NARRATIVES OF HOPE IN ANTI-OFFRESSION EDUCATION: WHAT ARE ANTI-RACISTS FOR?

by

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Abstract

This project explores the connections between the worlds we hope for and the worlds we help create. Over the course of several months, I conducted three sets of narrative interviews with three anti-oppression education facilitators, and a self-study with myself. Using narrative inquiry through a specifically anti-colonial lens as my method of analysis, I worked in partnership with my interview participants to draw meaning out of our interviews. Growing from these discussions, this thesis explores the work that discourses of hope do in our practices as facilitators of education for change. How do the things that we learn to hope for inform the way we teach, and the possibilities that are allowed in, or locked out, of our classrooms? In problematizing certain functions of certain discourses of hope, this study also explores the possibilities of anti-colonial hopings as a process of generating decolonizing dreams through education for change.
Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been conceived at all were it not for the friendship, wisdom, intellectual companionship and productive outrage of the inspirational facilitators who allowed me to interview them. Magpie, karolyn and Min shared their stories and thoughts generously with me, and in doing so they took a huge risk. I am honoured that they have trusted me with their narratives, and that they have engaged so tirelessly with this work, making it truly ours. My heartfelt thanks to them for helping me prove to myself that under the right conditions and with the right components, academia can produce healing, generative, anti-oppressive work.

The “right” conditions and components were created and drawn together for this study in large part thanks to my totally rad supervisors, Dr. Rubén Gaztambide-Fernandez and Dr. Njoki Wane. I am endlessly grateful for their support, encouragement, prodding and occasional (very productive) antagonism. Their treatment of my work and my self as important and as legitimate in academia has helped me to take chances and visit places with this thesis I had not imagined possible two years ago. Their work, their energy, and their commitment to equity and creativity in knowledge production have deeply inspired, informed, and helped to sustain my own work.

Without my family, none of the work I do in the world would be possible. Shukriya to my grandparents, who taught me about stories and dreaming, to my parents, who taught me about living and working, to my sisters, who teach me everyday to laugh, and to my cat, who taught me about napping. And shukriya to my chosen family, who make sure that I dance, and my partner, Nathan, who makes sure that I am fed, and clothed, and grammatically correct.
Dedication

For Dada, who told me daily I would be a “great lady.”

For Nani, who was a great lady.

For Alina, who will certainly take over the world.
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Chapter One – Contextualizing the Study

I have learned silence from the talkative, tolerance from the intolerant, and kindness from the unkind; yet strangely, I am ungrateful to these teachers. (Khalil Gibran, 1965 p. 85)

Going to School, Coming to Education

My grandparents’ generation were the first in my family to encounter the concept and reality of institutional schooling. They themselves were not wealthy enough to attend the colonial schools being newly established by the retreating British and by local elites in the sub-continent. However, without ever setting foot inside a school, they became convinced that hope for the future resided within its walls. Since this time conceptions of hope in my family have been irrevocably attached to schooling. As the first generation of my family to live in a time when life outside of war seemed possible, I have been bred on these stories of hope. They are how I know myself, and how I know my family and our history. My grandparents fought, and my parents struggled, so that I could do more than survive. The key to their accomplishments – whether staying alive or making a profit – has always been conveyed to me as being access to education, in the guise of institutional schooling.

We learned from our colonizers that we needed institutionalized education to survive, build, and grow in their world. But what does it mean to build and to grow? What does it mean to be educated, to know things? Until this point in my life in education, I have been concerned with living as the hope of my parents and grandparents. I have learned that to embody hope is to embody success, and that our success and survival are the surest ways to battle colonialism and extinction. Today, I wonder what it
would mean to be hopeless. What does hope mean – for my family, who have left the sub-continent for the cradle of colonialism, and for an institutional education that sallies forth in ever-growing waves into the world to bring into the darkness the light of hope and knowledge?

It was this history, begun with my grandparents’ rejection of their colonizers and their simultaneous desire for colonial education that brought me to anti-oppression workshop facilitation as resistance. Schooling did not fulfil the romantic hopes my family had sent me off to class with. Facing corporal punishment for transgressions like snickering in class or mispronouncing words in the colonial schools I was sent to as a child imbued me with a deep mistrust of teachers. After moving to Canada, I learned that not all teachers punished with hands and rulers, but that the everyday violence of racist sexism stung no less. A sprawling hidden curriculum existed in these colonial schools, which sought to teach me that in order to succeed I must transcend the place I come from. This colonial curriculum obscures non- or anti-colonial ways of knowing, making certain that there is no room for certain kinds of knowledge and experience in western classrooms.

As a person who was bred on stories of marginalization, resistance and hope, and with a deep respect for the possibilities in projects of education, I came to popular education and anti-oppression workshop facilitation as a form of both activism and self-exploration. These were spaces in which I could affirm my ingrained respect for education as a practice of resistance, while also acknowledging my distrust of institutional schooling and working to subvert its colonial agenda. Discovering anti-oppression facilitation as a mode of activism and community building was one of the
most significant events in my life. In this tradition of struggle, and community of practitioners, I found solidarity and a means of effecting change as well as countless challenges, dead-ends, and unanswerable questions.

Anti-oppression & me

I heard about anti-oppression workshops for the first time in my second year of university. Having become disillusioned with institutional schooling, I was looking for new spaces in which to situate my hopeful resistance when I stumbled into a very strange and decidedly unwieldy relationship with the concepts of anti-oppression and community education. I was a new hire at Trent University’s Ontario Public Interest Research Group (OPIRG), where anti-oppression training was mandatory for all staff, board members and volunteers. I arrived at my first board meeting excited and nervous. Staff members were encouraged to attend board meetings and ask orienting questions of our employers and each other. Yet I had never worked with a non-profit organization before, and the language of Turtle Island organizing was still very new to me.¹

With all the staff present that evening, the board members began throwing around dates for that year’s anti-oppression training. I had never heard of the term “anti-oppression” before, nor had I ever attended a workshop of any kind. I was interested, but also determined not to let my ignorance show in case it counted against me with the board and my fellow staff members. We arrived at three possible dates for the day-long workshop. I spoke for the first time that evening, requesting that we scrap one of the possible dates, as I would not be able to attend. An awkward silence followed my

¹ Turtle Island is known in colonial terms as “Canada” or “North America.” I refer to “North America” through this paper as Turtle Island, a term used by anti-colonialists to recognize Indigenous peoples and their claims to this land. This was not, however, a term that I was familiar with as I was first coming to activism on this land.
request. The all-white staff and board looked down at their papers, or up at the ceiling. Then one of the co-ordinators laughed nervously and said, “Well, we didn’t think you’d need the training! You’re the only person of colour at the PIRG!” Foolishly perhaps, I laughed too and let the subject drop. I wasn’t comfortable enough with the activist community socially, and with my own politics personally, to feel confident responding with some of the questions I had about their assumption. What if they had only hired me because I was supposed to know about this anti-oppression thing? I needed the money, so I kept my mouth shut.

I did a lot of shutting up over the course of that year. Every time an issue of oppression came up – which it inevitably did – I fell silent. I had been accustomed to the language of rights and justice I had been taught by my politically-conscious family, not oppression and privilege, and although I felt like I knew very little, I knew enough to understand that these were two separate things. Ironically, despite my ignorance of the subject, I felt positioned as the expert on what anti-oppression may or may not be, or should and should not be. Through the year of my contract, other young activists came to me with questions that seemed to me very odd: Is it ok for me to use a hip hop song in my performance at the drag show if I’m white? Everyone says it isn’t, but it’s the perfect song!; Do you think this image is right for this poster? All the other posters already have white men on them, but then I don’t want to put a person of colour on it because I’m white and that might be fetishistic! What do you think? I had no concept of how to respond to these perplexing questions. I couldn’t understand why people would agonize over the ethics of a problem for hours if they could already sense clearly that they were crossing a boundary. More than that, I had no idea why or how I had become the resident
anti-oppression expert. Worrying over losing my job and wanting to be useful, I began reading up on what this strange phenomenon might be.

Two years before I actually began running workshops as a facilitator, I settled into the unexpected role of “go-to girl” for white peoples’ issues with race and colonialism. As I read up on post-colonial and critical race theory, I began to understand that the questions people came to me with were not about isolated incidents or specific ethical conundrums. They were about much more than that; they were about all the unspoken and often-avoided tensions between white and non-white activists, about peoples’ own implications in systems of oppression, about guilt, and repentance, and absolution; and, through their conversations with me, the questions were also about hope. It was from within this context that two years later I attended a train-the-trainer workshop with Anne Bishop to run anti-oppression workshops. I began facilitating regularly with community-based and social service groups, and within educational institutions a few months after that.

I learned later that so many of the experiences that characterized my introduction to anti-oppression, to non-formal education, and to facilitation were and are characteristic of the culture of facilitation in general. Negotiations around community realities, support work, and facilitating transformations in peoples’ relationships to themselves and each other would all become and remain key parts of the context of my practice. Through this project, I have learned that they are also major factors for other facilitators doing similar work. These themes will be explored in greater detail later in this study through the narratives of my participants and my own.
Although my entry-point into the world of anti-oppression and facilitation was contextualized almost entirely by other peoples’ racist views and expectations of me, I found myself at home within and empowered by anti-oppression education. Through non-formal, community-based education, including the “training” I received coaching white staff, board members, and volunteers informally through their various crises around whiteness, I found a new place to locate my hopes, and by extension the hopes of my parents and grandparents.

Positioning the Project

In this exploration, I will look at the discourse of hope and the work it does in anti-racist/anti-oppression educative practices. I have focused my theoretical and empirical study on the work of hope in the theory and practice of anti-oppression education. Specifically, I explore the ways in which the things we hope for as facilitators merge with what we see as the results of our work, affecting and directing our pedagogical approaches to this unique form of learning. I say anti-racism/anti-oppression education rather than solely referring to our practice as workshops because although the practice and philosophy of such education is rooted in workshops as an educational environment, the facilitators I have worked with through this study locate their practices in other spaces as well.

Over the space of two months, I interviewed three facilitators, and conducted a self-study reflecting on my own practice and experiences as a facilitator. From these conversations, three distinct spaces in which anti-oppression workshops or non-formal anti-oppression based education occur have crystallized. Because these are the spaces that are most central to the practices of my interviewees and to my own practice, these
are the spaces that will contextualize the facilitation practices I explore. The first space, most clearly located in the grassroots, is that of anti-oppression (or anti-racism, anti-colonialism, anti-homophobia, trans-issues, etc.) workshops conducted through social justice or community-based organizations for staff, volunteers, and/or affected people. These workshops are themselves a diverse group, covering everything from basic “101” training on the general vocabulary, history, and principles of anti-oppression, to closed workshops designed for specific marginalized groups or communities (people of colour, Indigenous people, queer and/or trans people of colour, etc.) focusing on community building and personal healing. This space also includes facilitation work that might occur outside of workshop spaces, but within the context of the activist communities and interests, which give workshops meaning.

The second space is in the social service, international development, or educational sectors. These workshops generally focus on basic 101 workshop content and are considered radical by organizations because they employ the language of anti-oppression rather than diversity or sensitivity training. They are often directed at specific policy issues, with a view to developing new policy-making strategies based in anti-oppression principles. On occasion, they are financed by these institutions, but directed at affected populations as strategies to build capacity or to create cultural shifts among marginalized communities. Some examples include a series of anti-oppression workshops commissioned to be facilitated with paroled prisoners as part of the conditions of their parole, or anti-racism–based workshops run with immigrant youth on the importance and possibilities of schooling.
The third space is in post-secondary education, which frequently overlaps with the first and second spaces. Workshops or non-formal anti-oppression based facilitation in post-secondary education have taken form as specific approaches to teaching (at colleges or universities) which centre anti-oppression principles, and in anti-oppressive approaches to research.

Speaking to the three facilitators I interviewed and thinking about my own experiences, it is clear that these three spaces are not always separate or mutually exclusive. Rather, they construct each other over time and greatly impact the nature of facilitation through their interaction with each other. The relatively new interest of the social service, international development and educational sectors in anti-oppression has changed the nature of the work for facilitators. It has allowed facilitators, many of whom use the income afforded by sporadic contracts to make ends meet, to charge more for our services in general. It has also enabled us to fight some of the exploitation attached to contract labour, and to parlay our contract work at times into more secure permanent positions. The general interest in anti-oppression from institutions that are often State-funded has also had the effect of changing some of the language used by social justice and community-based organizations in their approaches to popular education. This has also shifted the nature of the objectives for the contracts we receive for facilitation work. All of these conditions impact our relationships to our work as facilitators, the possibilities we see for ourselves and our participants, and the conditions that determine our willingness to engage in the work.

The colonial work of education has impacted the lives of the three facilitators I interviewed for this study, as well as my own. In different ways, all of us have
experienced the trauma of colonization and re-colonization through the auspices of schooling. Perhaps because of this, all of us also identify education as an invaluable site and tool of resistance. However, as I worked to build a home for myself in community-based education, I began to notice that the work of colonialism was not always checked at the door. Spaces in which activists gathered to talk, learn and teach about issues of anti-oppression in fact seemed to replicate many of the power dynamics that existed in the world we were fighting to change. As I gained experience facilitating for organizations, I also gained an awareness that anti-oppression education does not exist outside of colonizing processes. It was through many conversations with the people who would become my participants for this study that I arrived at the decision to explore anti-oppression and anti-racism community education, as spaces of learning that I have until recently considered unequivocally productive, generative and resistant to empire.

This work explores the meaning and work of hope in anti-oppression/anti-racism education in grassroots and institutional settings (as well as in the spaces these settings overlap) as a guiding element of our pedagogical approaches to facilitation, resistance and building community. What are some of the problems, challenges and possibilities of hope’s narratives for facilitators whose work in education is linked directly to movements for change?

In exploring these questions, I use narrative inquiry as a methodology by which to frame my conversations with participants, and the subsequent analysis of our words. However, this study is not a study of my participants; it is a study with them. I explicate further in my methodology chapter the exact nature of their involvement, but it is important to note early that every step of this process has been designed and undertaken
in collaboration with my participants. This reality, though important to my politics, my personal commitments and my reasons for conducting this study, places me in a unique situation. If this study is conducted in collaboration with the participants of the study, what defines my role as researcher? In what ways am I accountable to this work, what distinguishes my interpretations from my participants’ thoughts? The lines between researcher and participant are indeed blurred in this study. However, I do not believe that this decreases my accountability. My role is defined by my interpretive work. Although each participant has had final say in every aspect of their representation here, and have added richly to my analysis, the final product is filtered through my own experiences and understandings. I have devised the central questions around which our analyses weave. As such, I am accountable to my participants for the outcome of their generous contributions to this work. These decisions, which make up my philosophical approach to the methodology and subject of my research, are fleshed out further in my methodology chapter, chapter three.

*Introducing my participants*

_Magpie_ ²

I met Magpie in the cold climate of Montreal’s activist scene. She was a prolific facilitator in the community and a fierce and inspiring activist. I was intimidated by her intelligence, but quickly learned that she was, and remains, a charming, accessible, and deeply compassionate person. We organized together around raced and erased labour issues in many contexts. She has taught me much of what I know about process-oriented facilitation, and has been centrally influential in my understanding around issues of race.

² “Magpie” is a pseudonym. “karolyn” described her name here as both a pseudonym and a real name. Min chose to use her birth name here.
gender, sexuality, class, displacement, ability, and their simultaneity. She has acted as a consult, a mentor, and an ally for me on countless issues of facilitation. Conversations with her have also been the basis for the development of my dissatisfaction with anti-racism, and the development of the theoretical framework and the way I have approached this project.

*karolyn givogue*

I met karolyn through a Peterborough-based organization that she helped to establish called the Decolonization and Anti-Racism Coalition. Her work as a patient, compassionate, passionate, and dedicated anti-colonial activist and academic had my attention long before I knew her well as a person. Her work on solidarity between people of colour and Indigenous people has greatly informed my own understanding of the world and my place in it, and her approach to pedagogy and facilitation have challenged and changed my own. She is a greatly admired community educator and facilitator in anti-racist and anti-colonialist communities, and her work inspires mine more and more as I come to know it better. Like Magpie, my conversations with karolyn have greatly shaped my understanding of and approach to this project.

*Min Kaur*

I met Min in a facilitated learning space dedicated to the discussion of anti-colonial methods and Indigenous knowledges. I was struck by the simultaneous uncompromising strength of her critique and her just-as-adamant compassion and care for those with whom she argued. Her presence in the learning space was calming, and although her intelligence and ability to articulate her thoughts intimidated me at first, she always radiated a sense of warmth and approachability. My all-too-brief conversations to
date with Min about her pedagogy and philosophical orientation to education have been thought-provoking for me. Min’s work in classrooms has helped secure my conviction that better work is possible, and her attitude towards learning as I experienced it in our shared learning space has shown me one way in which generative critique can be enacted. These facilitators have greatly affected my activist and academic practices and purposes, and I am honoured and excited to embark on a process of reflection, critique, and celebration of our work in the world.

Situating Workshops: A Fragmented Context

What I am calling anti-oppression or anti-racism workshops, or anti-oppression education, are actually diverse, de-centralized, and largely non-institutionalised educational practices. Though they may be commissioned, taken up, or appropriated by various institutions, there is no body governing what qualifies as anti-oppression or anti-oppression–based education. As I have mentioned, my specific working definition for these educational instances and practices are three overlapping spaces that contextualize the facilitation experiences of the participants in this research. The terminology, however, is far from official and varies depending on the facilitator, the organizer, the city, and the contract in question. As much as possible, I endeavour to be clear as concerns the differences between workshop settings discussed here. However, given the disparate nature of anti-oppression education, these terms are highly specific spatially and temporally, while being much less specific technically. The tendency to refer to this educational approach as anti-racist or anti-colonial instead of anti-oppression, for example, is a recent trend among Toronto-based facilitators. This is an effort to re-centre issues of race and indigeneity as important lenses through which other socially-
determining factors are constituted. However, anti-racism was purposefully decentred as a term by facilitators in the ‘90s as it was felt that issues of class and sexuality were often subjugated to an anti-racist lens which focused solely on straight and middle-class people of colour. As these shifts demonstrate, anti-oppression approaches to education have consistently employed similar techniques under various labels, which have marked changes in focus or attitude rather than in facilitation technique.

A number of author-facilitators have written about anti-oppression education as a form of education to be conducted through workshops commissioned by organizations or institutions (Anner, 1996; Arnold et al., 1991; Bishop, 2000; Curry-Stevens, 2001; Lopes & Thomas, 2006). They have published curricular material for other facilitators, along with instructions and advice to use in workshops or for interested participants to take up after workshops and learn more on their own. They have also, though less often, published work theorizing what anti-oppression education or anti-oppression workshops might be, how to run them and what their guiding philosophy should be. Alongside these publishing facilitators, a few anti-racist theorists have published work dealing with the theory and philosophy of anti-racism or anti-oppression education (Bishop, 2005; Dei, 1996). The first group of scholars focus their work on practice, and theorize only the way in which workshops should be conducted (Anner, 1996; Arnold et al., 1991; Curry-Stevens, 2001; Lopes & Thomas, 2006). The second group theorize social power, and focus on education broadly as a means by which to disrupt systems of oppression (Bishop, 2005; Dei, 1996; Wise, 2004). The different emphases create divergent ways of viewing what anti-oppression is or can be. These differences of opinion are reflected in
my work and the work of the facilitators I have worked with, as well as the organizations who hire us.

Published work on the theory and praxis of conducting anti-racism/anti-oppression workshops looks at it as a means of creating social change. They situate this kind of education as one that aims to expose hegemonic systems of narrative, knowledge, and power within spaces of privilege (Anner, 1996; Arnold et al., 1991; Bishop, 2000; Curry-Stevens, 2001; Lopes & Thomas, 2006). The theory of anti-oppression, as articulated by these author-facilitators, frames its praxis as grassroots-located, community-based, non-professionalized and accessible (Arnold et al., 1991). They locate their practices, and the facilitation practices of all legitimate anti-oppression/anti-racism education, as anti-elitist and as a part of movements for change. These virtues – to create change and be accessible – are the common denominator among divergent opinions on the function of anti-oppression education. These divergent opinions have generated questions in the field around which different facilitators mark out their own goals and approaches to anti-oppression education. Does anti-oppression education exist to educate privileged people? Can it be used to educate oppressed people who perpetuate systems of oppression? Who can be a facilitator in what contexts? How should privileged people behave in anti-oppression education spaces? Regardless of the ways in which these works take up these questions, their pedagogical approaches are geared towards a universally accessible form of education that draws on participants’ existing knowledges to lead and nourish discussion and learning. As far as the published work on the issue is concerned, at their base, anti-oppression workshops should be reflexive spaces in which narrative, personal experience, and experiential knowledges are central.
These approaches have been informed by Paulo Freire, who frames his pedagogy of the oppressed as a catalyst for “the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well” (Freire, 1970, p. 5). Expanding on this work in *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1992), Freire argues that, “one of the tasks of the progressive educator, through a serious, correct political analysis, is to unveil opportunities for hope” (p. 5). Other theorists pick up on the idea of hope invoked by Freire in different ways. Addressing it sometimes as “empowerment” and other times as “change,” hope’s discourses and promises are ever-present in the ways the work of integrative anti-racist curriculum is talked about. Tina Lopes and Barb Thomas (2006), who have worked for over fourteen years as anti-racism/anti-oppression facilitators for organizations, describe their work as “education to create equity” (p. 14). They articulate the goal of their book, *Dancing on Live Embers: Challenging Racism in Organizations*, as being to reassure, reach out, and guide people in various lines of work who are “trying to create more equitable organizations” (p. 14). Rick Arnold (1991) and Anne Curry-Stevens (2003) define anti-oppression/anti-racism education in the titles of their works *Educating for a Change* and *An Educator’s Guide for Changing the World: Methods, Models and Materials for Anti-Oppression and Social Justice Workshops*, respectively. Change, which is effective because it is accessible, is the central tenet of anti-oppression/anti-racism education.

*Anti-oppression education hopes*

At its core, anti-racism/anti-oppression education is about creating change, and so it is also about hope. Its pedagogical approaches have evolved out of movements for social change, and have always been used as tools for generating social transformation.
Even now, as its popularity grows and anti-oppression–based educational practices crop up in mainstream settings, the desire behind its implementation is for positive social or personal transformation. It is about having the hope that something different is possible, and about believing that acting on that hope will produce desirable results. In different ways, and with different emphases, every one of the scholars and facilitators whose work I have explored in this introduction chapter have expressed the urgency of creating transformations in individuals, organizations, and societies. They have also expressed the conviction that anti-racism/anti-oppression education has within it the potential to help us realise this hope. Through both its guiding principles and its goals, anti-racist/anti-oppression education requires educators to seek and teach ways in activism, academia, social work, and community work to challenge and change dominant policies, practices, and understandings of oppression and privilege.

This requires that facilitators incite or create transformation in the minds and behaviours of their participants. Lopes and Thomas (2006) argue that individuals making different choices and using power differently is the main way in which organizations can become and remain anti-oppressive. Curry-Stevens (2003) focuses her work on providing facilitators and organizations with materials and strategies they can employ to generate transformative thought and action in individuals. George Dei (1996) argues that in order for integrative anti-racist education to make successful change, “educators, students and administrators must be prepared to make an unequivocal commitment to societal transformation and then to make concrete change as required” (p. 10).

The popularity of Augusto Boal’s (1979) *Theatre of the Oppressed* as an important methodology in workshops might be seen as an example of this impetus to
change. Boal devised drama activities by which educators in many different circumstances might encourage their students/participants to learn through their bodies. That we are socially-positioned beings, that our social positioning affects our access and lived experiences, and that physical markers are often used to denote social positioning is also a recognized and important principle of integrated anti-racist education (Bishop, 2001; Dei, 1996; Lopes and Thomas, 2006; Razack, 2001). Anti-racism/anti-oppression education, then, can be said to be education that strives to create social change by inciting individual and institutional transformation and that locates at least part of that transformation and subsequent change as having to do with our relationships to our own and each others’ bodies and the environments they inhabit.³

Situating Workshops: A Grassroots Perspective

Facilitation means so many different things for me because I occupy so many different spaces. (karolyn givogue)

Change is absolutely needed to disrupt the casual violence and systemic domination of the status quo. It is not my intention to dispute that change is necessary, or that anti-oppression education must seek to facilitate some piece of that change. My own hopes as an activist, an educator and a person are tied up in movements for change. But through my experiences as a facilitator I have come to mistrust aspects of the underlying impetus to change that arises out of anti-oppression/anti-racism education. I have found that it is too often unaccompanied by a critical self-reflection on our roles as agents of change.

³ In this way, anti-racism/anti-oppression education draws heavily from post-modernist understandings of the self, but might – and sometimes does – position itself in relation to Indigenous ways of knowing (Dei, 2000). However, few of the texts that exist in reference to facilitation practice and/or theory actually make connections between anti-oppression education and Indigenous educational practices.
Mobilized in grassroots movements and service sector spaces as a training tool, anti-oppression/anti-racism education tends to neglect posing hard questions about what kind of change we as activists might want to make. Instead, more often than not, anti-oppression/anti-racism education is action-oriented without serious emphasis on process or reflection, looking simply to take basic anti-oppression principles and apply them to the devising of policy, the organization of events, or the design of programs (Anner, 1996; Arnold et al, 1991; Bishop, 2000; Curry-Stevens, 2001; Lopes & Thomas, 2006). Although these are all important considerations, without process-oriented thinking to guide their implementation, anti-oppression loses its edge, and becomes little more than a catch-phrase. Anne Bishop (2001) unwittingly provides an excellent example of this in the introduction to her first book, *Becoming an Ally: Breaking the Cycle of Oppression in Individuals*. She accuses Black feminists of divisive behaviour and of perpetuating oppression against women because of their criticisms of mainstream white feminist movements. This accusation both elides the racism of white feminist movements and perpetuates the racist sexist power dynamics already at play in systemic frameworks, which displace blame for social problems largely onto women of colour. Using anti-oppression frameworks to close down discussions about the things we do to each other in movements for change is counter-productive, but all too common.

The author-facilitators and scholars I have explored so far focus their work on anti-oppression through an ostensibly anti-racist lens. They are some of the most well-known authors and facilitators in this field. In general – with the exception of Tina Lopes and George Dei, they are privileged by race as well as class and often gender. Their work as facilitators targets populations also privileged by race and class. This means that
they, in the tradition of anti-racism/anti-oppression king-pin facilitators like Tim Wise (2004) and Peggy McIntosh (1989), focus their efforts on the education of other white anti-racists. Although this does not automatically mean that their work is problematic, the materials they have produced and the ways in which they theorize their work and experiences as facilitators are all affected by this fact. They seek to create a transformation that awakens people with the luxury of ignorance to the idea that their power could be used to create anti-oppressive change. In general, these workshops are facilitated with social service agencies, international development organizations – even sometimes corporate employees (Bishop, 2005). These workshops, and quite often the facilitators who run them, constitute what Magpie articulated as the “upper tier” of facilitation work; they are considered professionals, are paid high wages, and are generally white. In contrast to this, the facilitators I interviewed are all queer- and/or trans-identified, are of colour, Black and/or Indigenous. Their facilitation practices have evolved out of intensely personal experiences with and relationships to power, from a place of subordination. They continue to work in precarious situations, with little recognition and few resources.

What this contrast should highlight is not that my participants are more righteous than the author-facilitators whose work I have explored above. Instead it indicates that these three facilitators and I have built our practices out of different environments, and therefore by different sets of understandings about anti-oppression than most of the authors cited above.

In my view, these understandings provide a very different context and set of possibilities for hope and anti-oppression/anti-racism facilitation than those of published
work in this area. As Bishop (2001), Curry-Stevens (2001) and Lopes and Thomas (2006) all point out, facilitators embodying different kinds of social privilege and oppression will encounter different challenges through their work. I cannot underscore strongly enough how true their observation holds. Lopes and Thomas (2006) explore this reality together in *Dancing on Live Embers*. Lopes points out that Barb Thomas, a white woman, will frequently be treated as the authority and as the lead facilitator when the pair co-facilitate. These observations are borne out in the experiences of my participants.

karolyn, Magpie, Min, and I facilitate (or have facilitated) workshops, frequently among grassroots organizations and community groups. Magpie and I work often in non-profit, social service and development agencies as well. Min and karolyn facilitate workshops within post-secondary settings. However, none of our experiences, approaches, or tools fit neatly into the framework provided by the mostly-white literature on anti-racism/anti-oppression educational practices. This is important to note because the work of famous, recognized white facilitators also helps provide the context within which we facilitate.

