# Migrations, Transformations, and Getting to Home:
# A Theoretical and Personal Reflection

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*Abstract: This paper is a narrative inquiry into my academic experience as an international student in three different countries: the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and Canada. It is an analysis of how formal pedagogical spaces sustain epistemic coloniality. This study also serves as an example of practising epistemic disobedience, which begins with a recognition of problematic representations and relations within celebrated diversity and inclusion narratives of academic institutions.*

*Keywords: Higher education, International Student, Global Citizenship, Race, Coloniality.*

This paper explores my educational journey as an international student in three different countries: the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and Canada. It deconstructs what I learnt at these education institutes to uncover and unlearn embedded Western imperial reason and coloniality (Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012). I analyze my formal education through narrative inquiry to critique my own access to power (i.e., to decolonize my consciousness). Particularly in the case of Canada, as universities across the country commit to advancing reconciliation (Ono, 2018), it is time that we—as academics—reflect on the epistemic coloniality that our secondary and post-secondary institutes thrive on.

Coloniality of power, as described by Quijano (1999), theorizes the practices and legacies of European colonialism that are transferred into social orders and knowledge systems of geographies around the world. Scholars (e.g., Andreotti, 2011a, 2011b, 2012, 2014a; Beck, Ilieva, Pullman, & Zhang, 2013; Rizvi, 2009; Stack, 2016; Stein, Andreotti, Bruce, & Suša, 2016; Todd, 2009; Willinksy, 1998) have written extensively to critique the internationalization of higher education and models of global citizenship as methods that continue to perpetuate coloniality. These studies build on Quijano (1999), Santos (2014), Grosfoguel (2007) and Mignolo's (2000, 2011) works on epistemic coloniality. This paper takes a different approach; it uses the theories and critiques of epistemic coloniality and turns it inwards, through a reflection on one's own academic journey. The paper brings to light instances of harmful learning that are essential to address to strive towards a different "imaginary" (Stein & Andreotti, 2015). This paper uses narrative research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to untangle pedagogical experiences within various settings to identify how problematic concepts about universal rights, race, research, and post-colonialism are built into formal education environments.

As Smith (1999) argued, decolonization is a methodology, an ongoing process that one must engage with. Therefore, I do not claim to provide answers; rather, I ponder if I am even asking the right questions. This paper serves as an invitation for introspection, reflection, and fostering dialogue among those who are attempting to unlearn and then to learn again. My journey might be unique in terms of the combination of the pedagogical environments I encountered in my travels. However, the lessons learnt are applicable for students, teachers, and education administrators committed to the pedagogical goals of the *Calls to Action* from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015).

## Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is the study of experience understood through narratives. It recognizes that while people's stories are personal and reflect a person's history, they are also social, as they reflect the wider context of the person's life (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Clandinin and Rosiek used this methodology to study teachers' experience with curriculum reform, and focus on knowledge production through someone's experience and story:

> Narrative inquiry is a ubiquitous practice in that, human beings have lived out and told stories about that living for as long as we could talk. And then we have talked about the stories we tell for almost as long. These lived and told stories and the talk about the stories are one of the ways that we fill our world with meaning and enlist one another's assistance in building lives and communities. What feels new is the emergence of narrative methodologies in the field of social science research. (2007, p. 35)

This methodology holds deep resonance with the objective informing this paper: analyzing formal learning in postsecondary institutions. It allows for critical reflection of personal learning in the milieu of the social.

## Unlearning Universal Rights: UK

I was born in Pakistan and lived there until I was 16 years old. In my early teens, I heard a dinner guest tell my mother about a unique school his manager's daughter was attending. The school was called the United World College (UWC). It brought together high school students from around the world to live together and study for the International Baccalaureate. I remember being fascinated by his description of this school and how it resembled the United Nations (i.e., people from all over the world together on one platform). I had considered United Nations-like models to uphold equality and justice for all, creating an equal playing field for all parties involved. So, with my slow dial-up Internet and newly acquired Internet skills, I began researching the steps to take advantage of such an amazing opportunity.

