

Decolonising Social Work Education

Memory, Haunting and Critical Hope in the Nordics



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The path for today

- Approaching ideas of decoloniality require that we reflect on who we are, where we came from, why we understand the world as we do.
- Following Richa Nagar's call for explicit positioning to address how we speak across worlds, rather than to just recite a CV, we start by introducing ourselves.
- Then, we discuss the main concepts and contexts which shape our work.
- Finally, introduce our book.

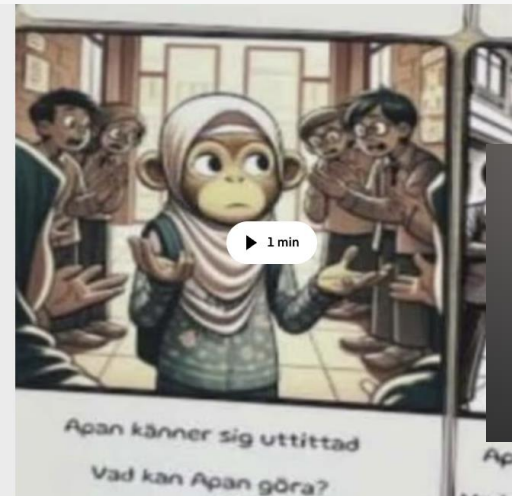
Positioning and weaving: Kris

- Born in Central California: one of the most culturally diverse and poorest region of the US
 - Immigrated to Finland in the 1980s
 - Active in early immigrant rights groups, worked with asylum-seekers and in the field of immigrants living with HIV, taught first courses with asylum-seekers => led to studying social work
 - Committed to abolitionist and decolonial perspectives in social work- dismantling carceral systems through systemic change
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Positioning and weaving: Michael

- Born Ireland
- Worked in social work in several countries
- Teach on undergraduate and graduate programs at Malmö University
- Research interests in schools, emergency preparation and pedagogy.



Socialförvaltningen Nordost i Göteborg har utrett kritiken mot "Arga apor" och vidtar nu åtgärder. Se vilka i klippet ovan. Foto: SVT

Utredning om "Arga apor" klar – socialförvaltningen Nordost inför nya rutiner

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Socialförvaltningen Nordost har utrett kritiken mot "Arga apor" och vidtar nu åtgärder. Rapporten slår fast att det var problematiskt att de rasistiskt uppfattade illustrationer stoppades i tid, men ger inget svar på om orsaken strukturell rasism.

Socialförvaltningen Nordost är nu klara med sin översyn



The Documentary Podcast

Give me my child back

”Sverige läxar upp andra länder om urfolksrättigheter”

27 min - tis 17 feb kl 06.00

Nyligen firades den samiska nationaldagen, men hur rapporterar andra länder om Sverige och relationen till Europas enda erkända ursprungsbefolkning?

Ladda ner (27 min, MP3) Dela

What is Colonialism?

- Colonialism is a practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one people (their land and resources) to another. Relations of domination have existed as long as human civilization, but the global scale of colonialism was unprecedented.
- 16th century: colonialism became global due to innovations in European technology, especially with weapons and ships.
- It was also supported by ideologies of domination and punishment, often framed through religious discourses to legitimise military conquest as a way to facilitate the conversion and salvation of Indigenous peoples. (see Bartolomé de Las Casas)



Coloniality: Ways of Being, Thinking & Doing

- The sense of our own subjectivity—who we are in the world—forms the basis of how we know and act. This is constructed in interaction with the contexts in which we are socialized and educated.
- How we exist in the world is interwoven with how we know the world. Modern Western subjectivity emerged from the forces of nationalism, extractive capitalism, and settler colonialism which constructed reality as linear and binary.
- The living legacy of European colonialism in how we interact with each other and construct social systems and knowledge.
 - Systems of hierarchies (gender, race, class)
 - Systems of knowledge (Eurocentric ways of constructing knowledge)
 - Cultural systems (reinforce Eurocentric norms)

