

Kai Ladd - Discovery Snapshot



CATAMOUNT

FELLOWSHIP FOR EMERGING CHANGEMAKERS

An exploration of inner work, anti-racism, and white identity

Introduction

The Catamount Fellowship has led me down a path of self discovery. Using an autoethnographic approach I have explored topics such as inner work, racism, allyship, truthful Canadian history of Indigenous peoples treatment and lived experiences, decolonization, white privilege, racial identity, colonialism, anti-racism, as well as systems thinking, systems sight and associated tools.

On the surface, my research focused on what capacity building, decolonization, unlearning and other inner work changemakers have done so that they can effectively contribute to social change. Through this research, I have embarked on my own decolonization, unlearning, capacity building, inner work and personal growth in order to effectively contribute to social change and become a genuine ally.

In this snapshot, I have combined my experiences with the theory of the adaptive cycle and panarchy, while also plotting Helm's theory of white racial identity development.

My journey is not reflective of everyone else's, nor is how I view my journey along the adaptive cycle the same as another. It is also not finished here. I feel that at least I have a solid starting point.

Catamount Fellow

Kai Ladd

Community Partner

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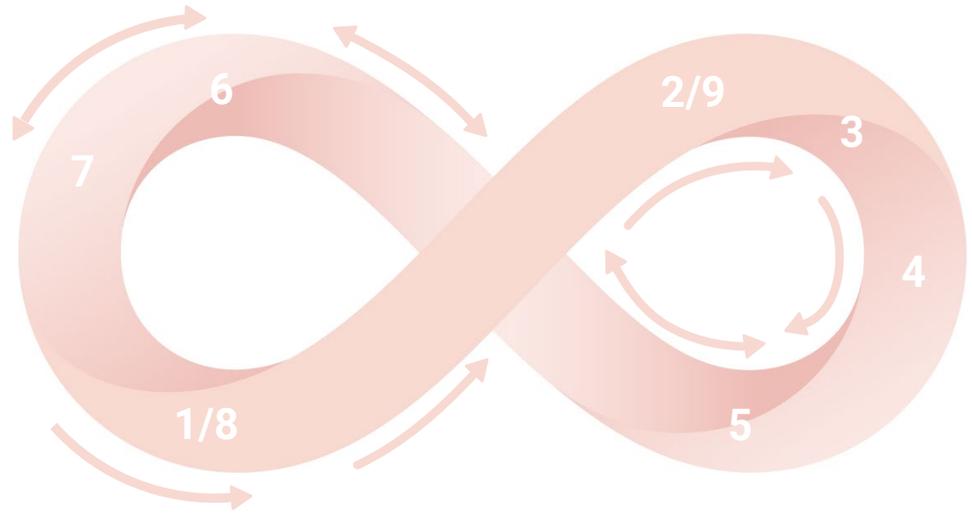
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Adaptive Cycle



1 Exploitation

- My socialization from birth to adulthood, learned colour-blindness
- Internalization of cultural expectations and societal norms, dreams and desires, definition of success
- Forming my understanding of the world & developing my identity

2 Maturity (Contact)

- Early adulthood
- Solidifying my understanding of the world and ways of operating
- Not yet questioning life lessons or socialization, no intentional actions

3 Rigidity Trap

- Creation of mental models that allowed me to hide the truth from myself
- Willful blindness to the racism and oppression others experienced
- Embraced a sense of superiority, ego and power
- Prevented me from continuing growth and building relationships

4 Shock

- Forced to acknowledge the real impact of our actions, behaviours, mental models, assumptions and dehumanization

5 Destruction/Collapse (Disintegration)

- Loss of faith in myself, unable to trust my own brain, or understandings
- Acknowledge that who I actually am is not who I thought I was

6 Re-organization (Pseudo-independent)

- Reconciliation of past understandings with reality and expanded awareness
- Acknowledge my privilege & the harmful internalized mental models and assumptions I hold
- Recognize my own accountability and responsibility for change and anti-racism
- Lots of unlearning, relearning, and capacity building

7 Poverty Trap (Reintegration)

- Stuck bouncing between destruction and reorganization, readapting oppressive mental models
- In a state of knowing that I was operating based on oppressive assumptions and understandings but having no skills or tools to overcome this

8 Growth: Immersion/Emersion

- Discovery of inner work and other tools that aid in reflection, healing, listening and learning
- Growing understanding of my white identity, racism, anti-racism, authentic allyship, etc.
- Begin to live intentionally, not reactively.

9 Conservation (Autonomy)

- Starting to reach this stage
- Acknowledge I still have a lot to learn
- Clearer understanding of who I am, my role as a white anti-racist ally & my white racial identity

Adaptive cycle: Sundstrom, S., & Allen, C. (2019). The adaptive cycle: More than a metaphor. *Ecological Complexity*, 39, 1-11.

Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecocom.2019.100767>

Helms: Silva Parker, C., & Willsea, J. (2019). Summary of stages of racial identity development. Interaction Institute for Social Change, 1-6. Retrieved from <https://www.sbctc.edu/resources/documents/colleges-staff/programs-services/foc-mentorship/stages-of-racial-identity-development-oct2019.pdf>

Overview of Helm's White Racial Identity Development Stages

Contact

We are colourblind despite the fact that we can perceive racial differences. We often exhibit our socialization unquestioningly, thus unknowingly are racist and oppressive. We are unable to recognize our behaviours can be harmful. If we are faced with a real-world shock that highlights the truth of our actions we are able to move onto the next stage.

