

inSocialWork Podcast Series

A Social Worker's Guide to Decolonizing the Field of Social Work

with Autumn Asher BlackDeer, Ph.D.

Peter Sobota [00:00:01] In social work so white? Or can we reform our profession before we acknowledge our own impact in helping keep indigenous people invisible? From the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Welcome to the In Social Short podcast. I'm Peter Sabella and good as always to have you on.

A settler colonialism perspective acknowledges that the United States is reflective of a colonial society whose systems, institutions and was form the fabric of our everyday lives. While racism directed toward African American citizens and immigrants has been brought to the forefront, there has been less focus on our processes and historical attempts to eliminate indigenous people. One of the institutions reflective of our society is the Academy and in this case, the Social Work Academy. Today we will talk with Indigenous scholar Dr. Autumn Asher Black here about why we need to and how to decolonize the Social Work Academy via our research, practice and teaching. It's factual that Indigenous folks experienced disproportionately higher levels of negative impact on their health, their mental health, and incidents of substance abuse, trauma, and violations of their human rights. Dr. Asher Black Deer will provide us with a contextual framework to examine how the Academy has historically reflected the entrenched beliefs of settler colonialism and how we as a profession, the folks that write research, attempt to empower communities and prepare practitioners and scholars alike, can change the patterns of systemic oppression in line with our stated commitment to social justice, truth, dignity, and the importance of human relationships.

Autumn Asher BlackDeer, Ph.D., is assistant professor at the University of Denver Graduate School of Social Work, where she focuses her scholarship on the impact of structural violence on American, Indian and Alaska Native communities. She's from the Cheyenne Nation and is the daughter of Russia and a Black Deer granddaughter of F1. Moore and great, great granddaughter of Sue. Little Calf Auto Massacre, Black Deer. Welcome in social work.

Autumn Asher BlackDeer, Ph.D. [00:02:34] Thank you so much. I'm excited to be here.

Sobota [00:02:36] Yeah, it's great to have you. Just a brief introduction here. I know your scholarship reflects your interest in interpersonal and sexual violence among American Indians and Alaska Native communities. And I know that you are shining a light on the impact of structural violence in those communities. I also know that you and probably many who are listening to this podcast, who are interested in supporting and acting on this reality that you and we operate and learn and practice scholarship in the context of the academy. We really wanted to talk with you about your perspective and your commitment to decolonizing the academy, especially, you know, the social work academy and the profession to boot. So we have we have a tall order in front of us here. So in addition to having the most badass regalia I've ever seen, I know that you are a storyteller. And could I begin by asking you to tell us a story about yourself and how you came to do the work that you do?

BlackDeer [00:03:47] Absolutely.

BlackDeer [00:03:48] Well, thank you so much for the regalia. And I. I love it. It's part of just being your full self. And we can definitely talk about, you know, decolonizing colonized faces as we go throughout. But definitely, I think just getting into the academy and being, you know, one of the only native students, faculty, you know, it's really hard to.

BlackDeer [00:04:15] Just be in a place that was not built for you. Right. And so the more that I went through, you know, my master's and social work program and my doctoral and social work program, it just seemed like it was from a very white Eurocentric lens. And so we're talking about social justice and diversity. And we only talk about Native folks like maybe one class writer. There's one reading here or there. There's no native faculty anywhere. And so it really just became clear to me that this was a huge piece that was missing in social work, education and just the field of social work together. Like where is it? You know, where are we addressing colonialism? Right. And so I think it just became apparent to me throughout going through these formalized and. Education programs that were really perpetuating colonialism. And I don't want to be another byproduct of colonial settler education. And so it just became so apparent to me that there has to be a larger conversation about what are we actually doing here?

Sobota [00:05:15] Yeah, I'm sorry for interrupting, but before you even go further, I'm curious, did you have.

Blakcdeer [00:05:21] Higher expectations.

Sobota [00:05:23] For higher education and social work especially? Yeah.

BlackDeer [00:05:26] Yeah. You think so? You see these people getting these degrees and, you know, they wear the cool hats. Their doctors, for crying out loud. Right. Or even just social work. Right. It's supposed to be such a noble profession that we're the people that are supposed to be healing and helping and serving our communities. And then to get there and see that it's so just whitewash are like, what are we doing here? And I kept waiting for like, this has to be something more. Right? Like, what am I missing?

Sobota [00:05:57] And conservative and not really that radical.

BlackDeer [00:06:02] Right? It's almost like radical is a bad word in social work.

