline of this writing project, and the balance of wholeness of my being was restored.

Just as the students reclaimed their wholeness through mindfulness, I was on the same journey with them. It is an ongoing process. Our mind, heart, body, and spirit are inseparable in the wholeness of our existence. There is no body-mind duality and no hierarchy among these foundations of our being in and knowing of the world. And when the students were grounded in the physicality of their being through mindfulness, they also began to recognize their interbeing and interconnectedness with all things and all their relations. This deep inward seeing not only supported them in reclaiming who they were in their history of relations but also invigorated them to extend outward and act in the world from the centre of their being, based in a consciousness of relationship and interbeing.

In integrating the wholeness of their being through mindfulness, these students also recognized the fluidity and multiplicity of their identities. Their “true names” defy the colonial Eurocentric essentialist and dualistic categories of identities that separate and hierarchize. This speaks to part of Frantz Fanon’s (1967) decolonization project in Black Skin, White Masks to go beyond fixed categories or binaries of being. He writes, “I should constantly remind myself that the real leap consists in introducing invention into existence. In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating
myself. I am a part of Being to the degree that I go beyond it” (229)—that is, beyond the enslavement of empire, colonization, and nationalism.

The processes of colonization, however, continue today. In recent years, divorced from its Buddhist roots, mindfulness has been popularized in the health and mental health fields, and even in the corporate world, in North America and England. Numerous quantitative measurement scales have been developed to measure mindfulness and the effectiveness of mindfulness in reducing stress or regulating other health or mental health problems (Baer, 2007, 2011; Cardaciotto et al., 2008; Feldman et al., 2017; Lau et al., 2006), even though mindfulness is an internal, fluid process of moment-to-moment consciousness that cannot be fully captured by quantification. Moreover, as a number of my students have informed me, some health and social service agencies push their frontline service staff to teach mindfulness to their clients without providing the staff with any mindfulness training. Mindfulness has been commoditized as a cost-saving technique to be added to the Western toolbox to treat modern ailments such as stress and mental distress (Bunting 2013). This has been done without examining the socioeconomic and sociopolitical conditions that contribute to the production of stress and mental health issues in this global, neoliberal, capitalist era.

A version of mindfulness practice has also been adopted to train soldiers to reduce stress while serving in the US military (Watson 2013), leaving the causes and consequences of war unquestioned. Mindfulness practice, despite benefiting many, has been misused in the West to perpetuate the harm that militarization and capitalist-driven productivity has caused in people’s lives. The practice is particularly susceptible to misuse when it is removed from its context as a 2,600-year-old Buddhist practice grounded in sīla—a code of ethical conduct based on self-discipline and on a commitment to nonviolence and a refusal to cause harm. As Thich Nhat Hanh (1999, 82) reminds us, these ethical precepts are essential to mindfulness: “If we don’t practice the precepts, we aren’t practicing mindfulness.”

The colonial appropriation of ancient practices from non-Western cultures is not new. Yoga, an Indigenous practice rooted in thousands of years of spiritual tradition in India, has been associated with New Ageism (Batacharya 2010) and commoditized for Western consumption. Reclaiming ancient practices such as yoga and mindfulness practice from such
contemptuous and potentially dangerous cultural appropriation and (re) colonization will require the persistent efforts of many in our continuous project of decolonization. Our task is not to decry any Western adoption of yoga or mindfulness practice but rather, as Brunette-Debassige suggests in her chapter in this volume, to call for a more critical engagement of spiritual practices that are not of our own tradition. It is to maintain a critical pedagogy that refuses to allow the colonization of mindfulness into yet another Eurocentric and capitalist commodity. Most importantly, it is to reassert the foundation of *sīlas* in mindfulness practice.

Finally, as Tuck and Yang (2012) remind us, “decolonization is not a metaphor.” As the journey of decolonization continues, I have become increasingly aware of the physicality of my here-and-now existence on the continent of Turtle Island and the ethics of my interbeing with the Indigenous peoples in Canada. While reviewing this chapter, I saw how this awareness was obscured at the time I taught the “Spirituality and Critical Social Work” course. The violence of settler colonialism in Canada blocked this awareness until I audited a course taught by Bonita Lawrence on the treaties and the history of Canada from Indigenous perspectives. Decolonization in the context of Canada must be connected to the materiality of this history. The teaching and practice of mindfulness thus requires the grounding of awareness in the presence of the Indigenous peoples, as well as in the incommensurability and yet interconnectedness of settler colonialism in Canada and Western colonization in many parts of the world. This recognition is mindfulness: an ongoing process with an open and humble heart to the unfolding of who “I” am, and who we are, in the ethics of our interbeing.

Now let’s come back to our breathing. What is the breathing like right now? Is it long or short; deep or shallow; fast or slow? Where do you feel the breath most strongly in the body? Let the breath come through us. This is not “my” breath, “your” breath, nor “our” breath. This breath comes from all lives and connects us to all lives and all things. It awakens us to our responsibility to each other and to the world, human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate.
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