The literature is not often representative of our work, but it constitutes the official framework for such work, and as anti-oppression facilitation emerges as a field, it sets the standard for how the field functions. Therefore, as I frame and contrast the approaches, ideas, and understandings of my participants and myself to that of the existing literature, I also contextualize our work within the norms of the upper echelons – the publishing facilitators – of anti-oppression education. My purpose in this study – my hope – is to uncover some of the unintended and often damaging work that discourses of hope can do in anti-oppression education. When anti-oppression education is used as a catch-all medication for any ill an organization, person or society suffers but is delivered without
critical self-reflection, it fails to enact change. However, in many ways this lack of change within moments of movement stems immediately from the specific discourse of hope which often guides the implementation of anti-oppression education. This chapter has positioned my broader project and contextualized the work I am addressing as anti-oppression or anti-racism education. The following chapters will tie the objectives of anti-oppression education more closely to discourses of hope, and will take up the thoughts and experiences of the facilitators I have interviewed in understanding and disrupting the colonial work of hope discourses in anti-oppression education.

I will take up notions of hope broadly and in relation to anti-oppression education in chapter two. As with workshops and anti-oppression education, the ways in which the participants and I approach notions of hope are situated within or in opposition to dominant discourses of hope. The chapter positions hope as a discourse and situates it in the context of anti-oppression education with reference to the published work on the topic. It then explores some of the ways my participants and I take up the discourse in our practices. Chapter three lays out my methodological approach to the fieldwork of this study. Chapter four fleshes out notions of the facilitator, facilitation, and the experiences that have been introduced in this introduction, and make links to concepts of hope articulated in the second chapter. Chapter five puts forward the concept of anti-colonial hope, and examines some of the possibilities of transformation in education – both, in the context of my fieldwork and in the context of existing literature. Chapter six, my conclusion, pulls together ideas around transformation, hope, and change and deals with implications, tensions, limitations, and possibilities.
Chapter Two – Discourses of Hope: Here Comes the Revolution

Resisting means assuring oneself of the heart’s health,

The health of the testicles and of your tenacious disease:

The disease of hope. (Mahmoud Darwish, “Palestine Chronicle” 2008 n.p.)

Finding Hope: Defining a Master of Disguise

For months, I have been searching for a way to begin a discussion about what hope might mean. I have found myself drawn up short time and again. The concept is undoubtedly powerful; it is not for lack of use that definition is a challenge – but no matter how often we invoke it, hope remains very difficult to define. I have felt, more and more intensely as I deepened my attempts to sketch an outline of this inscrutable concept that it acts on people like a kind of magic. In the process of researching and writing this thesis, I have found myself over and over again explaining to people I know to be both critical and intelligent that my project is suspicious of the work of hope. The word seems to have powerful discursive barriers protecting it from such an endeavour. One does not seek to define or understand hope. One simply turns to its ethereal presence for strength and nourishment, which the invocation of the term is somehow able to create for people out of nothing. It is deceptively simple, but it takes many shapes; it is a feeling, a noun, a verb, a process, and a virtue all at the same time. It gets under people’s skin, and avoids the searching eye of the microscope by changing form, shedding its outer layers, and re-presenting itself as something else entirely from what we have been looking for. It is seen as a disease, and a cure for a disease.

But, underneath all of its costume changes and paradigm shifts, there is something there. Hope is more than the effects of its presence, it is more than renewed strength or
false promise, more than a simple term or an admirable virtue. It is, rather, a historically and spatially situated discourse. The strength we take from it, the promise it offers, stems from wider contexts and older stories than we might imagine as we engage with hope’s processes. Hope doesn’t exist simply to serve us as people, it works to serve the interests of the systems within which it is defined, and within which we learn how to hope. When international charity organizations, for example, evoke messages of hope in campaigns for “bettering” the lives of oppressed children in the third world, a very specific image underlies our hope. We imagine these children living lives prescribed as “good” or “comfortable” within our own cultural narratives. We picture them going to school, playing with friends and buying toys. These are all culturally and historically specific images of a “good” childhood which are linked into western systems of capitalism, industrialism and colonialism. Although our hopes for the improvement of the lives of impoverished children in Africa may stem from personally altruistic places, it is also deeply enmeshed in systems which prescribe the meaning of our hope. Whatever we hope for as individuals, the act of hoping is neither politically neutral nor culturally universal. If we look at hope as we understand it in English language and in a western context as a discourse, we are forced to situate it within specific cultural, social and political spaces. The way that hope functions, the way it is created within discourse and helps create discourse within one cultural framework will differ from its work within another.

In this study, among other things, I am looking to demystify hope as it is understood within a specifically western colonial narrative. In contextualizing and historicizing hope as a general discourse threading itself through everyday
understandings of the world, I am working to make possible an exploration of the work of hope within anti-oppression education. As it is colonial discourses of hope which most affect, influence and guide anti-oppression education, I explore hope as a discourse specifically within western traditions of knowledge. Through this, I am seeking to contextualize the colonizing work that hope discourses do as a means by which to perpetuate status quo power relations. To that end, in this study I am considering hope in three interrelated ways. The first is hope as a discursive concept within a western historical tradition, beginning with Greek understandings of hope, moving through Christian theological conceptions and emerging in popular discourse today. I will explore the myth of Pandora’s box, as well as divergent readings of that myth depending on time and place in this section.

The second takes up hope as a discourse in contemporary everyday narratives in the west. I will also look at hope as it is presented in popular culture and as it appears in theoretical works that use the discourse of hope either uncritically or without context. This category includes hope as it is employed in the work of the author-facilitators whose texts make up the published work available on anti-oppression education.

The third introduces the possibility of hope as a discourse and practice taken up outside of its Christian history and colonial purposes. These themes are introduced here and are explored in depth in chapter five, “Anti-Colonial Transformation: Hoping Against Hope.”

Because I believe that process should reflect content, I close this chapter by explicating a commitment to an anti-colonial methodology that has shaped the way in which my participants and I have taken up the project of working with one another.
Contextualized by my concerns and critiques of the work of hope in anti-oppression education, the final section of this chapter introduces my approach to and hopes for this research.

**Opening the Box: Historicizing Hope**

As with democracy and philosophy, western tradition traces the origins of hope narratives to ancient Greece. Sources ranging from the populist Wikipedia to theorist Ernst Bloch draw the history of hope outwards from the Pandora myth (Bloch, 1986; “Hope,” *Wikipedia*, 2010). It is generally acknowledged that this story is told differently depending on place and time. However, every version agrees that Pandora was a woman of divine beauty and that she was in possession of a mysterious box (or jar, depending on the translation), which she subsequently opened. According to Bloch and others, the original myth starred a Pandora who was as evil as the hope that failed to escape her box (or jar). In this story, Pandora was created by Zeus as the perfect woman, endowed with every gift and charm, and possessed of a soul of evil. She was made as a trap for Prometheus, who had angered Zeus by gifting humankind with fire. Prometheus resisted temptation, but Epimetheus (the decider) was seduced and married Pandora. She came with the dowry of the box (or jar) and was able to open it once she was on earth, releasing all the evils onto humanity that Zeus could send forth, including hope. When he saw the suffering as evil after evil escaped Pandora’s box, Zeus took pity on mortals and shut the lid before the last and greatest of all evils could escape; thus, hope remained trapped within the box.

This is not a popular version of the story. Apart from being less well-known, it is frequently apostrophized as cynical or pessimistic, or as an interpretation of hope that
encourages people to succumb unresisting to the wills of tyrants, whether they be gods or mortals. Bloch (1986), in fact, dismisses this version entirely, calling later Hellenistic accounts the “true” telling of Pandora’s tale. The Hellenistic interpretation of the story is similar to its early depiction with its treatment of hope reverse. This telling was the first to depict hope as the last good thing, escaping the box last, to bring humanity strength. After this period, the story remained fairly consistent; hope did not return to its previous negative depiction, although many other parts of the story did – shifting to remain coherent in new cultural discourses.

I remember listening to a version of Pandora’s Box as a story on tape when I was young. In that story, Pandora was a curious young woman who was adjured by the gods not to open the box they had placed in her husband’s care. She was a well-intentioned woman, and worked hard to keep her promise. One fateful day when her husband was away and the servants otherwise occupied, she succumbed to temptation and opened the box. Once again, hope left the box last. In this version, the evils the box contained were personified as dark, many-toothed winged things, while hope manifested as a small and drab moth, right at the bottom of the box. There was nothing special in its appearance; its gift was how it made Pandora feel as it fluttered past her into the world.

This narrative of Pandora’s Box treats hope in much the same way as the Hellenistic story, but the other changes to the plot turn this myth into a close mirror of the Bible’s mythology of Eden. The Hellenistic narrative still contained a Pandora created by Zeus as evil, a pawn in his attempts to revenge himself against Prometheus. As Christian narratives gained ascendancy, however, so too did Christian understandings of hope. In order for the hope represented in Pandora’s story to ring true and gain meaning,
it needed to be removed from the frameworks of ancient Greece and situated within Christian contexts. This marks the second significant shift in the meaning-creation around western colonial understandings of hope through the telling of this story.

*Hope, faith and love*

In Christian (Protestant) tradition, hope (along with faith and love) is accounted as one of the three theological virtues (Outler, 1955). These virtues are seen as the qualities associated with divine salvation; the embodiment of these virtues is to be directed at god, endowing them with infinite goodness. Unlike other virtues in Christianity which may become vice if they are practiced in excess, there is no vice in having unlimited amounts of hope, faith, or love for god (Outler, 1955). It is in the absence of these virtues, not in their excess, that vice might occur as atheism/blaspemhy, hatred or cynicism. In the Catholic tradition these virtues are observed as well, however they are understood as being divinely imparted – they cannot be attained by human effort (Outler, 1955). In both traditions, hope is singled out as the only one among the three virtues that is specifically tied to our earthly existence. What we must wish for is divine union. Once we pass on, divine union would (ideally) be attained. Hope in Christian narratives is tied firmly to mortality – both to the expectation that we will die, and to the desire for a certain kind of existence in a certain kind of afterlife. Although faith and love should continue once a soul passes on, hope is no longer required, nor does it make sense.

Within this framework, hope is defined as being a combination of the desire for something and the expectation of receiving it. As it is defined as a virtue in relation to god, and linked closely to the virtue of faith, the thing being hoped for is tied strongly to cultural understandings of the individual self, the responsibilities of each individual
towards god, and the mortality of that individual. Beyond this, Christian theology does not provide a robust definition for what exactly hope might be. Is it a thing in the world? It is implied that it might be, if one can possess unlimited amounts of hope. But perhaps it is also a practice. This is also implied, for if hope is a theological virtue and acts as an impetus to divine union, then it is not unreasonable to suppose that one must demonstrate hope in some way. Believers must not simply act as containers for hope, but manifest their hope through action (Outler, 1955).

As in the case of the hope found in modern readings of Pandora’s box, the ways that hope is defined directs how we know and how we act, and so closes as well as opens doors. What hope might be is prescribed already as we listen to the story of Pandora; we interpret the story with an already clear understanding of what hope is and what it is not. We can have no real conception of what each version of the Pandora myth meant in ancient Greece. Rather, we interpret it through contextualizing lenses closer to contemporary western understanding. Therefore, although the origins of western understandings of hope are often traced back to the Pandora myth, it is Christian theology which has and continues to be the framework through which the dominant contemporary discourse of hope gains meaning.

Hope as a theological virtue functions primarily to bring believers closer to God. It can be inferred that, practically speaking, this discourse served also to bring believers closer to the church. This is one aspect of the very earthly work that hope accomplishes. It directs and guides personal investment in divinity toward the church, and situates a very specific future in the hearts of believers – and, given Christianity’s colonial history, in the hearts of quite a few non-believers as well. In other words, although literature on
hope within Christian frameworks does not explain in any detail what hope is, it does explain in quite a lot of detail what exactly we must hope for.

The mobilization of hope by the church in an effort to lay claim to a particular future has been noted and critiqued before. When Karl Marx referred to Christianity as the “opiate of the masses,” he referred specifically to the empty hope that faith in such religion seemed to him to offer (Marx, 1982). As long as the church remained tied to the hearts of the lower classes in Europe, the agenda of the church would also remain tied to their hearts. With his work, he sought to disrupt one unattainable utopia with another utopia that he believed was more worthy of hope. Marx was neither the first nor the last to criticise the unattainable hopes Christianity fostered. More recently, Terry Pratchett (1996), a popular novelist, defined and critiqued investment in systems like Christianity in his book *The Hogfather*. In Pratchett’s parody, a “Santa Claus” figure struggles over whether to grant the unrealistic wishes of an impoverished child hoping for expensive gifts, and his unseemly elf points out that doing so would ruin the socio-economic balance of the universe. His character argues, “Give a man jam today, and he’ll give himself a stomach ache. Promise a man jam tomorrow, and it’ll sustain him for years” (p. 103).

These critiques focus on the particular future promised within Christianity, and on the fact that it is an unattainable hope premised on false promises. However, critiquing unattainable hope did not stop either Marx or Pratchett from supporting unattainable hope; Marx wished to rally workers’ dreams around his own agenda, and Pratchett closes his scene with “Santa” granting all the wishes on his list. In these critiques and many other similar ones, the act of prescribing what should and should not be hoped for itself
has not come under critique. As we move into a time in which Christianity is simultaneously pervasive in the public sphere and ostensibly banished to the private sphere, we see hope playing very much the same discursive role, in a different framework.

**Wishing Upon Stars: Contemporary Contexts of Hope**

Popularly available sources for the definition of words explain hope as both a noun and a verb:

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**noun**

1. The feeling that what is wanted can be had or that events will turn out for the best:

   *Not to give up hope.*

2. A particular instance of this feeling:

   *The hope of winning.*

3. Grounds for this feeling in a particular instance:

   *There is little or no hope of his recovery.*

4. A person or thing in which expectations are centered:

   *The medicine was her last hope.*

5. Something that is hoped for:

   *Her forgiveness is my constant hope.*

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**verb (used with object)**

6. To look forward to with desire and reasonable confidence.

7. To believe, desire, or trust:

   *I hope that my work will be satisfactory.*

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**verb (used without object)**
8. To feel that something desired may happen:

*We hope for an early spring.*


Unlike specifically Christian definitions, this explanation is not tied to god. It is also quite utilitarian; it does not tell us how hope might be taken up. What this and other straightforward definitions tell us is that hope can be both a noun (an object, or a feeling objectified) or a verb (an action). It also tells us that hope attaches itself to particular objects, events, or experiences, and mediates the relationship between the current reality of the things it attaches to, and the future we ideally envision. Although this definition is revealing, it is useless without further context. *What* is the hope that we have for things and people? *How* does it mediate these relationships we create between our current states and our desires for the future? Hope is a discursive term; it is not simply a noun or a verb with specific grammatical meanings. It is a narrative spanning centuries which invokes meaning well beyond the parameters of fulfilling a grammatical function. Its meaning cannot be contained in a succinct definition, but must be told as a story.

The word and its representations are, in fact, inextricably linked with projects of nation-building and colonialism. Walt Disney’s movies are an excellent example of some of the most classic representations of hope in the mainstream as a discourse. Hope has adjusted to a new world order in which the superficial separation of church and state and added new dimensions to its discourse. The earlier Christian interpretations of virtuous desire for divine union are now merged with meritocratic discourses. Hope remains a virtue to be manifested through action. However, now that action is defined by
an engagement with capitalist structures and by an effort to fit into and be useful within statist structures and processes.

Disney movies share common themes among their story-lines, the most common being that of hope. Main characters, both good and bad, begin the stories cherishing their own various hopes – to fall in love, to be saved from a life of drudgery or poverty, to be “free” from whatever bonds they feel constrict their lives. Disney’s rendition of Aladdin’s tale, for example, sketches a compassionate young man living in poverty, who wishes to live a comfortable life and win the woman he loves. Characters also often have hopes of possessing great power or fortune, ruling the world, or usurping the existent and invariably-more-benevolent authority. Aladdin’s enemy, Jaffar, cherishes hopes of overthrowing the Sultan of Agrabah and reigning supreme in his stead. Without fail, the former group of characters achieve their hope, by luck, coincidence, or hard work. Without fail, the latter group do not, no matter how much hard work, prayer, and dedication they may put in.

The rules governing the fulfilment of hope in Disney movies are extremely telling. Songs like Pinocchio’s “When You Wish Upon a Star” suggest that wishes and hopes are accessible to everyone, and that fulfilment of these hopes is inevitable, if the dreamer wants it enough. However, Disney’s plots tell a different story: not everyone is entitled to having their hopes fulfilled. You have to earn the right to have your dreams come true – as Pinocchio himself learns – you have to prove yourself worthy. And this sort of worth is not proven only through hard work. The dreams fulfilled in Disney’s world are those of virtuous hopers, an evolved manifestation of Christianity’s theological virtue.
Disney productions, like other mainstream portrayals of hope, teach us moral lessons about how to get what we want, and what it is that we should want. As it does so, it creates and enforces race, gender, class, and sexual roles and norms, while fostering a deep personal and individual investment in the performance of these roles and norms. As audiences cross their fingers for Jasmine and Aladdin to live happily ever after, for example, we also learn moral lessons about the bad, cruel, or simply unworthy Arab. Aside from Jaffar’s character, who is quite clearly a caricature of American fears of dark, well-educated, and evil Others, audiences are also presented with a slew of thieves, merchants, beggars, and petty villains who, unlike Aladdin, are not deemed worthy of being lifted out of their difficult or impoverished situations. What separates Aladdin from these other characters? Other than their lesser roles in the film, “unworthy” characters are marked by large, crooked noses, darker skin, accents, and adherence to “backwards” and “barbaric” cultural rituals.

Like Christianity’s individualist approach to the fulfilment of hope for post-mortem divine union, the virtuous fulfilment of these race, class, sexual, and gender roles depends on the sustained enactment of the self as individual, finite, and pure. It is this enactment that renders people’s actions coherent to observers. Their ability to command empathy stems from their ability to conform to traditional hope narratives. This, as Noam Chomsky (2010) points out in his reflections on the 2008 Obama campaign, enables the practice of hope to inspire deep personal attachment to state goals. bell hooks (1997) makes a similar observation about the work of the movie Braveheart, which she describes as a concerted effort to represent themes of love, change, devotion, and nation-hood in specific state-sanctioned ways. In this instance, moviemakers succeeded in mobilizing an
ostensibly anti-colonial hope that actually served to reinforce white supremacist patriarchal understandings of statehood.

The term itself in these contexts is presented as half empty. It is filled by audiences the moment it manifests with their own personal hopes, allowing those individual hopes to become connected to the goals of the social or political project in question. Most often, though not always, this project is the maintenance of the state. However, even when it is not, it replicates the power dynamic and hierarchy of the nation-state. It operates on one level masquerading as a means by which to co-construct meaning. On a deeper level, it places the power of ultimate definition in the hands of those who write the moral and material agenda. This does not mean that the use of hope in such contexts is ahistorical, or that this hope is a word devoid of meaning. The term in western usage in fact boasts a long history of such discursive work. Even though when it is employed by institutions, organizations, or political movements the word itself is vague, it draws meaning from its historical and cultural situation within a continuing discourse. Despite its lack of specificity, it refers backwards through discourse to conceptions of the virtuous, of dogged determination, of the only thing that can save humanity from any number of evils. In the context of the mobilization of hope by the Obama campaign, this contextualizing history is particularly poignant.

*Transforming hope? Anti-oppression narratives of change*

This history is no less poignant in the context of anti-oppression education. Although anti-racism/anti-oppression education at its core seeks to challenge and confront the paradigms and discourses that cause the dichotomy of metropolis and margin, or privilege and oppression, we educators do not live outside these paradigms.
We are shaped by its discourses, and survive and gain voice by the privileges they grant us. This is generally acknowledged to be a concern among facilitators. In the value-laden but sometimes vague language that we employ in constructing our curriculum and delivering our pedagogies—language like “safety,” “empowerment,” and “hope”—there may be meanings we are not willing to acknowledge.

As I have noted in my introductory chapter, available literature on anti-oppression educational theory and practice employs hope as a central principle. Although anti-oppression education has nowhere near the scope of influence that schooling or other state-sanctioned systems do, they do incorporate ideas of “right” and “wrong,” conceptions of what is “desirable” and what should be rejected, notions of hope and stigmas of hopelessness. Even as it challenges hegemonic narratives, anti-oppression education is a site for the reproduction of social practices and ideologies. As in other educational settings, sites for anti-oppression education are spaces within which we teach and learn about how we should feel about things, and in what ways we should act upon our feelings. Anti-oppression education teaches that hope is possible and resistance is not futile; however, such hope is not neutral (Ahmed, 2000). Hope, like other social discourses, works along lines that seek to reproduce certain kinds of social order and that function to regulate actions in the world regardless of the fact that what we hope for specifically is likely as diverse in its minutiae as we are as people (Bhabha, 1990).

Unlike mainstream discourses of hope, which favour status-quo realities and urge individuals to change themselves in order to gain happiness or success, anti-oppression narratives encourage individuals to change systems, in order to foster those same things. However, as with mainstream hope narratives, meaning is only superficially co-
constructed. Anti-oppression education does market the notion that instead of changing ourselves in order to fit the system, we must change the system to fit all of us (Bishop, 2005; Lopes & Thomas, 2006). In actuality, this maxim is not strictly true; anti-oppression ideologies have developed their own frameworks and moral claims into which individuals must fit. This necessitates both personal transformation (in order to qualify to create structural transformation), and personal buy-in to the frameworks and moral claim of anti-oppression education and activism.

Anti-oppression takes its politics from the school of thought that places the personal within the political. When it weaves its narratives of hope around transformations, it in fact necessitates the transformation of the individual in accordance with these conceptions of right and wrong, and hope and hopelessness, as elements of structural change. Broadly speaking, these moral claims centre around the unequivocal rejection of privilege through the placement of bodies and beings on a grid of privilege of oppression. This grid forms the underlying basis for the definition of good and bad, right and wrong, moral and immoral. It locates oppressed bodies closer to an axis of purity and salvation. Privileged bodies are located on a corresponding axis of evil and contamination. As bodies move closer to salvation through experiencing or being associated with the purifying power of oppression, they also move closer to realizing the fulfilment of hope.

The grid is clearly, though un-self-consciously, represented in the work of the author-facilitators I explored in the introduction chapter, and is widely considered to form the framework that determines whether or not an act is anti-oppressive (Anner, 1996; 4)

4 Terminology articulated by Magpie.
Curry-Stevens, 2003; Lopes & Thomas, 2006). As facilitators, we are often expected by the organizations that employ us to explain and embody the values and hopes of the grid. According to this anti-oppression ideology, all actions in the world are determined as right or wrong based on where they fall on the relational map of privilege and oppression that the grid provides. If an action reinforces privilege, it is bad. If it challenges privilege and works in favour of those who fall into the oppressed category, it is good.

Theoretically speaking, the grid is logical, even attractive. Magpie described it as “seductive,” speaking intently of the sense of security, certainty and righteousness with which it provided her in a tumultuous and difficult time in her life. The logic of the grid has certainly been a saving grace in my life and work as well, and its empowering uses have often obscured from me how very damaging the grid can be. Although it is powerful and allows relations of dominance to be exposed in important ways, it is also overly simplistic and rigidly linear. In its earnest effort to contextualize everything it serves only to prioritize certain kinds of contexts over others. It teaches us only how to deal with problems in the face of a clear enemy: people with privilege. It teaches us nothing about how to negotiate problems among or between people dealing with various forms of oppression, how to heal ourselves, or how to continue resisting once our anger is burnt up. In part, this problem arises from activists’ desire to focus on a common enemy, theoretically aiding the construction of platforms for solidarity.

There are also, however, deeper issues at play. The logic of the grid is at its base oppositional. It teaches us how to fight, not how to heal. This logic tells us that coming from privilege taints us while coming out of oppression grants us a purity, which we must work to preserve at all costs. As activists, we hope to eradicate that which is bad and sow
instead the seeds of good things. However, in order to get what we hope for, we must be 
worthy, and in order to prove our worth, we must reject our privilege. This logic 
oversimplifies the complexity of resistance, making it taboo for marginalized people to 
strive for or acknowledge privilege of any kind. It also reduces our understandings of 
situations to a survey of who is more oppressed. For example, community attempts to 
identify and deal with abuse between partners, friends, or employers often centre around 
abuse narratives that make sense only when the abuser is from a (relatively more) 
privileged background. As a result, vulnerable members of such communities often find 
that healing comes at the expense of exploiting privilege and leaving their community. 
Because embracing the grid often also means the rejection of people who embrace, 
exploit, or are unaware of their privilege, leaving is not always a choice and solidarity 
becomes tenuous.

This process mirrors the work of hope closely. As discourses within anti-
oppression education, the grid and the narrative of hope serve to reinforce one another, 
narrowing the options of what is thought desirable and possible in order to fit perfectly 
with its overarching ideology. This process precludes multicentric ways of knowing and 
hoping.

Like mainstream discourses of hope, the moral claims and frameworks of anti-
oppression hoping are not communally defined. Despite anti-oppression education’s 
commitment to disrupting the notion of authority and centralized knowledge bases, the 
rigidity of the grid and of anti-oppression’s moral claims in fact reinforces them. On the 
surface the attempt to create change and shift dominant paradigms might seem counter-
cultural and anti-hegemonic, but the function of the narrative of hope that creates
attachment and commitment remains the same. Because of this, the power differential in terms of who gets to decide what qualities hope should take on and how we get to hope for things also remains the same. It is not a coincidence that most of the published work on anti-oppression education is written by white, able-bodied, middle-class people, the majority of whom are men. Although anti-oppression activists strive to critique, expose and (if at all possible) shift the politics of domination, those same politics are often recreated within movements and communities that employ anti-oppression principles as a way of life. When the people who carry the strongest and furthest heard voices in these movements and communities set the agenda, many smaller, softer voices are drowned out. On a smaller scale, from classroom to classroom or teach-in to teach-in, no anti-oppression educator can know, comprehend, and incorporate all voices and perspectives in their presentation of what anti-oppression is or should be. These situations feed one another, creating a space in which what it means to live in opposition to oppression and outside dominant logics becomes rigidly prescribed, and, often, just as rigidly policed.

This deployment of hope, even when it is unconscious or in response to the limitations within which anti-oppression education is conducted, serves to re-colonize our ways of knowing and being in community with one another. If the work of its hope narrative becomes to close off possibilities and to prescribe one way of being as the only road to salvation, anti-oppression education is not challenging the colonizing practices it claims to oppose.

The facilitators I have worked with in this study have experienced the reality of anti-oppressive hope and its narrowing and re-colonizing effects in different ways. All of them articulated the need to disrupt such processes in radical education and detailed their
own personal growth as facilitators in movements away from such paradigms. Chapter four takes up some of our experiences with hope and facilitation. Chapter five explores our understandings of anti-oppressive hope, our stories of our own journeys as facilitators and our perceptions of anti-colonial possibilities for hope.

Anti-colonial Research

*To produce knowledge, you need to have authority; you have to be able to see what the natives themselves cannot see.* (Edward Said, 1998)

In the next chapter, I explore the methodology I have employed to conduct my fieldwork in greater depth. However, in order to frame my methodology, it is important for me to make explicit my commitment to anti-colonial research, and its importance to the study. The central question of this study is that of the impact of colonial discourses of hope on our ability to teach, learn, act or resist in an anti-oppressive manner. My central critique of the work of hope in anti-oppression education is that it is re-colonizing, bringing colonial discursive processes into anti-oppression understandings. These processes preclude multi-centric ways of knowing, and employ only linear understandings of context, perpetuating colonial frameworks and futures. Therefore, it has been very important for me in the process of undertaking this study to make very clear to myself what I understand anti-colonialism and decolonizing to be. This understanding has been co-constructed by my participants, to whom I owe a great debt for interrupting my single-minded perception of hope as unsalvageable and for inspiring me with their insightful interpretations. I introduce this understanding here, in relation to undertaking my fieldwork. It is expanded upon as it impacts notions of hope in chapter five.
Anticolonial research methodology, in the manner I am approaching it, refers to an attitude toward the content and process of research, rather than a set of prescribed methods for conducting research. Although I will be using narrative analysis in my work with participants, and self-study as a means of examining and critiquing my own experiences and practices, I will approach each method, and indeed my entire thesis, through an anti-colonial lens.