Sobota [00:06:06] Yeah. Another illusion shattered. Yeah. So it's hard to know where to start with your topic, but I guess I would hope that we wouldn't have to do an extensive review of the history and the lasting legacy of settler colonialism and genocide of indigenous peoples. There isn't much of a question. And we've known for a long time that indigenous folks have significantly disproportionate difficulties related to health, mental health, substance abuse, trauma and, you know, routine violations of their human rights. So, you know, from your perspective, could you talk about how you feel the social work profession has responded to or maybe even perpetuated the existence of these needs?

BlackDeer [00:06:58] Absolutely. I think social work has really first of all, social work has really just perpetuated colonialism. It hasn't really responded to it. And in the several decades that the profession has existed.

Sobota [00:07:10] I suspected you might say that.

BlackDeer [00:07:13] Absolutely. Social work has really carried out the colonial agenda of the federal government. Right. We know this in participation in internment camps or child welfare or even taking native kids to boarding schools. Right. So it really there was no kind of like passive like, oh, well, social work existed at the time that these terrible things happened. No social workers were actively carrying out colonial agendas, right? And we're even continuing those colonial agendas today, like in higher education, in Eurocentric frameworks or evidence based practice as the gold standard of research in social work. Right.

Sobota [00:07:49] Oh, good. We're going to get to that, I hope. Okay.

BlackDeer [00:07:52] Oh, yeah.

BlackDeer [00:07:53] Or even just the way that we educate future social workers. Right. We're teaching the next generation of social workers to operate from this kind of internalized colonial mindset, right? Where we're actively teaching students to internalize. And that's how they go out into the field and practice this. And so we can't even really get to response until we talk about the fact that settler colonialism really is not even mentioned in social work. Hardly at all. You know, we're just now barely beginning to talk about white supremacy, but white supremacy is a manifestation of settler colonialism. So, there's a lot there.

Sobota [00:08:31] Is a lot there. Yeah. I'm not sure that I can speak about this eloquently, so please, by all means, take right over. But it does seem that even when we teach about it, about colonialism, we all seem to do it from a perspective of almost permanence that I'm not even sure that that's the right word. We're not talking about changing it. We're talking about it and its effects. I would suspect that you would, if we're even remotely talking about the same thing, that you would be a fan of impermanence.

BlackDeer [00:09:07] Absolutely. That's really kind of the greater conversation about Decolonial futures, right, is to think about that there are actually other worlds possible. And so that idea of colonialism and white supremacy as permanent kind of assumes that, well, they're just always going to be this way. And I think that's a big critique of decolonialism, right? People are like, oh, we can't just, you know, put Pandora back in the box. We're not going to all go back to riding horses. It's like, that's not what we're saying decolonization is. We're saying that an entire other worldview, an entire other world without colonialism is possible. That's a decolonial future. Like Native people have lived in a world without colonialism and survived and flourished, right? And so we're saying that there absolutely is an entire other world possible. And that's kind of how decolonizing relates to the larger conversations about abolition. Folks think that, you know, we can't have social work without the child welfare system or without the criminal justice system. Right.

BlackDeer [00:10:11] Well. other communities have before and its worked out really well.

Speaker 3 [00:10:12] Oh, let's see.

BlackDeer [00:10:14] Oh.

Sobota [00:10:15] Yeah. Is it a denial or an ignorance that it's already being done? That's the century part, right?

Speaker 3 [00:10:23] Oh, boy.

BlackDeer [00:10:24] Yeah, that's the internalized colonial mindset, right? That this is how things have always been. This is how they will continue to be, that these are just, you know, colonialism and white supremacy are just everyday facets of society. And that's just how things work.

Sobota [00:10:38] Yeah. All right. So take your thoughts a little bit further here. If we exist in a society that is reflective of colonialism. You know, we're going to have to accept that. That system, of course, also permeates education, including higher education, and now, most practically, schools of social work. Those places that, you know, supposedly create knowledge, create research, serve the communities, you know, that they're encompassed in and teach and socialize scholars and practitioners alike. So here comes the really easy question Autumn. Why do we need to and how do we decolonize the Social Work Academy?

Speaker 3 [00:11:25] Oh, that's my life's work. Absolutely.

BlackDeer [00:11:30] Well, I think we have to decolonize social work because colonialism makes the world white. And so we have all been impacted by settler colonialism. So it's the responsibility of all of us to undo colonialism. And that's essentially what decolonization is. It's the return to our traditional ways of being. It's addressing our internal colonial mindset. And the logical endpoint of decolonization would be to dismantle harmful structures or these systems of oppression. So if we're thinking about why would we do that in social work? Hello. The overall goal of social work should be to help our clients achieve social justice, right? We should be working ourselves out of a profession. What would a future look like that doesn't require social work? What if we lived in communities of care? Right. And so if we're talking about why do we need to decolonize schools of social work, we are increasingly teaching future social workers to help our clients put Band-Aids on their situations. Right to advocate for them to deal with these oppressive systems and structures that they live in. Right. Where is the advocacy for dismantling these harmful systems of oppression beyond voting? You know, how can we get social work to actually focus on dismantling these systems of oppression instead of helping our clients cope with them? That's really the question.