I received a scholarship to study at the United World College of the Atlantic near Llantwit Major in Wales. Before I could make my way to the school, I needed a visa to travel. Obtaining a visa is an anxiety-ridden process for someone holding Pakistani citizenship, as the First World consular staff often treated one as a criminal. The onus is on the applicant to prove that they are not a threat, as well as financially stable enough to cross First World borders.[1] As a young teen, I was amazed at seeing lines of eager Pakistani travellers outside North American and European consulates going through one security check after another. These security measures dictated that applicants wait in the summer heat without shade and accept disrespect as part of the procedure. It was odd that the Pakistani security officials seemed almost intoxicated by their power to represent and protect the few white diplomats inside the fort-like embassies.

I received plenty of advice from different family members about how to answer the visa interview questions. One suggestion I clearly remember to this day is, "even if they misbehave, just smile. Do not disrespect, obey them, don't speak your mind and speak English well." I would later realize that obedience to *Gora Sahab* (the name given to colonial masters in India) is still alive and thriving in Pakistan, some 70 years after "independence."[2] Even after applying for dozens of visas and travelling to more than 20 countries, I still find the process nerve-wracking. I continue to encounter humiliating bureaucratic measures around the world, all in the name of "national security." In the end, I got the visa and travelled to the United World College of the Atlantic. Within my class of 159 students were individuals from 61 different countries, including different ethnicities, races, religions, sexual orientations, and socio-economic backgrounds. I was ecstatic at the opportunity to learn from both the diversity of my classmates and the content of my courses.

My academic year at UWC began on September 11, 2001. This is a date etched into many memories across the globe and most commonly referred to as 9/11. As a 16-year-old Muslim woman, I had to suddenly explain my faith and plead innocent to a crime I did not commit. I was unable to articulate the fact that the news of those who perpetrated violence in the name of my religion sounded just as horrific to my ears as to the ears of those who had been affected by the attack. The only way I have found to describe my initial months at UWC is to say that it felt like the rug had been pulled out from under my feet, and even worse the earth itself had fallen in. So much of what I considered "universal" became idiosyncratic. My customs, beliefs, and the things I considered sacred were challenged at a time when I was a teenager just trying to get used to living in a different continent from my parents. I developed a strong (or at least loud) Pakistani voice, making a case for what was good in my country and downplaying what was bad.

The United World College system is based on the idea that proximity to multiple cultures brings a deeper understanding of "others" and therefore, a path to more sustainable peace. I had believed that one of the primary reasons for conflict is that we treated differences as a cause for suspicion and distrust rather than a reason to learn and celebrate. Dialogue with members of different cultures would therefore complicate what novelist Chimamanda Adichie (2009) calls the "single story," a term she used to describe how we all are guilty of perpetuating stereotypes in that if we "show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become." I believed that if we familiarized ourselves with the differences of others we would learn to trust each other. I naively assumed that what was just or unjust was universal for all. However, my undergraduate years taught me otherwise.

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[1] For reference on the concept of "passport power" refer to https://www.passportindex.org/byRank.php.

[2] For more information on the history of the British expulsion and partition of colonial India, see: Jalal, A. (1985). *The sole spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League, and the demand for Pakistan*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press and Talbot, I. (2012). *Pakistan: A new history*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Even though I had encountered prejudice before, I did not understand it to be systemic, and a UWC education only strengthened that misconception.

UWC in its own mission statement claimed to be an education movement that uses education as a "force to unite people, nations, and cultures for peace and sustainable future" ("What is UWC?", n.d., para. 1). Upon reflection, the unity UWC promises is based on moving towards western ideals as "features that arise from common humanity too often become conflated with features associated with a particular cultural formation. Thus, the West becomes the only place where a human can be truly human" (Sayyid, 2014, p. 111). Within my UWC education, proximity to other languages, food, and national "costumes" did nothing to shift the superiority of the West. It offered an ahistorical, ethnocentric, and paternalistic model of education (Andreotti, 2015). Current literature on UWCs portrays its raison d'être as commendable and unique in nurturing global citizens (Hayden 2006; Rawlings 2000; Samaranyake, 1991; Tsumgari, 2010). It fails to examine the problematic representations and relationships within global education models, such as UWC that continue to be Eurocentric in ontology and epistemology (Andreotti, 2015). What is presented as universal values binding all humanity is essentially a discussion on the superiority of Western values and therefore their applicability for all.