Disintegration

This stage deals with our response to this new information. We can feel as if we cannot trust our understanding of the world around us nor our own actions and motivations. We may feel lost, guilty and ashamed, possibly even disliking ourselves. Should we focus these emotions to drive positive change in our understandings, we can move towards pseudo-independence, but when we cannot reconcile these emotions we may move into reintegration.

Reintegration

This stage is marked with avoidance behaviours. We are socialized to believe that we are good people because we do not deliberately set out to cause harm. Therefore we operate on this idea that intention removes our responsibility from the consequences of our behaviours. We shift the blame onto the victim, or feel we are deserving of the privileges we have in society. If we are able to recognize and address this fallacy of logic, then we can accept our own responsibility and accountability, and move into the next stage.

Pseudo-Independence

In this first stage of positive racial identification, we acknowledge t we have undeserved privileges, that racism is real, and that it is a problem for everyone. We accept that we have perpetuated it and that we have to stop it. We are still unable to understand our responsibility to anti-racism, as we turn to BIPOC's to confront and uncover racism. We are unable to see how we can actively contribute to anti-racism efforts while also being white.

Immersion/Emersion

We are now making genuine efforts to positively connect with our white racial identities while simultaneously engaging in anti-racism efforts which can be seen as a performative allyship. We are actively seeking to learn about authentic allyship and anti-racism. We may be struggling to reconcile our accountability and responsibility and to accommodate our new understandings of the world around us. Thus we may feel an intense desire to meet and connect with other whites who have been through this path themselves.

Autonomy

More a stage of maintenance; we have a clear and positive understanding of our white identities and anti-racism. We understand where and how we are accountable, where we hold responsibility and what efforts we need to make in order to truthfully and authentically pursue social justice and anti-racism. This stage does not end, it requires continuous reflection and work in order to maintain. We have not earned a badge that we can then forget about, we must seek to cultivate a way of being that seeks to understand others perspectives, while ensuring that our own mental models are not accidentally oppressive.

Steps on a path towards anti-racism

This entire project has been based on my own journey of learning. I am not, in any form, an expert. Nor do I really know what you need to unpack in yourself in order for you to become anti-racist. Below is a list of five elements I believe were critical for me to face in order to change.

1. Stop subscribing to colour-blindness and hiding behind this notion that you are not blatantly racist therefore you are not racist.

You need to be willing to face the hard truths about your actions, how others perceive you and be committed to doing the work to learn. Change and understanding must first start with understanding yourself, discovering who you are, both the good and bad, the skills you possess and those that you need to cultivate.

2. Self-reflection and inner work are skills.

They need to be learned, practices, and cultivated. You have to learn how to be brutally honest with yourself. If you cannot admit your faults nor acknowledge where you are going wrong, then you cannot make a conscious effort to make changes. You need to look at your motivations, the power dynamics you possess, how you listen to others, what your words and attitudes are.

3. Harness your emotions

You will likely experience a lot of guilt, shame, embarrassment and even anger. If you let these emotions control your attitudes, perceptions and motivations, then you can do untold levels of harm. But using these in positive ways will propel you into a more open understanding of reality, into deeper listening and even into a better understanding of another's perspective.

4. Unlearning is an endless journey

Socialization informs our complete understanding of the world. Unfortunately, it is based on a society where power dynamics, white superiority, and racism are all fundamentally ingrained. We are taught not to question and to ignore the consequences. We can only use socialization as an excuse for so long. We are solely responsible for our actions, and therefore we are accountable. Inner work becomes a key element in understanding our socialization, then questioning it, and changing that which is not acceptable to our values. Some things we need to unlearn include:

- Preconceptions
- Stereotypes
- Negative assumptions
- Assimilation
- Colour-blindness
- White victimization
- Power and privilege
- Culturally acceptable aggression
- Fear, anger, hate, misunderstanding
- White supremacy and superiority
- Cultural deceptions
- Intention vs. Culpability
- Racism
- Rights