Sobota [00:12:59] Yeah. Can I invite you to maybe do a little bit of drill down here in terms of at least social work education? Because it seems like and, you know, I'm going to speak for me, not my colleagues. And, you know, I'm over here at the University of Buffalo, but sometimes I fear that in our attempts to do the right thing, you know, we do things that we're doing this right now. We're looking to kind of diversify our content in our courses. And, you know, we're poring over our syllabus. You know, we're looking at our assignments and our texts. And I think my first reaction to all of that is that that's good. But it feels it doesn't feel like nearly enough in most cases. So if we could talk more about, you know, social work education in the academy, could we talk about what this would look like in terms of research, teaching and practice?

BlackDeer [00:14:00] Absolutely.

Sobota [00:14:00] Why don't we start with with research. Your thoughts on decolonizing research in the Social Work Academy?

BlackDeer [00:14:07] Oh, my goodness.

Sobota [00:14:08] Oh. Oh, my goodness. I'm going to sit back in my chair. Okay.

BlackDeer [00:14:12] Oh, my goodness. I really could teach an entire, like all of the research sequences across social work on how to decolonize research from the very beginning to the very end. Right. So let's let's start at the beginning thinking about what does research start with. It starts with a question, right? A research question. And the way that we even teach how to formulate a research question is pick a population, pick a problem. Right. And then say like, oh, how does anxiety look for Somalian refugees? Right. And it's like, okay, sure. That's inherently problematic, right? Because we're we're coming up with the question and then we are going to either go to the community and try to find the answers or we will find. In a data set that already has Somalian refugees, and then we'll see what we can do with secondary data. The problem with that, we're not even starting with what the community is interested in. Right. What if they're interested in access to housing or, you know, like they might not even be concerned with what is anxiety look like in their community. So we're already starting off the process assuming that we know what the community is actually interested in. So we're already off to a bad start with the question.

Sobota [00:15:30] What? We've centered it around our own interest to.

BlackDeer [00:15:33] Right, why. The community's not? And then also it also assumes that there hasn't been any work done by the community. Right. What if the community already has their own way of addressing anxiety? And just because it's not in a peer reviewed journal article doesn't mean that that knowledge doesn't exist. Hello.

Sobota [00:15:52] Sorry you got me with that one. I'm the choir on that one, so I'm going to pour gas on the fire here. Love it here at our school of social work here in Buffalo, and I'm sure at many others end of the profession, we've hitched our wagon to the the evidence based practice thing. Let's call it that. Let's call it that. I would imagine that you have some thoughts on that.

Speaker 3 [00:16:15] Oh, my goodness.

BlackDeer [00:16:17] Me. And evidence based practice. So first off, the big thing that comes to mind whenever I think of evidence based practice is actually a concept called clinical colonization. And so it actually refers to the overall idea of evidence based practices that your client has an issue. You go to the research, you recommend a treatment based on what is published in the Gold Standard literature, and then you bring it back to your client and ideally combine the research knowledge with your clinical expertise to create some kind of magical formula. However, the actuality of evidence based practice is that it's just been really short sighted and limited to what we only do interventions that have been studied in a randomized controlled trial, which is deeply problematic, especially when we're talking about marginalized communities.

Sobota [00:17:08] You So that was the drill down.

BlackDeer [00:17:11] Yeah, right. Good idea of taking an intervention that only has empirical evidence with predominantly white communities and then taking that to a marginalized communities such as a native nation. And they're saying, we know what's best for you. This is the intervention that works because this is the intervention that has the most publications, but it has no knowledge on how that would actually work or be received by the native nation. That does sound a lot like colonialism, right? An outside entity coming

into your community and saying, we know what's best for you. This is what we're going to do to solve your problems. That's essentially colonialism though.

BlackDeer [00:17:46] Though. That's what evidence based practice does. And we teach that as the cornerstone of how to do research in social work. So whenever we're talking about how are we teaching from a colonial mindset or how are we how are we going to decolonize research? First off, we need to think about who decides what counts as evidence. Is it only things that are written down? Is it only things in peer reviewed journal articles? You know, we're missing generational wisdom, cultural wisdom, all of these things that have been passed down generationally. And then the methods, the hierarchies of knowledge that's ultimately white supremacy in action, the hierarchical defining of what this has to have so many pieces of evidence to be counted as this. And, you know, we value certain forms of knowledge over the other. That's colonialism.