## Unlearning Racism as Individual Prejudice: U.S.A.

Following my time at UWC, I applied only to colleges in the United States. I had two main reasons: (a) financial aid was available for international students; and (b) the liberal arts education model I was interested in was common to many programs. I studied Social Studies and Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I remember going through orientation, where issues of diversity were discussed. I looked around the room perplexed, wondering "what diversity?" The majority of the students were white American citizens.

While my friends were homesick, I was UWC-sick. It felt like I had no language to communicate with anyone. My peers either thought very differently about social change than I did, or they did not think about it at all. I remember taking a young activist–led tour of Boston but being confused when the "poor neighbourhoods" or "projects" we toured looked nothing like the slums I associated with poverty. I wondered if being poor in the US was better than being poor in Pakistan.

In conversations with peers, as well as through some readings in class, I began to see the grave omissions in my UWC experience. UWC assumes that proximity resolves intercultural difference. Conflict is positioned as a lack of "intercultural understanding." UWC education does not explore the systemic nature of discrimination, privilege, colonialism, orientalism (Said, 1978/2003), and racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; hooks, 1982; Sayyid, 2003) that are embedded within understandings of different cultures, epistemologies, and heritages. I began to see issues of racism everywhere and became heavily involved in a student-led advocacy group dealing with the injustices of the prison industrial complex in the US. UWC education taught me that racist acts are symptoms of individual intolerance rather than systemic discrimination (Bonilla-Silva 2015). My experience in the US made me race-conscious—not just within the American context but globally. Memories of being called "Paki" in the UK could no longer be dismissed as unruly behaviour and flooded back with a sting. This inner dialogue led to distressing realizations of my place as a racialized international student in the Global North[3], and further, to me questioning what were my rights?

### Learning How My Privilege Causes Harm: Research

Conducting research for my undergraduate thesis at Harvard taught me more about myself than about my subject of study. My topic was the trafficking of children from Pakistan to the United Arab Emirates (UAE). These children were forced to work as jockeys in camel racing. During interviews with government officials in the UAE, I would always get a look of surprise when I introduced myself as a student from Harvard. It appeared that the thought of a Pakistani woman at Harvard who had no political connections was almost inconceivable.

Their shock is easier to understand in the context of labour patterns in the UAE from Pakistan, where men from South Asia are primarily employed as physical labourers to build cities, such as Dubai (Shah, 2013). A young

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[3] Global North visually defined by the Brandt Line with the less populated by more economically powerful countries in the north and the more populated by poor south. The concept emerged out of the Brandt Report published in April 1980 by the Independent Commission on International Development Issues chaired by a former German Chancellor Willy Brandt.

Pakistani woman at Harvard seemed suspicious and was treated as such. I began to understand that the pigmentation of my skin, my gender, and my citizenship were considered determinants of my intellect. When I was expected to exchange sexual favours in return for research access to camel farms or in interviews with UN officials, I was reduced to nothing more than an object. During my research, I came across accounts of abuse and brutality that I thought were morally inconceivable. I had assumed that children, irrespective of colour, were precious to all. I witnessed first-hand that this was not the case.

This was my first experience seeing how groups of people are dehumanized and considered unworthy and less than human because of their place of origin. Camels at the farms were better shielded from the heat than the young children were (Mir, 2007). Although the UAE has since banned the use of children as camel jockeys, at the time these children were malnourished to keep their weight low. Light jockeys meant faster camels, which led to winning big prizes for the very wealthy (Degorge, 2006; Hindman, 2009; Mir, 2007; Nawaz, Matta, Hamchou, Jacobsz, & Al Salem, 2005; Vora, 1974). What kind of world do we live in where wealthy adults bet money on sports where a young child screams out of fear, causing an animal to run? It was a spectacle of our diminishing humanity.