5. There is also a ton of re-learning and new learnings to crave, such as:

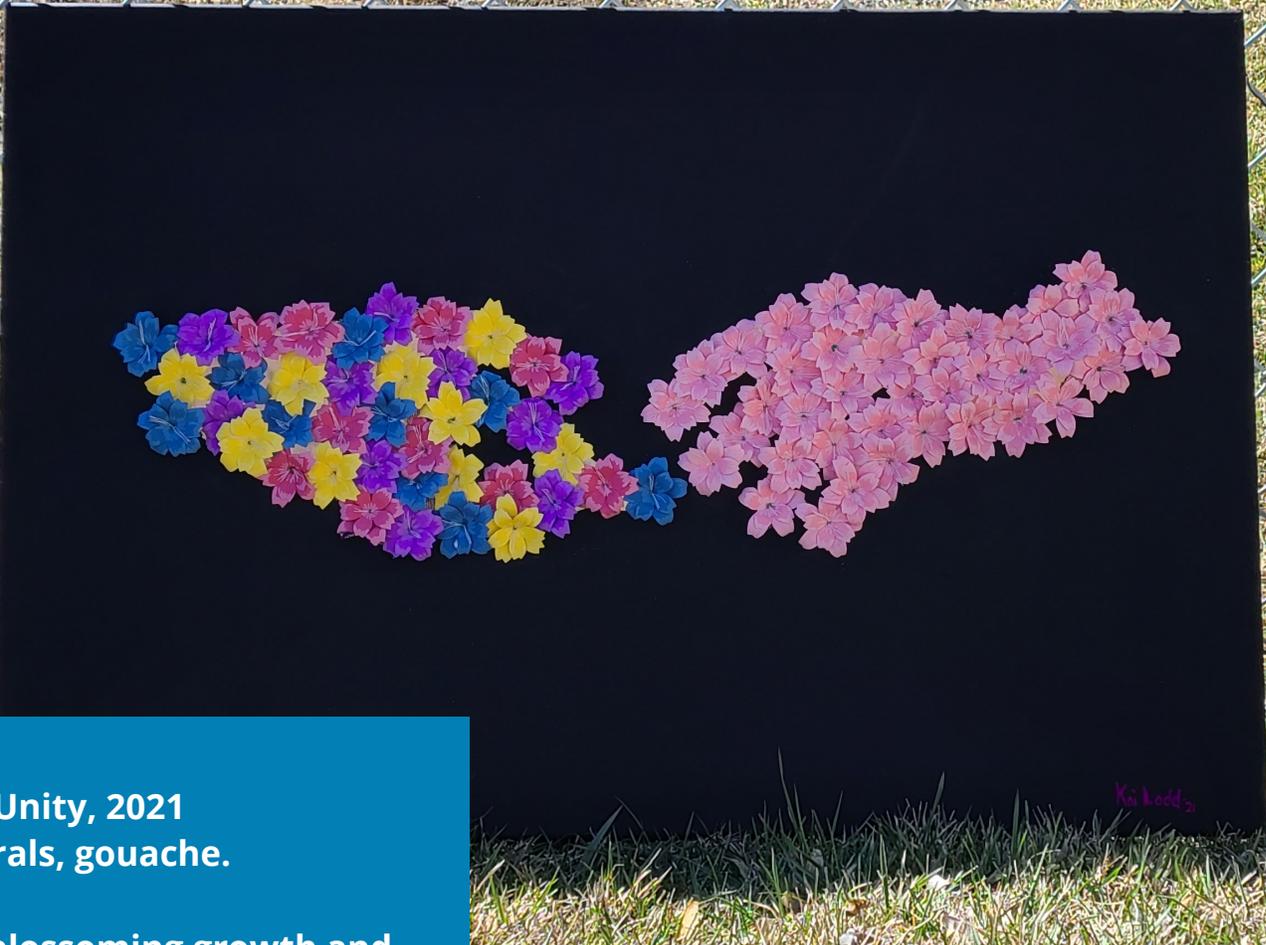
- Connections with other
- Listening Vs. Understanding
- History
- Racism & Anti-racism
- Allyship
- About each race
- Race vs. Culture
- Individuals vs. the group
- Systemic discrimination, oppression and racism
- Self-awareness
- Power and Privilege
- Allyship vs. Performative Allyship
- Intentions vs. Consequences
- Accountability and Responsibility
- Emotional maturity
- How to hold space
- Embrace discomfort
- Hero vs. Ally

Kai Ladd - Creative Work



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Kai Ladd
Hands of Unity, 2021
Paper Florals, gouache.

**Towards blossoming growth and
reconnection.**



Kai Ladd - Scholarly Output



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The mountain out of the clouds:

An autoethnography of white identity and anti-racism

Kai Ladd

Land Acknowledgement

I want to acknowledge the lands and the Indigenous Nations whose footsteps have travelled these lands for generations before settlers arrived. I am currently residing on the traditional land of Moh'kinsstis, and the Treaty 7 territory of the Blackfoot confederacy: Siksika, Kainai, Piikani, as well as the Îyâxe Nakoda and Tsuut'ina Nations. This land is also home to the Métis Nation of Alberta, Region 3 within the historical Northwest Métis homeland.

I feel that it is important to acknowledge the original spirit of treaty 7 as a treaty of peace and cohabitation, not land surrender. My family of settler descendants are able to live on this territory and honour this land because of the hospitality of the Indigenous Nations and Peoples both past and present.

It is also critical to acknowledge the legacy of colonization and the impact it has had on both Indigenous peoples as well as settler descendants. Colonial ideals and white supremacy still operate within our society, oppressing Indigenous Peoples. All Canadians must acknowledge that we benefit from this oppression. We also must acknowledge that this oppression is unjust and that it needs to be eradicated from our society. This project is based on understanding our roles and our impacts within our own white identities within this context of colonial oppression, white supremacy, and racism towards Indigenous Peoples, in these lands that we have named Canada.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank the following people:

The Institute of Community Prosperity, especially Barb Davies and Cordelia Snowdon, and James Stauch for selecting me and providing me with the opportunity to be a fellow. Thank you for all your wisdom, giving us space and autonomy, but then also guiding us when and where we needed it.

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Pattie Pryma, my faculty advisor for supporting me, directing me, but also giving me the freedom to explore and gather knowledge on my own. You've helped me cultivate new forms of research skills, encouragement, and helped me to bridge my traditional academic skills with new reflective skills.

My fellow cohort, both those still in the program and those who have left. Thank you all for helping me when I couldn't decide, commiserating in our panic and uncertainty, and for the tiny little lessons that every single one of you taught me throughout out this, things like humility, poise, grace, confidence, strength, unity. I mourn that the pandemic prevented us from being together more, but I hope to cultivate each one of you into lifelong friends whose successes and happiness I can celebrate for the rest of our lives.