Sobota [00:18:40] Yes. And as I listen to you talk, I'm thinking about some reading and a person that when I was younger, really kind of shaped the way that I thought about things I got turned on to and I became a big fan of Joseph Campbell, the mythologist. He was very adept at talking about, you know, myths and stories throughout the world. And he really focused. He's an academic, you know, I think he taught at Sarah Lawrence for like 40 years or something like that. He really opened me up and my eyes to the storytelling ritual. What I think maybe somebody like me would refer to as alternatives and probably second tier alternatives to evidence based practice, but nonetheless hold profound meaning for cultures and peoples that as part of their tradition. And yet we don't hear a lot about that as alternative approaches in treatments, in social work.

BlackDeer [00:19:47] Yeah.

Sobota [00:19:48] How about let's talk you kind of led to this a little bit. Let's talk about teaching a little bit, apart from the kind of the stuff that I talked about in the beginning that again, I think is necessary but seems still kind of short. How can we decolonize teaching schools of social work?

BlackDeer [00:20:06] I think we have to first think about what kind of world you are holding for our students. Right. So the idea that you talked about a permanence, we kind of teach from this mindset that we'll always have to live with these systems. Right. But for indigenous communities, we have this idea of a relational worldview. So everything that we're doing is based on who we're in relationship with. So that the work that we're doing right now, I'm doing to be a good relative, right? And so the way that we pass knowledge in relationship is more of a relational context, right? So that breaks down that hierarchy of teacher versus student. It also breaks down the hierarchy of, you know, as an instructor, my job is to just open the student's head, place all the knowledge in and then leave. Right. That's not how education traditionally looks in indigenous communities. Right. So there's even a concept of that we can learn from in social work education about land based education. And so in indigenous communities, I would look like, you know, me spending time with an elder and maybe we would actually be like on our tribal lands, right? And so it would be teaching me things first. I would learn by seeing them do it. Then they would have us practice it together. And then the third time it would be me doing it on my own, but still with the guidance. Right. And so it's like opportunities to develop expertise and to develop these sorts of things without it just being I'm going to tell you something and you'll write a five page paper on it and then we'll never discuss it again. You know?

Sobota [00:21:42] Nice model. Nice. Yeah. Did you want to say more about teaching your own role there?

BlackDeer [00:21:47] But I mean, I just think it's really we have to think about this is kind of what you were talking about with, you know, adding more people of color to our syllabus or, you know, thinking about the ways we do assignments. You know, a true Decolonize classroom is one that kind of holds a sacred learning space for a collaborative, right? So we're all learning together, even the instructor, right? There is no kind of I know everything and I'm expected to just bestow this knowledge on y'all. It's more of a collaborative environment of like, that's truly how you decolonize your classroom. It doesn't matter then. I mean, you should obviously have more people of color and you should really critically evaluate whose voices you're privileging within, you know, your required readings and those sorts of things. But ultimately, the idea of a sacred learning collaborative would be there's an indigenous scholar, Dr. Jeremiah. She has a model called like her grandmother's kitchen table. And so she tries to make classrooms be like her grandma's kitchen table, right. Growing up, you're sitting around, you're maybe sharing a meal, you're laughing, right? And that's really the embodiment to me of being in community and learning in community because you're bringing your full self. And so, I mean, we know we talk about a lot of difficult things in the social work classroom, right? We're helping people deal with privilege. We're helping people, you know, kind of identify all of these horrific things that are happening in the world and holding space for them to ultimately be the healers of the next generation. Right. And so how do we hold space for them to become all of these things and to learn? It's a process. It's in community. It's holding that space.

Sobota [00:23:26] It seems very much like all of that. Is that also fair to say that it's a power sharing experience?

BlackDeer [00:23:33] Yeah, I would almost say that the collaborative nature of it really removes the idea of power and separation and hierarchy. Right. We're all sitting at the head of the table, you know, or there is no head of the table. Actually, we're all sitting at the table and.

Speaker 3 [00:23:49] Yeah.

BlackDeer [00:23:50] Yeah. I just think I think too, it's really modeling that vulnerability as an instructor requires a certain level of self-assuredness, right? Because I think that it's easier for instructors to hide behind the stiff instructions in office hours and only email me after, you know. But to be that vulnerable and to model that for your students, that's an entirely different level of education. Right? Rather than just bestowing knowledge, it's actually. How are you embodying this practice for your students?