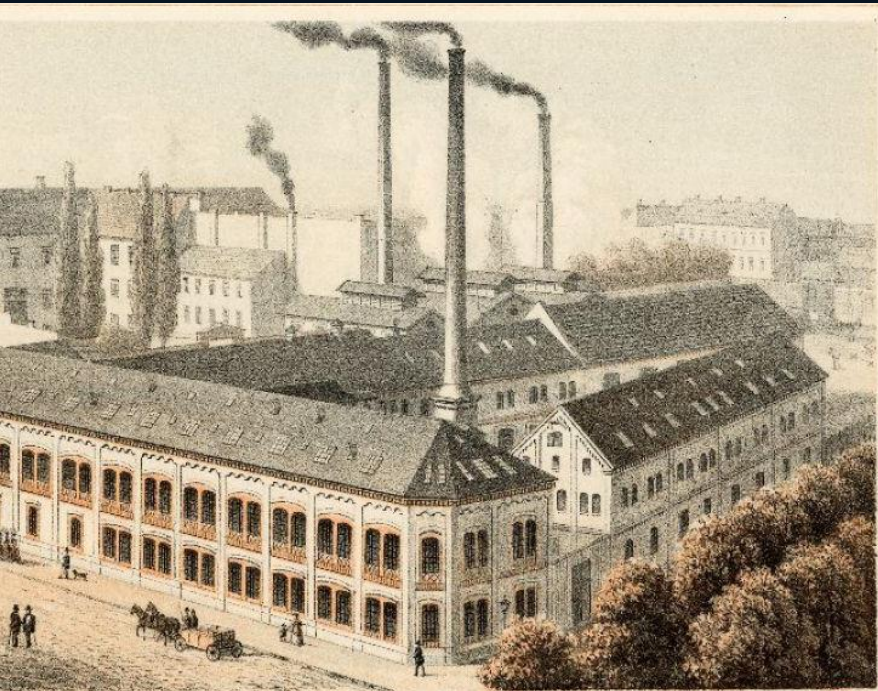


Colonial vibes in the Nordics: Finland

- Not unitary country before Swedish incursion (nature spirituality, dispersed settlement)
- Under Swedish rule (1200s-1809) : Christianisation
- Expansion into Sámi territories (1500s –on): eventual administrative control, cultural suppression, boarding schools.
- Grand Duchy of Russia (1809-1917): modernisation and rise of cultural nationalism
- Independence (1917) followed by civil war and political repression
- World War 2 (1939-1945): complex and diverse wars



