



Animals in Indigenous Spiritualities: Implications for Critical Social Work

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Abstract

This article explores the roles of other-than-human (OTH) animals in the spiritualities of Indigenous Canadians, and the implications of these roles for anti-oppressive or decolonial social work practices. To respond to the needs of the people with whom they work, social workers must look beyond the Eurocentric roots of the profession and consider other ways of knowing and doing. Hart (2009) points out that spirituality is central to an Aboriginal approach to social work. Despite this, the implications of spirituality for social work have not been centred in scholarship. The study of OTH animals in social work is an emerging field, and we hope this paper will contribute to a broad and nuanced conversation about Indigenous spiritualities, animal relationships, and critical social work.

INTRODUCTION

This article explores the place of other-than-human (OTH) animals in the spiritualities of Indigenous Canadians, and implications for anti-oppressive or decolonial social work practices. To respond to the needs of the people with whom they work, social workers must look beyond the Eurocentric roots of the profession and consider other ways of knowing and doing. Hart (2009) points out that spirituality is central to an Aboriginal approach to social work. Despite this, the implications of spirituality for social work have not been centred in scholarship. The study of OTH animals in social work is an emerging field, and we hope this paper will contribute to a broad and nuanced conversation about Indigenous spiritualities, animal relationships, and critical social work.

This paper is a collaboration between two authors, one who identifies as Indigenous and one who does not. The first author, Melissa Marie (emmy) Legge is a

settler social worker, vegan, and animal activist, originally from Newfoundland and Labrador. For emmy, engaging with a vegan lifestyle means avoiding the consumption of animal products in any way. These practices have been criticized as Eurocentric; however, some Indigenous scholars (Robinson included) have started exploring its potential relevance to Indigenous knowledges, particularly in an urban context. As emmy is also committed to solidarity with Indigenous peoples, and an anti-colonial approach to life where possible, an intersectional analysis of their social location and a commitment to veganism is both complicated, and necessary. Margaret Robinson is a Mi'kmaw woman with a PhD in theology, a health researcher, a vegan, and a member of the Lennox Island First Nation. Margaret's veganism is an expression of her kinship with other animals and her rejection of colonial industrial farming, not a claim of innocence. Margaret roots her veganism in the agreement between the Mi'kmaw people and the animals upon whom they relied (and upon whom many still rely) for food, as recorded in Mi'kmaw oral knowledge (Robinson 2013; Robinson 2014), and in the values encapsulated in the Mi'kmaw values of *Netukulimk* (avoiding scarcity), and *M'sit No'kmaq* (all my relations) (Robinson, 2016).

Indigenous spirituality has been defined as “belief in the fundamental interconnectedness of all natural things” (“Native Spirituality,” 1992, p. 30). Instead of distinguishing the spiritual from the secular, Indigenous cultures frame spirituality as a way of being that undergirds contemporary Indigeneity (“Native Spirituality,” 1992). For this reason, Indigenous spiritualities are themselves a social work issue. These traditions persist against a background in which many Indigenous practices have been lost or altered due to government assimilation policies (Hornborg, 2013; Hirsch, 2011; McGee, 1974). The denigration, criminalization, and attempted eradication of Indigenous ceremony and practice has been a tenet of colonialism since contact, and was concretized into law as early as 1884. As Smith (2011) has articulated, Indigenous peoples “are trapped in a logic of genocidal appropriation. This logic holds that Indigenous people must disappear. In fact, they must always be disappearing” (p. 50). In practice, this has meant that Indigenous people are pressured to assimilate into Settler society even as Indigenous cultural traditions are co-opted by Settlers. Despite these pressures, Indigenous spiritualities persist, and have seen a resurgence (Iseke, 2013; Corntassel,

2012; Robbins & Dewar, 2011).

OTH ANIMALS IN FIRST NATIONS SPIRITUALITY

OTH animals feature prominently in the beliefs and practices of Indigenous Canadians, yet there is wide variation in how animals participate, and in how animal being is framed and understood. We identify four ways in which OTH animals feature in Indigenous spiritualities: 1) as part of kinship systems; 2) as sources of wisdom and protection; 3) as ceremonially significant; and 4) as historically important.