Sobota [00:24:25] Wonderful. Actually, the way you describe it is bordering on the comical. If you think about it for a minute. There's a fair amount of hubris, if not a tremendous amount of hubris involved. How about practice? Should we talk about practice at all? How do we decolonize that?

BlackDeer [00:24:43] Well, I think the cornerstone of social work practice has really been cultural competence for years now. Right. And that was even it was even a struggle to get to cultural competence. If you look at the beginnings of the profession, folks were really not concerned with it at all. But now the idea of cultural competence is so outdated to be. Really just again thinking about the worldview and the positionality of being culturally competent. Right? That means I can know enough about your culture to be competent

enough to provide you services. That doesn't make any sense. We actually think about hubris, right? This is actually really ridiculous.

And then now, you know, after 2020, everybody had their great racial justice awakening and wanted to become anti-racist all of a sudden. But even there, there's still the backlash and the hesitancy to be anti-racist. And so thinking about decolonizing practice, what does that look like? What does it truly look like to have a decolonial social work practice that's not based in cultural competence and really goes further than Anti-Racism. I think there's a lot there. I mean, we have to first kind of address that social work has really harmed a lot of communities over time. Right. And so it's not enough to just kind of say like, oh, we know about different theories. We know the theory of anti-racism, we know theories of colonialism. Right. But how do we get practitioners to truly know who they are in a clinical setting? Right. I think we kind of skip all of this and just go straight to modalities or theories. Right. And we're never really holding space for students to critically evaluate who the heck are you? You know, how do you come to the work? How are you as a person sitting in that room with individuals? Right. And so or even, you know, it doesn't even have to be individuals at the macro level. Right. How are you embodying social work? We don't even talk about that. And I think one of the best places to start with practice is bringing it all the way back. So there is a lot of work by Dr. Michael Yellow Bird about neuro decolonization. Decolonizing your mind. What does it mean to really sit with yourself, have that critical self-reflection, to meditate and to really combine the ideas of mindfulness and decolonization into saying, Who the heck am I? And how does that impact the work that I'm trying to do as a social worker?

Sobota [00:27:30] Mm hmm. Just one more thing. I have a lot of thoughts as I listen to you here. But when we were talking about evidence based practice, that was one thing. But when we talk about practice itself, so many social workers are invited, you know, to wrap their arms around the DSM when they do their work. I would imagine that you have a couple of things to say about the beloved Diagnostic and Statistical Manual.

BlackDeer [00:27:58] I sure do.

Sobota [00:27:59] Oh, you do? Okay. Yes.

Speaker 3 [00:28:01] I mean, I.

Sobota [00:28:03] Go right ahead.

Speaker 3 [00:28:05] Oh, my goodness.

BlackDeer [00:28:06] So we're talking about things that perpetuate colonialism, right? Let's talk about the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual and. Oh, gosh, so let's like. Okay, so first off, it's an inherently deficit based approach, right? You're only talking about symptoms and presentations, right? So that automatically if we're talking just with indigenous communities, that doesn't fit right. Several indigenous communities don't have words in their native languages for things like anxiety, depression. Right? And then if we think about how culture is treated throughout the DSM, it's so problematic. Even I don't even know we're on the fifth edition now. Yeah. And they're trying to get better. Sure. But like, it's all in like appended materials, right? It's not in the actual diagnostic criteria. Or even if it is, it's still just another checkbox, right? Like, oh yeah, I talked with Peter today, checked our culture check. Right. And so let's.

Sobota [00:29:04] Put it on the assessment.

BlackDeer [00:29:05] Yeah, exactly. It privileges these sort of just hollow ways to assess for culture in a way that doesn't make any sense. Right. And so if we're thinking like, I've had a therapist before this, like, do you do the whole native thing? What does that mean? And I'm sure she wrote like, Oh, does she assess for culture? Like, what does it mean to do the whole native thing?

Sobota [00:29:26] Yeah. I don't know what the I don't know what that means.

BlackDeer [00:29:29] Exactly

Sobota [00:29:30] I know somebody said this to you.

BlackDeer [00:29:32] Yeah, I went to see a therapist, and in their initial intake assessment, she said, Oh, you got that? You're American Indian. So do you do the whole Native thing? And I was like, What is what does that mean? Like, how are you involved in your... you are you actually a person? Like, what does that even mean? Right. Like, and that was a clinical interaction. I was a client. This is within our lifetime, you know, like, yeah.

Sobota [00:29:57] Well, to your point, you know, this is going to kind of give away where, how old I am. But when I was in school. I learned that, you know, we were at DSM two and I literally don't recall anything about culture in DSM two. And it sounds like you're saying that it's not much better.

