

# On Whiteness in Migration and Refugee Education: An Unsettling Reckoning

Zuhra Abawi  
*Western University*  
ORCID ID 0000-0002-5327-6495

Nidhi Menon  
*University of New Brunswick*  
ORCID ID 0009-0003-6491-4565

## Abstract

This reflective essay examines the persistence of whiteness and colonial logics within refugee, international, and migration education studies following a symposium attended by the authors, two racialized women scholars situated in the Global North. Drawing on personal observations and critical scholarship, the essay interrogates how refugee children from the Global South are often represented through deficit-oriented and damage-centered narratives that privilege Western authority while marginalizing the voices and agency of displaced communities. One key moment examined involves a white educator presenting refugee children's poems in English, raising questions about consent, language, assimilation, and the ethics of representation. Engaging with the work of decolonial and Global South scholars, the essay critiques how suffering becomes consumable within academic spaces and highlights the role of the white gaze and white saviourism in shaping knowledge production. The essay calls for more accountable, relational, and decolonial approaches to refugee and migration education research.

We write this essay with intention, urgency, and a measure of discomfort following a recent symposium on refugee, international and migration education. We come to this work as racialized women situated within the Global North. Zuhra identifies as a white-coded Afghan/Scottish woman, born in Canada. Nidhi identifies as an immigrant, woman of colour who migrated to Canada from India. We both live as settlers on unceded Indigenous lands and recognize that we are shaped by and implicated in the very systems we seek to critique (Shallwani & Dossa, 2023). We also acknowledge our own nuanced proximities to whiteness through our positions of privilege as university scholars in the Global North, even as our identities and histories remain entangled with the Global South. This tension is the ground upon which this reflection emerges.

Following the symposium, we were left with a sense of unease that we could neither dismiss nor ignore. What we witnessed compelled us to confront the persistence of whiteness and the reproduction of colonial logics within refugee and migration education studies. This unease was not tied to a single moment but accumulated across interactions, presentations, and silences that revealed deeper structural patterns. Throughout the two-day symposium, we found ourselves exchanging glances marked by fatigue, disbelief, and recognition. White women scholars repeatedly positioned themselves as experts on refugee children from the Global South, speaking with authority about lives that were not their own. Their presentations were often devoid of meaningful engagement with the geopolitical conditions that produce displacement, including Western military interventions, extractive global economies, racialized border regimes, and climate violence. Instead, refugee children were framed as objects of study - figures to be interpreted, analyzed, and "given voice."

One moment has stayed with us. A white educator stood before the audience and read aloud poems written by refugee children in English, detailing experiences of pain, loss,

and suffering. The room fell silent, moved by the emotional weight of the words. Yet we were left unsettled. We found ourselves questioning who these children were, whether English was their language of expression, whether they had consented to have their words, as well as their photographs shared in this way, and whether this representation reflected how they wished to be known. The educator emphasized that the children struggled with their writing. While struggle is indeed an important component of learning, we were left wondering whether this difficulty stemmed from being required to write in a language that did not reflect their identities. How does this differ from assimilationist practices historically imposed upon marginalized communities? The fact that these poems and stories were published collectively in English further underscored this tension, suggesting strong assimilationist undertones. In that moment, the children's voices felt both present and absent, mediated through a framework that rendered them legible to a Western audience while simultaneously stripping them of agency.

As Eve Tuck (2009) cautions in her critique of “damage-centered research,” (p.409) there is a persistent tendency to frame marginalized communities primarily through narratives of pain and brokenness. While documenting oppression is necessary, Tuck (2009) urges us to consider the long-term consequences of representations that reduce communities to suffering alone. In this instance, we were left questioning whether these children were invited to speak for themselves, or whether their stories were being curated in ways that made their suffering consumable to others.