Animal Kinship

Connection with others is foundational to Indigenous ways of knowing (Baskin, 2009; Medicine Eagle, 1991). Bradshaw (2010) notes that prior to contact with Europeans, Indigenous people lived “shoulder to shoulder” with OTH animals. First Nations oral knowledge portray animals as thinking, talking, and living much as humans do. This view of animals is not anthropomorphism—that is, human traits projected onto animals—rather, personhood is understood as an experience common to all forms of life (Hornborg, 2013). Indigenous people in Canada and the United States have sometimes expressed this kinship in the phrase “all my relations,” used to refer to the network of all beings, sometimes including those not considered alive by Settlers, such as rivers and mountains. Kinship with animals is embodied in a number of Indigenous cultural expressions, such as the use of animal clans and totems in First Nations.

Communication across species also feature in many Indigenous oral traditions. Such dialogue need not be framed as Dr. Doolittle-style verbal conversation. Bradshaw (2010) describes trans-species dialogue as “the thoughtful mutuality of knowledge, language, and custom developed among species over many years” (p. 408), and uses Indigenous Americans' relationship to the bison to illustrate this concept. While it may seem counter-intuitive to claim kinship with the animals one hunts for food, some Indigenous epistemologies frame meat-eating as rooted in the kinship system. Among the Mi'kmaq, the Indigenous people of northeastern North America, the hunting and consumption of animals is premised on the idea that animals sacrifice themselves to feed their human kin (Robinson, 2013). This is expressed in the Mi'kmaq creation story in which Glooscap asks his friend, Apistanewj, an American pine marten, to sacrifice

himself so that Glooscap's grandmother may eat. Apistanewj agrees, and to acknowledge this sacrifice Glooscap makes Apistanewj his brother (Native Languages of the Americas, n.d.). A number of protocols around the treatment of animal bodies have arisen to express respect toward animals for their sacrifice, and to break with such traditions risks alienating the animals upon whose sacrifice Indigenous communities have traditionally relied (Kinnear 2007; Christmas, 1977; Harrod 2000).

Some Indigenous traditions take the interconnectedness of animals further, and pose that transformation from one animal into another is possible. Cassidy (2008) writes that Inuit knowledges "are filled with examples of people who turn into animals" (p. 83). One such story, from the North of Baffin Island, tells of Avilayoq, who marries a tall handsome man (Swinton, 1985). However, she soon discovers the handsome man is actually a petrel (a type of sea bird). As Avilayoq's father attempts to rescue her, the bird creates a violent storm and Avilayoq's father throws her overboard to save himself. As she clings to the side of the boat, her father cuts off portions of her fingers, which transform into whales and seals. Finally Avilayoq sinks into the water and becomes Sedna, a powerful ocean goddess (Swinton, 1985). Nungak and Arima (1969) present a story by Inuit stone carver Saali Arngnaituq, in which an old woman separates herself from her family and community, and eventually transforms into a wolf. The shapeshifting represented in these stories is possible in part because of the permeable nature of the spiritual and physical worlds in which we live. "In Aboriginal knowledge systems," explains Marlene Brant Castellano (2014), "the boundary between material and spiritual realms is easily crossed. Similarly, the boundaries between humans, animals, plants, and natural elements are also permeable." This shapeshifting can be willing or inadvertent, and is framed by Cassidy (2008) as an essential part of trans-species dialogue.

Shapeshifting is also present in Mi'kmaq legends. In *The Beaver Magicians And The Big Fish*, a Mi'kmaq hunter encounters an elderly man and his family in the woods and joins them for dinner. He later discovers they were beavers whom he perceived as humans due to the magical power of the beaver elder (Rand, 2004). In another story a hunter transforms into a moose to feed his starving sister (Rand, 2005). Mi'kmaq stories present human and animal life as a continuum, and animals speak, become human, marry humans and raise children with them (Robinson, 2013). This magic is possible because of

the shared personhood of all animals. In some Indigenous cultures, human kinship with other animals is inherent in the nature of embodied existence while in others kinship is established through rituals or bestowed as a result of specific incidents (Hubbard, 2009; Cassady, 2008). Harrod (2000) writes of a Blackfoot story in which kinship was established through a sexual encounter between a human, a woman who was the wife of a hunter, and an animal, Beaver. This encounter resulted in the birth of a young beaver child, and ultimately Beaver gave to the hunter “a ritual and songs and showed him all of the items that should be gathered to form the beaver bundle” (p. 82).