I am using an anti-colonial rather than anti-racist lens because while anti-colonialism certainly incorporates the concerns and priorities of anti-racism, anti-racism can often dismiss or neglect anti-colonial concerns. As anti-colonialism and anti-racism are often understood as separate from one another, however, we must understand both concepts in order to understand anti-colonialism.

Anti-colonial research is not constituted by a liberal attempt to “include” Indigenous people, people of colour, or issues of racism in one’s analysis or research content. Simply adding marginalized bodies, or sentences acknowledging culture, race, or ethnicity as a constitutive factor of one’s object of study does not make research anti-colonial. In fact, anti-colonial research seeks to problematize both of these approaches. Token inclusion of people, or an analysis that seeks to incorporate difference for the sake of difference without examining the underlying nature of one’s framework in fact replicates the very structures of domination that anti-colonialism seeks to challenge.

Nor is anti-colonial research an identitarian approach that views all colonized people and ways of knowing as one and the same. Working from a philosophical starting point that acknowledges structural systems that dehumanize and subjugate marginalized peoples, anti-colonial research methodologies seek to create opportunities for researchers
to “critically engage [their] own experiences as part of the knowledge search” (Dei, 2005, p. 2). Framing the overall purpose of the research as an attempt to “understand social oppression and how it helps construct and constrain identities,” this approach allows researchers to situate themselves holistically within the research they do, no matter from what position they approach it (Dei, 2005, p.2). Simultaneously, however, anti-colonial research methodology guards against attempts to de-racialize the subject as a knower, particularly when such attempts are made from an objectivist standpoint (Dei, 2005). This is often seen as a way to ensure accountability or to acknowledge that marginalized people may also sometimes become researchers. However, in viewing the relationship between the researcher and their research as intimate, as physically, intellectually and emotionally constituted and as important, it is also a humanizing practice.

What is anti-racism?

Anti-racism cannot accurately be referred to as one movement. The disparate nature of anti-racist work, the fact that it is largely unpaid, locally contextual, emotionally charged, and deeply personal renders it ever-changing and difficult to define. However, there are general similarities between approaches to anti-racist praxis and thought that values and centres anti-colonialism. Anti-racism, broadly, addresses issues of structural rather than personal injustices, but also examines the ways in which our personal lives and psyches are constituted, abused, restricted and defined by structures (Razack, 1998). As race is often inscribed on the body, anti-racist thought is often concerned with issues of embodiment, particularly as they pertain to lived experience (Ahmed, 2000). Anti-racism is also intimately linked to and actively engaged in projects of exposing the white supremacist ways in which we employ language and weave it into discourse. This means
that anti-racism is simultaneously a project of constructing new language, and
deconstructing existing discourses (Razack, 1998). Parallel to this, in anti-racisms that
value and centre anti-colonialism, is a project of decentering the supremacy of whiteness,
white bodies, white knowledges, and white intellectual assumptions from all public
spaces (Dei, 1996). As Karolyn Givogue aptly summarized, anti-racism and anti-racist
research is a constant, ongoing and active process that is not declarative, that engages
issues of language and discourse, that deals with injustices that emerge out of systems of
power and social organization, and that takes up privilege as a factor in institutional and
interpersonal interactions.

In many ways, these are elements of anti-racist praxis seen through a decolonizing
lens. Although that lens is not always present or acknowledged in all anti-racist praxis, it
is and should always be a constitutive part of what anti-racism and its goals are. What
are the implications for research, if we take these principles (read through a decolonizing
lens, which will be expanded on further in a later section) and apply them to research
methodology?

*What is decolonization?*

As with anti-racism, decolonization is popularly misunderstood as a simple
process involving the return of or recompense for historically stolen possessions, ideas, or
resources. As with anti-racism, this misunderstanding of the aims and processes of
decolonization often leads to a characterization of anti-colonialism that situates it as
reactionary, exclusionary, violent, and uncomplicated.

Anti-colonialism and decolonization, however, are far more complicated
processes, which address much more than the physical spaces and resources plundered
during ongoing colonial and neo-colonial ventures (Said, 1993). As many anti-colonial theorists have argued, the process of colonization is always connected to – though not limited to – the material (Ahmed, 2000; King, 2003; Said, 1993; Sardar, 1999; Smith, 1999). Colonial processes have also targeted culture, knowledge, understanding, and all of their processes of social production. Indigenous and non-western knowledges have been uprooted, criminalized, genocided, pilfered from, rendered obsolete, dehumanized, and very firmly relegated to the margins. As Said (1993) argues in *Culture and Imperialism*, colonial processes have relied and continue to rely on cultural imperialism in order to articulate and proliferate the ideology that one culture, one system of knowing, one way of living is superior to all others and thus bound to save, convert, or exterminate its inferior competition.\(^5\) In so doing, cultural imperialism has also supplanted diverse discourses of hoping with one, dominating, and colonizing one. Ziauddin Sardar (1999) furthers this analysis to generatively critique the assumptions and goals of western-based development projects that seek to raise the world to a particular notion of what it is to be “civilized.” These processes, however, are not limited to either explicitly colonial projects or specifically developmental ones. Every element of how we learn to know, to story ourselves in the world and to exist within our knowledges is subject to colonizing agendas, and Indigenous communities and communities of colour maintain difference and resistance in the face of this hegemony at great cost to themselves and their people.

It is an anti-colonial struggle to seek to retain and actively engage in alternative processes of thought and methods of reasoning and resistance. This effort is fraught, and

\(^5\) Although Said refers to the process of cultural colonialism as imperialism, I will use the term colonialism here because the distinction between the terms “colonialism” and “imperialism” is not readily evident to most anti-colonial/anti-racist activists. However, I refer to the process Said describes.
those who engage in it and who are most affected by cultural, economic, social and physical colonialism have a multitude of solid reasons not to share their endeavours with academics. As Smith (1999) notes, the act of studying Indigenous knowledges and cultural anti/decolonization is also the act of reifying, intellectualizing, translating, and neutralizing these efforts. Therefore, the work of decolonization is rarely an academic process. To seek to create, locate, or understand knowledge in any way but an intellectual one is almost universally decried, even by many anti-racist academics. Veering away from Enlightenment-based ways of knowing, even within post-Enlightenment logics, often creates discomfort and feelings of being under threat. Such attempts are generally shut down quickly in the academy.

However, to push these boundaries within academia in ways that do not compromise the integrity of Indigenous knowledges is important. Decolonizing research does not commodify Indigenous knowledges, nor can it use Indigenous informants as mindless sources of information without the power to analyse (Dei, 2005). Decolonizing research should serve the interests of ongoing anti-colonial processes and actively and respectfully engage Indigenous knowledges from the researcher’s own positionality (Dei, 2005; Smith, 1999). These important tenets have major implications for the ways in which researchers committed to these movements undertake their academic work.

Decolonization through anti-racism in the academy

There are, to begin, implications for research content and researchers’ approach to content. Anti-colonial methodology requires more than a token acknowledgement of processes of racism in knowledge production as well as social construction. This means that whether or not a researcher’s content pertains specifically to race, if they wish to
engage in anti-colonial research, they must take care not to de-racialize the data they collect and the information they produce from this data (Dei, 2005). They must also strive to incorporate space in their work for multi-centric ways of knowing, demanding neither that all data fit into their own theoretical mould, nor that each participant agree with the other in order to be incorporated in the work with respect. The work must also contribute to an explicit or implicit political action or movement that seeks to dismantle and replace the dominating structures of white supremacy and colonialism.

Taking an anti-colonial approach to research also has implications for research methodology. Researchers committed to decolonizing knowledges and anti-racism must prioritize the equilibrium of their relationships to their participants over the single-minded pursuit of data. If we believe that our status as academics does not give us the right to extract knowledge from Others no matter what the cost, then we must shift at least part of the focus of our work in academia as researchers. Instead of searching for ways to analyse participants’ stories, or our co-constructed stories, in ways that affirm our research questions, “the challenge is for critical, anti-racist research to promote and uphold a discursive and interpretive space for our research subjects” (Dei, p. 7). Like decolonizing approaches to methodology stress, centering participant knowledges is not enough – we must facilitate the centering of their interpretations also and actively gear our methodologies to relinquishing the academic authority that allows us interpretive monopoly over the knowledges of Other people. As Dei states, “Pursuing anti-racist research in an anti-colonial framework means to critique the ‘shark phenomenon,’ (the practice of seeing subjects as merely ‘objects and subjects’ of raw data) and the
researcher’s role as collecting data and then ‘theorizing’ elsewhere apart from the subjects. This practice seeks only to reproduce colonial and power relations” (p. 5).

Undertaking decolonizing anti-racist research also means the examination, implication and honest engagement of the researching self. One cannot expect to challenge the deep-rooted history of domination, objectivism, and anthropological anxiety of academia only by examining other Others. We must look also at ourselves, and while this is certainly a mechanism by which we might hold ourselves as researchers accountable, it is also an important and exciting opportunity. In such a spirit, I will engage in the research and analysis for this study. This will help me to look critically at my own facilitation praxis and mobilization of anti-racism. It will also, I hope, help me to develop a self-consciousness with regards to my interpretations of the participants in this research that will assist a process of co-interpretation that honours their intelligence as well as my own reactions to and interpretations of their knowledges.

Chapter two has situated hope as a discourse within western traditions of colonial thought. The discourse of hope, as a tool of colonialism, has been used to create and enhance a deeply personal desire to fulfil classed, raced and gendered roles which support status quo power relationships. These desires, and the social and political dynamics that they perpetuate, guide the articulation of hope through anti-oppression education and impede its ability to create meaningful anti-colonial change.

Through this study, my own hopes are to disrupt or disturb some of the effects of colonial hoping. Therefore, I have closed this chapter by explicating a commitment to an anti-colonial methodology that has shaped the way in which my participants and I have taken up the project of working with one another. Chapter three further explores this
commitment, taking up in specific relation to my methodological approach to the fieldwork and analysis of this study.
Chapter Three – Methodology

Do we have the right to seek research information, no matter the cost, in the name of knowledge production? (George Dei, 2005)

Beginning Humble: Situating the Research

Research, as a site for interpretation and interpellation, is also (perhaps inevitably) a site for conflict. As an anti-racist educator, as a marginalized body, and as an academic, undertaking what I hope to be a constructive self/critique of some kinds of anti-racism and anti-racist teaching praxis, I am very aware of the colonial and racist mechanisms embedded in research methodology. Searching for a methodology with my participants that resonates with all of us and that might create space to nurture a mutually beneficial and equitable relationship within the exploitative space of academia has been a journey in itself. My philosophical orientation to the doing of my research is – must be – an organic outgrowth of my orientation to and investment in my desire to research: in my critiques of colonial and re-colonizing education, of the academic industrial complex, and of Eurocentric and neo-liberal regimes of thought generally. And so, as I settle into the position of “researcher” and all that that implies, I imagine the material process of gathering knowledge that I wish to be involved in, a methodological praxis that values elements of process in dialogue, values the knowledges of research participants, and lends itself to multi-centric ways of knowing. As I am prioritizing anti-colonialism as a research lens, I wish to engage in a research methodology that promotes a decolonizing process for knowledge production. As a result, I have cobbled together a methodological approach from several disparate sources, resulting in a methodology which draws narrative inquiry into overtly anti-colonial approaches to methodology. As I have noted
in my introduction, every part of my fieldwork and analysis has been constructed in
collaboration with my participants and it has been in accordance with the merging of four
different personal and intellectual agendas that the process for this study has formed.

Even so, no mechanism governing equitability in interaction is fail-safe; it is up to
us as active agents to check our own privileges on an ongoing basis so as to contribute to
the creation of a consistently anti-oppressive environment, rather than assuming that a
cursory declaration makes it so. As this maxim is the basis of the investigation I have
undertaken with my participants, I must pay its implications more than lip-service in the
construction of my methodology. Too often researchers who harbour the purest
intentions and work within the most “progressive” methods fail to break the cycle of
exploitation. This has generated strong feelings of resentment and mistrust towards
academia and its researchers across many marginalized and heavily researched
communities (Smith, 1999).

The work of anti-racism and anti-colonialism is not declarative (Ahmed, 2004).
This work must be lived, in our bones, bodies and communities. And so, although I was
drawn to self-study and narrative inquiry as promising, viable tools with which to
undertake my research, I have also made adjustments to both processes that have better
equipped me for working in my particular context, from my particular standpoint.

I will explain these methodological decisions and their underlying reasons in
greater detail throughout this chapter. I begin by positioning myself and my relationship
to anti-racist education and research, knowledge production. One of the ways in which I
honour anti-colonial/anti-racist approaches to knowledge-production is in my decision to
conduct a self-study, and, in a following section, I draw out my approach to self-study
research based in Stephanee Pinnegar and Mary Lynn Hamilton’s work. Introducing Clandinin and Connelly’s narrative inquiry next, I flesh out how I have engaged the method and situate it within a decolonizing approach to research.

**Research, Resistance, and Community**

Learning in my life has more often happened outside of schools than within them. This is one reason why I was drawn to workshopping as a method of grassroots, community-based learning for change. I have been fortunate in my life as a student and a learner; those times when I have found myself the most isolated and alienated from schooling or the academy have also been the times that my learning has been most nurtured by self-aware, politically-oriented Indigenous communities and communities of colour. The learning that I have parlayed into admittance to graduate school and the chance to write a thesis has come from friends and community mentors, many of whom have themselves been rejected by or evicted from the academy.

The research I have undertaken is work that has demanded a careful negotiation of commitments to the academic world, which seeks knowledge of marginalized bodies, and the worlds of the people who have been rejected or exploited by academia. My knowledge of anti-racism, and my anti-racist educative praxis has been deeply informed and inspired by members of these communities. The three facilitators I have worked with are members of these communities. It has been through them and in partnership with them that I have developed my facilitation praxis and my personal relationship to education for change. It is also through them and with them that I have come to feel a sense of dissonance with some elements of anti-racist praxis, in and outside of the classroom. Through this project, we have discussed and analysed together our
relationships to, experiences of, and hopes for anti-racism as an educational praxis and a way of life. Our marginalized communities (as they live within our knowledges and life experiences) have once again been brought into the academy – as always, not as students but as objects of study.

All of my participants have expressed worry over the way in which research generally is taken up or co-opted by the world of the academy. As self-aware and politically oriented people living within marginalized realities, my participants share with Linda Tuhiwai Smith a well-deserved mistrust of the academy and a deep sense of protectiveness of their communities and the knowledges they have produced with/in them. In her work *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Smith recounts a part of the violent history of research colonialism that has (and continues to) use the abjection of her people under settler colonialism as a site for coerced knowledge extraction. She points out that Indigenous peoples are likely the most researched population on the planet, and also the population that has benefited the least from the fruits of this research (Smith, 1999). In his introduction to *Anti-Racist Research Methodologies*, George Dei echoes this sense of ill-use and mistrust. He says, “this naked appropriation of voice and experiences is at the heart of the increasing suspicion that many local peoples have for academic research and researchers” (Dei, 2005, p. 7).

Attempting to counter this ongoing phenomenon in as many ways as I can, as well as to self-consciously acknowledge my role as partial “native-informant,” I have worked to not only to co-construct but co-interpret the knowledge that I have helped to create with my participants. This is an established practice within decolonizing and anti-racist
approaches to institutionally accepted methods of data analysis (Brown, 2005; Dei, 2005; Smith, 1999).

Research as a practice is in many ways counter-intuitive to the way I have been taught to learn. In my experience, the learning that has counted has been co-constructed community-based learning that has been born, fabricated, pieced-together, and imagined through my relationships with the people who make up my community. In the spirit of community-based, co-constructed learning, I have meshed the principles of anti-racist and decolonizing methodologies (which are related but distinct approaches) with that of self-study and narrative inquiry.

Self-study Research

The truth about stories, is that that is all we are. (Thomas King, 2003, p. 4)

My approach to self-study research stems from the work of Stephanee Pinnager and Robert V. Bullough (2001), Pinnegar and Mary Lynn Hamilton (2009), and from Audre Lorde’s (1982) construction of a biomythography. In this section, I will map out the methodological strategies and tools offered by these theorists, and my philosophical approach to them. I will also detail the manner in which I have carried out my self-study in this research context.

Biomythography: Telling tales of colour

Audre Lorde’s conception and use of biomythography allows marginalized people – in particular, women of colour – a space within which to narrate pieces of our stories without situating these narratives as the whole truth or the only understanding of our experiences commonly shared by marginalized people. Her biomythography, Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (1982) performs this function splendidly, telling the reader a
part of the story as Lorde experienced it, potentially including memories that are part-real or not real, and reading like a personal account rather than an authoritative text on racialization and marginalization. Although the rapid rise to popularity and continued fetishization of narratives of marginalization have been rightfully critiqued by theorists of colour and feminist theorists, the method itself retains potential for generative process, if employed in specific contexts (Razack, 1998). Further, beyond affirming a writing practice of reflection as theorization, Lorde’s biomythography offers an example of a model by which marginalized people can speak to marginalized concerns without necessarily going through or speaking to systems of dominance first.

In the context of my critique of anti-racism, which is intended for and directed towards anti-racist people of colour and their allies, I very much appreciate this model and this possibility. Lorde’s framework has inspired my approach to self-study, and facilitated my process of turning the lens inwards and looking critically at myself and my practice.

Situating self-study

Pinnegar and Bullough (2001) frame the nature and purpose of self-study research as they see it in their article “Guidelines for Quality in Autobiographical Forms of Self-Study Research.” They base their framing on a set of themes, ideas, and critiques that have arisen around the use of self-study as a method in education research, specifically teacher education, since its inception. Pinnegar and Bullough situate self-study and its growing validity and popularity in curriculum studies in part as a result of an increasing interest in and focus on subjectivist qualitative research. They observe that “some argue that subjects can no longer be studied as if they are atemporal…determinant…or static
[and] questions of context, process and relationship have moved toward the centre of inquiry” (p. 13). Self-study research, in teacher education and curriculum studies broadly, is used to make important links between the personal and historical/political, and to facilitate the process of educators holding themselves accountable to their practices, their students, and themselves.

Pinnegar and Bullough determine that in order to function as a successful self-study, narratives must 1) have use beyond the purely personal, 2) contribute to the improvement of a teaching practice, 3) navigate productively the gap between the self and the other in the teaching context (whether that other is student, fellow teachers, the establishment of education, etc.) and 4) effectively historicize the personal. They argue that self-study narratives should be taken up as reflections on identity-formation, recognizing the link between the self and the play of power in its formation (p.14).

Contextualizing my self-study within the framework of Lorde’s biomythography, I approach both history and biography in a divergent manner. Instead of focusing on cobbling together a coherent autobiography, with plot twists and character development as Pinnegar and Bullough suggest, I have created a set of loosely linked narratives that speak to the main goals of self-study, without seeking to frame it within a traditional European storyline.

Studying my self

One of the core purposes in this project is a generative self-reflection of my facilitation practice as a grassroots anti-racist/anti-oppression educator. This thesis is not a break with anti-racist and anti-oppression facilitation, but an effort to make my work in this area better. Self-study is designed with a view to achieving such ends. In Self Study
Pinnager and Hamilton argue that self-study is important as a form of research for another reason as well: in starting with ourselves, we can begin to make important connections to the work of others, structural issues and broader discourses (2009). In the case of my project, self-study has enabled me to forge spaces for me to engage as participant, and my participants to engage as investigators. This helped me remain transparent throughout the analysis process, and reminded me frequently of the risk and trust involved in participating in someone else’s research. It has also facilitated the process of connecting our work and experiences to one another through interviews, as I was actively undertaking reflections on my own work alongside my participants.

In accordance with Pinnegar and Bullough’s criteria for self-study, I have viewed the self in this study as balanced on the nexus of four intersecting points: my self, my practice, the community in which I practice (and their social relations), and the broader social relations that shape those communities.

Methods – Self-Study

Pinnager and Hamilton (2009) offer frameworks by which researcher/educators looking to engage in self-study can plan their inquiry and analysis. Following elements of their framework, I decided to use the same set of questions I planned to pose to my interview participants as well as old workshop templates, notes, and evaluations to guide my self-study inquiry. Eagerly, I planned neat and detailed stages in which my self-study would unfold. I planned to conduct my self-study in five distinct but connected increments. In the first session with myself, I planned to revisit old workshop outlines, templates and agendas as well as program curricula that I helped design and/or
implement, materials I have used in the carrying-out of workshops, participant evaluation sheets, feedback from organizations and so on. In the second, third and fourth sessions, I planned to ask myself the interview questions I had set up for my participants. I planned to interview myself, answering the questions verbally rather than in writing, and to co-analyse the transcripts with my participants. The fifth self-study session was to function as a wrap-up session, the time during which I would analyse my data, and reflect on my analysis.

I learned pretty quickly that, for me at least, self-study would not occur in neat, easily differentiated stages. In reality, my self-study played itself out in several overlapping and extremely messy sessions, some of which occurred before or after interviews with participants, and were facilitated by my participants. Viewing my self-study as balanced between self, community, practice and broader social relations prohibited neat and clear lines of distinction between the phases I had carefully separated my interview questions into. This dynamic played out in interviews with my participants as well, and all of us found ourselves jumping all over the map – and sometimes off it entirely – in situating our selves within community and practice.

Coming to the realization that my thoughts and experiences are not as neatly processed as I had supposed was a rich and unexpected lesson of my self-study. As I attempted to answer the interview questions I had devised, I found myself bringing up stories and memories I had all but forgotten, or previously thought irrelevant. The narratives I used as data sprung from these interviews, often in response to questions my friends and participants thought to pose on the spur of the moment, rather than in response to my own prescribed questions.
Performing the self-study as part of my fieldwork was very useful in helping me to highlight themes I felt were important, and to provide a record of why they were important to me. As I analysed my participant interviews, I found this created a transparency around which themes I picked up most eagerly, which I found hardest to relate to or draw out and which I dropped altogether. It also helped me to build trust with participants, as they were able to interview me, creating space for an exchange of ideas instead of one in which I siphoned ideas away from them and analysed them in private. Finding myself unexpectedly balking at answering certain questions during my interviews – often those I had myself designed – was also a lesson in conducting interviews and demanding vulnerability and confidence. The narratives which my self-study yielded certainly aided me in a critical self-reflection of my practice, and the parts of my world that my practice is tied up in or influenced by. But the process of the self-study also helped me to build empathy and trust with my participants and to facilitate an exchange of stories which has enriched my research experience immeasurably.

Co-analysing self-study interviews

I analysed my self-study interviews using the same methods as those I employed in analysing my participant interviews. Listening to my recordings of the interviews, I read over the transcripts and marked out themes which seemed recurrent, significant or promising. I then read over each narrative again, keeping in mind the themes I wanted to expand on. I then drew the themes out of the narratives and wove them into the theory I built around and through the narratives. This process was challenging, and I found myself often forgetting to articulate important steps which brought me from identifying a theme in a narrative and constructing an analysis around that theme. My own narratives
were especially difficult, as I was naturally privy to all sorts of information about myself which I took for granted while analysing my narratives.

I also invited participants to look over my transcripts, the themes I construct out of them and the way in which I tied these themes to their interviews. We hashed out which threads we would weave together and which we would leave collaboratively. Their input helped to keep me honest and to draw out themes and patterns that I myself was not seeing. Co-analysing the data from my self-study also helped foster a greater sense of trust and connection as I moved from the fieldwork to the writing phase of my research. Not only were my participants kept from becoming voiceless research subjects as regards their own narratives, but they were able to exercise a measure of influence over my narratives as well.

Data Collection & Recruitment
I recruited participants through my existing contacts as an anti-oppression popular education facilitator actively engaged in community education projects. My decision to approach facilitators whose work I am familiar with stemmed from a number of criteria that I felt would facilitate the functionality of my methodological approach in the context of my participant pool.

My methodology relies heavily on process; trust, sharing, and a community-minded intent to improve facilitation practice while avoiding blame-placing are integral elements of my method of interview and analysis. As well, the purpose of my project is to co-create knowledge with a set of participants who come from and are involved in facilitation work within marginalized communities. The idea behind this project is the co-construction of knowledge and not the examination of the thoughts, philosophies, or
life-experiences of a group of people. Therefore, it was important for me to work with participants whose practices, approaches, and concerns aligned with mine to some degree, and who I felt could challenge my own practice.

I approached possible participants about this project informally before sending them my recruitment letter and consent form. I did this because all three participants have played key roles in the development of my theoretical framework, focus and approach to this project as community mentors, friends and fellow-facilitators with whom I share ideas. Having discussed the development of this work in detail with them over the course of a year, I invited them to become officially involved with the work personally and informally. Once they had confirmed their interest, I sent them my consent form and recruitment letter in order to satisfy institutional protocols.

All three of my participants are Indigenous and/or –of colour, and have strong personal and theoretical understandings of and analysis around issues of sexuality, gender, poverty, and colonization. Personal identification with racially, sexually, culturally, and economically marginalized communities was not in itself a parameter for this study, but my other parameters including engagement in a specific form of facilitation practice and an investment in integrated anti-racist education lead me to facilitators who do, in diverse and varying ways, identify with such communities.

Narrative Inquiry

I am interested in hope as a discourse: a narrative or a set of stories that contextualize our processes of knowing and feeling. Therefore, it is important that I work with narratives to explore how hope is storied in my mind, and in the minds of fellow facilitators. In their essay, “Personal Experience Methods” (1994), D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael
Connelly describe narrative inquiry as a method which draws data from any of: stories, autobiography, journals, field notes, letters, conversations, interviews, family stories, photos (and other artefacts), and life experience as objects of study. As a research method, narrative inquiry focuses on the management of existing knowledge rather than the collecting and processing of data. This philosophy behind the approach indicates a specific attitude to narrative; narratives are already vehicles for meaning – even when known by only one person – and narrative inquiry seeks to transfer the knowledge embedded in these narratives. So, rather than deconstructing narratives, narrative inquiry focuses on transferring the knowledges of unquantifiable elements such as experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). As a result, narrative inquiry requires researchers to consider narratives contextually, paying attention to variations between social and cultural frameworks and with particular attention to the “why” of the story.

Narrative inquiry engages narrative as both the phenomenon under study and the method of study. Clandinin and Connelly (1994) make a distinction between the phenomenon and method, referring to the phenomenon as “story” and the method as “narrative.” In other words, they say, people lead storied lives, and they tell stories about their lives. Researchers take those stories and make narratives out of them.

Of the media listed above which narrative inquiry acknowledges as sources of stories, I focus my fieldwork on conversation. Through oral conversation, I have worked to build stories, narratives and relationships with participants. Clandinin and Connelly underscore the importance of building trust, caring and generative relationships with participants through this process, in order to strengthen and facilitate the process.
Clandinin and Connelly also note that it is important for researchers to be aware of how and why we are representing participant voices in the narratives we construct from their stories. Are we allowing one element of our participants’ voices to creep through, at the expense of others? In my study, I have worked to counteract this danger by co-constructing narratives with my participants. This process is detailed below.

Anti-colonial inquiry

Along with an investment in narrative as a means of conveying important aspects of experiential knowledge, I am invested in anti-colonial ways of knowing, and decolonizing stories. Narratives, as central elements of many forms of Indigenous ways of knowing, are central to my research as both subject and method. This connection between my decision to work with narratives and the importance of narrative in Indigenous ways of knowing has deep impact on the way in which I have carried out my methodology. As I outlined in my previous chapter, I have endeavoured to conduct my fieldwork and analysis in ways that are consistent with and that honour anti-colonial politics and a decolonizing process. For me this has meant placing the agency of my participants over the impetus to produce research. Doing so consistently through this study has, I believe, addressed in small ways the real and important issues Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) lays out in Decolonizing Methodology. Doing so has also been an intrinsic part of constructing the theory and analysis in this project. None of my understandings of hope in anti-colonial contexts, or of the colonial work of hope in mainstream contexts could have crystallized had I undertaken this study in a manner which served only to re-colonize my participants.
This commitment has demanded that I cobble together my own approach to narrative inquiry, so as to align that methodology with my particular context more closely. One of the consequences of this has been that the narratives I work with in the chapters that follow are rather long, and are not analysed in close, deliberate ways. Rather, I have attempted to preserve as much of the living voices of my participants as is possible. As I explained in my introduction, this study is a collaborative study, a study with my participants and not of them. For this reason, I have worked to provide narratives which reflect aspects of the people each of my participants are in the world, rather than reducing their narratives to a few short phrases which convey only my own meaning.