Colonialism in the Nordics: Sweden & Denmark



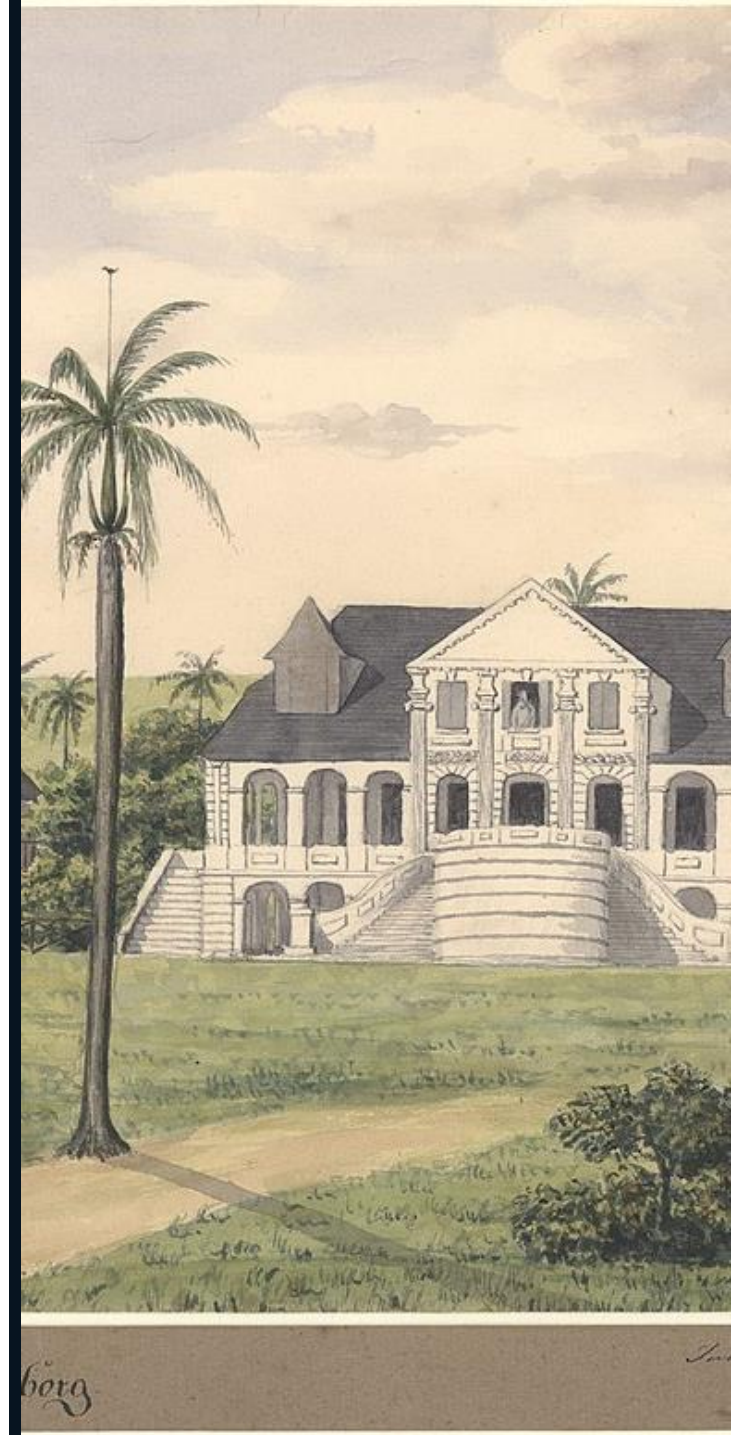
MALMÖ YLLFABRIKS AKTIEBOLAGS ETABLISSEMENT.

Sweden

- New Sweden (North America)
- Swedish Gold Coast (West Africa)
- Saint-Barthélemy (Caribbean)
- Colonisation of Sápmi (internal colonialism)

•Denmark

- Danish Gold Coast (West Africa)
- Danish West Indies (Caribbean plantations)
- Danish India
- Greenland, Faroe Islands, Iceland



Trade implications

*“It is not easy to predict how much time may elapse before the cotton weaving [sic!] industry is restored to its former position, or whether this will ever be the case, since the production of cotton. It is not easy to predict how much time may elapse before the cotton weaving [sic!] industry is restored to its former position, or whether this will ever be the case, since the production of cotton since the **abolition of forced slave labour** in the American Southern states has become both more difficult and more expensive, whereby the raw material will probably not for a long time be offered in the world market at as cheap a price as before the war.....**this deplorable position for the cotton industry** may, unfortunately, continue for many years, and the auditors therefore do not dare to endorse the resumption of the factory.”*



What counts as colonialism?

- **Complying with colonialism (Keskinen, 2016) or Colonialism without colonies (Lüthi, 2016)**
- **Recognising colonial roots are interwoven with epistemic violence and suppressed social memory**
 - Must be situated within our specific time-space
 - How Nordic nations without formal overseas colonies participated in, profited from, and reinforced colonial structures, racism, and knowledge production.
- **Nordic self-image vs. reality**
 - Branded as tolerant, peaceful, humane welfare states
 - Myth of being peripheral to European imperialism
 - Obscures deep complicity in global systems of oppression



American progress (John Gast)

- **Nordic emigration and settler colonialism**
 - Part of the colonial settler narrative: pioneers, “taming” territory
 - Example: Vilhelm Moberg’s *The Emigrants* series (*Utvandrarna*, *Invandrarna*, *Nybyggarna*, *Sista brevet till Sverige*, 1949–1959) documenting Swedish settler migration to Minnesota or Ole Rolvaag (*Giants in the Earth*)