Understanding the concept of kinship between humans and other animals can enrich social workers' interactions with the people who use their services. If social workers are to support Indigenous peoples to enhance their own well-being, we must understand how that well-being is intimately connected not only with other humans, but with the OTH animals who share their territories, and with the land itself. How an individual embodies this kinship in their own life will vary. While many Mi'kmaw people base their hunting practices in the human-animal kinship system the second author roots her veganism in this same system.

The connection with OTH animals embodied in Indigenous spiritualities may have direct and positive social impacts. An extensive body of work has documented the benefits of the human-animal bond (Barker, et al., 2003; Black, 2012; Hanrahan, 2011; Mallon, 1994; Putney, 2012; Risley-Curtiss, Holley, & Wolf, 2006; Risley-Curtiss, 2010; Risley-Curtiss, Holley, Cruickshank, et al., 2006). Fine (2010) offers a succinct compilation and discussion of the therapeutic benefits of animal-assisted interventions for service users in a social work context. Fine (2010) highlights the positive impact of animal assisted interventions on loneliness, socialization, motivation, and physiology (p. 64-73). Levinson (1962) indicates that the animals who participate in interventions fill many needs for young people, including companion, friend, confidante, trustee, and defender. Dell and colleagues (2011) explored a culturally relevant equine-assisted learning program for Indigenous youth seeking treatment for addictions. The human bond with horses, and an Indigenous worldview, were foundational for Dell's study, as researchers attempted to distance themselves from the traditional biomedical model. Dell and colleagues (2011) found that the intervention established therapeutic and spiritual

relationships between horse and human participants, provided an opportunity for youth to engage in non-verbal communication with the horses, and facilitated positive physical touch.

Despite the demonstrated benefits of animal connection, most social services do not incorporate OTH animals into their practice, and many are not accessible to the animal companions of people using their services. To better serve people for whom kinship relationships with other animals are important, we must acknowledge these relationships and their physiological, psychological, and spiritual benefits. Such an acknowledgement has policy implications for front line social services, and for the incorporation of insights from the animal rights movement into social justice work.

SOURCES OF WISDOM AND PROTECTION

A second feature of Indigenous epistemologies is the view of animals as sources of wisdom. A short essay entitled *First People* offers an explanation of the teachings that animals offer:

For us, the animals are understood to be our equals. They are still our teachers. They are our helpers and healers. They are our guardians and we have been theirs... We have deep obligations to them. Without the other animals, we are made less. Indeed, for most Indigenous peoples the traditional relationship between humans and animals exists within a kinship context. Survival and Indigenous ways of life relied upon intricate knowledge and respect for the animal inhabitants who shared the land, and this remains true today. Survival does not mean physical survival, but also our spiritual, emotional and mental well-being (Hogan, 1999, p. 12).

As Hogan suggests, approaches that focus solely on the physical well-being of Indigenous people miss the mental, emotional and spiritual elements that make up Indigenous wellness. This view is embodied in the Medicine Wheel, which incorporates mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical health into the concept of wellness (Longclaws, 1994).

Due to their success surviving on the land, OTH animals are teachers, guides, messengers, or protectors of human individuals and communities. Writing of the First Nations of the plains, Hubbard notes that the buffalo are “a relation who is there to teach the people and provide guidance” (2009, p. 68). Absolon (2009) affirms this belief within

the context of a Canadian First Nations childhood, stating, "I often felt close to the animals and knew that the spirits around me would protect me and watch me when I was in the bush alone" (p. 173). Inuit stone carver Aisa Qupiqqualuk recounts the tale of a blind boy, abandoned by his family, and rescued by a loon who hears his cries and helps him regain his sight by repeated dunking in the ocean (Nungak and Arima, 1969).