Another of the ways in which my anti-colonial approach to this research has impacted the construct of its outcomes is the relative openness of my analysis. Instead of taking a close look at each piece of narrative, I look at the narratives as a whole and draw general threads out of each of them. I have chosen to take this approach for two reasons. One, in many non-western traditions including my own and those of my participants, narratives are employed as open-ended learning tools. Part of the value of narratives as a way of conveying meaning lives in the process of engaging with the narrative, following the narrative and drawing one’s own conclusions from it. Although I do provide my own analysis of the narratives presented in this study, I have attempted to provide enough of each narrative that it may produce meaning even outside my analyses.

The second reason I have opted for this approach is very related to this first. As I deconstruct the notion of hope in the western mainstream, I also endeavour to construct an articulation of anti-colonial hoping as it manifests in the work of my participants. An
important part of this concept and practice of anti-colonial hoping is its ongoing, multicentric and inconclusive nature. In keeping with my commitment to fostering such processes, I have worked to make conclusive statements and draw meaning from the narratives I have worked with, while leave space for uncertainty. By this I mean that while I have drawn threads from each narrative which have seemed significant to me, I have also chosen to leave other threads untouched. I have left them, storied here but unanalysed, because they help contextualize the threads I have drawn and because they create a potential for ongoing meaning-making, beyond the specific work of this study.

Methods – participant interviews

In my original plan for this study, I had intended to perform narrative analysis, as outlined by Elliot Mishler (1991) and Catherine Riessman (2003). As I went deeper into my work, however, I found that for the reasons I have outlined above, I could not do a close deconstruction of my participants’ narratives, searching for meaning. I found meaning shining out at me, instead, pouring out of their words. Although I have a particular role to play as investigator in this study, it struck me that in many ways these narratives did not need an academic interpreter to make meaning out of them. They created their own meaning. As a result, I parted ways with narrative analysis, looking to make my methodology more reflective of my own critiques of academia, and more respectful of my participants’ agency. In this context, using narrative analysis would simply not work. Instead, I needed a methodology which approached narratives more broadly, allowing me the wiggle room to insert my decolonizing approach into the methodology, as I inserted the methodology into my decolonizing approach.
I came to narrative inquiry because its more general approach to narrative allowed me to do just that. Clandinin and Connelly (1994) list a number of media within which narratives can be found; I ran interviews with my participants as conversations, and drew my data from those conversations. I conducted interviews with my participants individually, in three separate one-hour sessions with each participant. I ran each interview separately, and wrote about them separately. None of my participants knew each other especially well and I was already requesting them to make themselves vulnerable to me about some raw and intimate elements of their identities and experiences as activists and facilitators. It was unreasonable to expect them in addition to that to do all of the work required to build the necessary trust required with one another to do group interviews in the limited time we all had. As a result of this, we were unable to build thematic lists together, and separating my analysis of each participant’s narrative ensured that each thematic priority would be given some attention.

I developed a set of questions for each one-on-one session which focused on one of my three research questions per session:

- How do these facilitators construct notions of “the anti-racist facilitator” and anti-racist education?
- How do these facilitators critique their own and others’ constructions of the anti-racist facilitator and anti-racist education?
- How are notions of hope reflected in these constructions?

However, in accordance with decolonizing and anti-racist principles, and with the narrative inquiry method of drawing narratives from conversation, I encouraged my participants to answer questions with as much or as little focus as they desire, to ramble,
to bring in their own questions or to pass over mine. Our interviews resembled casual conversations over dinner, with quite a bit of give and take between the two of us. In some cases, the role of interviewer and participant reversed and reversed back as we wobbled over the boundaries between researchers, activists and friends. As with my self-study, my neatly organized questions served as vague guidelines for a process that was much richer and much messier than merely answering a set of questions on a page. Participants brought their own questions they wished to address, questions arose as we spoke and narratives begat narratives as the interview conversations wore on, becoming more natural and more comfortable. Still, the three questions I have outlined above formed the core around which my focus evolved and around which I formed my analysis of all of the interviews.

Clandinin and Connelly (1994) make a distinction between story and narrative at least in part to describe different kinds of work undertaken by researcher and subject. The subject is partially responsible for conveying a story to the researcher. The researcher then takes the raw material of the story and creates from it a narrative. Clandinin and Connelly acknowledge that stories are co-constructed through dialogue, and so although a participants’ story may be about their own lives, they are often told in collaboration with sharing on the part of the interviewer (Webster & Mertova, 2007). The territory of producing stories to analyse belongs to both interviewer and participant collaboratively. However, the power to analyse these stories, to make them narratives, continues to lie only with the researcher.

As I have argued, I feel this distinction between the analytical agency of researcher and subject is a false distinction, one which perpetuates racist and colonial
ways of knowing and producing knowledge. Therefore, in my analysis the lines between who write the narratives and who the stories are blurred. Although the final interpretive lens is certainly mine, I cannot so easily differentiate between the narratives I create as I analyse my participants’ stories, and the narratives we created together as we told one another stories. This blurring of lines delineating the distribution of epistemic privilege is evident through chapters four and five, dealing with our narratives.

However, as Clandinin and Connelly (1994) argue, it is important for researchers to attend carefully to their central purpose in researching, in order to find anchorage in the tumultuous seascape of experience-focused study. So, although I do blur lines between analyser and analysed, in an effort to subvert epistemic privilege, I also employ my role at main interpreter to bring stories and narratives back to my three central questions. I acknowledge that this is a potential contradiction in my philosophical approach to my methodology, but unfortunately one which is necessary in order to bind narratives from separate one-on-one interviews together into a generatively coherent whole.

Creating narratives, collaboratively

Clandinin and Connelly write that stories are turned into narratives through a process of analysis enacted by the researcher. Analysis is performed by running stories through the researcher’s central questions and breaking down narratives into a number of subheadings or themes. This process creates a prism through which the story can shine, refracting to display the elements of meaning within most relevant to a researcher’s points (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Reflecting on this approach, Leonard Webster and
Patricie Mertova warn researchers not to drill too deeply into stories and miss the essence of a narrative (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

Following Clandinin and Connelly’s (1994) model, I analysed participant interviews and constructed narratives using the same methods as those I employed in analysing my self-study. I read over transcripts while listening to recordings of the interviews, identified key themes which felt important to the participant as well as to my project, and related the themes back to my central questions.

I then invited participants to look over their transcripts, and to highlight passages they felt were important. From these passages, we pulled themes they thought articulated the central points they were raising through their stories. I took their themes, passages and points and made links between them and the core questions I posed above and the analysis I had performed earlier. Although there was a good deal of give-and-take, and re-evaluation or re-articulation of central ideas, it was this step during which my role as researcher and central interpreter came most strongly into play. This manifested in my work pulling together participants’ themes and suggestions with my own, creating new combinations and offering them back to participants. Although each participant was active in analysing their narratives and theorizing their stories, I worked to remain mindful that my role as researcher placed more epistemic power in my hands than in theirs. Even with all our adjustments and collaboration, we were not engaging on equal grounds.

After making links between the focuses brought by each participant and my own focus, I sent participants a break-down of my framework. Collaboratively, we tweaked
and tuned, taking pains to maintain a strong presence of each participants’ voice while making sure their narratives wound around my central questions in this study.
Chapter Four – Facilitating Hope: What are Anti-Racists For?

When I began my fieldwork, I began by asking what brought the research participants and myself to anti-oppression activism and education. How did we discover these politics? What prompted our engagement with them? What was our buy-in? The question was meant to address both our personal investment in anti-oppression education and the details of our personal journey with it. Our attempts to answer the question revealed the deeply tangled, troubled, mutually constructing fibres between the work we do and our personal, community and professional investments in it.

Each of us answered this question differently, and for each of us our answers illuminated differing definitions of, approaches to, and hopes for facilitation. However, there were strong overarching themes to our narratives as well. Each of us discussed one or a series of “ah-hah” moments that brought us to anti-oppression as a way of understanding the world and our places in it. Each of us also underscored that the ah-hah moments were significant not because they presented us with new information, but because they occurred at opportune moments in our lives. Each of us articulated the challenges we face as facilitators as in some way having to do with language, whether that meant the ability to name our experiences, the ability to appear coherent to others, or the ability to tap into different ways of knowing. Each of us came up against colonial narratives of hope in anti-oppression discourses as we attempted to articulate our practices. For each of us, these challenges revolved around ongoing struggles we faced in our attempts to create meaning outside of racist, colonial narratives. These narratives intervened in our work and our stories consistently, colonizing Othered meaning and assimilating them into dominant hope discourses.
These similarities, however, should not obscure the differences that made meaning from our stories divergently in each of our contexts: karolyn and Min found a home in anti-oppression or anti-colonial thought; Magpie described herself as having visited anti-oppression for a while, and as struggling to find a way to fully leave it; I cannot say I have found a home in anti-oppression thought, but neither am I ready to relinquish it. Each of our arrival stories are coloured by our current relationships to anti-oppression and facilitation, and each of our arrival stories gesture towards the spaces we hoped we might move into with our work in the future.

This chapter introduces the four of us as facilitators and as marginalized people struggling with the discourses of anti-oppression education. The narratives I have selected for this chapter provide overviews of each of our entry-points and approaches to anti-oppression education. Through this, I seek to situate each facilitator’s negotiation of facilitation and hope.

Each section of this chapter deals with different content, depending on what themes and concerns were most important to each of us. Each section also differs according to the relationship I have with the facilitator in question. The chapter as a whole focuses on the troubled and challenging contexts created by narratives of hope in our histories and current practices as facilitators. The narratives presented here expose aspects of the obstacles and impediments created by the interventions of colonial conceptions of hope into our anti-colonial work. The content represented here is only one piece of what each facilitator shared with me, and what they shared with me is only one piece of what they experience. Although this is inevitable in any interview, Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s (1999) points around academia and its exploitation of marginalized
peoples – which I have elucidated in chapters two and three – must also be borne in mind. Each section should be read as one facet of the real challenges and opportunities each facilitator deals with: those challenges which were both most convenient and most strategic to discuss in a space like this. The places in the text of the narrative marked by ellipses indicate pieces of text removed. I have attempted to ensure I have removed only text which was repetitive, rather than anything that might change the meaning of the narrative presented. As each of us articulated these moments separately from one another, I have presented them here broken up by facilitator.

karolyn
karolyn did not tell me her arrival story at the beginning of my first interview with her. We spent some time settling into the interview dynamic, explicitly and implicitly negotiating language and discussing karolyn’s current work. Towards the end of our interview, she returned to one of my earlier questions; how and when did she come to anti-oppression or anti-racism or anti-colonial thinking? In part, it was the tension between these labels that delayed her response. Our discussion around language and her current projects served to underscore the real dissonance she feels between these terms. I had hoped for each of my interviewees to define the difference between these terms as they themselves saw it, and the vehemence with which karolyn rose to this task spoke loudly of the marginalization of Indigenous voices and concerns within anti-oppression and anti-racism discourse. When she told me her arrival story, she centred it around understanding colonialism and anti-colonialism as central to methods of resistance:

I’ve been thinking about what I think might have been one of my first anti-colonial um, like, feelings or experiences. It was whenever I was like really,
really young, like really young like maybe five, k. And um, like, we used to live in the city, but like really on the margins of the city, like borderlining the countryside, like across the street from me was considered like not Cornwall anymore, but the side of the street that I was on was considered to still be Cornwall. Like if, like ok, yeah, I’m going to like recontextualise this – romanticize it – (laughing). In a lot of ways I think that the greatest thing my parents ever – they’ve done lots of great things, especially my mum – but one of the greatest privileges of my childhood was um, came out of being so, being like really lower class. So like, you know, facing economic oppression and stuff like that, so my parents basically, they rented this really decrepit farmhouse with these barns that were totally condemned and um, and it was really cheap, they were paying $300 a month to rent this like huge ass farmhouse and um, it’s kind of hard to describe, but uh .. the way that Cornwall is developed, like you have all these main streets but then, um, in between like two of the main streets, like you have little neighbourhoods that are carved in, but you basically have this like long, long, long strip of land, it’s actually a hundred and fifty acres of bush that’s untouched because there’s no main road that cuts through all that, right. You have all these suburbs that are carving into from like the sides, but there’s basically this huge strip of land that’s on the periphery of the city that hasn’t been developed yet. And that was my backyard. Like we didn’t actually have ownership over that or anything but just like where in terms of where my house was located and we had access to like this huge strip of
land, and that was amazing, like that was like the greatest thing ever. So we were really poor, we didn’t have TV, I didn’t have toys, like I never had my own possessions of any sort, all of my clothes for ever were hand-me-downs from my older cousins and stuff like. We didn’t have any material possessions, so I was just left with the land, which was amazing, like that was like the greatest thing I think that could ever have happened for me. Cause as a really small child I got to start to develop these relationships to the land, right. Um without being distracted by all these other things…I remember being really young and like building this relationship with the land and like my best friends were things like this really big rock or like this willow tree, um, and, anyways, so, I’m like living my life like everyday outside, and one day, k, and like, I didn’t even take up indigenaeity til like way late in life. Even though it was always there, it was like, you know, I have white skin privilege, I pass as white, I can live as white, like my family wants to be white, like to succeed and I’m the whitest one in my family and I’m the most successful and I don’t think that’s like a coincidence you know what I mean to be like the only one to go to university and stuff. So even like my taking up of indigenaeity kind of threatens some people in my family, like they were just like “why would you do that” like you know, I’ve had like aunties of mine tell me that you know “we’ve worked so hard to be white, why would you want to go backwards” like things like this right. Um, so anyways, I’m like this little kid and I don’t even think of myself as Indigenous or what that means and one day I’m just like sitting with this
rock and like having this conversation and then I just like break down and I start crying, and it’s like the saddest moment of my life. And I’m like this 5 year old and I, like I can’t even talk about why I feel so depressed and isolated, and all I know is that there’s a language to be able to talk to this rock, and I don’t know it anymore. And I should know it. Right, and it’s like this profound sense of loss like a sense of loss and you don’t even know what’s lost. And like it was so intense that I still remember that today. So, anyways, that’s, I feel like that was like my first anti-colonial moment.

karolyn’s narrative turns around a few recurrent themes: poverty, land, language, connection and loss. She sets her first anti-colonial moment within a background characterized by poverty, access to land, connection and happiness. Though not in traditional ways, the image she conjures is idyllic. However, when she gets to the part of the narrative that she has built her story around, the part about language and loss, the tone changes. As she speaks about her sudden realization that she is unable to communicate with the rock in a way that she feels she should be able to, the pace of her narrative picks up. Although she remains a young child allowed a miraculous access to land, she experiences a moment in which she becomes suddenly aware that the reason this access is so miraculous is tied to a deep and ongoing loss. That this loss is firmly tied to land, and that the rest of the themes enter her narrative in relation to land is extremely important: karolyn’s ah-hah moment happened in conversation with the land, not in opposition to her oppressors. Although she nestled this narrative moment within a larger narrative around racial identity and her decision to reclaim her Indigenous self, the moment she is awoken to the reality of colonization is experienced away from her colonizers. The
moment that karolyn characterizes as anti-colonial is also a moment in which she is awakened to her situation as a colonized body, on colonized land.

The centering of the land and the issues which surround the ongoing colonization of this land, as well as karolyn’s identity as an Indigenous woman, deeply impact her separation of anti-oppression, anti-racism, and anti-colonialism as terms. The moment she selects for this narrative and its characterization as “the first” are named as anti-colonial, although she also occasionally refers to her work as anti-racist or anti-oppressive. karolyn characterizes the difference between these terms primarily as land. She holds anti-oppression farthest away from her work, as in her experience anti-oppression education has been embraced in institutional settings and divested of radical potential, serving only to replicate dominant power relations. Anti-racism is important to karolyn, but she positions herself on its margins, explaining that she has not found room within its framework to have real discussions about the land or spirituality. She explains in her interviews that many of the issues at the heart of anti-racism, issues like migration, are not relevant to her experience as an Indigenous woman. Although she remains in solidarity with people of colour, she is also clear that her experience of displacement should not be conflated with non-Indigenous experiences. This is an underlying tension in karolyn’s relationship to dominant hope narratives in anti-oppression education, as these narratives centre middle class experiences of colour, while erasing Indigenous realities.

*Facilitating Hope: negotiating power and acting in the world*

karolyn was hesitant to answer the interview questions as I posed them, and our sessions got off to a stilted start. We spent the first three-quarters of the first interview
dancing back and forth over the implications of the terminology I was using. She told me in various ways that she was uncomfortable making conclusive statements, using linear timelines, and fitting herself into the discourse of a rapidly professionalizing field. The stories karolyn shared with me framed her work and its challenges firmly outside of and in opposition to western linearity and institutional legitimacy. Within the context of a contested practice, these particularities are difficult for radical facilitators to articulate, situated as they are at the nexus of our own individual oppression as people and the Eurocentric approaches around which the field is growing. As anti-oppression facilitators committed to decentring the west in our practices struggle against the rigidity of the more widely known “canonical” hopes of anti-oppression education, we are placed in impossible locations. For karolyn, as an Indigenous woman, this meant being positioned by turns as an esoterically wise font of information, a precariously authentic native informant, and an impostor. karolyn was aware of these conflicting discourses vying for control over her narratives, and responded to my attempts to position her within my understanding of anti-oppression education work by keeping such an interpellation at bay:

I feel like for a lot of these kinds of questions it’s really hard to locate. It’s like, I’ve been doing it [facilitating] for a long time, or maybe I just started doing it, or maybe I never have…I can’t say like I’ve always known about anti-racism but I think there’s layers around that and it gets deeper and deeper and deeper, and in some ways I feel like I could say its over a decade I’ve thought about anti-racism.
As facilitators inhabiting marginalized realities encounter and respond to dominant tendencies in anti-oppression activism that push our work towards structurally compatible paradigms, it becomes harder to coherently articulate our place within this work. karolyn’s hesitancy to position herself firmly within the practice of anti-oppression education illustrates this. In our third interview, she revisits this difficulty, saying, “Yeah, I never identified as doing anti-oppression work until you asked me to do these interviews…and it’s like well why haven’t I identified as that? Maybe it’s because I feel like I’m not entitled to, maybe it’s because the work I do is so informal…” karolyn is an excellent facilitator, and a force to be reckoned with both inside and outside the classroom. She is confident, knowledgeable and able to deal with conflicts of ego deftly in a workshop space. Never in the course of my interviews with her did she seem unsure of herself; her narratives about being in the classroom were all related with confidence, self-reflexivity, and humour. So the idea that she might not feel entitled to name herself an anti-racism educator struck me with some force. If karolyn feels on the outside of this field of education, it is not for lack of experience or ability.

Perhaps this sense of out-of-placeness arises instead from the struggle for control of anti-oppression hope narratives, and the resultant trap within which marginalized facilitators find themselves. Attempting to counter the colonizing hegemonic discourses that create and perpetuate oppression (in society and in our field), facilitators must be aware of the ways in which we ourselves exert power in learning environments. We must find ways to speak ourselves into the world without speaking over other voices. karolyn articulated this as the problem of authority in workshop spaces.
Um, yeah, I don’t know, I’ve been thinking a lot lately in terms of how does one effectively mobilize one’s power and privilege in these moments, um, even whenever you wanna take those [things] down at the same time… I feel like in some situations it [exercising authority] is really important especially if you’re talking about being in a room with people who are maybe service providers or agency people or military personnel or police or what have you. Um, I don’t think that it would be as easy to keep all of those potential egos in check if you didn’t also present yourself as some sort of authority figure. Cause there’s going to be some kind of competition happening for authority in that space, and if you can’t maintain yourself as an authority figure, you’re quickly overridden and then nobody’s paying attention to anything you have to say…If you don’t present yourself as the authority to some degree, people will take advantage of that…and I don’t think it’s a coincidence that the only people who have tried to question my authority or like tried to date me in my courses have been white men.

As a marginalized facilitator, karolyn’s authority is always already under scrutiny, both in the workshop setting among participants and outside of it among other facilitators and by organizations who hire her. However, as an anti-oppression facilitator who acknowledges the problems of colonizing knowledges, as an Indigenous woman and as a compassionate teacher, karolyn avoids exerting her authority in ways that silence other voices. Counter to the advice of published author-facilitators, karolyn does not work with privilege worksheets or absolute definitions that label, quantify and dismiss people. She calls this kind of facilitation “privilege hide and go seek,” jokingly characterizing
interactions within this context: “I’ve got privilege but can you locate it?” However, as her narrative above reflects, this refusal to don the mantel of academic authority has its drawbacks. Without playing into the hierarchy of knowledge, karolyn cannot clearly voice her own hopes within the classroom setting, leaving her at a disadvantage as a facilitator.

The problem of authority that karolyn articulates is very much the problem of who gets to call the shots about what we say anti-oppression looks like, and what ends anti-oppression action might hope to achieve. Bringing together these issues, karolyn makes some important observations as she relates some of the ways she has encountered convergences of tokenization as an Indigenous woman and assumptions about her work as an anti-racism educator:

If you’re an organization who’s willing to have this kind of training then you’ve probably done it in the past… and then you pin all your perceptions of what you perceive of them onto the facilitator that you hire…And I feel a lot like I get hired because I’m seen as some approachable Indigenous person and I’m going to speak to all these issues that should somehow be in the collective unconscious of like all native people and I’m going to do these workshops and people are going to walk out and not only be anti-racist but also environmentalist!

karolyn’s work struggles against this pigeon-holing tendency, while attempting to push the boundaries of dominant structures. However, she is not hesitant to exploit the leverage such positioning might grant her. Walking the lines created by the cracks in
dominant social and dominant anti-oppression discourses, karolyn pieces together her practice.

Magpie

Magpie is well known in Toronto and Montreal as a workshop facilitator who works with anti-oppression content – whether that means a focus on labour issues, peer counselling, trans issues or anti-racism. Magpie has found the majority of her employment in what she wryly called the “lowest tier” of facilitation, with student- or community-based organizations and social justice groups:

It’s where I started off at the – you’ll delete this name – University Organization and I think I actually started organizing workshops for the University Organization, before I became a workshop facilitator…They had to do peer counselling, 101 kinda stuff as well as a mandatory anti-racism workshop. I came in as a co-ordinator…and I had to organize that. And there were all these problems, how the workshops were run before and how racism was construed…they wanted something more radical as opposed to something more policy-driven…and then the other thing was that people of colour had to take these workshops alongside white people, and they were hearing all this really annoying stuff, and it wasn’t reaching them where they needed to be reached…So, when I started doing it, I was asked by the GSA to do an anti-oppression workshop, along with the co-facilitator, Hannah, who had been organizing workshops with me…And, because we saw Leah just come in to it from what she knew, her direct experience of the world, and politics and ideas, we thought, we can do this too, right, we don’t
need any specialized training, like the experience will build itself. I don’t know how I feel about that, but that’s what happened. Um, and we made a lot of mistakes. Sometimes we were better about admitting them than others but the first one was a GSA anti-oppression workshop. We didn’t get nearly as far down the packed agenda that we had planned. Um, but, the whole workshop became the check-in that they had. Like, just, checking in about what did you have to go through today just to get to this workshop…And then the next one was an anti-transphobia workshop, which I started doing with another trans person of colour, right after I came out as trans, so again, this is my direct experience, this is what I’ll do as a workshop facilitator.

That’s how it started.

She articulates her initial approaches to facilitation coming from watching others she respected doing related work. Drawing inspiration, direction and a sense of family from anti-oppression based communities marked her early facilitation projects, and her relationship to anti-oppression as a politic. Her introduction to anti-oppression ideals coincided with her arrival to Canada, finding her at a tumultuous and vulnerable time:

How did I first come into anti-oppression ideas, it was 1994. I was at Different University Organization …I came to Canada in ’93, fell in love with people who at the time were women, um, and was just looking for a place where that made sense. So that took me to the Different University Organization. And they were forming this journal of feminist anti-racist something called Journal [name removed], which never actually happened…I can’t remember exactly why, but we had these long collective
meetings, with about, it felt like 20 people, I don’t know how many where actually there, and we got stuck right at the point where we were deciding collective process and policy for the rest of Journal, and the idea was there should always be a majority people of colour. And I had never heard of that concept, there were white people saying “this is unfair,” and I agreed with them at the time. Right, cause it just, I didn’t understand (laughs). It was interesting, I think I understood shortly after, it was um, So-and-so’s older sister Name, Name who articulated it in a way that, that made sense to me. And, I also saw that her lover was white so I saw that (laughs) she could walk things in a really complicated way that meant something, a particular pull. So then I was like, yeah, why not people of colour, sure. How did I get into anti-oppression stuff, I was looking for family, I was looking for ways to make sense of the people that I was feeling attracted to, and I was looking for, um, a broader social base, where I could be attracted to those people and we could have friends, and they could, sort of, multiply without people standing on our backs. Um, and I found myself moving towards different kinds of anti-oppression, based on who felt strong and solid and like they actually cared about me in the moment. So the way that Name chose to take on my ideas as an equal in that space, even though I was challenging this whole people of colour majority thing that was so weird at the time, there was something about her treating me like an equal that I hadn’t had in my year in Canada, by someone who looked like my family.
And that was important. So because of that attachment, I adopted her politic.

Magpie’s arrival narratives articulate the coils that these simultaneous arrivals created. As a Black woman, an immigrant and a trans and queer-identified person, she was automatically shut out of many communities. Simultaneously, she was expected to embody a certain lifestyle and conform to certain mores in order to fit into the radical, politicized, Othered communities she gravitated towards:

Did that politic help foster that sense of community, it helped me find ways to look for things, because anti-oppression puts things on a grid. These are all the privileges, these are all the oppressions and stuff. And it puts events on a grid. And this is where you go, uh, um, on this day at this time, I was just, now that I’ve started Facebook, I was just thinking of the grid again, so-and-so’s attending this event, and this event and this event. So it puts almost everything in a grid where it’s locatable, and being new to Canada it was important for me to find things that were locatable. Um, that felt family-like, that promised family like first experience of Name, and some of the other women of colour there. So, it helped me, point me in the direction of where to look for things, but it didn’t help me find stuff, and that’s why, for the last five years I’ve been sort of begging off saying, I don’t do anti-oppression anymore.

She elaborates:

Well, the attraction was to people and how they treated me. The initial points of entry were people. And the affect between us, right, and my
longing, and perhaps their longing too, I can only speak about mine. And then their politic made sense of my experience in a way that said “I am justified, I am righteous.” And that was really, really important. Um, and so then there became this thing, with the grid, and then I started looking for things, I kinda remember going to the Rose, it’s now Pope Joan, or maybe it’s something else, and, it was called the Rose Café, its this dyke bar, and I was like, “maybe that’s where I’m supposed to go,” and it was called the Rose Café, so I thought you sit there and you drink tea. So I went there in this really, really long skirt – and I grew up in a convent, right so it’s all complicated – with a book! It’s a bar, with pool tables! It’s called the Rose Café! And I remember I couldn’t find it, I didn’t know where uh Parliament street was and I couldn’t understand how Toronto worked, it was like my first year here and stuff, you know, so, I took money that I, I’m not sure that I really had, and I took a cab, cause I knew a cab would know where to find it. That’s just my, that’s one thing that the grid calls up. Yes! Let’s use that as a metaphor. Because I thought, “it’s the Rose Café,” I saw it in a list of Rainbow places, queer positive places, in a book, somewhere. It was called the Rose Café, and I went there prepared to read a book and look at people. Except it turned out to be a bar, and I was really terrified for some reason, I guess a lot of reasons, and I wasn’t dressed for a bar, at least not the way other people were dressed. I was wearing a long, flowered skirt, down to my ankles and a turtle-neck sweater. With a book. That is the metaphor for um .. the grid pointing me in certain directions, and me not finding. It was, I
didn’t find a mirror, I totally misread the text, you know. I felt so ashamed that I took a cab back, ashamed of my own error. Another metaphor for the grid, I remember my first job here, was at Community Organization – Oh, here’s a missing piece of anti-oppression, Jesus! That was ’95, that’s where I learned that reverse discrimination does not exist. Yeah, so the Journal thing was where I learned that there can be people of colour majorities, and that’s ok and uh, Community Organization was where I learned that reverse discrimination does not exist. Oh, and I remember, my first task was to prepare the mailing list for the AGM. This is anti-oppression at its best! (laughing) NGO-style anyway. And I called someone’s executive assistant to find out the address that I should mail the formal invitation to. Um, and she kept saying, “oh its this address, blah blah blah, Mike three, Charlie two, Tango Three” or something. Now, I’m from Trinidad, I have no idea, look, we don’t use postal codes. I had no idea what this meant, and I just knew that in the office, when I was hired, that I shouldn’t ask and show how ignorant and undeserving of the job I was. So I kept calling back, hoping I would get somebody else who would describe the address in a different way. And it was the same person and she kept getting annoyed, cause I was the same person calling, and she kept saying Mike three, Charlie two, whatever (chuckles). And I had no idea what this meant, so I decided to write it down verbatim. And, finally I asked someone, and they were like “oh that’s the postal code, M, M3C,” whatever. And um, that’s again the grid. About, how I used it to find stuff, but I didn’t find what I was looking for...And
anti-oppression stuff that I’ve come into, I feel like I’ve been the last 16 years trying to understand the text of the grid.