BlackDeer [00:30:18] Yeah, it's really not. They removed some of the like culturally bound syndromes I think from.

Sobota [00:30:24] Yes.

BlackDeer [00:30:24] Four TR on, but it's really all within. So first off, culture, the way culture is treated throughout the DSM assumes that everyone is based in the white culture. Right. And everything else that's nonwhite is quote unquote culture. Right. That's inherently problematic.

Sobota [00:30:42] Oh, yes, yes.

BlackDeer [00:30:44] Right. Like that's white supremacy, right? We're saying that white is neutral and everybody else is culture.

Sobota [00:30:50] But white is normal. Yeah.

Speaker 3 [00:30:51] Yeah.

BlackDeer [00:30:52] If we think about even the thresholds or the way that the questions are interpreted like so there's evidence that or, you know, evidence, right. There is previous work that shown that Native men rate higher for certain personality disorders. But the way that the questions have been interpreted, there is one question about like impulsivity and native men like rated really high on that and they're like, what does that mean? You know, like I remember the personality disorder it was for, but the question for them was really interpreted as like, if I have an obligation that I need to attend to, I will

leave to go to that other obligation. And they were interpreting it as like, well, if I have like a ceremonial responsibility, right? Or if I need to be like... if my aunty calls, I'm going.

BlackDeer [00:31:43] It is not an option for me to not go right. And so for that to be like pathologize is impulsivity when they're actually that they're being, you know, who they are, right? Yeah. That's fulfilling cultural obligation. And so it's just one example about how these criteria are really used to pathologize our communities rather than actually help us identify any kind of issue.

Sobota [00:32:09] Great examples. So you've been speaking a lot about, you know, some really good ideas and what to do in terms of decolonizing for folks who are interested and engaged and have energy to do this. It's going to be a strange question. What should they not do?

Speaker 3 [00:32:30] Love it.

Sobota [00:32:31] Well, I'm just thrilled that you understood the question because I wasn't sure I could. I couldn't get it up.

BlackDeer [00:32:37] Yeah, absolutely. What not to do?

Sobota [00:32:38] Yeah. What's what's the. Do not do. Yeah.

BlackDeer [00:32:41] What not to do for decolonization first versus don't hashtag it and make it more of a buzzword than it already is. I feel like half of my time is spent just telling people what decolonization is not rather than what it actually is or how we can meaningfully participate. Right. So a lot of people talking about the racial justice awakening from 2020. Now, everybody was from anti-racism to now hashtag decolonization. And so people use this in the discourse around diversity, equity and inclusion, which is what we're not going to do. Right. Decolonization is not diversifying your syllabus because, again, diversity again privileges white ways of knowing right or white whiteness as neutral. And so everybody else is now diverse. And then if we think about decolonization is not equity. Decolonization is the verb or like the pathway to achieve equity, to achieve liberation and sovereignty. Decolonization is also not inclusion. Right? So we're not going to this is the thing where people think that they're decolonizing by adding, we're including more people into our broken system. Right. It's like decolonization wants to fix the system. Right? We don't want to be included into your problem. It's a broken system.

Sobota [00:34:04] Yeah, we're talking about transformation here, not the pattern around it.

BlackDeer [00:34:09] It's just something that's not working. You just want me to come in here, fix it, and yet that's how you break the people, right? Like adding people to broken systems, just breaks the people. What we're not going to do is use decolonization as a synonym for diversity, equity and inclusion. We're also not going to just add more people of color to our syllabus. We're not going to just use it as a synonym also for indigenizing things, right? So a lot of people think like, Oh, if I'm decolonizing something like people say, Oh, Peter, you're decolonizing the podcast by having Autumn on. She's an indigenous person, right? That doesn't inherently lead to decolonization. Just because you have Native people present does not mean that it's decolonizing anything. Right? Or even the picture that you talked about earlier with my regalia, like me being in full traditional

southern tribe regalia in front of this colonial institution, is not actually decolonizing the institution. Right. Is there any meaningful change that happens from that? No, it's more aligned with representation. Like it's great and it's hopeful. And I hope that other people that oh my gosh, that could be me someday. Yeah. But also the actual institution itself can continue to be less racist or you can continue to be all of those things. Merely having native people at your thing is not decolonizing.

Sobota [00:35:35] It's not like some kind of metaphor. It's actually that's the mirror, right?

