

## **“There are Teachers Everywhere”**

Artist Statement by Cristina Aquilina

Wilfrid Laurier University, Faculty of Social Work, offers opportunities for faculty, staff and students to participate in their Equity Committee. I have had the privilege of working alongside Dr. Jessica Hutchison and fellow graduate students’ leadership initiatives on the Decolonizing Sub-group. On January 23, 2025, the Decolonizing Sub-group organized a Panel Discussion, inviting author, Elder Norma Jacobs, social worker/PhD candidate, Shelley Hachey, co-founders of Land Back/Willow River Centre/activists, Amy Smoke and Bangishimo and associate professor, Social Development Studies (U of W), Craig Fortier to share their insights.

The theme of the panel discussion was “Social Work Continues to Harm Indigenous Children and their Families”. The panel opened with Elder Norma Jacob’s Thanksgiving address. It was a time of recentering and recommitment to slow down, take notice and offer gratitude to the multitude of spirit-filled beings we share life with daily. Calm and quiet filled my heart and the room listening to Elder Norma’s words. She walked us through appreciation for Mother Earth through: people (ancestors, story/ceremony holders), trees, plants (bean, squash, corn, strawberries) animals, (eagle, fish, deer, bear) medicines, (tobacco, sage, sweetgrass, cedar) elements, (water, land, air/wind/thunder, fire) Grandmother moon, Grandfather sun, Auntie stars, and the four directions.

As Elder Norma Jacob’s centered our hearts and minds, I chose to center my artistic representation of the panel discussion within her Thanksgiving address. You will find many of the spirit-filled beings she acknowledged placed, in a circle, in the center of the painting. The circle was chosen due to its significance to Anishnaabe people which represents the interconnectedness of life, spirituality and natural cycles of Mother Earth as well as community and balance. As each being within the Thanksgiving address took its place in the painting, the image became full of spirit-filled life.

This parallels my experience with the Decolonizing Subgroup. As a student taking their place in the group, it created space for me to imagine ways to decenter colonial practices, both personally and professionally. As a group, we were led by our hearts, in community, on an emotion-filled and unknown path. In finding our way, we returned home to our roots, at times, to refocus and continue our hopeful journey of learning decolonial ways. We learned that colonialism has a strong hold on us, however by learning and listening we can loosen its grip. The Decolonial Sub-group has taught me to not breathe life into my preconceptions, prior knowledge and experiences, when in community together. I believe that if we are willing to allow our colonial selves to die, we can begin to nurture decolonial life.

This theme of the cycle of growth, death and regrowth was interwoven throughout the panel discussion and my artistic representation. Decolonizing our social work practice involves, firstly, acknowledging that our education, and experiences take place within colonial systems and secondly, allowing these pieces of our professional (and personal selves) to, metaphorically, die. This is accomplished, in abolition social work discourse, through burning these understandings. The imagery of burning down our current colonial social work foundation is represented, in my painting through flames and ashes. This colonial foundation must be broken down, similar to the process involved in forest fires. The extinguishing of colonial ways invites new light to appear and as a result, regrowth through decolonial and Indigenous ways.

Through learnings from Indigenous teachers, Craig Fortier spoke of the vulture’s purpose within the ecosystem and its parallels to social workers, depicting in the painting. My interpretation, of this teaching, is that similar to how vultures provide balance within ecosystems by clearing the dead, social workers provide balance, in community, by supporting people with dying/dead relationships to themselves and/or others. Both do so, by taking in the dying/dead, in different ways, to prevent the spread of disease or dis-ease. In reflecting on our role as social workers, much like the purpose of vultures and forest fires, I have come to understand that social workers support people’s regeneration. As we take our place within the forests of our ecosystems, we continue to commit to facilitating renewal, in our communities, through gratitude, acceptance, and new imaginings of decolonial ways.