What we encountered reflects what scholars have described as the white saviour complex, whereby people of the Global South are constructed as in need of rescue by the expertise and benevolence of the Global North (Sondarjee & Kanakulya, 2023). This phenomenon operates through the white gaze, which positions whiteness as normative and authoritative, identifying deficits in the lives of Black and Brown communities while legitimizing interventions designed and funded by the Global North (Shallwani & Dossa, 2023). Within this framework, knowledge production is not neutral but deeply racialized. The authority to interpret, represent, and intervene is unevenly distributed, reinforcing hierarchies that privilege Western epistemologies while marginalizing other ways of knowing. At the symposium, these dynamics were not subtle; they were pervasive. White women dominated conversations, speaking on behalf of refugee children and youth while their authority, and indeed how and why they came to this work, remained largely unquestioned. The absence of sustained engagement with the structural causes of displacement revealed the extent to which colonial logic continues to shape the field. There is a growing body of literature that problematizes the overrepresentation of white women within helping professions, particularly in education (see Judy Ryde's “Being White in the Helping Professions”). The white feminine archetype is situated at the nexus of whiteness and empire, reinforcing subjectivities that position the “other” as voiceless, powerless, and lacking epistemic agency.

### **Re-Centering Narratives of Displacement for Epistemic Agency**

The question that lingered for us was both simple and profound: who is speaking, and who is being spoken for? As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) asks, can the subaltern speak within systems that systematically deny their epistemic agency? In refugee and migration education, this question is particularly urgent. Refugee children are frequently positioned through deficit-based narratives emphasizing vulnerability, trauma, and lack, thereby undermining their capacities as knowers and agents. This aligns with what Boaventura de Sousa Santos (1996) conceptualizes as epistemicide - the systematic erasure and devaluation of knowledge systems outside dominant Western paradigms. At the symposium, knowledge about refugee communities was often produced in ways that excluded their direct participation, reinforcing the idea that legitimate knowledge must be mediated through Western frameworks.

These experiences cannot be understood in isolation from broader global conditions. Across the world, children are living through overlapping crises shaped by war, displacement, and systemic inequality. Ongoing conflicts across the Global South including Gaza, Sudan, Iran and Afghanistan have resulted in widespread loss, injury, and displacement, leaving children to navigate profound instability and loss. Anti-immigrant backlash in the United States and Europe has led to detention and deportation practices that further marginalize families, while the United States has also seen a broader assault on diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, curricula, and academic freedom. Simultaneously, cuts to childcare, early education, and international aid have weakened infrastructures designed to support children, particularly in the Global South. These realities are central to refugee education, yet within academic spaces they are often abstracted or omitted. This allows for a depoliticized understanding of displacement that obscures the role of the Global North in producing and sustaining these crises.

Beyond Western narratives of bordering and unbordering lies a deeper set of political and economic structures that render life increasingly unlivable in many parts of the Global South. Education within these contexts is frequently framed in ways that obscure these broader geopolitical forces. Such omissions contribute to the normalization of violence and suffering (Tuck, 2009). As Judith Butler (2004) suggests, certain lives are rendered ungrievable, unrecognized as worthy of mourning or protection. Refugee children and youth, many of whom are unaccompanied, are often positioned within this framework. When they arrive at the borders of the Global North, they are required to justify their presence, their suffering, and their humanity in order to access asylum systems. In effect, those displaced are compelled to explain why their lives should matter to the very states implicated in their displacement.

In Canada, these tensions are particularly pronounced. While the country is often celebrated as a multicultural nation, this narrative can obscure ongoing practices of exclusion, surveillance, and control. Recent policy developments, such as the Strengthening Canada's Immigration System and Borders Act (Bill C-12), have expanded the state's capacity to enforce deportations and increase data sharing (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2025). Deportations have intensified, with hundreds of individuals removed each week (Abraham, 2026). For many refugee and migrant communities, belonging remains conditional. Within educational contexts, these contradictions are rarely addressed. Schools and universities position themselves as sites of inclusion, even as they reproduce the hierarchies that marginalize the communities they aim to serve. This dissonance raises critical questions about the role of education in either challenging or sustaining systems of inequity.

### **Navigating Tensions and Complexities to Challenge Epistemicide**

We are left, then, with a profound sense of tension. What does it mean to engage in refugee and migration education while embedded within institutions that benefit from global inequities? How do we reconcile commitments to justice with our own complicities? These are not questions with easy answers. The work is complex, emotionally demanding, and often met with resistance. Yet it is precisely this complexity that must be acknowledged rather than avoided. As Cindy Blackstock (Rynor, 2023) reminds us, we must find ways to express ourselves in ways that people can understand and, more importantly, to listen to lived experience. This requires moving toward a deeper engagement with power, accountability, and relationality.