This realization weighed down on me. I reluctantly finished and wrote my research, never wanting to engage with the issue again. My research did nothing for those children. I was, and still am, deeply ashamed that their narratives of misery became nothing more than words shelved away in my thesis. I felt too insignificant to contribute anything meaningful at a systemic level.

Harvard University is considered one of the most prestigious academic institutes of the world.[4] Prestige within education and the bureaucracies of ethic boards did nothing to protect the most vulnerable, the children I was studying. I lacked a true analysis of my own privilege compared to those I was aiming to document. Though I could critique multiple structures within Harvard, what stays with me from my undergraduate experience is that the best of intentions cannot guarantee that no harm will occur. I felt like I had pursued my education and the importance of my own learning at the expense of others. Mignolo's (2009) discussion of Smith's (1999) research about Maori in New Zealand reveals how her decolonial methodology in research furthers the Maori cause rather than the discipline of anthropology. Smith puts anthropology at her service rather than the other way around. Unfortunately, my research, in fulfillment of an academic requirement, furthered my degree alone. I made a choice to turn to the corporate world and to abandon any activist leanings.

[4] See Shahjahan, Blanco-Ramirez, and Andreotti (2017) as well as Stack (2016) for analysis and critique of university rankings.

Figure 1: I have greatly struggled on deciding whether or not I should include this picture. Is it just another voyeuristic exercise to "display" certain narratives? Can trafficked children in bonded labour/slavery give consent? I don't have answers to those questions. This picture has haunted me for over a decade and reminds me that my research and academic credentials are not innocent projects. I too benefit from the unequal webs of power endemic everywhere including higher education institutes.

## Unlearning the End of Colonialism: Going Home?

After living away from Pakistan for about a dozen years, I decided to change the "international" part of my identity and I went back "home." I finally had a simpler answer to the question, where are you from? Or so I thought. I never expected to suffer from culture shock upon going back home; I never expected to feel like a complete outsider and for the third time in my life, I could not describe or process this disorientation. I learnt there is no greater loneliness than feeling alone while surrounded by loved ones.

Gender consciousness was added to race consciousness. I found myself in an environment where a Harvard education meant less to those around me than how well I could cook. I worked in a male-dominated industry (i.e., asset management) and was not taken seriously because I was "too young to know what I was talking about." I was constantly told that I should focus my energies on ensuring future stability by finding a suitable husband, because "men don't like wives with lots of opinions." Patriarchy was not challenged but rather considered a necessity for a functioning society. Moreover, such beliefs were normalized even in conversations with highly educated Pakistanis. It would seem that patriarchy transcended education and socio-economic status.

The extent to which women spoke as champions of patriarchy within family and social structures bewildered me. A woman's worth, I was told, is measured by the sacrifices she can make as a daughter, sister, wife, and mother. To be "career oriented" is a flaw and delivered as an insult. Any explanation or perspective I offered was taken as a Western perspective, even when I rooted it in Islam. My understanding of my religion, even when academically sound, was perceived as culturally ludicrous and therefore rejected. My years living outside of Pakistan made me less Pakistani despite my citizenship. I was estranged from a culture I belonged to.

Narratives that publicly position themselves as different if not antagonistic to the West do little to understand how coloniality is thriving within those narratives as well.[5] Even with the expulsion of British colonizers, the reverence towards the colonizer's educational models, legal structures, and their ideas of progress, development and civilizations continue (Mignolo 2009). Ibn Khaldun (1978/1377) writing in the 14th century captured this desire of imitating the colonizer in the following words:

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[5] See Sayyid (2014) for a critique on models of "Kemalism" and "Islamisim" that describe and deconstruct such narratives.