BlackDeer [00:35:39] Exactly. Exactly. And I think ultimately what not to do with decolonization is to just learn about it as a theory. Right. We should be headed for a decolonial praxis. And so a lot of kind of critiques or thoughts about it, say, like knowing is not the same as doing right. So once you take the time to learn what true decolonization is, the next step would be to implement right. To go towards action. Mm hmm. To do that work, to dismantle these colonial structures. How do we move towards that embodied practice? So what not to do is just learn about it and hashtag it.

Sobota [00:36:22] All right. So, Adam, if I may ask, with your permission, I do want to acknowledge that while we are talking about these very difficult and entrenched issues, that the people that we are talking about are literally you and me. And so I can get my head around how being an indigenous person who is doing the work that you're doing can be really helpful. I couldn't see how it could not help but inform what you're doing, but I really can't even pretend that I know what it's like to walk in your shoes and how you do. This kind of work in lived experience and at the same time stay hopeful and forward looking.

BlackDeer [00:37:19] Yeah, that's a great question.

Sobota [00:37:20] It is.

BlackDeer [00:37:21] Okay. Yeah. I think that's great. I think. Oh, yeah.

BlackDeer [00:37:25] I think I always have to think about what am I doing from a generational perspective. Right. And so whenever, you know, like how we began the conversation thinking about how social work responded to colonialism, yes. There are generations of native social workers that have paved the path for me to be here today. Right. So it's like I'm not the first person to talk about decolonizing social work. And I hopefully won't be the last native person to talk about decolonizing social work and even seeing that, you know, in 2021, the CSA we report on like the statement of accountability or whatever reconciliation against native people or foreign people, whatever, shows a little bit of progress.

But I think in being a native social worker, talking about settler colonialism and social work, the thing that really keeps me going is this idea of being a good relative and of being a good ancestor ultimately. So there's the principle of the seventh generation's right. So the things that I'm doing today have been guided or made possible by the seven generations that came before me. All of the native social workers, all of the native people, period. Right. Have made it possible for me to be here today. But then also the things that I'm doing today will help the next seven generations will impact them, hopefully. So it should be hopefully helpful, whatever I'm doing so that I can be a good ancestor both for the future, but then and honoring what my ancestors have done for me. And so it's important to kind of take this broader generational perspective, because I think a lot of times,

especially doing Decolonial work, it's very it's the long game, right? Who we have to play the long game and thinking about challenging systems of oppression and reimagining new worldviews. And so I have to kind of remind myself whenever you like, hit your head on the colonial ceiling, you know, that it's a generational perspective. And so whatever I'm doing today, will ultimately help the cause.

Sobota [00:39:37] Yes. Thank you for even entertaining that question. And you know, from an entirely different lens, I found it very helpful because now I know a little bit more about what I need to do, being who I am and how I need to hold that while still trying to be connected to all people and all things. Knowing what my own history is and what I've been steeped in since I was very young. We are running out of time here. Unfortunately, I have one more question for you. I would put this in the kind of odd category as well. So bear with me. Could we end our conversation and could I invite you to tell us a story about your mother?

Speaker 3 [00:40:22] Oh, a story about my mother?

Sobota [00:40:25] Yeah. You're being a good relative. You're being generative. And I would have to imagine that somebody like you has a very interesting mom.

BlackDeer [00:40:37] Yeah. Oh, my gosh. I love my mom. My mom is my best friend. Oh, my gosh. Yeah. I think I have so many stories, several of my whole life with this woman.

Sobota [00:40:49] I would imagine she had something to do with your position and who you are and how you think about these things. I could be wrong, but I. A place in my money. Yeah.

BlackDeer [00:41:02] So. Okay, so I. My mom is a single mom. And so I've grown up with her and my grandma in the household all together, like my whole entire life. And so growing up, my mom really didn't date much, but she went on a couple dates, like whenever she was, whenever I was a teenager. And the way that she did not tolerate any sort of nonsense, I remember she would tell me she came home from one day, one time, and she said, I don't even remember what he did. But she said, poof, you no longer exist. And yeah.

BlackDeer [00:41:35] And never spoke about him again. Never talked to him again. And so she was she just didn't take any nonsense. But then at the same time, I always called her like chicken soup because, you know, those those old books like Chicken Soup for the whatever.

BlackDeer [00:41:52] So, yeah, it always had some kind of just ridiculous quote or like motivational saying. And so like all throughout my life, like even in college or my master's or like she would just send me these quotes or like encouragement. And so, like, knowing that this woman can go from poof you no longer exist to also being chicken soup for the soul. It's like, embodies really, like what I try to be, right? Like that you have to get some tough skin, especially navigating the academy and trying to pursue the things that I'm trying to do. So the show really taught me that like food, you know, it's just right though, I think. Well, that's done. But then also the kind of like you can still be both right now, like caring and nurturing, like sending chicken soup for the soul into into the world.