At the conclusion of the conference, we presented our work, which draws on Global South feminisms to reimagine and re-center the lived experiences of refugee-background students while challenging ongoing processes of epistemicide. Our presentation engaged directly with current political realities and emphasized the importance of centering lived experiences. In the discussions that followed, some responses reflected uncertainty and

concern about engaging with these topics in academic spaces. We were asked whether addressing such urgent political issues might carry risks within our work. These exchanges prompted reflection. They highlighted how certain forms of knowledge, particularly those grounded in lived experience and critical perspectives from the Global South, can be perceived as disruptive within established academic norms. We also observed how suggestions to align our work more closely with established (and often predominantly white) scholarship functioned, perhaps unintentionally, to reassert dominant frameworks of authority. In these moments, we became more aware of how expertise continues to be shaped and recognized through particular lenses. Rather than interpreting these interactions solely as opposition, we understand them as indicative of broader tensions within the field. They point to the challenges of shifting epistemological boundaries and the discomfort that can accompany such shifts. They also reinforce the importance of continuing to create space for diverse ways of knowing and for scholarship that emerges from lived experience and relational accountability.

In this essay, we call for a decentering of white saviourism within refugee and migration education studies. This is not simply about diversifying representation but about fundamentally rethinking the structures that determine whose knowledge is valued and whose voices are heard. What is desperately needed, as Pailey (2020) suggests, is transparent dialogue about racism, whiteness, coloniality, and white settler colonial logics within spaces of refugee and migration studies, particularly in relation to who is doing this work and why. Such dialogue requires moving toward a deeper interrogation of power, accountability, and positionality. This work also demands humility from those of us working within the Global North, an openness to unlearning and a willingness to relinquish control. We return to the image of the symposium, to the quiet room where the words of refugee children were shared without their presence in a language that is not their own. That moment continues to unsettle us. It reminds us that representation without agency is not justice, that voice without control is not empowerment, and that listening must be accompanied by a redistribution of power. This is the work that lies ahead, and it is work that can no longer be deferred.

### References

- Abraham, G. (2026, March 20). Canada is ramping up deportations, with 400 a week. The Walrus. <https://thewalrus.ca/canada-is-ramping-up-deportations-with-400-a-week/>
- Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence*. Verso.
- Canadian Council for Refugees. (2025, November 24). Release: Rights groups issue urgent warning ahead of critical C-12 vote. <https://ccrweb.ca/en/release-rights-groups-issue-urgent-warning-ahead-critical-c-12-vote>
- Pailey, R. N. (2020). De-centering the “white gaze” of development. *Development and Change*, 51(3), 729–745. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12550>
- Ryde, J. (2009). *Being White in the Helping Professions*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Rynor, B. (2023, April 5). Don't just publish another paper. Let's do something, says scholar-advocate Cindy Blackstock. University Affairs. <https://universityaffairs.ca/features/dont-just-publish-another-paper-lets-do-something-says-scholar-advocate-cindy-blackstock/>
- Santos, B. S. (1996). *The fall of the Angelus Novus: Beyond the modern game of roots and options* (Working Paper Series on Political Economy of Legal Change No. 3). University of Wisconsin–Madison.
- Shallwani, S., & Dossa, S. (2023). Evaluation and the White Gaze in International Development. In Khan, T., Kanakulya, D., & Sondarjee, M. (Eds). *White Saviourism in International Development: Theories, Practices and Lived Experiences* (pp. 43-65). Daraja Press.
- Sondarjee, M., & Kanakulya, D. (2023). How white saviourism harms international development. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/how-white-saviourism-harms-international-development-199392>

Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.

Tuck, E. (2009). Suspending damage: A letter to communities. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79(3), 409–427. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.3.n0016675661t3n15>

Dr. Zuhra Abawi is an Associate Professor at Western University in the Faculty of Education, whose research examines refugee student access to education in Ontario through North–South geographical hierarchies. Dr Abawi can be reached through email [Zabawi2@uwo.ca](mailto:Zabawi2@uwo.ca)

Dr. Nidhi Menon is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of New Brunswick whose scholarship centers marginalized voices and women-of-colour perspectives to advance more equitable and inclusive educational practices. Dr. Nidhi Menon can be reached through email [Nidhi.menon@unb.ca](mailto:Nidhi.menon@unb.ca)