As Magpie expresses, anti-oppression gave her a sense of what was lacking, a grid on which to tally losses and to locate structural threats. But it did not show her how to find the things she needed to start building a home in Canada. Instead, the convergence of demands made by the people around her and the politics they were all supposed to adhere to struggled with each other to guide the nature of her work as a facilitator. Caught between these exacting and often contradicting sets of needs, she found the logic of anti-oppression unravelling, and the reasons behind her buy-in dwindling:

There’s a lot of anti-oppression efforts, and every time we say anti-oppression, we mean capital A-O, right. Um, which is a way of doing things and a larger discourse, as opposed to how it shifts within each person. What’s wrong with it is that a lot of efforts get mobilized against something, and not for something else. So, it means that our bodies are empty. Our hands are empty. They’re fixing something else. And out of the fixing the something else, something’s supposed to come back to us. Except I’m still waiting…A transformative time in my life was when my brother died. And I had all this community, I was a facilitator, I was this trans facilitator in Montreal and all this kinda stuff. And, there was nobody. You know. So, that, that, that’s, so my experience of community has changed. And who I let in and around me, a lot of it has to be, where will you be when someone else dies?...But the objectivist epistemology, that’s really what’s really like hurting my heart about the anti-oppression work. It’s just coming back to
what we were saying about the grid. That, what can we know and how can we know it, that certain things are knowable, that this, and this is gonna sound so wrong – you know, it’s just that, I can guide my fear by how I see this white, straight-looking man walking down the street at me, and learned experience will tell me enough about what to fear and stuff, but it seems to be sealing off options. By this like, “I can read things and I can know the grid and I can anticipate the harms.” A lot of them you can, a lot of them you can’t and the worst thing is that it doesn’t tell you where to anticipate the benefits or it tells you to anticipate the benefits only among people of colour. So there’s a certainty of how we know things. That’s a transportable body of knowledge that is inaccurate. And therefore it’s going to harm people. I learnt through anti-oppression communities that people of colour would be safer. The most violent person in my life has been my own mother, and she’s darker than me. You know, it’s like. This is, and there’s something so, how do people even buy into and stay, you know it’s just, it’s ridiculous. The first kind of racism I learnt about – this people of colour majority and I was wondering what’s up with that, and the first kind of racism that I learnt was among people of colour, right I grew up where I was the majority, so I didn’t understand the benefit of being the majority anywhere else, because it was really fucked where I grew up (laughing). So, I didn’t see anything wrong with it, I just didn’t understand the particular benefit, that’s all.
In reflecting on her arrival to anti-oppression activism and education, Magpie clearly situates the issues and themes that were important to her. As she illustrates the attraction of her buy-ins, she also explains her reasons for moving away from anti-oppression as a politic and an approach to education. However, through this journey, her central concerns – the buy-in factors which brought her to anti-oppression in the first place – remain unchanged. Themes of community, compassion, healing and home remain strong as Magpie talks about the complicated paths she is working to create within community education, but outside of anti-oppression.

As she learned that anti-oppression – though capable of doing positive things – was not a place for her. Subsequently, Magpie gravitated towards working with arts-informed learning spaces based in principles of healing and therapy. While anti-oppression education often embraces the use of the arts, Magpie’s focus on healing and therapy-based strategies does not jive so well with traditional anti-oppression. Magpie’s resistance to investing in or dismissing participants’ knowledges or claims based on their positioning on the anti-oppression grid, and her focus on personal transformation have also earned her the reputation of a touchy-feely facilitator. “Some of the feedback about the last two workshops I’ve done, some of the cautionary feedback was that it started to feel more like group therapy and not a workshop,” she mentions as she talks about the dissonance she feels between her practice as a facilitator and the expectations of the organizations who hire her. Although she is alive to ethical concerns around the crossover between a therapy session and a workshop, Magpie maintains that learning cannot constructively happen without some component of therapy and healing. These concerns
are central to her facilitation practice, as she continues working in anti-oppression contexts, but outside of anti-oppression paradigms.

*An Oppositional Approach: Anti-oppression Without Hope*

Magpie’s central struggle with the framework and demands of anti-oppression education is one of being in the world. How can we articulate ourselves through the logic of the grid in ways that are not damagingly reductionist? As karolyn also pointed out, anti-oppression education too often lacks an anti-colonial component, and for Magpie the problematic impacts of this manifest in a system of thought that trains us only to see what is missing. The problem of hope narratives in Magpie’s experiences of facilitation is simply that through her experience, the narrative of hope has been laid bare. As she explains in the narratives above, the hope anti-oppression presents is one which is based in the conception that if we know structural relations, we can know what to expect in our interactions with structural relations. Magpie illustrates that she sees this as both a false hope, and a hope which encourages a continual devaluation of our selves as human. She speaks in her narratives against the reductionist logic of the anti-oppression grid and her narratives about her own struggle to locate herself on the grid speak eloquently to the sense of disorientation, humiliation and lost-ness which this logic fosters. Her story about her journey to the Rose café illustrates this poignantly. Her narratives also address outright the logic of the grid which assures activists of a “transportable body of knowledge” which will help keep them safe. Her narrative about the loss of her brother, and the simultaneous loss of the community she imagined anti-oppression would help her build reflect this.
Illustrating her divergence from general anti-oppression ideology, Magpie tells me about an interaction with a client during which her approach came into conflict with those prescribed by anti-oppression:

He was trying to finish a major project...he’s so used to doing things without anyone’s help, just all by himself. And he was telling that to people that he was hanging out with who were like, you know, activists and stuff and their immediate response was “that’s so disablist.” Which it is (laughing) in addition to a whole bunch of other stuff. Yeah, sure, but you know, as he was telling me, all I’m thinking is, ok, this isn’t a group of people, this is just one person, all I have in front of me is the person in front of me. Ok? And, when I heard “that’s so disablist” I got immediately irritated. Like, my spirit got irritated. And, he said it, “that’s so disablist,” with, like, a mixed voice, like he was also irritated, but he was also sad that he was being disablist and sad to think of himself that way, and all the friends that he was isolating. And he couldn’t shift it, so he also felt sad and stuck. So, I said to him, “You know, regardless of whether or not that’s disablist, is it true? Is it true that you’ve gotten where you’ve gotten without anyone’s support?” And so we started picking apart his own life, and his own narrative, and realised that it wasn’t true. For me, that was anti-abilism work. By saying regardless of whether or not its, its disablist, is it true? No, its not gonna be true. Real anti-oppression is about truth, in some ways. Right, and its not about the language and I hate that, I hate saying that cause
now I’m like one of those people saying “well its not about the PC stuff,”
right (laughing) which is also ridiculous, right.

Anti-oppression hope narratives tell us that the world can be changed if we prove ourselves worthy, if we change our own behaviour. It is through these personal sacrifices and changes that we can earn the right to identify as activists, as good people, as people who can hope to have their hopes met. Magpie sees this, and the trouble with it, but the difficulty she has articulating what she believes, instead of what she disagrees with, is reflective of the discursive trap that traditional hope narratives place us in. She peppers her narratives with caveats like “this is going to sound terrible,” gesturing to a gulf between the meaning she is striving to make and the language available to her. She closes the narrative above with a similar statement, saying, “I hate saying that cause now I’m like one of those people saying “well its not about the PC stuff,” right (laughing) which is also ridiculous, right.” Again it is evident that as she expresses her thoughts, they become co-opted by dominant narratives, which do not allow her to convey her own meaning effectively. Again, language becomes an issue. Trying to dream outside of these dominating frameworks, Magpie walks a dangerous line between undesirable coherency and imposed incoherency. The careful way she articulates her thoughts through the course of our interviews reflects the precariousness of this positionality, teetering on the edge of what is knowable and what is simply Other.

Magpie is not alone in this; each of us in this study experiences this precarious positioning, though we voice our negotiations of it in different ways. The issue of hope in the context of Magpie’s practice is that she is immediately running counter to the narratives organizations and many participants expect, even before the workshop
introductions are over. This leaves her in a complicated space, operating outside of and often in opposition to dominant structures, but outside as well of the recognizable, protective mantel of anti-oppression education:

I try to plan my workshops in a way that people really want to buy in. For their own sake. For their own souls’ sake. I got indoctrinated into anti-oppression for my sake, my buy-in was “if I do this, I’ll have friends,” the people who will treat me right. That was wrong. I didn’t have friends, the people who would treat me right. So, the reason why I still adhere to anti-oppression politics, though I call it by another name is because it’s for my own soul’s sake. It’s because I feel better about myself in the world. You know, and if I can imagine generations after me coming through me then I feel better about what I have to offer them. So, I try and plan my workshops so that people have that, they take it away. Even if the community completely abandons them and falls apart, they have something. That’s how I do it. So I wouldn’t have to use things like the privilege game. You know, the power game and like all the different grids and boxes and identities and stuff and who has relative privilege, and it might as well be a chess game, or something, some kind of – divide a board up into grids.

As Magpie’s narrative illustrates, however, these sometimes dangerous complications do not leave her without recourse. In fact, despite the enforced incoherency and the constant need to stand in opposition – even while building something – Magpie is building towards something generative and revolutionary with her work. Although the pervasiveness of colonial hope narratives works against her attempts to coherently
construct her work, she builds a rich practice full of potential. Her work draws together her original reasons for buying into anti-oppression and layers it with a re/connection to spirituality, Other ways of knowing and a commitment to creating. As she does, she opens up different possibilities for engaging with community, with our selves and with processes of resistance.

Zahra

Conducting this self-study has been challenging and rewarding. Most of the pieces I have included here have come out through interviews and conversations with Magpie, who graciously helped me run and analyse my self-study. I found the processes more difficult than I had imagined, and felt myself far more reticent than seemed reasonable to actually share and articulate my thoughts, challenges, and mistakes with facilitation. My arrival story was particularly difficult for me to explain as a story, and it took me several false starts before I was able to articulate some of the experiences and investments that brought me to facilitation:

I would say it was three things. One, that you can’t have activism without community education and as long as I can remember I’ve wanted to be an activist. When I was young, I wanted to join Hamas. Then I thought Hizbollah was more radical. That was when I was, what, eleven? My family lived in ex-colonies and we were in the Middle East for the first part of the Gulf War and my Dad’s always been very political and, you know, all the regular things that people of colour sort of tend to cite as politicizing factors. Our histories, our present…So as I got older and felt like I had more opportunities to engage with activism – like, after a certain period of
being new immigrants and adjusting to being poor and getting to know the culture and all that…by that time I was just heading off to university. As I got to that point, I really wanted to do something, to make something of myself in the world. So, two, that you can’t have activism without community education and that I wanted to be an activist and I felt like I had shit to say. So I plunged into the Peterborough activist world. And I remember going to the OPIRG orientation session at the beginning of the year and feeling like, this isn’t anything like Hizbollah, this is barely activism! I remember being really frustrated by that, both in that meeting and later. In the meeting…the co-ordinator at the time…she asked us to divide up by issue we were interested in. And I remember being really confused, cause I was like double-you-tee-eff, you can’t separate this shit, and then I was like ok, well maybe you have to for efficiency and then I felt a little excited cause I was like ok, well maybe as we’re dividing up the groups someone will name an issue and I’ll be like got it that’s what I want to change, that’s what I want to do! But that never happened. Everyone kept naming issues like “environment” or “menstruation” and shit like that and I was like oh-em-gee how much do I not care about making sure I bleed onto a home-sewn pad made of organic fair trade fibres that fairies picked under the full moon and that automatically sends my regards to the fucking goddess while I celebrate my femininity? I mean, none of it spoke to me and it was in part I guess the language…But it was more than terminology…So I was really frustrated by that, by not finding a place to fit
in there. And for the next couple years I sort of stuck around stubbornly, like I worked for OPIRG as the publications co-ordinator…And I just felt so out of place, I couldn’t make anything that was happening feel coherent to me. People were like making their own pads or having drumming circles or organizing panels and teach-ins…and none of it really spoke to me….So, yeah, I mean I really wanted to do something, something useful, something meaningful but I felt like…something was always missing, I felt like – I felt like I do when I’m trying to write a paper and I have like 15 pages and I still haven’t actually managed to say the thing I’ve been trying to say. So, that was the second reason, I was looking for something to do, to contribute to this community that I was in, in Peterborough but to other communities as well. A transferable skill that I was good at and that was useful in radical movements. I wasn’t any good at learning to spin fire or knit for the revolution or write angsty slam poetry about like why the revolution isn’t already here or tag public property, so. And policy language just slipped right through my brain and so I wasn’t reliable enough at advocacy work. But I was really good at explaining shit to people, and I liked it. And I guess that’s the third reason, it’s tied into the second thing is that I was one of the only people of colour in a really, really white activist scene and like most people of colour in similar situations I found myself doing a lot of explaining to people just on the regular. Why is green anarchism racist, why was the second wave racist, why is the idea of waves racist…That sort of thing. And I saw how the activists treated the other people of colour who
didn’t explain shit to them and I didn’t want to end up like that – they went through all sorts of shit, being called scary, having their sexuality questioned constantly if they were queer identified – I was the only straight person in this community – cause they didn’t fit into the white dyke notion, or being called rapists and having shit spread around the community about them. And I know it’s not feminist to doubt someone when they call out a rapist, but fuck man, every person of colour, every straight man and queer women of colour and the one straight Indigenous man in this community, they’re all rapists? Come on. So, I guess it was in part a defence mechanism but also it felt good to be doing something I was good at. When I started facilitating, it was like I found a home in activism. It was like, ok, here’s a place I don’t need to split everything up and deal with issues like they’re separate. And here’s a place I can actually use to call people out on their shit and make them accountable. And that last piece, that felt good for a while. But that’s a double-edged sword, accountability, and it was on the accountability piece that I started really noticing some of the bigger problems, the contradictions, around what I was doing.

As I talked about these experiences, Magpie pointed out to me that what I referred to constantly as a desire to fit in and find a place could also be parsed as a search for a home, a desire to build community. This desire is voiced by each of us, in different ways. At the centre of my activism, I was (and still am) searching for connection. That has meant connection to my past, to my culture, to my spirituality. It has also meant connection to the people around me and to the cultures and spaces I live in every day.
The desire to create such community and to be coherent to the community around me was a major push for me towards facilitation, as my arrival narrative reflects. However, discourses of utility, usefulness and efficacy played big roles in encouraging and developing my work as well, making issues of accountability, action and product important. My commitment to community and desire to be useful and produce change overlapped in ways that fit neatly into western narratives of hope. I went into workshop and classroom spaces negotiating conflicting agendas which stemmed from these competing goals:

Cause, facilitating, it teaches you how to speak to white people I guess. And that’s what I was doing mainly for the first long time I was facilitating. Speaking to white people. It was a weird place to be in, there was a very specific language to speak to white people in, you know. I mean, it had to be part science, part policy, part high-brow theory, part salt-of-the-earth magic darkie, part hard-ass, part mammy. But you know what’s weird? It was like instinct, going into my first workshop, to know how to talk to white people. My first like twenty or thirty workshops that I did, all white people. Every single person. And I went in there with this really specific persona that I don’t even remember fabricating, I sometimes still use her, she’s all those things I just said, a little funny and a little awkward so she’s not threatening but ’hood enough to seem like authentic or something – you can accomplish this by making bad jokes and swearing intermittently. Also reference nerdy sci-fi things but show glimpses of an intimate knowledge of bad-ass POC communities. And yeah, really gentle with this really thin
overlayer of like street hard-ass. But only be hard-ass to people who are not in the room, remember that. Like telling a story about some stupid thing that happened that you know very well could have and probably has happened with most of the people in the room, with them being the stupid racist ones you’re telling the story about. But tell it like everyone in the room is already on your side, like you expect them to know why what happened in the story is fucked up even though they don’t, even though you know they don’t. I used this on military personnel who turned up in one of my workshops once, I was all “yeah, and I mean these supposed weapons of mass destruction, and sending poor people in, bribing poor people to go fight a rich man’s war and like kill other poor people for what” or you know something slicker but along those lines. These guys had just gotten back from Afghanistan, I didn’t know that at the time, I thought they were just beefy white guys, but yeah. And they were totally nodding along. On the evaluation sheet one of them wrote that he and his buddy had just gotten back from “the war” and that what I said really spoke to him even though he wouldn’t have said it before or thought it before and here’s his email and can I send him more resources to read about this colonialism thing of which I speak. I mean of course it won’t work on everyone but it makes the white people in the room, some of the white people in the room, feel like they’re honourary POC and even if they’ve done this stupid shit right now they have a get out of jail free card and they’ll hear you out and make notes in their heads so they don’t ever do it again. And you come off like such a hard-ass
cause you’re talking about systemic racism like its so fucking obvious and like everyone knows about it so that when someone actually fucks up in the workshop and you’re gentle with them, it’s like such a relief but they also feel like oh they’re special snowflakes now cause you’re being nice to them, you must really like them. So that’s how I learned to talk to white people. And I’ll say it like that because I know I sound cynical and probably a bit manipulative, and I don’t really use this technique anymore because I discovered I hadn’t invented it, I had been taught it. This is how white people taught me to interact with them, because this is how it’s easiest for them to be dealt with when race is an issue. Or anything they’re implicated in, if it’s like a labour issues workshop and they’re all board or something. So, as a facilitator, I think in part because of all the reasons I came into it, wanting to be efficacious, being a people-pleaser, I respond a lot to the needs in the room, sometimes that’s a good thing, but unless there’s also something else behind that, like a clear conception of why I’m there, beyond the money and the contract, then I get hijacked really easily and there’s no point. Then it’s not pedagogy, it’s babysitting. I need to be able to assert boundaries and I think the reason why I’m so bad at that, other than being a people-pleaser is that I struggle with being too damn pomo, like asserting boundaries is about asserting an agenda and I didn’t want to like colonize other people’s narratives and shit, but without an agenda, yeah, I was just babysitting, just Speaking to White People tee-em like a day at the zoo or something.
Discourses of utility and efficiency heavily affected my arrival to and development of facilitation and facilitation style. It was these discourses that fought with various kinds of discomfort for me around my facilitation style. Should I use the manipulative but efficacious Speaking to White People approach? It showed the most results, certainly, but what change was I actually making, when buy-in on my participants’ part relied on their continued belief that they were not one of the “bad ones”? What change, in fact, was I making in myself? Through my narrative, I refer to the development of this facilitation style first as instinct and then as a learned thing. I believe I meant both, though they may seem contradictory. This facilitation approach was a self-defence mechanism, which gained meaning and favour in my life through the ways in which I found myself subjugated and dehumanized by colonial white supremacy. This sort of response, while reasonable, plays into a cycle of dehumanization. The cycle may be created by systems of oppression, but this kind of facilitation style reinforces it. As I articulated by use of the approach as instinct and a learned response, I both distanced myself from it as a part of myself and expressed my dissatisfaction with being caught up in this cycle.

The issue of product versus process created a vortex in which divergent hope narratives competed, with western conceptions of hope winning out through my early work as a facilitator. These conflicting desires resulted in a facilitation style that strove to navigate the needs of the organizations that hired me and the needs of the participants I interacted with without questioning or reflecting on these needs. Positioned as I was as a woman of colour teaching white people, I navigated difficult lines between being termed
useful and being termed whiney. I responded to these pressures by facilitating on the terms of the dominant narrative:

I’ve talked to everyone about that moment at NOW already, right. That moment where that kid, he came up to me and told me he wasn’t Black? The whole time, that whole program, through training and everything, I was just so determined to do good as a facilitator in that project. And the whole narrative, it was supposed to be anti-oppressive, anti-racist, but it was just all about being efficient, talking to these kids about what they can do, strategies, tools, plans, success. All about success. Not once did we stop and consider, these kids are young, they’re in high school, that’s a rough time at the best of times, but these kids are also poor and immigrant and mostly of colour. And what happens? This kid, pretending for god knows how long that he’s not Sri Lankan, he’s Black cause Sri Lanka is going through a war, and he’s lost sisters and he’s a refugee, and here we are all about success, all this fucking success that his whole identity became a failure. It was bunk, total bullshit.

It was not until this contract that I was able to articulate the problems behind the work I had been doing, and that I began to become aware of the dissonance between process and product as imperative pieces guiding my facilitation technique. I had felt this tension in the past and dealt with it in different ways, though I had not articulated it clearly to myself as a tension as yet.
Useful Community: Creating Family for Resistance

Facilitation was a very contextual thing for me; it was something I was socialized into as opposed to something that built itself around me organically. As my narrative above reflects, this reality placed me in a position where competing agendas fought for control over my own priorities, which evolved as I learned my trade. In 2006, I facilitated my first workshop with people of colour and Indigenous people:

It changed my approach to facilitation. It showed me that yes, there are instructional workshops, like anti-oppression 101 and there are more touchy-feely workshops like healing spaces for marginalized communities type things, but always, always you have to see your participants as people, not as like white people or straight people, people you’re expecting shit from, people who will back you. People. So that’s when I moved from being a facilitator who existed to kind of push organizational agendas, something I was really uncomfortable with but didn’t know any other kind of work, and so I ended up doing the Speaking to White People thing that like Tim Wise and those people do, to when I moved into being a facilitation who was actually interested in building community knowledge bases, looking at making ways for people to say things in their own way so that no one else would need to sit in that kind of OPIRG meeting like me and think god, I just don’t have the language for this, I’m so stupid I’m not an activist and instead be able to say my language is different and that is a strength.

Becoming aware of these processes, I started to experiment with ways to challenge the control that oppressive discourses exerted in the conditioning of my facilitation style.
Although my new awareness helped me to engage in this process, the problems with facilitation for change ran deeper than I had been prepared to acknowledge:

So that’s when I became a part of communities of colour like as a thing, as like a political thing rather than a result of birth or culture or poverty. It wasn’t just like a life choice, it was a political choice. And, I mean, it was so fucked up but at the time it was really good for me and all I saw was that this was something that I really, really needed. I don’t think I had the capacity at the time to really question to myself, what was I doing, what were the processes by which I was understanding myself and the world that was moving me towards this? I was trying to challenge this idea that facilitation and workshops always had to produce a product and that, you know, every change we made had to be detectable. But I wasn’t questioning the idea of enforcing political change through education. I mean, I don’t think I would have even known how to do that. I would have thought of that as synonymous with saying that the status quo should prevail. Which, it isn’t. But yeah, so I was angry, I felt isolated from my white friends and white activism, I was coming out of a really white community and I moved to Montreal. And I became friends with all these people, these people of colour who I really had nothing in common with. Because I was looking at myself as primarily a person of colour, not as primarily someone who has grown up in rural areas, who is a giant nerd, who loves cats or whatever. Our bonding, the things that brought us together were all stuff about race, about anti-racism, about the political projects we were working on. And for
a while, I didn’t realize that that sense of home, however contested it was, that sense of home that I had found in Peterborough hadn’t carried over. It took me a while, but all that caring, all that seeing each other for something beyond the politics we chose to embody, and all the things that came with that – the capacity to forgive each other for example – none of those things existed in the communities of colour, the politicized communities that I migrated into. And, frankly, it sucked. And what did I learn? At 3am in the winter, when I’m having a nervous breakdown and I need something, some help, some community, who do I call? My racist white union friend who I didn’t realize had to get up at 6am to go on shift, but who came out and had a drink with me and talked. All around me in my community of colour people were depressed, they were suicidal, they were trying to kill themselves. They were lonely, they were angry, but we never tried to help each other. We never built anything together. We just hated white people, and when we’d shut out all the white people, we hated each other. We policed each others politics in ways that would make the State blush, that’s how we hated on each other. This one is fatphobic, this one is too straight, this one is appropriating something or other, this one isn’t enough of an immigrant. And it wasn’t just like we were calling each other out. I mean, that’s cool. But it was like these definitive statements about why whoever we were targeting sucked as people. And that was used to evict them from the community. We never attacked people based on what actually bothered us about them. We attacked their politics instead. How does this relate to
facilitation? Well, fuck man, this is was I was doing in facilitation! I mean, when I left the community, I realised, even if I was being really nice to people, or even if I called the workshop about healing, this is what I was doing. I was creating spaces into which people could only enter if they already had a certain politic. Or else they could only remain if they adopted that politic. That isn’t about multiple ways of knowing. That isn’t about being challenged or creating anything. There isn’t anything generative about that. It actually made me feel sick, and since then, since leaving that community and since realising that I will always value the people of colour in my life, but because of who they are, not because of what I assume they experience based on one or two factors, so since then I’ve been trying to find a different way to facilitate.

These issues were and are central to my continued negotiation of my facilitation practice. Community and utility (and through them, resistance) remain major elements at the core of this negotiation. As I work towards developing a different kind of practice, one that I can articulate in positive terms, I work against conflating community building with community education, and community education with The Revolution. The interventions of colonial hope narratives push ideals of efficacy, material change and the development of product as priorities in my work. For me, it is the possibility of removing prescriptive political projects, which lurk behind every workshop agenda and determine every moment of conflict, that makes this project conceivable.
Min conducted almost every part of our three interviews as stories. Her stories focused on the positive; even as she related tales of dealing with hostility, experiencing racism or homophobia and living through oppression, she managed to bring out her strength and agency through her narrative. When I asked Min how she came to be an anti-oppression facilitator, she responded with three narratives. Like Karolyn, Min linked her arrival to anti-oppression education to childhood experiences and knowledges, but initially rooted her facilitation practice in the experiences of her undergrad life:

So if I were to look back to say when I actually started actively facilitating, it would have to be as an undergraduate so, I’m gonna date myself here, so it would have been in the 90s (laughing)...when I became as an undergraduate actively involved in anti-racism action at the University of Guelph. And, it was through other people who were sort of paving the path for me, other students, uh, other people in our community that...I came to a state of consciousness for myself and I learned about ways in which we could learn that did not have to be, uh, teacher-centred...but I was able to actually facilitate learning, for myself, challenge the way that I learn myself, in an environment of people. And it started with me actually doing popular theatre, doing anti-racism work and education through popular theatre...as a group of, um, students who had created the, at the time Race Relations Commission – now, we’re in the 90s, we’re also framing the language as being different, so the language was anti-racism, not anti-oppression at that point...So as students we’d organized this organization called the Race
Relations Commission, and the mandate of the Race Relations Commission was to look at issues around racism and, and again the language around intersectionality didn’t exist at the time, so it was about looking at how, you know, racism, sexism and sexual orientation, disability, things like that, how those crossed. Um, and the way we did that was we formed a popular theatre troupe – just randomly, we heard, somebody had heard about popular theatre, someone was from Brazil, and we came to learn about Paolo Freire and the Brazilian movement with literacy and street theatre and things like that. So I was part of a committee and we had just challenged the university, the president of the university to create an anti-racism policy on campus and to set up a working group that did that kind of work. And to make sure that student involvement was there, we went to the different student residences and we bribed students with donuts and we would hold performances…So, we did those things and that’s how, that’s what I learned about, that’s my first experience with facilitating. What I consider to be non-formal education. And then through that experience of the Race Relations Commission, um, learning how to do anti-racism workshops, you know, like racism 101, things like that, for different spaces on campus, whether it was students, whether it was for faculty, whether it was for support, administrative staff, things like that, you know, I was, I was the student that went and tried to be a part of this group of people facilitating things and just, I mean, again in the 90s the backlash that we received was enormous. It was huge. You weren’t allowed to like – who was I to “teach”
a professor? Right, and I’m saying teach in quotations, right, so…But you know, what it is, as you ask me that question I’m also really thinking about going back into my own childhood, and my own cultural ways of learning and, and I would say so much of the learning that I’m able to tap into now, as an adult, like understand that those were learning pieces and learning moments happened in space where there were women. Where women gathered, and whether they were singing, whether it was stories or songs that were being exchanged. Whether it was around a ceremony for birth or a death or a wedding, and that’s where, those were learning spaces. Those were all facilitated spaces for learning, and non-formal learning.