Writing about the Great Basin area of California, Myers (1997) describes the animals as "instructional guides," who are "sources of information relating to various biotic elements," and "the conceptualizations and symbolic processes expressed in Numic mythology" (p. 34). Nadasdy (2007), writing about northern hunting populations, identifies a parallel, stating "In stories, animals regularly speak to northern hunters in human languages and in so doing convey important information (such as how they wish to be treated)" (p. 34).

OTH animals also serve as spiritual messengers. Green (2009) states that "Kermode bear is known as 'spirit bear' because although they are American black bears, their fur is white. It is said when spirit bear meets you, its actions carry a message for you" (Green, 2009, p. 223). The significance of these spirit animals for contemporary Indigenous people often becomes apparent to others only when the animals are killed by Settlers attracted to their value as trophies (Hall, 2013). To respect Indigenous knowledge, we must respect the integral place of OTH animals, even (perhaps especially) if doing so challenges the anthropocentrism of Eurocentric cultures. Social workers must question what place OTH animals have in the lives of the people with whom they work, and respect and honour the supports such relationships offer contemporary Indigenous people.

CEREMONIAL SIGNIFICANCE

The animals with whom Indigenous peoples have lived shoulder-to-shoulder participate in ceremony. Sometimes the participation is spiritual, such as when a person embodies an animal through dance, or when animal bodies are used to create objects which possess spiritual power (e.g., a drum that is the heartbeat). Among the Northern Plains peoples, Harrod (2000) writes that "Dances that embodied animal movements and voices were essential features of most hunting rituals" (p. 76). Harrod (2000) reports that

the person enacting the ritual would take on the qualities of the animals, or that the acts of the ritual would manifest in the physical world. Harrod (2000) notes the causal connection between the body parts of an animal and the behaviours of living animals of the same species, noting that “dancing or ritual enactments involving animal body parts invoked the power of particular animal masters or animal spirits who could withhold or release the buffalo” (p. 90).

Indigenous knowledge systems regulate interaction with OTH animals. As Nadasdy (2007) indicates, such practices “commonly include food taboos, ritual feasts, and prescribed methods for disposing of animal remains, as well as injunctions against overhunting and talking badly about, or playing with, animals (p. 25).” Kinnear (2007) quotes a Mi'kmaw woman from Bear River First Nation who suggests that human respect for animals is essential to traditional hunting practices. She says, “If we learn to live in good spirit with the animals they can continue to reproduce and that they will always be offering themselves; there will always be enough.” (Kinnear, 2007, p. 71). Peter Christmas (1977) notes that an animal’s spirit would report any disrespect to its living brethren, who could retaliate by not permitting themselves to be caught for food. The importance of respectful treatment of animal remains also feature in a number of Mi'kmaq stories. In *The Invisible Boy* a child thoughtlessly smashes the leg bone of a moose, resulting in the breaking of his own father's leg (Rand 2005). This story underscores the physical and spiritual connection between hunter and prey.

The Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq (2007) extend the protocol of respect to encompass both animal and plant life:

[...] all things are part of nature and must be respected, the Mi'kmaq give thanks when they use part of nature for their own needs. For example, when they cut down a tree, or dig up plant roots for medicine, or kill an animal for food, there are certain rituals they must follow to pay the proper respect—to give thanks for things they disturb for their own use (p. 50).

A respectful attitude toward the animals and other persons in the environment upon whom Indigenous lives depend is expressed primarily through ceremony. The Bladder Feast, for example, is a ceremony held by the Yup'ik people of Alaska to honour animals killed for food. The bladders of seals or other animals killed throughout the year are saved (since this is where the soul resides), and during the Bladder Feast are inflated,

painted, and hung in the men's communal house. At the end of the festival the bladders are deflated, removed through the building's smoke hole, and returned to the water via a hole cut into the ice. This ceremony is intended to release the souls of the animals into the water where they can reincarnate (Doherty & Doherty, 2008, p. 39).