To all the auxiliary individuals, who provided guidance and teachings, such as Lena Soots, Miriam Carey, Katharine McGowan, Elle Griffin and others who gave teachings, provided a shoulder to cry on, to help with design and idea formation, who encouraged us to open up and learn. There is more that you have done for me than I could say. Thank you for your support and all the work that you have all done in the background that helped us gain perspective, systems thinking skills, leadership skills and cultivate our own identities and brands, as well as helping us produce finished and professional outputs.

To my mom, Dawn Nikolov, who has listened to me wax poetic about this whole thing, dealt with half-formed thoughts, days of being shut in my room, and all the tea and food you have brought me when I get so involved, I forget to eat. Thanks for being my cheerleader, my sounding board, and the devil's advocate. I appreciate you more than I could ever convey.

To my Aunt, Laura Ladd, for supporting me, being my cheerleader and my support. Your encouragement, excitement, and pride has helped me learn to find the beams of light under the dark storm clouds.

Recommended Resources

Academic Articles:

- McLean, K. & Pasupathi, M. (2012). Process of identity development: Where am I and how I got there. *Identity*, 12, 8-28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2011.632363>
- Miller, J., MAE, Peat, F. D. (2009). Gentle action: A better way. University of Minnesota and Life Science Foundation. <https://www.csh.umn.edu/sites/csh.umn.edu/files/csh-gentle-action-summary.pdf>
- Papi-Thornton, D. (2016). Tackling heropreneurship. Skoll Centre. <http://tacklingheropreneurship.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/tackling-heropreneurship-daniela-papi.pdf>
- Peat, F. D., (2008). Gentle action: Bringing creative change to a turbulent world. Pari Publishing. <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/6093614-gentle-action>
- Silva Parker, C., & Willsea, J. (2019). Summary of stages of racial identity development. Interaction Institute for Social Change, 1-6. Retrieved from <https://www.sbctc.edu/resources/documents/colleges-staff/programs-services/foc-mentorship/stages-of-racial-identity-development-oct2019.pdf>
- Sundstrom, S., & Allen, C. (2019). The adaptive cycle: More than a metaphor. *Ecological Complexity*, 39, 1-11. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecocom.2019.100767>

Videos:

- Alexess Sosa. (2020, July 5). Racism and allyship: What is racism? [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5zeBz7bsK8E&t=3s>

Podcasts:

- Demby, G. & Merisol Meraji, S. (Hosts). (2016, May 31). Can we talk about whiteness? [Audio podcast episode #1]. In *The code switch* podcast. NPR.
- Geller-Mohamed, R. (Host). (2020, February 20). Anti-racism work with white people. [Audio podcast episode #4]. In *Racially Responsible*. Anchor. <https://anchor.fm/rorri-geller-mohamed/episodes/004-Anti-racism-work-with-white-people-epkesa>
- Croxton, S. (Host). (2020, June 25). Dr. Robin DiAngelo: "Racism is a system, not an event." [Audio podcast episode #935]. In *Quote of the day show/ Daily motivational talks*. Redcircle. <https://redcircle.com/shows/the-quote-of-the-day-show-daily-motivational-talks/episodes/07fb6647-ece0-4231-ac51-922a23339f75>
- Wagman, C. & McGlynn, A. (2020, October 25). Sharing the responsibility for decolonization with Tim Fox. [Audio podcast episode]. In *the small nonprofit podcast*. The Good Partnership and CharityVillage. https://www.thegoodpartnership.com/post/___87

Grey Literature:

- McCullough, A. (2020). The 7 circles of whiteness. Medium. <https://alishiamccullough.medium.com/the-7-circles-of-whiteness-cb60e53d14e0>
- McIntosh, P. (1989). White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. The international SEED project. <https://nationalseedproject.org/Key-SEED-Texts/white-privilege-unpacking-the-invisible-knapsack>
- Milligan, K. & Walker, J. (2020). Self-inquiry for social change leaders. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. https://ssir.org/articles/entry/self_inquiry_for_social_change_leaders#
- Resilience Alliance. (n.d.). Adaptive Cycle. Retrieved from <https://www.resalliance.org/adaptive-cycle>
- Learning for Justice. (2016). Toolkit for "anatomy of an ally. *Teaching Tolerance Magazine*, 53. <https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/summer-2016/toolkit-for-anatomy-of-an-ally>

The mountain out of the clouds:

An autoethnography of white identity and anti-racism

Acknowledging your role in oppression when you have been socialized to be blind to it seems impossible and wholly traumatizing. We gain our identities and understandings of the world and how to operate within society via socialization. Socialization is a lifelong learning path where societal norms, social institutions, family, and peer interactions all combine into providing us with the baselines we need in order to function as humans and members of society. These institutions are built upon power hoarding and oppressive ideals. Often, white descendants are socialized by societal norms and social institutions to feel superior while ignoring the realities of their actions and their impact on others. Familial and peer interactions can then reinforce these paradigms, often without their conscious awareness.

Through my research, I have learned that many potential allies must face the harsh reality of what power they hold and the consequences of their ignorant behaviours, mental models, and actions. Most white people in Canada would not consider themselves to be racist, or complicit in the racism and oppression of Indigenous Peoples. The reality is our entire society was built on white dominance and colonial ideals which has resulted in racism being built into our very ways of living and being. We as whites, hold more power and influence than we could perceive. We are indoctrinated into engaging in implicit and covert racism, resulting in us being blind to the harms while we use the unmerited power and privilege that we wield without cause or care.