Min centres community, resistance and solidarity as strong interwoven themes through this narrative. Her reference to “students who were paving the way” for her highlights a strong undercurrent of belonging which girds this narrative. Min’s story here belies both the sense of unbelonging and devaluation she experienced outside of anti-racist community, and the sense of belonging and solidarity she felt within. She sets her coming to activism and facilitation up in a context of community learning and mutual help – students who initiated her into the language of political resistance on Turtle Island, the creation of community-centred as opposed to teacher-centred learning spaces. She frames the references to backlash in terms of outside forces which worked to dismiss and punish the work her community sought to accomplish.

These themes blossomed again and again in later narratives, connecting her work, her approach and her impetus towards positivity. Her later narratives on facilitation and support draw heavily from these themes, tying her arrival narratives strongly to her
reasons for facilitating, and her evolving approach. As she stories her arrival to Canada and her significant moments as an activist and facilitator, Min continuously centres an image of a solid, coherent and connected community. It is through this community that Min comes to gain a language that makes her experiences coherent to those around her.

Min also brings up the issue of language, an issue she and I both revisit at different points through our sessions. She links the issue of language to her ability – or inability – to make her thoughts and experiences coherent in her communities:

I think I would have to go back to me growing up as a child, in Singapore, and as specifically as a girl child, a female child. Even though I was not in an environment where I would say racism like here in a North American context, I experienced racism there as a minoritized body of colour within a community of colour. The majority of the population in Singapore is Chinese. And, they hold the power…And um, as a minority in terms of number, of the Sikh community, growing up, even though I never thought of myself as being any different than anybody else, the way that I was often treated by people who were Chinese was different. And so whether they said I smelt and – but within that I was also recognizing, within my own family, how I was treated as a girl-child. The restrictions that were placed on me, what I couldn’t be because I was female. And so I always contested that. So if I look at that, and that was my base of it, I never understood and why was it this way? Why was it that everyone around me were talking about marriages and things like that – you know I was fourteen years old and we were sitting and my best friend Mary-Anne was with me, and we
were chatting, you know, we’re school girls, talking and everyone had a vision of what their marriage would look like, and I had nothing, it was nothing, there was nothing about marriage that intrigued me. Because I could never see myself as married because being married meant being married to a man, that was the only thing I was ever exposed to, so why would I want to do that? I didn’t want anything to do with men. Now, in my fourteen year old brain I was not able to break down the fact that I was queer…I didn’t have the language around it…

As with her previous narrative, personal and collective agency, positivity and resilience play important roles. As Min tells each story, she focuses on what could be done, what she did do. Her narrative agitation comes not from experiencing oppression but from having felt as though there was nothing she could do about it. She describes the gender subjugation she experiences as a girl-child, but follows it up with her ability to contest it. She spends more time discussing her inability to story her queerness coherently in the heterosexual space she inhabited. This piece takes the most space in this narrative. The fact that she could neither articulate her difference nor find anyone to articulate it seems to cut off possibilities for resistance, creating more tension in Min than the fact of the oppression by itself.

As she pushes her personal “buy-in” factors through later narratives toward the point at which she is actively participating in a movement of resistance, a sense of anticipation and liberation infuse her narrative.
Supportive Facilitation: Negotiating Power within Narratives of Hope

Telling me stories about her journey towards anti-oppression activism and education, Min relates a narrative about racial discrimination she experienced trying to ride the bus in Guelph:

I was, um, I was at the downtown, in downtown Guelph, waiting to catch the bus…So I get on the bus, its downtown, there’s a whole bunch of people in front of me, behind me…I show my bus pass and I walk, and he calls me back, the bus driver. And, he says let me see your bus pass, and I thought, oh maybe I showed it upside down or the wrong side or whatever, right. So I open it up and show it to him again…People behind me all coming in, all white people, come in, he’s not even looking at their bus passes. But he has stopped me to examine my bus pass. He takes it out, makes a big show of looking at it, everyone in the bus was looking at me at this point. So at first, I’m, I’m just saying, like thinking, oh you know I must have done something wrong. So, he finishes looking at the bus pass, and he’s like, and he says it this way, he’s like “oh, well I needed to check it because some of your friends have been known to use, uh,” I don’t remember what he said, something about old bus passes, “some of your friends have been known to cheat.” So I go ok, and I’m a little bit embarrassed at this point, cause everyone’s watching me, and you know when you stand there, and then you notice, and you suddenly have this feeling that everyone is watching you? And then as the bus was travelling, I got up and I walked over to him, and in front of the whole bus I said, “What did you mean by some of my friends?”
I don’t, like he’s like, “Oh,” and he started like fumbling over his words, and at this point I still haven’t, in my head, I still haven’t clued in that it’s, this was about race. I just wanted to know that how did he know my friends? Like, I was like, how does he know who my friends are? And, and, he’s like “Well, you know, there’s some students who do this, and stuff,” so I was like, “Oh, ok.” So, it plagued me for the whole day, the whole day I was in class and I was thinking about this. The thing that I was fixated on was how was how was it that he, how did he know who my friends were? And what did he mean by who are my friends, and still I haven’t clued into race, I haven’t clued into race, until about two o’clock in the morning, I’m still thinking about it and then it hits me, I was like. “I think he meant some of my friends meaning people who look like me.”

Like the other stories she tells, this one speaks loudly not only of humiliation and discrimination, but of isolation and loneliness. Reflecting on the themes of community, resistance and solidarity with which Min infuses her narratives, this story stuck out to me because of the way she ended her narrative. Talking about what she did to confront the racist transit system after the incident she said,

And I started asking questions about what could I do about this? Nobody around me knew, they just thought, oh you’re just making a fuss about the bus pass, I was like, no this is bigger than the bus company…So I went to the student union and asked to speak to the whoever was the person in charge of connecting with the bus company for the bus passes. Told the guy, this white guy, you know ran for VP external or whatever …and he
was like “Ok, uh, I guess we could just kinda write them a letter.” And again, not knowing anything I thought, yeah I guess a letter is good. As long as somebody tells the guy that he shouldn’t do it to anybody else. That was my big thing. And it was funny, that bus, that bus ride thing that as I talked to a few people and someone said “Oh you should meet so-and-so and you should meet so-and-so” and in the meeting of the so-and-so and so-and-so, sitting on the steps one day, someone said “hey, there’s this Race Relations meeting and I was like Race Relations, what is that? And they were like “Oh, it’s a group of students who fight racism,” and I’m like (gasp) I just experienced racism, I should go to this meeting and then that was it! My life changed.

Here, Min’s attraction to anti-oppression and to education as a form of activism seems to crystallize. As she began accumulating language that would make sense of her experiences to people around her, those experiences became clearer to herself. The tone of Min’s narratives shifts after she describes her arrival to the Race Relations Committee. Her descriptions of herself before coming to this organization, which would become her community, stories her as a lost, naïve and searching young women. As she relates her experiences on the bus and her attempts to address those experiences, she seems like a small and vulnerable person, innocent and alone. Once she begins speaking about her life after her discovery of anti-racist community, her self-description blossoms, and she becomes a vivacious woman who is a vital part of her community. Her narrative of the bus incident illustrates the cusp of this shift, showing her as a young woman of colour looking for the words to describe her world, and following her as she becomes an activist,
determined to respond to oppression rather than simply receive its effects. For her, community might be the glue to making these things and survival possible. Telling me about her first Race Relations meeting, the excitement of discovering community sticks out clearly:

And so, as it went around the room, people introducing themselves and this young um, East Asian woman…I still remember her words, she was like “I’m here, because this fucked up racist white supremacist society has ruined my life forever” and I was just in there going (gasp) I have to be friends with her! (laughing) I have to be friends with her, and I think I’m strangely aroused.

Min articulated this moment as her entry into a world of queer people of colour, living in community with one another and outside the immediate everyday violence of white heteropatriarchy. It is from these communities and these experiences that Min draws her framework for anti-oppression and her approach to facilitation. As she tells me about the wonder of discovering and living within a vibrant, thriving, sustainable queer community of colour in Toronto, she emphasizes:

Those are the collective memories that sort of need to be passed down, right. And I think that’s why I’m relating it to the women of colour, queer women of colour, we do get together, we sit with the younger women of colour and we share these memories with them, that you know, um, there is a difference. Those were ways in which anti-racism was practiced for me like that was the lived anti-racism, the lived anti-oppression, right.
It is this search for support and community that underscore all her stories about what anti-oppression action and education actually look like for her, not adherence to a universal and unchanging bigger political picture. She seeks to create transformations that allow students to support themselves or each other, and she creates community for herself that can do similar things.

Solidarity, community and resistance as they are understood by Min are central to the criteria she uses to define her approach to facilitation, “The role of educator or facilitator in the classroom has to encompass the ability to listen to somebody, support them with their problem-solving, or, just listen to them and know maybe that person’s not in a space right now to problem-solve.” This is what makes her teaching anti-oppressive, she feels. Rather than concentrating on conveying a package of knowledge about what it means to be anti-oppressive, Min tries to facilitate in a way that is itself anti-oppressive. This approach is unconventional, however, both within traditional approaches to education and within mainstream anti-oppression approaches. As with other facilitators, and indeed with many women of colour in positions of perceived authority, Min finds herself constantly questioned and critiqued for her approach: “Now, many instructors don’t agree with that, so when we have faculty meetings, or when I have to co-teach with other faculty, they will always say, ‘oh, you’re too lenient’ or, or they’re polite, ‘Min has a different way,’ right so those kinds of criticisms come out that way. There’s a different ‘way,’ you’re very ‘kind and gentle’ with the learners – like, that’s a bad thing, right, that’s a bad thing apparently.”

In many ways, Min’s approach challenges traditional pedagogies, and her narratives fit into mainstream narratives about teachers who “believe” in their students
and challenge the system to support them. But it poses a challenge to anti-oppression approaches to education as well. She finds students’ critiques of her facilitation approach more valid than those of her colleagues, but also more difficult to respond to:

“Sometimes they think it’s kinda flaky, but, I do think they have a point there, and what they’re asking from me is how is a structural change happening. You may be changing that within us, as we sit together as partners in this facilitated learning environment, but then I gotta go to that math class, and sit behind a row and do things with a person who says you’re not allowed to have a calculator.” Traditional anti-oppression education has nothing to say in response to these concerns. Anti-oppression approaches encourage teaching marginalized people to “pass” within structures of power. By complicating this strictly structural lens and prioritizing the people in front of her, she veers away from the general anti-oppression approach.

Rejecting European humanism that makes a mockery of the idea of treating people as people, anti-oppression education encourages facilitators to view students as manifestations of structural problems. Situating her approach within neither of these systems, Min discards Eurocentric humanism and looks at her students as people. The tension between these competing monolithic discourses remains, however. Although anti-oppression education is certainly not as powerful a discourse as Eurocentric humanism, or the traditional banking approach to education, for facilitators functioning “outside the box,” it is sometimes all we have to guide ourselves. This makes it powerful, and it indeed impacts Min’s articulation of herself as a facilitator. In a later interview, talking about promoting the idea of higher education to students, she says, “I don’t even know if I should be promoting the idea of going to university. I mean, why go
to university? It’s just institutional validation, but some of my students, they want to, and they can, they’ve just been told all their lives that they are not good enough. So why not?” Being in the classroom and centring support and community, Min cannot discount the contextualizing factors that the discourse of anti-oppression does in favour of strictly structural factors. However, being a marginalized person coming out of non-western discourses and experiences, she never views her students outside of contextualizing structures. These dissonances do not encourage Min to shrug off the mantel of anti-oppression educator. Rather, to anti-oppression’s weakness, she adds the strength of her facilitation approach, working towards ways to function coherently as a grassroots community educator, an anti-oppression activist and a marginalized body.

**Facilitating Hope: Imperfect Work in an Imperfect World**

For each of us, facilitation has meant different things, and centred around different themes that have been significant to our lives, and to our lived experiences. For each of us, however, our entry points to facilitation and continued investment in it has formed as part of a work in progress. Though there are differences in the details of our work, we each locate facilitation as one part of our engagement in ongoing processes of world-shifting and world-building. Our struggles with facilitation have in many ways reflected our struggles with ourselves, the experiences that brought us to political work and the battles we fight in our broader contexts. karolyn’s struggle with making her approach to anti-colonialism coherently a part of her facilitation, Magpie’s search for a discursive “home” in which to locate her work, Min’s navigation of the line between structures and people and my own struggle negotiating the tension between the demands of community
education and working within the framework of a political project are all reflective of this.

As we map our ways through these tensions, we find ourselves facing the constrictive power of the systems of oppression that brought us to education for change in the first place. In karolyn’s work, she feels this tension and marks it as a point of divergence between anti-colonial and anti-oppression approaches to education. She situates anti-colonial (and anti-racism) educations as being primarily about healing, about dealing with the people in front of you and about building community. She describes anti-oppression education as being about unlearning. karolyn does not position one as more necessary than the other, but makes it clear that anti-colonial education holds more potential for her. However, as her narratives reflect, the tension she encounters between these terms and between the divergent movements that build themselves around each term is absolutely linked to the ongoing colonization of Turtle Island. Magpie meanwhile expressly rejects anti-oppression education because of the tensions she encounters between the work she wants to do and the work she is expected to do. She situates herself outside of anti-oppression education as a facilitator (though uncomfortably so) precisely because she feels that within the discourse of anti-oppression, she cannot deal with the people who are in front of her. Although neither Min nor I expressly reject anti-oppression education, we experience similar tensions.

All of us find ourselves battling the work of hope narratives through the discourse of anti-oppression education. As the oppressive and dominating nature of hope’s discourse comes up against our positionality as marginalized facilitators, we find ourselves inhabiting a complicated nexus point: an overlap between the world as it is, and
the world we are trying to build. As this is in fact a place where hope dwells as well, this is the place in which our tensions, limitations and challenges as facilitators come to light. For Karolyn, her struggles with the articulation of epistemic power and authority in the classroom constitute one nexus point between the machinations of colonial hope discourses and the intention of her work. For Magpie, the transportable knowledge of the grid and the attendant uncertainty of teaching different ways of knowing form one of her knotty ties with the demands of colonial hope narratives. My own work struggles against the assimilation of meaning and product which marches alongside an engagement in dialogue with colonial narratives on their own terms. Min does battle with colonial discourses of hope as she attempts to forge supportive community which recognizes each person as a person, and not a potential activist or enemy while simultaneously continuing to engage in a political project of resistance. Looking at the relations between our reasons for facilitating, our hopes in facilitation (the things we value) and the challenges we face as facilitators, we uncover the thumbprint of hope. Each of these tensions characterize our understandings of, commitments to and reservations for community, as well. As we fight the individualized logic of western hope discourses, we work to situate ourselves in spaces of collectivity and dialogue, working to create sustainable or temporary spaces in which we might be coherent outside of dominant structures. These attempts are characterized by each interview participant as the site of greatest tension and greatest creativity. The hurts, betrayals, loves and lessons we earn and endure through our attempts at community-building underscore our sense of triumph or loss in our ongoing battles with western hope narratives.
This western hope is tied to colonial histories and interrupts spaces of resistance by promoting colonial dreams and promising survival in return for compliance. However, even in this contested space in which marginalized facilitators find ourselves tangled within competing agendas we are able to make meaning. Common to all of us as facilitators is a commitment to community building, meaningful engagement with our participants and resistance to dominant structures. For karolyn, each of these mean working towards the physical, political, spiritual and intellectual decolonization of Turtle Island. Land, non-human beings and others engaged with the same projects are central to the communities she seeks to build. For Magpie, it is the ways in which she interacts with her participants and the ways she understands them, reacts to them and facilitates transformation that create meaningful moments of community, engagement and resistance. I see my facilitation as a means by which organizations can open up space for their own ongoing community building, a series of catalysts or parts of larger moments. Min’s current teaching context is more sustained than the rest of ours, and so for her ongoing personal support, the creation and maintenance of a welcoming classroom atmosphere and a practice of truly respecting each of her learners constitutes her approach to community, meaningful engagement and resistance.

Despite the challenges and limitations that make our work fraught and always imperfect, each of us have had to (and continue to) develop facilitation styles and frameworks that allow us to challenge the colonizing work of western hope. Although the spaces in which our work comes in contact with western hope narratives are troubled, they are troubled because we work towards articulating different kinds of hope narratives. Our construction of these Othered hope narratives have not come out of academic study,
but out of our experiences as facilitators and people. As each of us locate our arrival at anti-oppression education out of moments which highlighted our marginality, so our tools of resistance come from the margins. In the next chapter, I explore through our narratives these tools and the anti-colonial hope narratives they help us construct.
Chapter Five – Anti-Colonial Transformation: Hoping Against Hope

Facilitation often becomes an intricate negotiation between conflicting agendas. Often, this takes the overt form of a consultation (or, occasionally, an argument) with our hiring organizations as to the specific goals of our workshop. If we are being contracted to run a board visioning, for example, do our facilitation obligations begin and end with drafting specific programmatic objectives for the organization’s coming year? Do we include material about ethical labour practices to frame discussion about organizational capacity? Do we schedule in a brief component to familiarize board members with the language of anti-oppression? According to what – and whose – priorities do we allot our workshop time and contextualize organizational hopes?

Magpie and I had long conversations with an organization that hired us to run just this kind of workshop only a month ago. The conversations were complicated and fraught, reinforcing for me once again that these questions are not simple logistical concerns, but broad ideological issues. These ideological issues come down in one way or another to the question of hope. Which strategies lead to which effects? Which effects are considered good, and which bad? Which strategies should we, as facilitators, employ to ensure good effects? Negotiations about workshop goals place facilitators in the role of product producer. The products being produced are changed people. In the context of anti-oppression education, the change in people is hoped to be a shift from oppressive to anti-oppressive individuals, from private citizens to activists engaged in fighting for their cause. These negotiations are often loaded, and they place a lot of pressure on facilitators, most of whom work as contract labourers and cannot afford to
lose contracts. These are not the only negotiations around goals, objectives and hope that we must engage in, however.

As the last chapter illustrated, more often – perhaps always – our personal objectives shift, expand and find meaning through negotiations with invisible but powerful and pervasive hope narratives. These narratives of course frame the discussions we have with organizations about what is realistic, reasonable and ethical to expect from anti-oppression based workshops. However, they also frame our discussions with ourselves as we plan and carry out our workshops, our discussions with our participants, and our participants’ discussions among themselves. The four of us participating in this study came to notice and articulate these discursive intrusions in various ways. The interventions of hope into our work generally manifested as tensions, obstacles and points of contention (as the previous chapter illustrates). This chapter takes up the concept of anti-colonial hopings, including some of the ways we have dealt with these tensions; some of the emotional, spiritual and practical spaces we have built outside of them; and some of the truly transformative work our facilitation does, even in the face of powerful, pervasive, institutional and colonizing western hopes. It combs through our narratives, hunting out spaces, often temporary, out of which still grow divergent, subversive, humanizing and nurturing narratives of hope, which lend themselves to decolonization. I introduce first the notion of anti-colonial hopings, and then situate this notion within our practices.

**Anti-colonial Hopings: Resisting through Living, or Living through Resistance?**

I originally picked up Amitav Ghosh’s *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1997) as “down time” reading while I worked on the interviews and transcriptions for this study. It surprised
me how deeply the book’s narrative impacted me, and how closely its premises mirrored the framework I was struggling to articulate, in the hopes of redeeming hope.

Ghosh’s works have generally been well-received by critics and readers. His novels and theoretical works are widely known and widely read – with the exception of *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1997). Not only was this book prodigiously difficult to find – I ended up ordering it from a used book seller in England out of sheer curiosity – it was also poorly received. None of the reviews I uncovered from mainstream sources were notable; and, it seemed, none of these sources had considered the book particularly notable either. The blogosphere was another story. On a livejournal community dedicated to the review of theory, fiction, and children’s books written by people of colour, a blogger referred to the work as “unethical” (“March books,” 2010). Fascinated, I probed further and found dozens of reviews from across the globe. Though none of the other reviews referred to the work as unethical, all of them agreed on two things: the book was confusing, and no westerner could have written this book.

I wondered if the charge against the novel’s ethics might be related in any way to the general agreement that the narrative of the book was decidedly non-western. Literary critics have referred to the work as post-colonial science fiction (50books_poc, 2010). The livejournal community I mentioned is a locked community that moderates the use of its discussion forum according to the rules of anti-oppression. Therefore, the description of Ghosh’s supposedly post-colonial novel as unethical by a blogger apparently concerned with the ethics of anti-oppression held special interest for me, in particular next to the claims that there was something about his story that was intrinsically un-western. What are the ethics of post or anti-colonial, non-western story-telling?
Ghosh’s story-line is complex. In a near-future time, a lonely and aging Egyptian man carries out the tedious details of a massive archiving project for a major multinational corporation concerned with water. As readers, we know very little about this future, as most of the plot unfurls in a series of flashbacks. What we do know is that Antar lives and works in a time when industrialism has failed, and the world’s largest corporation is (among other things) sorting through the rubble, carefully categorizing everything it finds, from machine parts to pen caps. Antar, reflecting on a visit to his remote village in Egypt years before by a Polish archaeologist, concludes that the corporation wishes to have the last word; to categorize, name and describe everything from their recent past in their own words, so that future generations would know them as they themselves wished. This theme of naming, interpellation and self-determination runs strongly through the novel and is troubled and played with in unique ways.

As Antar works from his dingy apartment in New York – his computer uploads images of recovered artefacts, and Antar oversees their categorization – he is sent an old ID card to analyse. As he studies it, he realises it belonged to an old colleague of his, a peculiar man obsessed with the history of malaria. Fascinated, Antar remembers a bizarre conversation he’d had with the man, Murugan, who was determined to be in New Delhi on World Mosquito Day, at the site at which Ronald Ross first discovered that malaria was transmitted by an insect. In a fast-paced, often confusing and always interesting blur of events spanning centuries, readers follow Murugan’s theory and its characters across eastern India in a complicated dance. Murugan believes that the British colonialist, Ross, who the world believes made one of the biggest medical breakthroughs of all time, was in fact a pawn in someone else’s game. Who’s game? asks Antar.
What if you came from a culture that believed silence to be the ultimate knowledge, the ultimate truth? And what if, believing that silence was the ultimate knowledge, you also believed that speaking – naming, categorizing, interpellating – materially changed reality? Murugan, and gradually the reader, believe this to be true. That in fact a group of believers, made up of Untouchables, cleaning women, migrant workers, and orphan children, knew more about malaria than Europeans and controlled their colonizers’ movements, feeding them discoveries at convenient moments, in order to change the material world enough to allow them to accomplish their goals. And what are their goals? Not glory, not fortune – not even resistance or freedom. Despite their obvious power, the group remains in marginalized conditions, as though “bettering” their circumstances had never occurred to them. Like their worldview, their aims have nothing to do with Europeans. They do not exist in western hope narratives; they are striving neither for redemption nor acclaim nor transcendence. Their aim, rather, is eternal life, born of many impermanent deaths and achieved through a constant subverting of subjectivity and blending of souls.

It is perhaps this element that elicits the label “unethical.” Life and death are viewed differently in the narrative of the spiritual group we fleetingly encounter, and neither are held as sacred according to western traditions. Interestingly, however, the only lives lost in the novel are British lives, all of whom perished in attempts to harm or undermine their colonized servants. Of the Indigenous lives that are drawn into the plans of the group, it is unclear if any are lost, though a few are ended. Souls are merged in and through bodies, creating different people, different subjectivities, though always with very informed consent. Thus, subjectivities are altered or destroyed as an act of creation.
rather than subjugation. Perhaps what has confused, repulsed, offended, and unnerved so many is not that it is poorly written or penned with malicious discursive intent, but that it exists so far outside of western hope narratives. Perhaps this fact makes it difficult for readers to relate intimately to Ghosh’s mysterious group, dedicated to worshipping the knowledges of silence. Unlike the institutions housing and keeping the gates of western knowledges, this group does not look to name or to categorize, except as a means of changing the very thing they name. Even then, they do not undertake this task themselves, but guide westerners in doing so.

The hope embodied in the story of this novel is difficult to articulate outside of its storyline. The pieces of plot that I have rehashed here, and my framing of it alongside reactions to the text perhaps accomplish a partial conveyance of its texture, its character. It is what I would call one kind of anti-colonial hoping, a decentralized, constantly reinventing sort of hope which exists outside of western discourse – perhaps outside of all discourse, given the importance of silence – emerging from colonized peoples but existing for reasons far greater, far more complex and far more inscrutable than the simple opposition of power. It is within such frameworks of hopings and with Ghosh’s silence in mind that I set about articulating the anti-colonial hopings of myself and the facilitators I interviewed.

Facilitating Anti-Colonial Hopings

From the work of George Dei, Njoki Wane, and Amitav Ghosh, among many other Indigenous and migrant people concerned with non-European ways of knowing, I have been able to draw a distant picture of what anti-colonial hopings might look like. The work of this project and the thoughts, experiences and wisdoms of the facilitators I
have interviewed have brought that distant picture closer, and given it concrete form. I term anti-colonial hopings as “hopings” rather than “hope” because the picture I see paints them as plural, and as ongoing processes. These hopings are contextualized within diverse and sometimes divergent principles and actions that differ from facilitator to facilitator, but share in common two important aspects. One, anti-colonial hopings are necessarily open-ended and half finished, and therefore difficult to articulate in individual contexts. They are co-constructed from workshop to workshop and moment to moment through the process of facilitation and engagement, and therefore always changing and developing, both personally and in collectivities. And two, anti-colonial hopings are always understood as one (or a few) of many, a facet of a larger construct, or of many larger constructs.

In this way, anti-colonial hopings challenge western modernist Truth narratives, while maintaining that truths exist. They also confront the myth that everything can or should be known, by placing our own lives and dreams within a context too expansive to ever be quantified. This makes faith and spirituality integral aspects of anti-colonial hopings, though not in the manner of traditional Christianity, whose hopes were both clear and knowable. Anti-colonial hopings trouble linear dimensionality, offering different understandings of the future, aspiration, death, living, and reproduction. While western hope narratives, including the hope narratives of anti-oppression education, are contextualized by monotheistic (or atheistic) and teleological relationships to the universe, anti-colonial hopings (as I am framing them here) may include these aspects, but are contextualized by much more than them. Consequently, monotheism and
teleology as built by western colonialism find their powers dissipated or gone in anti-colonial hopings.

In our work as marginalized facilitators based in anti-oppression politics, our often unarticulated notions of, or relationships to, anti-colonial hopings rarely emerged in opposition to the colonial work of western hope (which, given the oppositional focus of anti-oppression politics, is perchance one reason they have been so difficult to parse). However, the fact that our conceptions of anti-colonial hopings were not constructed in opposition to a perceived structure strengthened our ways of hoping outside of western constructs. It is a commonly misconstrued notion that western discourse, being pervasive, must touch, affect, and interpellate everything. Along with Ghosh and myriad Others, our facilitation practices prove this not to be the case. As Ghosh beautifully illustrates in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, it is possible for discourse and dreaming to exist outside of western narratives. Existing outside of, rather than simply in opposition to, is imperative if generative processes are to occur. As Magpie and karolyn note in their interviews, the kind of facilitation and community education that they participate in is a generative process. Both of them contextualize the generative nature of their facilitation within the framework of anti-colonial hoping; such a hope discourse allows us to create spaces in our facilitation practices that exist for our own sakes.

Although there were strong similarities between the ways each of us articulated pieces of anti-colonial hoping, I will divide this chapter by facilitator, as I did with the last. The grid undergirding anti-oppression politics and education may be reductionist, but in no way am I looking to suggest that our life experiences do not shape our thoughts and actions. That is one reason I am choosing to separate our words here. Each
facilitator brings different experiences of marginalization and privilege, and I do not wish to erase or subsume any of these. Additionally, every person whose voice is represented here is vibrant, intelligent and filled with personality and it is very important to me that each of their voices stand out and take shape here.