Trifecta of science, religion and philosophy: examples

Racial science

Binary gender

Individualistic

Ways of collecting, classifying, and representing
knowledge about indigenous people

“Owning” research

Broadening lineages

- International social work generally traces its origins to Jane Addams and Mary Richmond (two white Americans from settler colonial society). That represent the yin (community organizing) and yang (clinical practice) of social work, both of which are based on a colonizing gaze.
- Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2006, 42) writes about Western science as “creating a language for a set of complex stories, ideas, historical events, and social relationships.” It classifies, represents, condenses complexity, and evaluates.
- What would it look like to consider a more complex genealogy? To decolonize the origin story of social work?



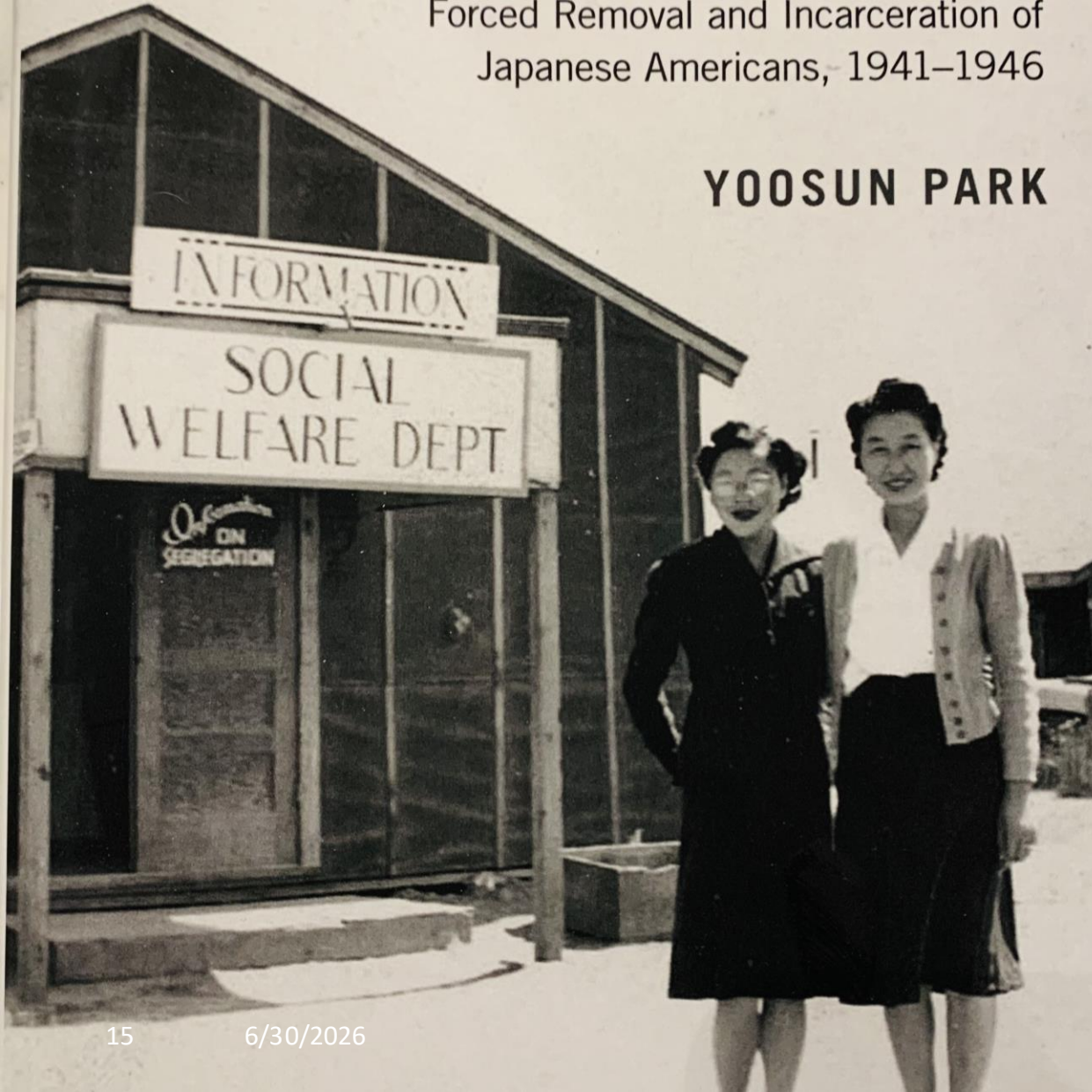
Complex legacies and futures of social work