The covert and systemic nature of our racism means that we are creating harm as if we were blindfolded in a crowd firing off a gun loaded with hollow point bullets, when what we thought we were firing was a cap gun. We are taught to be ignorant to the carnage we leave in our wake because we never had the intention to cause harm to another human. We then dehumanize the survivors to protect ourselves from the repercussions as well as to hoard the power, privilege, and resources that we barely recognize we hold but are still essential orientation markers for our behaviour and identity. It is violent, predatory, and horrific, but many of us, white settler descendants, operate in this manner, completely blind to what we are doing.

This paper is written mainly for white people who are just newly facing the reality of our white culture and privilege. I cannot know their stories through this medium, but I can share my experiences, my learnings, and hope to inspire others to learn the power of their actions and face the consequences, be it harmful and oppressive or uplifting and supportive. Through this autoethnographic reflection on my past, I hope

to give a little guidance, a launching pad if you will, for those who want to be a better and anti-racist person. I highly recommend that everyone, but especially potential allies, changemakers, and social justice warriors engage in inner work to better understand yourself, how you understand and interact with the world, and to make authentic and deliberate efforts for positive change. I applaud anyone who wants to learn how to become real and effective allies, who want to move beyond the performative and face value definition of allyship to become true changemakers.

My journey started before I became a Catamount Fellow, but the fellowship is where I have really began to learn how to accomplish my goal of being a part of the solution of racism. It is during this fellowship and through guidance and support from the Institute of Community Prosperity at Mount Royal University, my community partner Canada Bridges, and my faculty mentor a professor with the School of Nursing and Midwifery, that I have internalized many lessons, learned to listen better, to decolonize my mental models and to examine my values in relation to my actions and behaviours. They all helped me realize the colonial research methodologies taught me to focus on where Indigenous Peoples were less than me, and attempt to discover ways to assimilate them into my definitions of value and success. They helped me realize I was perpetuating assimilation in all my interactions with Indigenous Peoples. Where instead, we should be working to understand ourselves in relation to Indigenous Peoples. We need to make changes to our white dominant society and how we function, in order to eliminate a system of oppression and racism that our settler ancestors created, fostered, and built into our institutions and society.

Canada Bridges operates on a relationship-based model in their changemaking. They are using relationships to frame all their efforts and work. They have shared three key principles around relationships that they use to do this.

First, they work in a human-centred way, meaning they work to build relationships with communities and individual community members first. When they do work with communities, it is only in response to a direct invitation, and they focus their efforts into service of that invitation. They do not consider these invitations to be full access or an invitation to the entire community, only to the community members who have invited them in to work together in the ways that they have been asked. The invitation only model is critical to Canada Bridges' approach for many reasons. The Canada Bridges team members believe in the potential of every human to contribute to changemaking, by working to co-create a lasting impact with the communities they are invited into (Canada Bridges, n.d.). They are also working to avoid the colonial based ideal of knowing what is best for a community that they themselves are not a part of (Canada Bridges, n.d.). It is about recognizing and building on the strengths of the community members involved with the invitation and avoiding being ignorant allies with hero complexes.

The second is that they then consider their relationship to non-community aspects of change making and capacity building. For example, they will ask themselves:

- What are our relationships to ourselves as individuals, to the work we do, to our motivations, to colonialism, unlearning, reconciliation, allyship, and advocacy, history, etc.?
- How invested am I in the system and in rebuilding it (racism, capacity building, etc.)?
- How am I connected to and engage with the community? This is especially important because as allies we are not actual members of the community we are seeking to support.
- How am I invested in and dedicated to the work? How does this affect my role and the methods I take to engage with the work and the community?

It is important to understand yourself and the system that you are being invited into working in. Just like a mechanic needs to understand how your engine functions in order to know what is broken, we need to understand the system and ourselves within it to provide effective support. Only then can we find what we can change, discover skills that need to be cultivated in changemakers, and know where we need to make changes to our own ways of being and interacting within that system to disrupt it. This also gives us an understanding of our motivations to provide the support that is being requested and informs our roles within this. It helps us be intentional in our actions, support, and methods, instead of being reactive and providing ineffective support.

The third key concept that Bridges embodies is that they look to take gentle actions. Gentle actions refer to creative, flexible, and non-invasive activities and actions that encompass sensitivity while acknowledging the complexity of situations (Peat, 2008). They are not looking to create sharp and drastic changes to the community, but to facilitate the creation of small changes that over time accumulate and generate momentum and inspire action (Miller, MAE & Peat, 2009). For example, they encourage the youth they engage with to consider making goals to grow themselves, their understanding, their self-awareness, etc. instead of focusing on changing other people. I see their philosophy to be based on the idea that we create ripple effects with all the people we interact with, and when we change ourselves, we inspire and build new relationships with ourselves, the work we do, the people we connect with, the way we listen and respond, thus opening the same possibilities for others to do the same. It means that we work to create space and quietly support the community members and avoid exploiting the community to feed our own egos and satisfy our own white heroism and heropreneurship (Papi-Thornton, 2016). I also tried to emulate this relational idea throughout this process of personal growth during this fellowship. At times I did not see how these values related to my own personal growth process, but upon reviewing and reflecting on my own learnings during this writing process I am beginning to understand and internalize why these values are so critical. These concepts also align with the intention of the methodology style I have undertaken in this project, my learning, and this scholarly output.