> The vanquished always want to imitate the victor in his [sic] distinctive characteristics, his dress [sic], his occupation [sic], and all his [sic] other conditions and customs. The reason for this is that the soul always sees perfection in the person who is superior to it and to whom it is subservient. It considers him [sic] perfect, either because it is impressed by the respect it has for him [sic], or because it erroneously assumes that its own subservience to him [sic] is not due to the nature of the defeat but to the perfection of the victor (p. 116).

Going home exemplified how the exit of the colonizers does not automatically result in decolonial ideologies and systems. As Mignolo (2009) has posited, for a decolonized being we need decolonized knowledge. This can be achieved through epistemic disobedience that de-links from "the illusion of zero-point knowledge" (p. 160).[6] So how do I learn and practise epistemic disobedience? I did not have an end goal in mind as to what I would do with further formal education—just that hopefully, I would discover the answer to my questions, or perhaps, develop a different set of questions altogether. As I became a parent, my criteria for school selection had changed. Deciding where to go to study was dictated by two things: (a) what I could afford (through the combination of total fees, funding available to international graduate students and hours allowed to work as an international student); and (b) in which country I would feel comfortable leaving my daughter in daycare without hiding my identity as a Muslim woman. I decided on Canada, and applied to research-based Masters programs in the field of education. I was accepted at the University of British Columbia (UBC).

## Unlearning Eurocentrism in Higher Education: Canada

At UBC, the coloniality embedded in my consciousness caused unsettling confusion and shame. Mignolo (2000, 2002) associates coloniality and modernity as two sides of a coin, where coloniality is the darker side of modernity. Andreotti (2014b) further explained modernity's link with specific systems of knowledge production:

> Modernity's shine is grounded on modernity's 'grammar' (interlinked ontology, epistemology and metaphysics) of universal reason and history, seamless progress, teleological, dialectical, totalizing and anthropocentric thinking, allochronism and Cartesian selfhoods who see themselves as 'heading humanity.' (p. 5)

My educational journey and desire to be part of the modern economy will therefore require continuing to centre Western epistemology. Mignolo (2002) has explained how the structures of colonization are still in place today hidden in words like "development" and "progress." He proposes border thinking, an epistemology from the subaltern perspective, to both recover and materialize subaltern knowledge:

> The main thrust of my argument has been to highlight the colonial difference, first as a consequence of the coloniality of power (in the making of it) and second as an epistemic location beyond right and left as articulated in the second modernity (i.e., liberal, neoliberal; socialism, neosocialism). The world became unthinkable beyond European (and, later, North Atlantic) epistemology. The colonial difference marked the limits of thinking and theorizing, unless modern epistemology (philosophy, social sciences, natural sciences) was exported/imported to those places where thinking was impossible (because it was folklore, magic, wisdom and the like). (Mignolo, 2002, p. 90)

Within this perspective, I have realized that I have never tried to decolonize my own education both within the "secular" realm as well as the religious one (Talal Asad [1993, 2003] has critiqued what is commonly understood as secular). My education has shifted inwards to expose and untangle ways coloniality dictated my own consciousness. I struggle to unveil the embedded logic that enforces control, domination, and exploitation disguised in the language of salvation and good for everyone (Mignolo, 2000).

UBC's campus is located on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Musqueam people, and the irony of thinking about coloniality as an international student on stolen land is not lost on me. There is complexity within my own position at the university and the institution's outlook towards my utility as a student. Institutionally I am positioned as, "cash, competition or charity" as described by Stein and Andreotti (2016):

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[6] Mignolo (2009) employs zero point as described by Santiago Castro-Gómez (2007). The assumption is that scholars are "untouched by the geo-political configuration of the world in which people are racially ranked and regions are racially configured" (Mignolo 2009, p. 160). Therefore, such scholars can provide detached and neutral observations. Such "neutrality" Mignolo argues does not exist.