Indigenous ceremonial practices use animal imagery to communicate complex concepts. For many, the eagle feather communicates honour, strength, and wisdom. Due to the height of their flight, eagles are associated with foresight and awareness, and with crossing from the physical into the spiritual world. Murray (2011) describes the bodies of eagles as “material manifestations of physical, intellectual, and spiritual transactions between human and supernatural beings,” and proposes that these parts “are complicit in the integration of the earthly and spiritual worlds, and embody the continued use and transmission of eagle medicine” (p. 149).

Animal bodies are important in the production of medicine bundles (a collection of sacred items) (Harrod, 2000) and of regalia. Regalia is ceremonial dress designed for an individual, often indicating their home territory or family, or clan. Regalia incorporates the portions OTH animals that cannot be eaten, such as animal hide, fur, feathers, bone, horns, or quills. "Circle of Dance" (2014) offers the example of regalia worn in midwinter ceremonies by the Yup'ik to thank the ancestors. Such regalia includes fur parkas said to "represent the human spirit itself" ("Circle of Dance", 2014).

Skeath, Fine, and Berger indicate that OTH animals can "represent some aspect of the person's life experience or need" (Fine, 2010, p. 320). For example, companion animals may provide an opportunity to nurture for people who do not have children or who do not have access to their children. Given the numbers of Indigenous children apprehended by the state, which now outnumber those ever held in residential schools (Globe and Mail, 2014), this is serious and ongoing issue. Animals may also represent a connection to Indigenous spiritualities or to their traditional territories for the half of the Indigenous population that lives in urban centres (Siggner & Costa, 2005).

Understanding the importance of OTH animals in the lives of service users can enrich relationships between social workers and the people they support. Furthermore, the meaning attached to animals can serve as a tool for social work interventions. Metaphors and stories involving OTH animals can be a useful therapeutic approach. Writing of

metaphor therapy, Fine (2010) argues that metaphor can be used to explore a person's feelings or coping mechanisms, and offers examples from eagles soaring and birds flying in unison to those grounded with clipped wings. Social workers should consider animal symbolism contextually when choosing interventions or interpreting narratives.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Animals have an historical importance for contemporary Indigenous peoples. Traditionally, animals formed a large part of the Indigenous diet, and animal behaviour determined the location and composition of Indigenous settlements. Writing about California's Indigenous people, Anderson (1997) describes the connection between culture and place:

Affinity and choice for specific animals and plants grow out of linkages to places. The steadfastness with which a plant or an animal is interwoven into the cultures gives the culture a continuity with its past. It is the long-term association with place and the plants and animals that inhabit that place which translates into tangible, distinct tribal ethnicity (p. 17).

Contemporary Indigenous knowledges are rooted in traditional territories. Understanding Indigenous histories and knowledges, including that about relationships with about animals, is essential (Reid, 2009).

As with most Indigenous knowledge, colonization and Christianization have had a profoundly negative impact on Indigenous spiritualities and on the place of OTH animals in Indigenous cultures. Many Indigenous communities migrated with the animals on whom they depended, and these animals, along with persons such as lakes and rivers, shaped transportation, housing, and traditional clothing. Similarly, Métis settlements arose near trading posts that were central to the fur market (Douaud, 2007). Indigenous culture is so embedded in its environment that to forcibly move Indigenous people to a different territory, as is frequently done under colonialism, does violence to Indigenous peoples and their cultures by breaking their relationships with specific animals in specific places, and does violence to their language by uprooting it from its points of reference and origin.

The Eurocentric Christian view of animals is drastically different from that of Indigenous peoples. Harrod (2000) describes the Christian worldview as one in which

humans "are granted clear priority and greater value than animals, which are understood as having been created for the benefit of humankind, which therefore has legitimate domination over them" (p. 118). The difference in perspective is explicit when Indigenous and OTH animal communities share parallel experiences of colonial violence and extermination. Hubbard (2009) writes about the prairie bison, or the buffalo, who, like the human communities with whom they shared their land, were "systematically removed from the plains by colonial forces" (p. 66). This had dire consequences for those Indigenous people who depended on the Buffalo (Hubbard, 2009). Images of the Buffalo were then appropriated by colonial forces, and used as a symbol of the "wild west." In this way, ecocide is strategically positioned alongside cultural imperialism. "The narrative was simple," writes Hubbard (2009), "the Buffalo had to be tamed in order for settlement to occur" (p. 71). Medicine Eagle (1991) writes of this same phenomenon and the impact that it had on Indigenous people of the time:

The US Army policy of slaughtering the buffalo was a devastating blow to the Plains people. When millions of buffalo lay rotting on the Plains, one of the major life supports of the people was gone. This killing was so depraved and evil, it must have struck a certain terror and despair in their hearts. The buffalo symbolize for us that which nurtures and helps renew our lives (p. 53-54).