Our identities are a combination of many elements, some seen and others not, that combine in the center to produce who we are and provide the context of our perspective; how we see and interpret the world. Using the adaptive cycle from systems sight and my growing understanding of white racial identity theory, I will share my journey of realizing and understanding my own race of white, the privileges that come with it, and my impact on the world. I will explore my own socialization and mental models, how I have acted, discuss two jarring incidents of my own racist actions, and how these have impacted my internal system. I will also highlight my progression along Helm's White Racial Identity theory to provide a theoretical perspective to my mental models and thought patterns (Biggs, Westley, & Carpenter, 2010).

Systems Lens and Adaptive Cycle

This paper is not intended to teach you about systems change or the adaptive cycle, however, a brief overview and understanding of the cycle and how it works is justified to provide some context. In sociological terms, society refers to a group of people who live within a definable area and share a culture (Macionis, Jansson, & Benoit, 2013). Our society is a system that is meant to provide us with a stable life and existence. It informs us of our values, our aspirations, defines success, right and wrong, happiness, and what it means to live a good life. It tells us what a good person looks like, how we can be beneficial to our society, and how to best live our lives. By considering complex ideas as a system, such as we do society, we reframe our understanding in a way that then allows us to identify elements, patterns of behaviour, viability, the system's sustainability, where we can innovate and create positive changes (Zimmerman, Lindberg, & Plsek, n.d.). Systems sight combines complexity theory in a manner that allows for exploration of change, be it within the process of, leverage points, factors, and elements that foster transformative change (Biggs et al., 2010).

We are individual elements within this social system, but we ourselves are a system. This idea of panarchy, or systems within systems, is a central concept in systems thinking and social innovation (Sundstrom & Allen, 2019; Geobey & McGowan, 2019). We can view all life processes as a system, which then is influenced by and influences other systems, stretching out in starburst shapes that bump, tangle, stretch, and cover each other.

Socialization is the process in which we learn how we are expected to be, act, behave, think, comport ourselves, believe, value, connect, interact, and consider good – essentially, we learn how to be proficient members of society (Little, 2016). This process is achieved through socializing throughout various stages, and it frames our personal identities, our racial identities, our sense of self, our moral development, and our sense of agency (Little, 2016). Socialization gives context to our perceptions, understandings of the world around us, as well as different groups from us, be they separated by culture, race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, etc. (Little, 2016). If you view our socialization through a systems lens, it is easy to understand that socialization is a lifelong process, where new information and elements are continually added, where they change and adapt, influencing and creating a lot of complexity into what honestly makes up our identities (Little, 2016). Sometimes these identities can present differently than

how we understand them, as they are complex, and often, we cannot perceive all the elements and angles.

Therefore, tools such as the adaptive cycle are important. While these tools are not all encompassing or infallible, they do provide us with a way to look at a specific element or change process over time. The adaptive cycle springs from ecology and has been embraced by some in the social innovation sphere (Resilience Alliance, n.d.). It provides us a way to look back on the past, and understand how we have processed through changes, what might have held us back and what mechanisms provided energy and momentum. The adaptive cycle is particularly fitting to this topic as it is also based on a hierarchical framework, much like race, racism, white privilege, and racial identity are (Resilience Alliance, n.d.). The biggest benefit of the adaptive cycle is that it is a powerful tool that allows us to reflect on systems and the growth the system has experienced over time while highlighting the internal dynamics that fuel this growth and cycle movement (Sundstrom & Allen, 2019). Thus, it allows us to measure resilience over time (Geobey & McGowan, 2019).

One of the biggest fallacies of the adaptive cycle is that both the cycle and resiliency testing is often only suitable to be used by system members after the transformation and crisis have been completed (Geobey & McGowan, 2019). This is because according to Geobey & McGowan (2019) the complexity and uncertainty of these types of events leads to “an iterative learning-by-doing process as [the] agents in the system try to understand the changing world around them” (p.2). I cannot speak for others on this matter, but I can say in my own experience that this is true, and which will be expanded on later in this paper.

There are four stages to the adaptive cycle, a point of crisis and two progression traps. There are also two sides to the cycle. While the stages are not necessarily linear in that there is no fixed starting point and I fully believe that you can move in both directions, generally the starting point for this process is the exploitation phase. In short, exploitation is the slow growth stage, where the system builds skills, networks, and trust, conservation is where the system is then able to function with a routine and has developed a baseline understanding of its use and functions (Biggs et al., 2010). This routine and almost automatic functioning then result in the system becoming the most vulnerable to shocks (Resilience Alliance, n.d.).

The system can become stuck in a rigidity trap, the first of two progression deterrents, which limits its ability to adapt or move forward. It will take a shock that challenges the system on its current way of functioning, breaking its stagnant status quo, and propelling it into the release phase. This prompts the system to let go of notions, ideas, understandings, routines, etc. that have gone untested and ultimately limit it before it moves into reorganization, where new knowledge is integrated into the older methods of functioning so that the system can continue (Biggs et al., 2010). In this reorganization phase, the second progression deterrent appears. Poverty traps are the result of insufficient resources or new ideas on how to return to functioning, limiting the system's ability to be resilient and move onto the next adaptive cycle.