BlackDeer [00:42:45] Yeah, my mom.

Sobota [00:42:48] What a great story. Yeah. Now, I don't know if your mom is a professional or an academic, but I would imagine that she is she's noticed what you've accomplished and what you're doing. And I would imagine there's some some good thoughts headed your way based on all that. Adam, thanks so much for joining us and talking with us today. Before we wrap up, our production assistant, Cate Bearrs is graduating from our MSW program and she has a question for you.

Bearrs[00:43:18] Thanks, Peter, and thank you for being here. I so enjoyed the entire conversation. Honestly, I was taking notes much of the time while I was listening because I loved the idea of a sacred learning space. And I think the identity work and mindfulness that you talked about social work first doing and social students doing in order to really start to understand themselves in relation to their practice is just like something I still relate to and have thought a lot about. So I just really appreciate the conversation and I do find myself in all of this talk of decolonization and wanting to be someone who is pushing that movement forward. I'm just curious about your perspective of dealing with the skeptics, the people who have a hard time getting away from the way they've always done things. And if you have any thoughts around that. Well, Kate, come in with the heavy hitters. Yeah, that's like. Oh, like, oh, Nathan. Oh, it was. Oh.

BlackDeer [00:44:18] It was all kosher. Yeah, I think it's an important question. Yes. So actually, my former mentor, Dr. Patterson Silver Wolf, he passed away last year, but he was our only native faculty at WashU. He was only a native person.

Sobota [00:44:36] I knew David. David was on our faculty for six years. Yeah.

BlackDeer [00:44:41] I love I call him Patti. David Paterson was like the first person to really like welcome me to watch you. Like, he saw my application before I even was accepted into the school and met with me for interview weekend. Mike was just already on my team, but as I like, I was in like my first or second year I started talking about decolonization and it was so funny because he's our only native faculty, so I'm like, Oh my gosh, we need to decolonize this. And he said, Shut up.

BlackDeer [00:45:14] Like to like, oh my God. And I was just baffled. Right? But you know that if you know David, that's exactly how.

Sobota [00:45:18] I was going to say yes to actually knowing David a little bit. It would be shut the fuck up.

BlackDeer [00:45:24] Yes, exactly. Exactly. And I was like, what do you mean? Like we have we have to do this like your native. You get it? He really challenged me, I think, to think about what does it actually mean to decolonize social work, right. He was like, what do you, what do you expect people to do? You really think that these people are going to address colonialism, that they're going to do more than like checkbox? Right. And I'm like. Well, you know, like, it's frustrating for me.

BlackDeer [00:45:53] I really I'm a hopeful person. Right. And so I actually got guidance on this from another native faculty member, Dr. Demento. She's from Alaska, Alaska native. But she kind of says, like, we have to hold space for folks wherever they're out of their journey. Right. And so how we were talking about, you know, we want social workers to have a grounded understanding of their identity and how they come to the work. Like we also have to hold space for folks that are not quite ready for their decolonial journey. Right. And to kind of say that, you know, we'll still hold the space for them whenever they're

ready. Right. So I have had people, you know, laugh in my thesis about decolonization or, you know, especially from other Native folks, too.

Sobota [00:46:37] Well, even I think to have David do that must have been a bit startling. Yeah.

BlackDeer [00:46:42] Yeah. Cause I'm like, you should get this.

BlackDeer [00:46:43] Write your name, and, you know, I get out of my office.

BlackDeer [00:46:49] But you have to just be hopeful, right? And just. That's fine. Not everybody's ready for it. And we're all on different stages of our journey. Yeah. You know, you leave the door open, so if they want to come talk to you about it. Eventually we'll be here. I like that. It's certainly helpful. And I think just all dialog you two have had. Not only helpful for me, but galvanizing, too. So thank you for that. Absolutely.

Sobota [00:47:15] Autumn Asher BlackDeer, thank you so much for joining us. It's been a real pleasure to talk with you. Thank you.

BlackDeer [00:47:22] Absolutely. Thank you so much. I'll say that again.

BlackDeer [00:47:27] []. Thank you. In Cheyenne. I thank you. Okay. Well, thank you all so much.

Sobota [00:47:36] Thanks again to Dr. Autumn Asher Black here. A special thank you to Cate Bearrs for her initiative in bringing Dr. Asher Black Jared to our attention. Be attentive in social work production team is Steve Sturman, our director and website manager. Our multitalented graduate production assistant, Cate Bearrs. Say Hi Cate. Listeners and I am Peter Szabo.

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