In the wake of colonization, with the salmon rivers blocked by dams or poisoned by pollution, fish populations destroyed by overfishing, the regions where food and medicines grow threatened by development and economic exploitation, many Indigenous communities have joined in solidarity with Settler allies to protest fracking, clear-cutting, or strip mining. Social workers should be aware of the impact that generations of historical loss and trauma, as well as the opportunity to resist and protest such loss, have on the health and wellbeing of contemporary Indigenous people (Fast & Collin-Vézina, 2010), and of the ways that spiritual, ceremonial, and physical connections with animals can promote and support resilience.

European colonization has repeatedly attempted to invalidate and supplant Indigenous beliefs and practices. This loss has shaped daily life for Indigenous people, including their relationships with OTH animals. Hubbard (2009) writes, "As a result of the assault on Indigenous memory and knowledge systems, particular traditional teachings essential to understanding relationships in ecology and nature, have been

disrupted" (p. 74). This disruption has disastrous consequences for Indigenous communities, relationships, and health, and these consequences continue through to the present day. Anderson (1997) states,

Loss of biodiversity means loss of religious freedoms to California Indians. For instance, the endangered status of the California condor and the bald eagle due to habitat loss, shooting, pesticides, and lead poisoning has made it difficult for tribes to acquire feathers so central to religious dress and ceremony.... Sacred areas that are the places spoken of in human creation stories and are loaded with numinous meaning to different tribes have become increasingly threatened by roads, logging, ski lifts, and other developments (p. 19).

Cassady (2008) notes that little research has examined how Christianization shapes the perspectives of elders charged with maintaining and transmitting traditional knowledge, and how Christianization might shape communities moving forward. Given Christianity's often instrumental view of OTH animals, the impact of Christianization must be considered when it comes to preserving and transmitting Indigenous teachings regarding OTH animals to future generations.

Because social work aims to be a justice-oriented profession, it cannot overlook the impacts of colonialism in its scholarship, education, or awareness. Sinclair (2009) discusses the importance of decolonial work in the academy if social work is to be relevant to Indigenous service users. To operate from an anti-colonial perspective, social workers must aim for a fuller understanding of ongoing colonialism, and its repercussions for Indigenous communities and OTH animals. The retention and reclaiming of Indigenous knowledges and spiritualities is essential for the future of Indigenous people and communities. Reid (2009) states, "We need 'to build on innovations that are based on thousands of years of successful caring for children, families and communities and the challenge is to find and think of ways to bridge it forward'" (p. 210).

INTERCONNECTEDNESS

The concept of interconnectedness is fundamental to Indigenous knowledge generally, and to Indigenous spiritualities in particular. With an eye on the impact of climate change on the Indigenous people of the Northern Plains, Murray (2011) discusses concepts of wellness as they relate to OTH animals:

Wellness for many Aboriginal groups is a holistic concept that encompasses a

balance among four aspects of the human condition: spiritual, physical, emotional, and mental. Based on the medicine wheel, wellness is achieved when there is a balance among these four dimensions within an individual. Aboriginal wellness is also achieved through harmony between the individual and the environment. Changes in the environment, animal patterns, and climate have created an imbalance in resources in the environment, and an imbalance in well-being for many participants (p. 451-452).

Medicine Eagle (1991) writes about this concept generally, making reference to a Sacred Web of Life, in which all humans are “entangled”, as well as to “all beings, energies, and things in the Circle of Life” (p. 9). Baskin (2009) relates this concept directly to social work practice:

I also emphasized in my work the inter-connectedness of individual adults to their families, communities, other adults, Mother Earth, all of creation, the Creator and all of the spirit world. It is important for adults in pain to realize that they are both affected by and have an impact on everything and everyone around them. They also need to see that their connection to other people, the earth, and the spirit world can be a powerful source of healing for them; that they can communicate with and gain clarity from their ancestors in the spirit world; that holding a rock can give them strength; and that water can soothe and calm them (p. 137).