Theoretical Frameworks

I am an academic at heart, which led me to seek out a theoretical understanding of the growth and personal development journey I was embarking on. While I acknowledge that academia is rife with colonial power structures, it was also something comfortable for me. I used it as a way to organize my thoughts, to consider myself, and to orient my thinking. For me, traditional academia defines my ways of knowing, thinking, and learning. Autoethnographic methodologies are considered fringe within the traditional academic framework. Traditional forms of research are based on a “White, masculine, heterosexual, middle/upper-classed, Christian, able-bodied perspective” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 3). Autoethnographies attempt to expand this lens to understand personal experiences by acknowledging and incorporating subjectivity, emotionality, and that there are various perspectives to be considered, including that the researcher has an influence on what and who they are researching (Ellis et al., 2011). Autoethnography attempts to produce meaningful and evocative research that calls out human experience, human identity and gives voice to those people and aspects silenced within traditional research (Ellis et al., 2011).

In various podcasts, webinars, articles, poetry readings, storytelling’s, etc. I have devoured throughout the last six months; I have noticed that there is a duality to the argument of white racial identity. The first is that there seems to be an assumption that white is not a culture, due to unquestioned social acceptance of white normalcy and white dominance (Bazon, 2018; Irvin Painter, 2020). They say that whites can be Irish, or English, or Danish, but they are not a race (Bazon, 2018). It results in white people subscribing to colour-blindness, our strict adherence to individualism, to thinking that our whiteness has little to do with race issues, denial of white privilege and white dominance, and ultimately that we have no identity ties to it (Bazon, 2018). This assumption of our values and realities as normal is the basis of white dominance, and I believe fuels white culture and drives our learned ignorance of our behaviors.

I find I must put myself into the second paradigm; that White is a culture. First and foremost, because culture is not the whole formation of race. Race is a socially constructed way to categorise individuals who appear to share biologically transmitted traits of social importance (Macionis et al., 2013). Culture, on the other hand, is directly linked to our ways of life, thinking, acting, beliefs and is provided to us via our socialization (Macionis et al, 2013). When we are thinking about white culture and white dominance, I am referring to the dominant and questioned behaviour and functioning standards that have become so normalized, that they are sometimes indistinguishable from Canadian and U.S.A societal norms and expectations (Gulati-Partee & Potapchuk, 2014). As Irvin Painter (2020) points out, whiteness is a severely under researched ideology, not a biological fact.

Second, I feel that it is a colonial ideal based on a hierarchical notion of power and an inherent racist idea that white is not a race. This idea that only others are racial is a way to state that being non-racial is ideal, which means whiteness is ideal and normalizes the white perspective. Thus, it separates people of colour as being lesser, therefore giving credence to dehumanizing people of colour. Race is a socially constructed paradigm that groups us, thus providing us with community, but it is also a socially constructed system of dehumanization and separation.

This led me to Janet E. Helm who identifies a kind of continuum of a white person’s process of becoming aware of their white identity and becoming anti-racist. Helm’s model was specifically developed with only the consideration of white people (Silva Parker & Willsea, 2019). It sits alongside other racial identity development models created specifically for other races, such as William Cross’s People of Colour Racial Identity Model or W.S. Carlos Poston’s Bi-racial Identity Development Model (Silva Parker & Willsea, 2019).

Helm’s Racial Identity Development Model represents two important concepts that showcase the differences in power and experience between white individuals and people of colour. The first is that Helm’s model being singularly focused on the white experience showcases how we experience life and that our understanding of our identities are so very different. Whites cannot really connect our life experiences to the experiences of people of colour or bi-racial people, power dynamics and privilege make our perspectives and understandings so very different. The second is that much of the societal understanding of how to be non-racist is based on this notion of colour blindness and white normalcy, which only perpetuate harm in a white dominant society.

Blind & Deaf

As quickly explained above, the adaptive cycle starts with this growth or exploitation phase, where we build our skills, networks, relationships, understandings, and we accumulate resources and knowledge (Resilience Alliance, n.d.). During this front leg of the cycle between growth and conservation, growth and innovation occurs slowly and incrementally (Biggs et al., 2010). I associate this with our basic childhood time of initial socialization and into young adulthood, where relationships are trusted at face value and socialization happens with little to no awareness.

I was raised in a society where I profited off discrimination, oppression, and white privilege with no understanding of what was actually occurring. I was socialized within a colour-blind doctrine where white was the ideal model and I had privileges that I could not begin to fathom. I had no understanding of these concepts, of racism, of the harm I perpetuated unknowingly. I operated under stereotypes, implicit biases I learned from those in my network, whom all happened to also be white, with little understanding themselves. I had no capacity to question my socialization, to question the things I had been taught, or to consider them from the perspective of someone not like me. I had no concept of the accountability or responsibility I hold as a white person towards racism. I had no understanding of what racism or oppression was beyond blatant and obvious physical attacks.

By the time I reached adulthood, I was firmly within the adaptive cycle's conservation stage. I thought that I was a good person, that I did not harm others, that I cared about and supported other races, and that I could not possibly be racist because I was not blatantly racist, I had two best friends in High School who were Métis, I was acquainted with people of other races too.