Specifically, we consider how the [global] imaginary shapes three dominant, racialized tropes about international students, which frame them as: (1) sources of income and intellectual capital that support the continued prosperity of the Western university and nation-state (i.e., as ''cash''); (2) as unworthy or inferior participants in the contest for social mobility through educational and employment opportunities (i.e., as ''competition''); or (3) as objects of development and recipients of the West's universal knowledge (i.e., as ''charity''). (p. 226)

Within the wider internalization of higher education in Canada, international students are part of the portfolio of the Federal Ministry of International Trade (Beck, 2012), rather than the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or Ministry of Innovation, Science and Economic Development. This classification in itself speaks to how international students are seen to be contributing to Canadian society; more specifically, not within the context of their personal experiences or intellectual potential, but as the higher fee that is associated with their admission to post-secondary education in Canada. I wonder if one can practise epistemic disobedience within a system that classifies the foreign student as ancillary to its institute? If there is no home, then where and for whom is my decolonizing project directed?

## Conclusion

The Enlightenment, with its hallmark of reason and rationale, gave superior status to knowledge produced in Europe while excluding everything else (Andreotti, 2016). In this context, the principles of liberal justice follow a trajectory I can best explain through an analogy of being seated or unseated around the table. We are currently in a world where certain people have access to entitlement (i.e., a seat at the table) while others are excluded. The trajectory progresses so that the bodies of those excluded earlier are counted, but their experiences and voices are not included; they are not regarded as actors with agency. Further social progression as per liberal justice leads to their experiences being counted, and some entitlements are given to address their concerns. However, the discourse is still centred around a table that is established through the violence of structures of power.

In her book, *On Being Included*, Sara Ahmed (2012) spoke of the dilemmas of working for diversity and inclusion in higher education settings. Students of diverse backgrounds become representatives of large groups perceived as Others in order to have a voice in institutions based on white privilege and coloniality. To advocate for themselves, they are tasked with explaining the exclusion of their experience to predominately white university leadership and faculty. Why is it that all heterogeneous identities of the Other are asked to have one voice while there is no assumption of a sole white voice? Throughout formal education, I have struggled with European theorists, including Habermas, Weber, De Beauvoir, and Marx. I have felt like a spectator of their theories, not a participant. I found their theories intriguing but inapplicable to many of my own lived experiences. However, my excellence in education performance was based on the use and analysis of those theories, not ones that spoke to my experience. Mignolo (2002) explained why such critiques are inadequate:

… the critiques of modernity, Western logocentrism, capitalism, Eurocentrism, and the like performed in Western Europe and the United States cannot be valid for persons who think and live in Asia, Africa, or Latin America. Those who are not white or Christian or who have been marginal to the foundation, expansion and transformation of philosophy and social and natural sciences cannot be satisfied with their identification and solidarity with the European or American left. Nietzsche's (as a Christian) criticism of Christianity cannot satisfy Khatibi's (as a Muslim and Maghrebian) criticism of Christianity and colonization. (pp. 85–86)

By privileging learning about West centred critiques, the experience of those who do not fall within those explanations are written out of history and/or the civilized modern world. So, what is the purpose of my formal education? Is it primarily to find a stable source of financial means or is it to be able to gesture towards a different "global imaginary" (Stein et al., 2016)? Reflecting back on my academic journey, I have unlearnt the neutrality of education and the universality of Western epistemology and ontology. However, I have yet to explore different ways of conceptualizing my own utility in the social world and comprehending the responsibility that comes with my privileges. How do we build a pedagogy that does not replicate the inherent violence of the current system's assumptions, hierarchies, and indicators of success? And, what is my responsibility in it?

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**Rabia G. Mir** is a mother, a daughter, and a graduate student in Educational Studies at University of British Columbia. She completed her undergraduate studies in Social Studies and Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations from Harvard University in 2007. Originally from Pakistan, Rabia has lived in US, UK, Singapore, Egypt and now Canada. Her most active project is to decolonize her own consciousness and her research includes theorizing about elements of an Islamic decolonial education. Through the Muslim Literacy Project she actively thinks about curating and deploying art and media to challenge "well meaning" assumptions about Muslims. Rabia has six years of working experience in investment management and two years in management consulting. This combination often results in being stumped as how to create an alternative economic pathway to move away from the single story of modernity.