Min: Transformative Survival, Transforming Survival

For Min, anti-colonial hope found expression in the way she overlapped themes of community, support, or solidarity, and co-constructed learning through her practice. Min consistently challenged the harmful impacts that linear and absolutist conceptions of power had on marginalized communities and individuals. She geared her facilitation practice towards creating a space in which she could draw out from the learners what directions they wished to move in, according to their own hopes and dreams for the future. This technique challenges traditional hope narratives in a few ways. Most immediately apparent is that learners themselves create the agenda for the learning space – a practice which is often plugged by mainstream and anti-oppression educations, but which actually requires a decentring of the political aims of the institutions who control learning spaces in order to function. Min accomplishes this by decentring her own personal goals, as well as the goals of the institution in whose space she facilitates:

One of the learners in my class, his name is Adam, he’s um, he’s a second career student which means, you know, he’s lost his job. And he has a small scholarship but it’s very restricted in what he can learn and how he can learn it. Yeah, so you know he’s worked as a personal support worker for 25 years and he’s coming back to school cause he wants to get a nursing diploma, he wants to go into nursing. And he came to me today and he said
“Min can I speak to you outside for a bit” and I said sure and he said “I wanna ask you this cause in my experience in this last two weeks you’re the most level-headed person that I’ve met.” I said ok and he said “here’s my struggle. I have to do the math and science, I’m feeling so overwhelmed by the math and science and your class I’m finding it’s the easiest one for me to go through and even though it’s so enjoyable and, but I’m just really I’m so frustrated by the math and my ability at math and I’m just getting tripped over the words, I don’t know what to do.” And, you know, he’s just a calm man and I’ve never seen him in the two weeks that I’ve known him to look so frazzled and I said “well would it work for you if right now you don’t worry about English, I’m not taking you off the roster, just still as far as anybody in the system is concerned, you are coming to English class, I’m marking you present every day. Right, go to your math and science and do it full time. Do it for a week, do it for two weeks, know that you’re always welcome back in English class cause I don’t want you to lose out, on getting the certificate for the English. I also have seen some of your writing stuff, you really don’t need to be here. I love having you in our class cause you know you’re so great you bring such a great perspective. I’m happy if you and I were to work something out so that you do your math and science and maybe every once in a while when you wanna take a break from them and your brain is just soggy from all that information, if you feel like writing a reflection, if you do, I will give you that certificate.” Right, so I know
where I have certain power that I could use and I use it in a particular way, right.

In this case, the decentring taking place is occurring outside of the classroom. It is not a function of the group dynamic or the immediate teaching space, but it is clearly an important component of the way Min builds relationships with learners, and the ways those relationships mediate learning spaces. Min values generative relationships as a component of her practice, and interactions such as these certainly affect the way in which her overall classroom functions. In fact, it is telling that all the narratives Min shared with me were specifically one-on-one stories; she did not attempt to guess at the relationships which develop between her learners, nor did she attempt to dismiss the impact her role as “instructor” plays in affecting her relationships. Instead, she focused on several individual relationships with learners as themselves important and illustrative of her approach. This emphasis indicates that she values each participant and hir goals separately, but also that the give-and-take of subjectivity necessary to developing trusting relationships underscores her approach to learning. The continual development of trust and negotiation of relationships that Min centres as a means by which to challenge the coloniality of traditional classroom roles lends itself to an anti-colonial way of hoping. Embedded within her negotiations with her learners is a continued process of articulating and re-articulating joint and individual hopes of learning and growing.

Another important aspect of traditional hope narratives challenged by Min’s approach is the mobilization of a language of authority in which to articulate claims to, or

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6 Hir and zhe are gender-neutral pronouns, used when the speaker is unsure of the gender of the person they are referring to, or when the person in question identifies outside of the gender binary. Hir indicates the same grammatical meaning as his or her, while zhe replaces he or she.
experiences of, oppression. Such authoritative use of language is a habit for which anti-oppression education has come under scrutiny. Although there are times when the language of anti-oppression can be useful, such scrutiny is often extremely warranted.

Min discusses her negotiations with language on her arrival to Canada and to anti-oppression activism, and its impact on her perception of her experiences:

"By the time I came to Canada as a twenty year old, having had those experiences but not having the language around it, not having – right, a language that is very particularized in the North American context, that as a university student I became exposed to language about anti-racism and was able to relate that language around homophobia and racism and all those things to connect it to myself….Right, as a, as a person who, like a brown person, I didn’t think I could experience racism. You know, I’d seen on TV, growing up in Singapore, racism was about civil rights, it was something Black people experienced, right. So that was the only correlation I had to racism. So, I thought, I was like, “oh my god, I just experienced racism.”"

With the issue of language comes the issue of authority. Who is allowed to define anti-oppression, generally? Who can lay claim to the term? And (related though separately), how do we as marginalized people make our experiences coherent to ourselves and in the face of dominating power? In what language must we do this? As Min struggles with these questions and their implications, she maps out her own understandings of and approaches to anti-oppression education and resistance. Anti-oppression gave Min the language to coherently name the oppression she experienced, and provided her with a community from within which to resist oppressive regimes. However, it also pushes its
own agendas with the language – language which is value-laden but opaque. Min deftly deals with this tug of war over the meaning she works to create, locating anti-oppression out of her own history, rather than situating herself within its history. She takes up resistance as transformation, as survival on each person’s terms based on the spaces within which they choose to locate themselves. Rather than attempting to group all histories under the language of anti-oppression education, Min opens room for divergent agendas, forms of survival and approaches to transformation:

I worked at a Neighbourhood Learning Centre. And the agency was so small that there were two staff. There was the full-time executive director and there was me, the part time staff and I worked there 20 hours a week. My job there was to, I facilitated um, a learning group that all happened to be women, and it was a bridging program. It, it just happened that it was a group a women, I had a group of women, it was a cohort of women. So, you know, all excited and in the first few weeks, uh, one of the things that we’d been doing was I decided that I would ask the women what they wanted to learn. And then we built the list, and then we talked about all of the things that were relational to what they wanted to learn and the kinds of activities I could bring in. So we’re doing this and one of the women put up her hand and she said “I really want to know, learn, how to read my son’s report card when he comes home from school. Cause sometimes, when I look at it, I don’t understand it and then I have to go to the parent-teacher day and talk to the teachers and it makes me feel stupid.” And, and so I was like oh that’s great, a very functional real learning activity. So, as I’m talking I’m
like you know and there I go off, I go off on this rant, right, about you know systemic racism and breaking down systems and structures, and I’m going off on this diatribe, well obviously not present in my body, right, going on, and then suddenly I look and all the women are just, they’re just like – you know some of them have lost interest cause I’m standing on my soapbox right and then, that woman she’s like, “you know, I really don’t know what you’re talking about, I just want to know how do I talk to that teacher that’s telling me my son’s stupid, but I know he’s not stupid, she’s just saying that cause he’s Black. I just wanna know that.” And it was such a huge learning moment for me! That was, I was like, what are you doing? It all became about me, and I think that’s the big lesson that I’ve learned, when I’m in that classroom, it’s not about me. Right, or, and I use classroom cause I teach in a classroom right now but when I’m in a learning space, as the role of a facilitator it is not about me at all. It’s not about me at all. And so and she was brave to call me out on that. That took a lot of bravery and courage to say I don’t know what you’re talking about, I just wanna know how to I not feel stupid talking to my son’s teacher when I know she’s clearly being racist to me? And so, so that’s when I really, it started making me think about ways and strategies to support learners to navigate the system.

Insofar as radical education is viewed as productive to activist goals, it is imbued with the hope of converting more activists. Radical educators are expected to affect a specific form of change in the minds of participants; this is the work of the hope narrative in anti-oppression educational practices. Although it is tempting for radical educators to try and
sell a certain kind of critical thinking to our learners, Min works to ensure that each individual calls the shots for themselves. She defies the call within anti-oppression thinking to push the prioritization of defiance of systems over survival within systems. She remains committed herself to certain kinds of hoping and resistance, as her narratives in chapter four reflect, but she dialogues with her learners to discover what their priorities are, and to work them into her system of hoping. As commitments to community and support drew her to anti-oppression, so they continue to mediate her practice. These commitments imbue her work with a loving patience, born of needfulness through the experiences of living in marginalized communities:

Like everyday of our flipping existence, as, as marginalized bodies in this environment, and specifically for me as a queer body, you know, as a survivor, all those things, every day, you get up and you put this armour on and you go out and you deal, right. And to have that [abuse] happen and it’s within your own community or within the community of colour or other people you have an affinity with or an allyship with, it hurts. It is debilitating, right. But I always have to, right, go back to that, contextualize it as “this is what oppression has done.” And I don’t know if like, maybe it’s not post-modernist enough, cause you know there’s some things I like about post-modernism, but there’s some things that just don’t gel with me and I know that those however they choose to, how they’re behaving, it may not be a choice. It may be a reaction, right, to things, we’re always constantly reacting to the pain and the oppression that’s around us. And because I don’t know how to shift and change that, I can only work on
myself to, to take care of myself and to support myself with people, or, or, other beings that, that want to love and care. And, and I don’t know if I’m speaking in abstracts, but its really, like, taking care of yourself is the most important lesson I’ve learned. And we are so not good at doing that. As women of colour, as like, as marginalized women and queer women, I mean jeez, we are expected to hold everyone’s pain. Right. And it’s ok to hold, like you know if we, we have a particular relationship, and we have a relationship of care and compassion, that I hold some things for you that you can’t hold. That maybe you’re in a place of crisis right now, I will hold that for you. Right, but when that holding is forced on to you, when people are forcing that kind of stuff on to you – you can’t. You can’t do it. And that’s not like an abdication of, of any kind of responsibility to community, to change, all those things right. But like our daily living is, just like our daily living is hard enough. It’s hard enough, let’s learn to be kind to ourselves.

For Min, the practice of seeing each learner as a person and accepting their desires, convictions and hopes even when they rub against her own is a practice adopted for her own soul’s sake. It is the ground from which she seeks to build sustainable relationships. Therefore, it is integrated in and understood through her life experiences, and makes her truly a part of the learning space, inasmuch as her role as professor allows, while preventing her from becoming the arbiter of that space.

Min’s facilitation style reflects the participants who make up her learning group. She remains open to challenge from them, and maintains a classroom atmosphere in which participation in co-construction of goals and active consent are integral factors.
Her commitment to community and solidarity are realised through this approach – the approach itself, and its adept navigation of the myriad colonial tensions Min experiences in her work are together an act of resistance. These commitments, and the actions that demonstrate them, dwell in anti-colonial spaces, being shaped by ongoing and co-constructed processes which demand constant negotiation between subjectivities, rather than the unequivocal subjugation of difference before a common cause.

Zahra: Process, Relationships, Community

My experiences of anti-colonial hopings in workshop settings are deeply linked into the tensions and sour experiences that called the formation of relationships around bigger political projects into question for me. I spoke about the former in my first interview, conducted by Magpie. I talked about anti-colonial hopings in a later interview, and my tone was very different. A friend suggested that as I swing from irritation verging on anger in the first interview to thoughtful uncertainty in the second; perhaps the subjects that I was speaking about felt disconnected from each other for me, zhe wondered. However, reading over the transcripts I feel there is actually a deep connection, and that the disparate emotions and ways of speaking mirror the ongoing tension between the damage I see caused by colonial hope, and the promise I find in anti-colonial hopings.

Through my interviews, I situated moments of anti-colonial hoping as times or acts during which the tension between external agendas and the bodies in the space we inhabit were collapsed, and something new began to grow:

You know how there are certain elements of your work that you just kind of take for granted? For me these tend to be the parts I’m most proud of, or like think are most indispensable. But then they seem so regular, so
common sense, that I don’t really think about them as mine. They aren’t my intellectual brainchildren. They come from, I don’t know, instinct or at the risk of being totally corny, the heart… For me, I think what I would identify as anti-colonial hopings, or as really good practice or whatever, are these moments of connection. Do you feel suddenly strongly invested in the people around you? Are people suddenly listening to each other with new ears? Did our voices become visible? When we told stories, was there a moment when the content of the story didn’t matter anymore, when we were paying attention instead to the way the person told it, the pain, the fear, the desire for understanding? I don’t know if that’s clear enough theoretically, but that’s the feeling, the sense, that I get when I feel like I’ve had a moment in a workshop – or anywhere really – where genuine engagement with and caring for one another took over bigger political projects, and for a moment it didn’t matter what side you might be on and we weren’t trying to convince anyone of anything, we were just being solid together. Like, solidarity because life is hard and we want to help each other survive, not solidarity because we’re planning this event and we have no one to like do the snacks table so lets make friends with this other organization and get some political cred and extra help. You know?

I don’t position this attitude within the context of a larger discourse in my interview, but reading over the transcripts later, I realize that the way in which I discuss these moments describe them as instances of great clarity and connection, as though external barriers had been suddenly but temporarily removed:
I was facilitating this workshop in Guelph. It was supposed to be an anti-racism 101, your general training for staff, board and volunteers at the gender centre there. So I arrived there like super early in the morning, I had to take the like 7am bus to get there and run a 9am workshop and I was dying from sleepiness and feeling really anti-social. I was like well at least its just an easy workshop, I’ll just deliver the material and eat a sandwich and go home, right. I really didn’t feel up to engaging very deeply, I was so wiped – I think it had been a really busy week or something…but once I got in there I kind of forgot about everything else. I don’t know why, and I don’t think there is any tangible or logical reason why, it just happens sometimes when everybody’s energies mesh so well with one another, and people are groovin on being there, and I don’t know the coffee is brewed just right or something. There were only five people there including the co-ordinator…I had been told there would be like 20 people in the workshop and so I had planned activities that required more people than I had to work with. We didn’t get past the first activity. And it was so, so good…everyone’s energies just aligned, and like not in a way where everyone was agreeing with each other, but everyone was listening to each other. That’s so much more important. You’re unlikely to agree with most people if you actually listen, but agreement is just a cheap answer anyway…it’s important though that three of the five people who attended were people of colour, and they said that this was the first time at Guelph they had been to an event that turned out to be all people of colour…One
moment I remember clearly was an interaction between two of the women of colour present. One was telling a story about how leaving her Lebanese family and community was the only way she felt like she could be part of a diverse society, and how her culture had been holding her back. The other woman picked up on the thread, saying that she felt the same way about her Chinese background, and that her culture just in its character was closed off to outsiders. The women pursued their connection, bonding over the way they were now treated as outsiders in their culture and their mutual conviction that leaving cultural ties was the only way to be in control of their self identity. There was something strained about the stories themselves, even though the women were obviously excited to share them with each other. Without thinking, I asked them whether they felt like they had left a culture or whether they had moved from one cultural framework into another? If I’d thought about it, I wouldn’t have taken the stories on so casually, like so conversationally. As a facilitator, you always have to remember that even if the rhetoric of anti-oppression says you have no more authority in the room than anyone else, you almost always do. In weird, contested ways sometimes, but it’s still there. Usually, I wouldn’t have responded to a situation in the way I did, but it turned out it was the best thing for the situation…Like they were just waiting for someone to give them permission to speak up about the violence of colonial culture, that it is a culture, it exists and that they are stuck in difficult positions. And the best thing was that I don’t really think it was permission. I don’t know how to
describe it, but it felt more like a moment in which I, as an older woman of colour – in that instance! – who came from an immigrant background and had been exposed to those same narratives and had had the time and privilege to move past them in certain ways was put in a situation where I had the ability to open a door they were already ready to walk through. A moment of connection, not a relationship of dependence. Anyway, it was great, really different than some of the other moments I’ve had with friends and peers around racial awareness that have really been about forming shitty dependencies on one another when we barely had the resources to manage ourselves.

Reflecting on this, I can see the language of connection and prayer stemming from Sufi teachings my grandfather shared with me when I was younger. Although I was not couching the overlap between process-oriented workshop approaches (and the momentary relationships they help build) within a specific overarching discourse, I was very much connecting my hoping to narratives of healing and connection that stem from Hindu and Islamic roots:

Another super moment was in a for-realz 101 workshop, with like 40 people attending. It was for the provincial board training of OIPRG. It was a super long workshop, but one thing I remember was as we were talking about cultural appropriation, this white boy, who had started off confused and earnest and had gotten steadily more confused and more desperately earnest, burst out and said, “but then what should I do, should I just stay in the suburbs?” I think with a different tone, different body language, different
many things, the question would have come off really different. Like, dismissive, minimizing, trivializing, you know. But instead it just sounded kind of desperate and really, really sad. Although at the time I was very much affiliated with like politics that were kind of all about fuck whitey, yes, we should quarantine you in the suburbs, I didn’t really feel like reacting to him in that way. What I mean is, in that moment, he seemed like a human to me, a person, not like a symbol of oppression or something. I got that he felt really locked in, and almost scared and like he didn’t know how to move without replicating white supremacy. I mean, it’s a lot to take on! And I think it’s important that he didn’t actually go into it. He didn’t tell us that, it was just, even in a packed room of 40 people there was this like pause. I was speaking to some of the people of colour afterwards, some of the POCs from the workshop and we were like, “yeah, I guess if we have to work with white people, we’d rather work with folks like that.” I think we were kind of dismissive in the words we used, at least as far as I was concerned. Because it’s hard to really articulate what it means to suddenly feel like through humanizing someone else, you yourself feel more human. Its so dangerous, you feel like oh, white people will start to think that anti-racism can be all about them and we POCs just need to learn how to love them and oppression will be over or some shit. That overlay makes it so hard to speak, makes it hard to take a risk and say, hey, I’ve discovered something neat about not being totally protectionist, about connecting with people. So it’s easier, it’s better to just communicate with silence. We get
the meaning from each other, anyway. We just speak things differently, cause language…well, speaking is just one part of language, right?

Here again, I am framing important workshop moments, moments of relating to one another generatively and building fleeting-but-invaluable communities within a Sufi narrative of humanizing and healing. Even as I read the excerpt over, however, I feel in my body how very difficult it is to give voice to such moments. Dominant narratives and prescribed meaning press against the ability to make new meaning or connect to old meanings that live outside of colonial spaces. Moments like the one I describe above allow such meanings to live, but it is difficult to transport them from lived experience into colonial, colonizing language. These tenuous moments cannot have meaning made of them through the logic of solidarity for the sake of a larger political project. They are characterized by a feeling that becomes flat and insufficient when it is pressed into language. It is from these moments of incoherent feeling that I find anti-colonial hoping beginning to grow, weaving across the gaps between workshops and instants and coming together to form something bigger.

karolyn: Building Community Hopings

karolyn situated her approach to anti-oppression based education firmly within community building initiatives and activism. She also resisted strongly the impetus to quantify, name, or label her position and her work within the discourse of “capital A” activism or “capital A-O” anti-oppression. These overlapping commitments are important in contextualizing karolyn’s strong sense of anti-colonial hoping, and the impact of such hoping in her practice. Locating herself in community allows her to focus
her energy on generative projects, or on the generative elements of deconstructive projects:

By which I mean that I’m very fucking sceptical that it [anti-oppression education in a western framework] is useful. Because like I don’t know I tend to feel like the master’s tools aren’t so useful. I think there’s a lot of power to be created in constructing your own tools, or using your own tools that maybe you’ve already had, um, that are I don’t know can be invisibilized or taken away from you or whatever. And just I don’t know, there’s a lot to be said for creating power instead of borrowing power or shifting it. Like, um, I don’t think that power is something that is finite and that if I grapple with power institutions and gain some power that means they’re less powerful, like I don’t think of it in those terms. And I think there’s always moments and spaces to be creating your own power and using your own tools and having your own voice.

karolyn focuses her language on developing strength and capacity outside of colonial frameworks in order to resist. However, she is not arguing for a simply oppositional politic or approach. Underlying her conviction that effective resistance must come from outside of dominating structures is the certainty that such spaces are possible, are in existence, and that they can be rediscovered, nourished and added to as we live within them. karolyn situates these moments of creation and resistance in moments of community building:

Every workshop I’ve facilitated that ends in people saying lets go out for dinner together, I think of that as a big success...and you know I’ve seen
things happen like lets, lets send a piece of paper around the room and we’ll all put our emails on it and one of us will email the rest of us and we’ll all keep track of each other. And just like little things like that which I think for me was like mostly signifiers of like you are not alone in this white space, right, and uh, you know, we exist. Which is huge, like that can be huge and is so important like for mental health. So, those are like my favourite moments, that there is this interest in a sustained community building.

These generative moments in which tenuous connection are formed in an alienating world are instances of existing “outside of” as well as “in opposition to.” As karolyn discusses them, she does not construct them simply in terms of what they are not, but instead in terms of their possibilities, their gifts, and their hopes. They are by no means always fully-realized systems and discourses, but are more often simply moments in time that hang outside of colonial frameworks. Although karolyn acknowledges that sustainability is a limitation with regards to these moments, she is unwilling to dismiss their potential:

I definitely think facilitation is community work. I mean, yeah you’re not going to have a two hour workshop and have everyone have major epiphanies and change their lives and go out and change the world. But it is community work…it’s just not as visible. And I think that the most immediate thing about it that lends itself to community work is that you create this a space for people to get together, and to talk. And like in that moment, in that space, like you are a community together.
karolyn’s focus on community requires that she draw together many different kinds of perspectives, concerns, and authority in her workshop practice. Her resistance to wield specific kinds of authority in her facilitation style speaks to this. And, despite the fact that circumstances demand that karolyn interact with such kinds of authority regardless, she does succeed in challenging mono-centric models of authority. As she strives to build community, even momentarily, she utilizes workshop tools which promote the creation of foundations of understanding and empathy, and which work to break down the walls of individualism that make solidarity so difficult. She notes:

Stories are a really concrete way that we could have anti-oppression workshops that are using other cultural frameworks to deliver that right…and often I find that the things that people want to bring to the table, or relate or the things that they can relate on the basis on are really different from my experience. Like, I don’t know what migration is like, I don’t know what moving is like. So, yeah, like in those moments I find that I, even though I’m positioned as an expert educator, and even if I bring Indigenaity to the table, I just don’t get a lot of what is said so. Which is why I think its like so much more useful to be a facilitator or like in a support position where I can be like “that was great, thanks for sharing, does anybody else have an experience like that that they’d like to share”? In this way, karolyn gently decentres her own authority, even in the face of the tokenization, racism, and infantilization she experiences as an Indigenous woman working in community education. As karolyn finds herself losing discursive control as a facilitator, she turns to her participants to fill the gap. In fact, it seems that in some
contexts, her loss of discursive control cannot be considered a deficit, but instead a mechanism by which to organically grow multicentric forms of authority, knowing, and narrative. By building community (even temporarily) around a departure from rather than return to sameness, karolyn challenges the basis of community construction in colonial frameworks. Through this, she also opens access to the construction of hoping, as each story creates its own narrative, and the addition of stories adds to and changes that narrative, until a space is filled with multicentric narratives of hoping without individual ownership and continually under construction.

karolyn’s reluctance to overtly articulate her work as a thing in the world, with a name and boundaries, is another important element of her ongoing construction of anti-colonial approaches to hoping. The difficulty we are often met with in articulating anti-colonial thoughts in colonial languages is of course a result of structural oppression. However, karolyn’s resistance to articulation was not simply a result of this difficulty. Like Ghosh, it seems karolyn finds power in certain shades of silence. As her narratives on the issue here and in chapter four reflect, karolyn is not a hapless victim of silencing structures, but a capable person who chooses to reject the reifying, quantifying effects of naming. Certainly tied to her multicentric approach to facilitation and to her own commitment to anti-colonial creation and discomfort with mono-centric authoritative voice, this abdication of narrative ownership allows karolyn to open space for issues such as land, spirituality, and the spirit injury of colonization, issues which balk at imprisonment within colonial meanings. karolyn’s arrival narrative embodies this process eloquently. She constructs herself as Indigenous in relation to the land, to unspoken knowledges and lost languages, to the other living things imbued by spirit by
which we are surrounded. This identity exists outside the colonial framework; it is brought into opposition by the violence of colonizing systems, but is real in the world on its own and without reference to dominating power.

Although pieces of her interviews with me, such as her arrival story, highlight this, karolyn’s relationships to certain forms of silence and the power that lies therein are expressed throughout her narratives. The issues she frames within discourse and those she does not are all telling. They are not reflective of confusion or uncertainty alone, as karolyn’s confident and self-reflexive demeanour affirm. They are also reflective of her understanding that certain narratives cannot be easily or properly understood through the fragmenting lens of colonial language. Her reluctance to quantify her practice, and her generative uncertainty around settling simple definitions for terms like “anti-colonial” are speaking examples of this.

These assessments may seem to contradict karolyn’s use of storytelling as an anti-colonial medium through which to decentre authority and allow a profusion of discourse. The two are, however, intimately linked. The processes through which karolyn engages her participants challenges a form of power that silences in order to erase. Her simultaneous resistance to reifying such processes honours the importance of the spaces created by her workshops, and the real diversity of narrative offered by her participants. These non-Eurocentric approaches to prioritizing agendas for hoping in anti-oppression education create possibilities for hoping in ways that are not permissible under “mainstream” anti-oppression models that mobilize hope though prescriptive frameworks.
Magpie: Hopeful Transformations

Although expressions of anti-colonial hope were rife through all the interviews I conducted, Magpie was the first person who overtly articulated a narrative that spoke to me like anti-colonial hoping. It was one of the earlier interviews in my fieldwork, and we were sitting on her front porch with the recorder perched precariously on the bench between us. As often happened with Magpie through our interviews, a discussion about faults, limitations, losses, and mistakes turned suddenly into a moment of unexpected inspiration. Because anti-colonial hopings are so difficult to articulate, language necessitating the forced adoption of some measure of linearity, Magpie related this moment as a story. It was one of her early experiences as a facilitator and it has since framed the development of her facilitation style, as that development has framed the telling of her story:

Well, one participant in a trans workshop, it was for a women’s centre that was undergoing its own transition. And so we were dealing with some of the myths about the impostor – like, what if someone walks in and they’re actually a man but they say they’re a trans person and they’re sort of invading the space and not belonging and stuff. It was really important to work through those myths, that’s what the workshop was for. Um, and I talked about identification and the importance of using self-identification and stuff. And the fear around invasion is that these people are going to treat you bad. Well, there’s women in this room who identify as women, who you would identify as women, who treat you bad. Closing the space, setting up fences, that doesn’t make you safe. Other things might make you
safe, but not that…and so another person, a woman of colour was asking me so what about people who look white, who identify as people of colour, is that the same thing? And I said well, I have to apply this principle across the board – of course I was uncomfortable and fidgeting a lot! – and then the first person who asked me about the impostor said “so, theoretically,” and she looked at me with this caution in her eyes, like are you saying what I actually believe you’re saying, “so theoretically, you know, because I heard a rumour that my great- great- great- somebody, you know, was Indigenous, I could identify as Indigenous?” And. Yeah. I remember saying, you know, why not? Not having fully thought through it but I had to be consistent to the principle I was presenting (chuckles). So again fidgeting and getting uncomfortable and stuff. And um, at that point I said its your identity, the way you identify is not about how safe I am with you. There’s links, but there’s not a necessary relationship. Um. I remember that particular participant because later on, she did come out as Métis. And she’s involved with a lot of Indigenous activism now and has been welcomed into a lot of circles…so, it was a trans workshop, and my goals for that workshop, I didn’t realise at the time how they were linked to mixed race identity…I didn’t anticipate or plan that kind of transformation. I saw it at the end of the workshop. We were both fumbling with it…and it is important to not predetermine all the transformations that happen in a space…it’s impossible to predetermine all the transformation that happen!
But not only is it impossible, it is necessary to go in with an attitude of not wanting to predetermine all the transformations.

Transformation, as Magpie defined, may be hoped for, but is not designed. They are not set up, premeditated or programmed. It was in fact a transformation which she herself noted made her slightly uncomfortable. And yet, she was able to recognize the transformation of a participant from white to Métis, and her own transformation as an anti-racist activist. She was able to recognize the importance it held for the individual involved and for the group, and it is a moment she looks back on with pride. The transformations Magpie facilitates are spontaneous and rise out interactions between and amongst participants and facilitators and at least partially react to the needs of the moment. They may or may not have anything to do with workshop structures and agendas, but importantly they arise from the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual weight that is brought into the space and grows from the space. It is significant to me that this was not a shift that Magpie sought to make space for or reward.

For Magpie, the performance of anti-colonial hopings has centred on her understanding of transformation, and her desire to facilitate transformations in her workshop participants. She refers to these processes of transformation as a kind of seduction. Anti-oppression seduces its converts through a buy-in based in an assertion of moral claims. It invites people into its politic based on a perceived sense of solidarity with and accountability to people around them. But Magpie has seen and experienced the many ways in which this kind of accountability is little more than an attractive theory, and so the transformations she invests in as a facilitator revolve around a different kind of buy-in: “For their own sake…for their own souls’ sake.” She works to facilitate ways in
which decolonizing, radical politics can be good for each person and their existing, imperfect and often abusive communities and relationships, rather than for an imagined ideal community.