This perspective runs counter to many norms in our current model of providing social services, which continues to be biomedical and influenced by neoliberal individualism. We must consider the relationships that people who use social services have, not only with other human beings, but with OTH animals, the natural environment, technology, and spiritual worlds.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK: PRACTICE, POLICY, THEORY, AND RESEARCH

Unique relationships with OTH animals feature centrally in many Indigenous spiritualities, and lessons derived from Indigenous spiritualities and histories are valuable in social work (Dell et al., 2011; Sinclair, Hart, and Bruyere, 2009). Most of the scholarship that surrounds social work practice and spirituality in general is focused on Eurocentric, Judeo-Christian beliefs, and institutionalized religions (eg, Bone, De Souza, and Watson, 2016; Jeynes and Martinez, 2015). The only social work journal focused on spirituality is the *Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*,

which focuses on religion, and finds its roots in the Catholic Charities. There is a dearth of scholarship that explores Indigenous spiritualities in the social work academic and practice context. In 2011, Hanrahan published an article entitled “Challenging Anthropocentrism in Social Work Through Ethics and Spirituality: Lessons from Studies in Human-Animal Bonds.” While this article makes the case for de-centring the human in anti-oppressive social work practice, particularly when integrating elements of spirituality, it does not explore nor acknowledge the roots of many of these ideas, that is to say, Indigenous knowledges. This is long past due. Lavallée (2010) notes the dangers inherent in integrating Indigenous spiritualities into social work, including appropriation and misconduct on the part of Settler practitioners. Social workers must proceed with caution and collaborate with Indigenous teachers and knowledge keepers when integrating Indigenous knowledge into curricula or practice.

The symbolism of OTH animals in Indigenous spiritualities gives us insight into the value of non-traditional interventions for Indigenous service users. In a contemporary context, some practitioners may find animal-assisted interventions to be meaningful. This is corroborated by Dell and colleagues (2011), who examined the effectiveness of equine-assisted learning as a social work intervention with Indigenous youth in Ontario and found it supportive of healing.

Interventions assisted by OTH animals have a number of important policy implications. First, challenging anthropocentrism in Canada would involve revising the Code of Ethics of the Canadian Association of Social Workers. Currently, members of the CASW are required to uphold six core values, two of which are “Respect for the Inherent Dignity and Worth of Persons,” and “Service to Humanity.” To incorporate Indigenous spiritualities and animal assisted interventions, social work practitioners, educators, and scholars would need to reconsider this code, which has not been updated in almost a decade. Examining organizational policies to create spaces in which humans and other animals can work together is a critical step. At the same time, an anti-oppressive approach can be a useful lens to examine how to involve OTH animals in our practice in a just way.

The social, ceremonial and cultural participation of animals in Indigenous life all have implications for present-day environmental activism. For a successful anti-colonial

conservation effort to develop, Indigenous people lead in directing the focus and tactics of conservation efforts. The notion of kinship with OTH animals has implications for justice-oriented social work as well, in that it is impossible for social workers to remain detached from the animal rights movement if they are to understand the deep, often spiritual, attachment that service users have with OTH animals.

From a theoretical perspective, social workers must be mindful that the practical and scholarly work they undertake is intentional and anti-colonial, and must work in collaboration with Indigenous communities, Indigenous practitioners, and Indigenous service users. Social workers must enter these relationships with humility, and be willing set aside professional agendas in favour of a learning stance. Furthermore, social workers may benefit from shedding a positivist stance in favour of postmodernist theoretical framework that accepts multiple realities and truths.

Further research is needed on the place of OTH animals in social work. For this research to be more fruitful it requires collaboration with Indigenous scholars and engagement with critical animal studies. To create a body of work around OTH animals and social work that is accessible to a wide audience, scholars would do well to blend the radical perspective of critical animal studies with the reverence for OTH animal life found in Indigenous studies.

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