- Originated from colonial-industrial population control and activism against industrial capitalism.
- Has become narrower due to shrinking welfare states and focus on measurable, outcome-driven skills.
- There's a decline in community-based, relational work that doesn't fit into evidence-based or policy-funded models.
- Critical theories (Black feminist, Indigenous, Afrocentric, queer, etc.) challenge mainstream assumptions and offer alternatives like mutual aid and radical care.

INJUSTICE

The Complicity of Social Workers in the
Forced Removal and Incarceration of
Japanese Americans, 1941–1946

YOOSUN PARK



Social work and social memory

- Social work has a complex history of also being complicit with oppressive structures and systems.
- This social memory is often erased in the social work profession because it does not fit in with our vision of what social work should be.
- Need to have uncomfortable conversations.
- How societies remember and forget is a complex process. Social memory is intimately connected to group relations of power, inequality, and social justice.

What the book explores:

- **Question the common story of social work:** Show that social work has a deeper and more complex history than often told.
- **Talk about colonialism and white innocence:** Explain how Nordic countries were involved in colonialism, both at home and abroad.
- **Think about what this means today:** Explore how this history affects how we learn and work in social work now.
- **Show how colonial history still influences us:** Argue that today's systems still carry the impact of colonialism.
- **Offer hope for change:** Suggest that “critical hope” can help us imagine and build a more just, decolonized social work.

Troubling ways of knowing and remembering

- Complex interplay of benevolence, expertise/state power, radicalism, social reform, resistance, eugenics, racism and colonial ideology/knowledge
- Challenging singular narratives to bring out polyvocality of knowledge and practices
- The European perspective as a socially constructed (but also socially powerful) category
- White colonial epistemologies frame history through modernisation theory
 - Centring the West as the model of linear emancipatory progress
 - Neglecting genocide, chattel slavery, and exploitation of much of the global population (Bhambra & Holmwood, 2021)

Haunting, ghosts and specters

- First discussed by Derrida (1994): conceptual metaphor – sense of ghosts and haunting from the past in the present.
- Paying attention to ghosts is memory work that is linked to calls for justice.
- Derrida: must learn to live with ghosts
- Remembering and forgetting, and re-remembering amid efforts to exorcise memory, are continuous processes for individuals as well as societies.

Memory, Haunting and Critical Hope

- Decolonial memory activism is a means of confronting oppression, power, violence, and erasure through the **untangling and recovery** of suppressed historical narratives that trouble unjust structures and systems (Pauls, 2024).
- ‘Memory activism is thus a form of epistemic justice, which recognises that **memory is a complex dynamic** process that **shifts** between past and present over time with ancestors speaking to us in the present to help us pivot to new visions of the future, reflecting a *kairos* approach to understanding the meaning of experience’ (Ch. 3)



Futurities

- Co-developing a collective ecology of caring. More than one-to-one interventions (therapy, etc). It is about creating social infrastructures of care and affect (emotion, hospitality) not just services.
- Inequalities and oppression must be dealt with – collective inspiration to create a more equal, ecological, sharing resources society. Institutional change and new social infrastructures. End to the throwaway society. Reclaim the commons.
- Turn away from radical individualism towards lives of relationality, sharing and co-creation.



Reclaiming: Taking back community-centered, justice-driven roots of social work.

Recovering: Honoring relational practices and values lost to neoliberal reforms.

Reimagining: Creating new possibilities through mutual aid, radical care, and critical theory.