The transformation that Magpie describes could easily be imagined within dominant individualistic frameworks. However, Magpie is very clear that while the transformations she hopes for in her workshops as personally focused and self-determined, they are also constructed within the context of relationships. It is simply that these relationships are mediated by a wish to be good and healthy according to fluid, ever-changing situational definitions, rather than according to prescribed political ones: “I like to think of it as a different kind of seduction. That, the way we treat each other is not in the first instance gonna be because a particular politic is a priority. It’s gonna be because it’s how people realise their own process of transformation, and I wanted to make that transformation seductive. You do this because it will make you feel good.”

For Magpie, meeting participants where they are is not simply a pedagogical tool that expedites the creation of teachable moments. It is an act of humility and humanity that helps Magpie centre her own personal convictions, making space for dialogue while simultaneously building trust, connection, and something more tangibly spiritual in the interaction between participant and facilitator. Meeting participants where they are is a journey, one which troubles and challenges western constructions of the self and the individual. It requires the subduing of the ego to some degree, but, as Magpie articulates and as Ghosh illustrates, this process is not one of simple altruistic giving without return. The journey and the moment of connection feed the ego also, opening up a facilitator’s subjectivity and broadening it in unexpected ways. Magpie said to me once that she
wished in the future to incorporate more aspects of spirituality actively in her facilitation. This practice of transformation, although not exactly a workshop tool or agenda item, is certainly that.

To date, Magpie has centred her hopeful workshop tools and agenda items on arts-informed approaches to open spaces for transformation to flourish. She moved into using the arts in her workshops as a means of centring the act of creation rather than deconstruction and of challenging the dispensation of transportable knowledge, with anti-oppression education encourages. Rather than doling out language in an anti-oppression 101 style, Magpie looks to reinforce temporary or situational knowing. More than this, she looks to help build multiple ways of knowing with her participants. As she first attempted to articulate this approach to me I misunderstood her and asked whether it was processes of unknowing which she concentrated on. She responded saying:

How not to know? I don’t automatically think that. Um, but I think of some of these questions here, some of the question [asked in a workshop] are: what sounds are you hearing? Like, what do you feel in your belly right now? Like, what do you feel on your skin? Like, what do you feel in your heart? It is knowing. It’s [a different kind of knowing] it’s not the transportable knowledge that, the banking education thing. It’s not the transportable knowledge that I give you. It’s like, what, what you do know, there’re all kinds of selves in you and there are all kinds of parts to your knowledge. Connect with all of them.

Magpie does not credit her use of the arts in workshops with inherently positive powers. Rather, she sees her employment of artistic media with her participants as a
means by which to shift the focus of the transformations being created in her workshop space. She explains that, “that’s why I moved into arts really, really, really quickly…I prefer the sectors that are all about creating something new… our lives will intersect with anti-oppression, we’ll be talking about oppression, but it will also be something else, right, it’s like something larger than the oppression, it doesn’t just start there.” Generative transformation overlays the themes that continue to draw Magpie to community education as activism.

The generative aspects of these transformations define the relationships Magpie strives to build with her participants through the use of art, dialogue and other facilitation strategies. She works to send participants out of educational spaces feeling better equipped to deal with their worlds than they did when they arrived: “[The workshop would] just be about how people are relating to someone, how people are relating to each other, in a split second and what they’re feeling and what’s coming up for them, and what the power looks like, and feels like and tastes like. Things like that.”

Learning from Magpie: Reflections on co-facilitation

Earlier this summer, in the midst of my many attempts to articulate what I am calling anti-colonial hopings, Magpie and I planned and co-facilitated a workshop for a gender advocacy centre. The contract was a wonderful opportunity for the two of us to exchange ideas and strategies, and gave me a glimpse into Magpie’s practice of anti-colonial hopings and facilitating transformations.

The workshop was commissioned as a board training, but had distinct undertones of conflict mediation and group dynamic work. The first couple of hours went smoothly, with some warm-up exercises and program planning. As we eased the group into a
discussion about organizational capacity, several interrelated conflicts flared up. We knew going into the workshop that conflict was inevitable. The organization wanted to steer clear of talk about labour politics, anti-oppression or group dynamics, focusing only on visioning. However, the board and staff were also deadlocked at that time in their bargaining processes for the staff’s collective agreement, and several organization members noted feelings of tension, hostility, and resentment between and among board and staff. Magpie and I worried over the practicality of facilitating a visioning for an organization that apparently had little idea of how they would function in the coming year.

Still more worrisome was the fact that board and staff had burst their facilitation budget hiring the two of us because they had heard of our process-oriented approaches. We assumed the attraction of this approach stemmed from a hope that we might be able to right some of the wrongness folks were feeling about their interpersonal dynamics. Our assumption was proven correct during our orientation meeting with the organization’s representatives. They told us they hoped to gain a sense of inspiration, energy, and unity from the workshop. Simultaneously, however, the organization tied our hands, asking us to deliver a product-oriented workshop and telling us not to worry about dynamics and process. Perplexed, frustrated, and sceptical, Magpie and I drafted two separate workshop agendas. One agenda centred the best of linear anti-oppression hopefulness, complete with unspecific but value-laden language, and focusing on a product. The second was process-oriented, and attempted to create a space in which participants could openly discuss the hopes that had constructed the first agenda, relate
those hopes to some of the problems the organization was undergoing, and perhaps begin a conversation about different kinds of hopings for the organization’s future.

We suspected tensions would mount around the time we began discussing capacity. As they exploded, however, we realized that neither of our agendas could competently deal with the outpouring of negative emotion that actually occurred. Magpie interrupted the quickly escalating quarrel raging between a board and staff member and asked the group to go around and comment on what they saw happening. As participants began speaking, tentatively, about the anger, the bullying, and the isolation they were seeing and feeling, I found myself struggling with the urge to reprimand certain participants and protect others. I found myself drawing my lines of alliance along the lines of the grid; as the tension mounted and I found myself in chaotic territory, I returned to the familiar to assign blame and mete out retribution. I restrained myself from speaking, and watched Magpie work instead.

Magpie seemed to have no interest in determining the right or wrong of the power struggle at play. She focused instead on drawing out of participants the various facets they saw to the struggle, the little details that changed its tone or complexion, or that allowed them to share their perspective with the other participants. As they spoke, they seemed to find themselves coming to their own conclusions about the impacts of their actions on one another. What then began as a momentary acknowledgement of responsibility and regret for causing harm turned into a two hour session, in which many participants involved in the struggle related stories of trauma or pain in order to contextualize their actions. At no point did the organization or any of the participants arrive (at least verbally) at a point at which they made broad claims about acceptable or
unacceptable behaviour, or right or wrong actions. Instead, they arrived at the perfectly
impermanent place of contextual understanding, and ended the workshop on a note of
tenuous peace. After the workshop, Magpie acknowledged to me that the peace would
not last and invited the organization to contact her if the need arose to deal with fall-out.
However, she said, the experience had hopefully generated two important experiential
tools for the group’s future: a moment of trust and understanding, and an exposure to one
process for bringing about such a moment.

**Generative Silence: Spaces Opened**

Each one of us has woven our narratives in layers of discourse. Most prominently, we
tap into anti-racist and anti-oppressive language to frame our narratives, even as we talk
about anti-colonial issues. Squinting closely at the layers, it is possible to see the myriad
tensions that characterize our individual and community relationships to discourses of
anti-racism and anti-oppression. These tensions sometimes stem from the everyday
difficulties faced by marginalized people, simply living. Sometimes, they stem from the
everyday difficulties faced by marginalized people, resisting. Often, they are made
manifest by an inability to make meaning of ourselves in dominant frameworks.

In the last chapter, I explored the undercurrent of hope narratives that made
engagement with mainstream anti-racism and anti-oppression education so difficult for
marginalized people with anti-colonial dreams. This chapter has, hopefully, prodded the
tension further, revealing the fractured, temporary, inarticulate, and occasionally
incoherent creative potential shrouded by the claims of colonial powers. Beneath the
superficial struggle for control of our practices between western hope narratives and our
own initiatives lie pieces of worlds tentatively created. These pieces are only indirectly
concerned with political change, as such change is framed within the context of mainstream anti-oppression. They are more directly concerned with change in the here-and-now, manifesting as moments in which anti-colonial ideals are fleetingly lived through educational practices. Although these moments themselves do not last, the lessons we learn from them certainly do.

For Min, these moments are manifested through acts of supportive engagement and transformative survival. In these moments, she is able to productively decentre her power as facilitator, enabling her learners to take the lead and voice their agendas. In the context of her class, which exists to bridge students between an incomplete or unrecognized high school education and eventual careers, this is significant. In sharing the act of hoping, she shares the responsibility of articulating and enacting hope narratives, turning them from prescriptive and rigid narratives into fluid, ever-changing tales.

In my work, I have experienced moments of anti-colonial hoping in acts of feeling. Between my participants and each other, or myself and my participants, these acts of feeling have intervened with dominant scripts and allowed us for a few moments to become people engaging with one another rather than actors moving through a play. These moments are characterized for me by their spontaneity, arising from a combination of factors created by a mingling of every consciousness present in the space. In this way, they are co-constructed, but are also rooted outside of language and connected deeply to my interpretation of Muslim spirituality.

carolyn’s practice centres her way of anti-colonial hoping within the work of building connections between marginalized people that contribute towards the work of
community building. She rejects the use of the master’s tools in her work, and in fact does not even centre the tearing down of his house. Rather, she focuses her generative attention on facilitating spaces in which community building can germinate into the formation of many living spaces. Her multicentric approach to hoping encourages many different narratives to make meaning together. Simultaneous to this, silence is important to karolyn’s practice in the creation of Other community spaces and knowledges. This silence is manifested both in her supportive approach, and in her refusal to operationalize anti-colonial possibilities.

Magpie valued self-directed transformations in her workshops deeply. She sought neither to incite nor direct them, but worked towards opening a space in which all participants could collaboratively co-facilitate them. Through these transformative moments, Magpie helped refocus definitions of opportunity and possibility, engaging participants in dreaming a diversity of narratives of knowing and being. She disrupts dominating anti-oppression hope narratives (and through them, western hope narratives) by neither doing away with community nor the individual as the basis from which to begin hoping. Rather, she connects the two consistently throughout her workshops. She opens her sessions by asking participants to remember all the people who have made it possible for them to survive. She operates throughout each workshop on the principle that healthy communities are developed through consenting involvement, and encourages both concern for the self and concern for community to fuel the construction of anti-colonial hopings.

Each of our approaches are framed within the pretexts that anti-colonial hopings must be multicentric and ongoing, forever open to contribution, forever open to change.
These pretexts are both its strength and weakness. As I have explored in this chapter, the organic, multicentric and open-ended nature of our anti-colonial hopings allow it to adapt to evolving circumstances while remaining a positive (rather than simply oppositional) force. Its multicentricity diminishes authoritative voice, removing colonial supremacy. Its open-ended nature invites a multiplicity of interpretation and practice. However, all of the contexts I have explored here are momentary. Although each context has centred instances of deep engagement and connection, the moments themselves are isolated from one another, housed within the workshop environment. In many senses, it can be argued that each moment is also housed within greater social processes and greater systems of connection and interconnection. But ultimately they are particular to the group and the time in which they occur. These are not, of course, inherently damning things. They are however limiting factors, ones that must be considered when anti-colonial hopings are framed within the context of systemic struggles.

The work of this chapter has been to frame the ways in which generative emotional, intellectual, and spiritual hoping can occur and be potent outside of western narratives. That work should not be discredited by the reality that these processes of hoping are incomplete and temporary. However, these limitations are important, and will be taken up in the next chapter, my conclusion to this study.
Chapter Six – Community in the Struggle: Complications, Implications, Inspirations

Her [story] remains irreducibly foreign to Him. The Man can’t hear it the way she means it. He sees her as victim, as unfortunate object of hazard. “Her mind is confused,” he concludes. She views herself as the teller, the un-making subject…the moving force of the story. (Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1989 p.34)

New Beginnings: How to Tell Stories (Complications)

The facilitators I have interviewed for this study have taught me wonderful things about the possibilities, inspirations, and hopings of community education. I began my research feeling weary and jaded, unable to see past the manifold barriers that blighted the paths I struggled my way down, sometimes by choice and sometimes necessity. Discouraged by the clearly ineffective attempts made by community education to exact structural change, I found myself questioning my engagement in that practice more and more. And that is good. To engage in activism, or in education for change, and to not be aware that change is fickle, fleeting, and elusive can be a very dangerous thing. Speaking with and learning from Min, Magpie, and karolyn has helped me rediscover that although I may not always be changing systems through facilitation, facilitation certainly changes me, and that is also important.

Though each of us is confronted by the machinations of colonial hegemonies, our work manages to create moments of silence in which anti-colonial hopings blossom through the creation of Other meaning. The work of colonization is always incomplete, and there is value in dwelling in the incomplete places, building, healing, and growing. It is the incomprehensibility of our actions in these incomplete spaces, when we are carried
back again to dominant regimes, that perhaps make it seem as though nothing at all were occurring there. But the work of hoping, which is the work of building, does exist outside of western colonial narratives, and can be combined with the necessarily oppositional work of anti-colonialism to help us to both survive and resist. Although facilitators are wont to remark that changes of opinion in participants are more often floating on the surface than resonating in their depths, it is the rare, precious moments of real transformation that we get to share in that keep us going, helping us renew belief in the value of anti-colonial hopings.

However, it is impossible to overlook the very real limitations that bind even the soaring possibilities of anti-colonial hopings. Recently, I was at a training session for facilitators who will be running programming with high school youth. Speaking with one of the facilitators present, a queer Black immigrant man whose anti-racist and anti-homophobia work is well known in Toronto, I recalled some of these limitations. This man has been running workshops with marginalized people on Turtle Island for fifteen years and was very aware of the transformative anti-colonial moments I was trying to describe to him. “It’s a great way of putting it,” he said, “and those things don’t get talked about enough. But we can’t deny we’re not making structural change. When the structure notices us, it’s never the structure that gets changed!” Although structural change is slow, and ever-unfolding, it is commonly held in activist space that this declaration is true. Radical, grassroots, community-based education does not change structures, though it may occasionally change perspectives. And, as I have explored in my introduction chapter and chapter four, quite often interaction with structural institutions changes the nature of anti-oppression or anti-racism work. As karolyn said in
my first interview with her, “I feel like in this position I have to be able to talk about anti-racism in a way that makes it appealing, almost like sexy, and acceptable, and non-threatening, like that’s the main thing, like how, how do you do anti-racism work and like completely empty it of the threat that it poses?”

Complications: Institutionalization

As anti-racism activism gets funnelled into state-funded organizations, it looses its teeth. These organizations often depend on doing their work in ways that seem as non-threatening and friendly as possible. They demand that anti-racism or anti-oppression work be done in the safe context of white civility, robbing it of its community building, transformational and unsettling quality. As Andrea Smith (2007) pointed out through her work with Incite! Women of Colour Against Violence, the state long ago identified the work of feminist, anti-racist, anti-colonial organizations like the Black Panthers and the American Indian Movement as a threat, and vanquished that threat by funding it. Smith explains ruefully that funding creates a dependency in movements, turning activism for change into activism for pay, and pretty soon anti-violence activists are no longer asking how to stop violence, but how to erect more shelters for battered women. Smith’s points highlight the detrimental effects that using the master’s tools can have on movements. She effectively demonstrates the way in which buying into colonial hope narratives stifles other ways of hoping from taking root.

She goes on to argue that it is a result of this dependency on funding, and an internalization of the capitalist work ethic, that activist organizations can be so inaccessible. We meet, we plan, we work; where is the fun, the camaraderie, the help in hard times? Where is the food, the laughter, the nourishing? In short, as Magpie puts it,
what is there in activism that makes me want to buy in “for my own soul’s sake”? What I hear clearly in Smith’s gentle criticism is that, as activists, we invest too much in getting finite jobs done in hopes of finding ourselves in a blessed future, and too little in creating anti-colonial spaces with one another in the present.

Institutionalization not only robs community education of its efficacy – it robs it of its soul. As Madonna Thunderhawk (2007) argues in her essay, “Native Organizing Before the Non-Profit Industrial Complex” institutionalization brings the state into bed with anti-state activists, it forces us to depend on the good opinion of governing bodies for our bread and butter and alienates those who cannot fit into the professionalized model of state-sanctioned activism. Thunderhawk argues that this kills movements. The experiences of many anti-oppression facilitators mirror this statement. We are not creating structural change, and as facilitation turns into a profession, those of us who can do the work of community education form an ever-shrinking pool of people.

Even so, Magpie argues in her interviews that there is a strong case for a limited institutionalization of anti-oppression education, and for many of the same reasons. As a facilitator who has been working since the early 90s in radical communities around Ontario and Quebec, Magpie argues that marginalized facilitators need the protection that institutionalization offers. How are we, as facilitators, supposed to care about capital-C Change when we are abused, derided, and harassed by the communities we are supposed to be working within? Magpie and I brought up this dynamic in our interviews, and Min alluded to it; what protection can we as facilitators seek when our livelihoods are threatened by those we should be in solidarity with? Many facilitators have experienced an ebb and flow of contracts available to them in accordance with ebbs and flows in
community popularity. I have heard stories of contracts lost or pay cheques denied because of personal conflict – because a facilitator slept with the wrong person, or disagreed with the wrong person.

Without some measure of regulation, how can we protect ourselves in an anarchic field? Magpie and karolyn point out that “people of colour” are a social category, not a de facto community. Expecting marginalized and often abused groups of people to always protect one another, and never to replicate some of the abuses we have experienced, is unreasonable. It is, in fact, another variety of racism: expecting oppressed peoples to rise to a moral plane higher than that of their oppressors, thereby encouraging a doomed race to innocence. But who will perform the role of arbiter in conflict situations among radical, marginalized people?

Neither perspective on institutionalization is simple, though I would argue that they do not contradict each other. Rather, they both highlight different aspects of the same problem with regards to the work of anti-oppression facilitation and its continuing institutionalization. Institutionalization cuts off the possibilities of forming community through community education, and of doing the work of facilitation without a number of conflicting agendas vying for control of the space. Institutionalization may, at its best, protect marginalized people from the harms of depending on inconsistent work in an unregulated field. However, by and large, this is not the purpose institutionalization has thus far served.

What this means for anti-oppression education is that amidst the relentless tug-of-war over what method will pull the best product from facilitation, we have lost sight of the people involved. Whether anti-oppression education will produce better results if it is
conducted among government workers, social service workers, and law enforcement officials, or whether it should be conducted among marginalized peoples as a civilizing or healing project has become the primary bone of contention. The answers brought forward to these questions do not seem to induce very productive conversation because the question itself is faulty. What Smith (2007), Thunderhawk (2007), and Magpie all point to is that as long as we ask only how to produce more radical soldiers for the cause of structural change from anti-oppression education, we reproduce systems of domination, abuse and colonization.

Complications: Storytelling

Sherene Razack (1998) and Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) agree with these cautions around institutionalization, but take their critique into the work of the workshop itself. Many activists and scholars argue that anti-oppression education is not serving to provoke systemic change, but rather is being drawn into the system itself. Razack and Minh-ha agree, but push further saying that the methods of anti-oppression education cannot hope to enact structural change, but only to reinforce oppression.

Narratives are used in anti-oppression education as a means of challenging western objectivist epistemic privilege. Facilitators encourage the sharing of stories in order to reinforce that knowledge of privilege and oppression resides in our own bodies, and that we do not need to resort to published work to understand the world in which we live. We sometimes employ story-telling to disrupt the notion that “bad things” do not happen to “people like us,” or that “people like us” do not do “bad things.” Stories are also often shared in such contexts as forms of healing, bonding, and conveying deeper lessons or ideas.
In *Looking White People in the Eye*, Razack (1998) takes up anti-oppression education as it functions in community, classroom, and activist spaces, teasing out its many contradictions and limitations. She explores the pit-falls of the narrative focus anti-oppression education brings to learning spaces, deconstructing the desirability of such narratives as part of the colonizing framework. Razack points out that what narratives are valued, who tells the story, and who listens and what role the narrative ends up playing in the educational space actually serve to reinforce dominant paradigms. She argues that narratives of oppression are used to act as a balm for the listener, allowing them to return home feeling that they “know” the pain of oppressed people, or are absolved from their privileges because they have endured the harrowing stories of oppression. She also argues that they ways in which we present these narratives construct larger narratives, narratives that regulate who can feel oppression and how, drawing us into games of authenticity and pissing matches to prove ourselves Most Oppressed. In short, the use of narratives in radical education does not reassign epistemic privilege. Instead, it invites marginalized people to eroticize, reify, and effectively sell their narratives for the edification of systems of privilege. Further to this, Razack points out that the idolizing of narrative as the pinnacle of radical ways of knowing in fact coerces people to share their narratives, cutting off possibilities for willing silence.

As Minh-ha (1989) illustrates in the quote which begins this chapter, the process underlying these systemic operations is a failure to hear. Both Minh-ha and Razack illustrate the gulf in meaning between the words spoken and those received. If the listener is hearing a narrative through the obscuring veils of systemic privilege and its attendant assumptions and prejudices about marginalized people, they will not hear the
empowerment, pain, or strength in narratives that we hope they will. Listening to a Black man speak of the trails of poverty, systemic and familial abuse, gang life and incarceration, a white woman may only hear a narrative that enforces her existing racism about Black people in general and Black men in particular. Bridging the gulf between the story heard and the story in potential is not simply the work of speaking. Narratives are not inherently transformative, in other words.

Razack and Minh-ha caution us that the difference in epistemic power between social standpoints is ignored at our own peril. Using narrative in anti-oppression education as a means by which to enact change in systems or individuals is a tricky, treacherous proposition, and one of which facilitators should be wary. As anti-oppression education becomes institutionalized, so too do our narratives, which are often seen as part of the product of a workshop. These narratives have been catalogued by organizations and agencies, and used to demonstrate the variety of experience and success in Canadian society. This, of course, serves only to reinforce the power of the state and further marginalize the people who share their stories.

**Telling Stories: What Can the Work of Anti-Oppression Education be? (Implications)**

Razack’s (1994) and Minh-ha’s (1989) critiques are extremely valuable and insightful ones. They are correct in warning facilitators that we ignore them at our own peril; stories are awesome, powerful, dangerous things, and I have yet to meet a facilitator who was not burned by their use of narrative at one point or another in their careers.

Even so, and having run into numerous problems with narrative as a workshop tool – from stubborn silence to intense triggering – I remain convinced that the centring of consensual narrative in anti-oppression education is pivotal. And, as the experiences
of the facilitators I have interviewed reflect, narrative and the co-construction of group understandings and hopings, however temporary, are extremely important in creating or sustaining moments outside of the colonial meta-narrative. Viewed within the framework that Minh-ha and Razack employ, narrative is more trouble than it is worth. However, if we do not ask narrative to make broad political changes but only to work with facilitator and participants to affect a space, we open up different, much richer, possibilities for its work.

It may be true that anti-oppression education makes little structural change outside of institutions. Certainly, it does not make immediate, noticeable or material change in a quantifiable and consistent fashion. It is true that as it is incorporated into institutions, it is anti-oppression education that changes visibly, and not the systems which assimilate it. It is certainly true that the use of narrative in anti-oppression education does not automatically make education anti-oppressive, safe, or revolutionary. It is true that these narratives, both in the telling and the hearing, are subject to the same colonization of meaning that they are purported to magically disrupt. But…what would anti-oppression education look like, what would the use of narrative in community learning spaces look like, if we tried a different kind of hoping. What would it look like if we did not demand that anti-oppression education make visible, quantifiable structural change at all?

This may seem counter-intuitive; anti-oppression is, after all, a political project with clear goals towards shifting or abolishing existing social and political structures. How can we mobilize education under the principles of anti-oppression and not expect to make structural change? Magpie and karolyn provide one answer in their interviews –
that anti-oppression education is one aspect of movements for change, but that the work that anti-oppression education needs to do is qualitatively different from other aspects of movements for social change. Another (connected) response would be to say that if we centre anti-colonial processes in anti-oppression education, we can return emphasis to creating nurturing, healing, and generative spaces in the moment while also fighting oppositional battles outside the classroom.

The important piece, however, is that seemingly impossible disconnect between the workshop space and the space for organizing. If we see our work as educators as being to funnel students from open learning spaces into other, predetermined spaces – whether that be fighting for The Revolution or working in a bank – then we are not focusing on the people in front of us. We are not co-constructing our agendas, our understandings and our processes for hoping in our learning spaces. We are simply functioning as one part of an assembly line. However, if anti-oppression education is viewed as a part of movements for change because of the work it does in the moment rather than what it promises for the future, we may see many more possibilities for our work in the present.

Anti-oppression education, viewed outside of the construct of “education for change” can be a powerful force in building roving decolonizing spaces. As I have explored in chapter five, there are gaps in colonial discourses and facilitators who are aware of the politics of colonization and oppression can set up camp in these spaces. However, it is important for us to keep in mind also that there is no one narrative for decolonization, and the context participants wish to bring into the room is just as important as the contexts we hope they will come to value. It is important to meet
participants where they invite us to, and to deal with the people in front of us. Doing so in our facilitation may not be a means to change the world, but it is an act outside of the dominating systems that seek to manipulate our actions for their own purposes.

In the final analysis, no teacher, no matter the subject, can learn for the student. The facilitator exists to facilitate, not to do for. This must include deciding the terms on which learning will happen, and the ends to which learning will be put. As community educators, we have the opportunity to facilitate generative discussions around many diverse narratives and agendas. If we can bring ourselves to view each narrative and agenda in its own context, rather than rushing to incorporate it into our own contexts and narratives, we can germinate truly multicentric ways of knowing at a grassroots level. Although this may not change the material world in ways that are always knowable, it may add more worlds to the one we already know.

Hope for Hoping: Continuing Our Work (Inspirations)

Seeking to perform a perfect action in this world is a fool’s quest. Even as we are able at times to inhabit spaces in the gaps of the colonial project, moments in which our various Indigenous knowledges seem truly to have meaning and power all their own and we feel strong, even these moments do not separate us from colonial structures. We are still continuously created within them, and always given meaning by them. In positing the significance of moments that transcend colonial domination, I am by no means looking to deny this reality. Transcendence is not an emergency exit, nor does it disconnect our bodies from the everyday world we inhabit. But it is these moments, which I cannot but think of as transcendent (through I am not sure that Min, Magpie or karolyn would share my choice of language!) that make working in the world worthwhile for me. And,
though they may use different language, and would almost certainly imagine the feel of these moments differently from myself, these moments are energizing and inspiring ones for Min, Magpie and karolyn as well.

I began this study unable to think or work past the limitations and challenges that are so often all that define anti-oppression education in the minds of activists and educators. I am ending it energized, excited about new possibilities, perspectives and skills I can engage in future workshops.

I have been lucky to work with three such intelligent, dedicated, and compassionate facilitators. Their perspectives have helped me challenge various vestiges of grid-thinking in myself as I moved through my own process of transformation, from mainstream anti-oppression facilitator to one concerned with anti-colonial hopings. Each of them have influenced my transformation without intending to, and as a group they have constructed the analysis found in this study with me.

Magpie helped me articulate for the first time my deep-seated problems with western narratives of hope, and its impact of the work of anti-oppression education. She gave words to the concept of the anti-oppression grid, and it was through conversations with her that I was able to develop much of the analysis which framed my critique of hope in chapter two.

karolyn gently and consistently reminded me to remain aware of my position as a settler of colour committed to anti-colonial work. Her generosity in sharing her thoughts and experiences as an Indigenous women engaged with anti-racism work has been indispensable to my framework of anti-colonial hopings. Her work as an academic and an activist on solidarity between Indigenous people and people of colour has also been
illuminating to me, and has added to my awareness of decolonizing spaces, outside of western discourses of domination.

Min’s positivity, her commitment to generative processes and her love and compassion in support work have helped affect in me a much-needed shift in perspective. Her stories and wisdoms have reminded me of the good work we can do when we commit ourselves to building things, and that this commitment is not mutually exclusive to deconstructing systems. She gave me the framework for thinking through possibilities for generative engagement with workshop participants in ways that do not play into prescribed hope narratives. And, above and beyond each of these quantifiable contributions, each participant has added their own perspective and allowed me a minute glimpse into their rich, innovative and inspiring worlds and work as facilitators.

Learning has always been a community process for me. Through this study, I have been privileged to begin developing a community of facilitators who I can learn from as I work. With my participants I have been fortunate to develop that form of learning relationship wherein I gain from what I say to them and what they say to me. Their narratives have added to mine, and I can only hope that the pieces of myself that I have shared with them will bring something worthwhile into their worlds, and their work. As I continue engaging community spaces in my work as a facilitator, I will bring pieces of them with me, and for that I am profoundly grateful.