According to Helm's theory, I was in the contact stage, where I was fully indoctrinated into the colour-blind philosophy, able to see racial differences, but I acted as if they were inconsequential (Silva Parker & Willsea, 2019). I felt that I was just a normal Canadian, unconsciously striving to the normalized expectation of whiteness. I was fully subscribing to the idea of assimilation, of whiteness, and all the expectations of success, and speech, and attitudes that go along with it. I expected people of colour to strive to be like me, to define success the way I did, to hold the same values, beliefs, expectations, understandings, etc. This resulted in thinking that this white way of living was good and the only way to live. I could not see that different people and groups would have different ways of living, experiencing events nor varied significance placed on ideas, expectations, values, and norms. This accumulated into unconscious actions of racism, oppression, and discrimination, attempting to define how others should live. I operated out of superiority, and my ego and sense of self-entitlement grew and grew until I became intolerant, arrogant, and superior to others. This affected how I treated everyone around me, but especially people of colour and Indigenous Peoples.

First Shock

At the peak of my arrogance, I placed these unrealistic labels and definitions on myself, things that portrayed me as the alpha dog in the room, the strong, take no names, tough and rough queen bee. I was so lost in this image of myself, that I fully believed I was invincible and could do no wrong. At the time I was working in a local mall as a security guard, and I wielded that authority like it was a flame thrower. Now I can see that I targeted Indigenous Peoples in the mall because I perceived them to all be drunks and a menace to society. This eventually led me to falsely arresting an Indigenous person. This literally was my shock. I was devastated, that I had harmed this human being. I was suddenly forced to face the fact that he was more than this stereotypical, inaccurate, and dehumanized view I held of Indigenous Peoples. It was like being electrocuted into reality, where I remembered he was a human being, who has inherent value because he was alive, who had people who loved him, that he was someone's son, someone's brother, someone's father. I had just put that loved one at serious risk, disregarded his human rights, dignity, and respect, all because I had a bruised ego. It slapped me down and ripped me out of that superior perspective.

This incident propelled me out of the rigidity trap, where I did not think I was a problem, where I refused to give up the power and privilege I obtained and dropped me into the release stage, or as I have heard it called, the creative destruction portion (Biggs et al., 2010). In this stage of the adaptive cycle, the backside of the loop, change occurs quickly and is often radical, as ideas and processes adapt and are re-organized; in other words, this is where re-evaluation, dreams, motivations, and concepts are let go and then rebuilt, in the next phase of reorganization (Biggs et al., 2010; Resilience Alliance, n.d.). In this release phase, I had to release the idea that I was not racist, that I was a good person. I had to let go of my ego, my arrogance, and my colour-blindness. I was forced to re-evaluate myself, my impact on the world, how I operated and comported myself. I had to face the fact that how I saw myself was not how others perceived me. I was experiencing Helm's Disintegration stage, facing a challenge to my perspective, and understanding of the world, where I was suddenly overwhelmed with guilt, shame, and self-hate (Silva Parker & Willsea, 2019).

In this stage, we are forced to confront an experience that makes us question our understanding of the world, of ourselves, and the consequences of our actions, behaviours, and mental models (Silva Parker & Willsea, 2019). This reality left me riddled with guilt and hatred of my actions, and blatant hurt that I had been lied to about who I was. Sometimes I felt like the victim of my own socialization, of my own perspective and naivety. I often felt so guilty, I would just burst into tears randomly, and the anxiety I felt trying to make any decision would choke the breath from my body. I felt like I lost more than my ego and arrogance, any trust I had in myself and my decisions was gone, and I could not rely on my understanding of my actions and situations. This lack of trust in my own perceptions and reality is what prevented me from just finding a way to rationalize my actions before continuing to ignore my impact and the truth of my actions. It made me question everything, opening my eyes to the realities that others experience which prevented me from being able to put the blinders back on.

In a Fog

I then had to reorganize. I became aware that I had to face the notion that I operated under covert racist mental models, that I needed to become more self-aware of my motivations, the consequences of my actions, and that I had a whole lot of potential to cause some serious harm to a person. I recognized that I needed to learn how to check my ego, step off my high horse, rediscover and re-learn who I was, and re-evaluate who and what type of person I wanted to be.

During this stage of reorganization, I found myself in Helm's reintegration stage, where the person experiences a "blame-the-victim" attitude, even going so far as to feel that other races are inherently inferior (Silva Parker & Willsea, 2019). I was continuously plagued by the guilt, disgust, and hate (as marked in the disintegration phase) I felt for my actions, who I thought I was, my blindness about the world, and my impacts on it. At the time I felt like I had let myself down, and that I had no real identity. Mine was shredded, disintegrated and I was so emotional and mentally jumbled up, I had no way to

rebuild my identity, to process the whole event and my role in harming another. I waffled between blaming everyone else or the culture of my job, to such cutting self-recrimination that I felt hollow and useless, barely knowing which way was up and questioning every single emotion, action, and thought I had.

I sometimes slipped slightly into blaming the person I victimized, but I felt extremely uncomfortable with these thoughts immediately as they came. I often found myself feeling this blame but avoiding ever naming it even in my own head. I used my ego and superiority as excuses to exploit and bask in the privilege I received while allowing myself to never question where this power and privilege came from. Even writing this, I find myself struggling with the desire to downplay that, at any one time in my past, I considered my race to be superior. I like to believe that because I never explicitly prescribed to the idea that one race or one individual person is inherently more important than the other, that I never really fell into reintegration. But I must acknowledge that this is not true, that I believed this superiority in a way that allowed me to be blind to the truth of it. I allowed my ego to protect myself from the reality of it.

Another Brick Wall

Now that I had realized that I needed to let go of my ego and that I was inherently racist, I found myself stuck in a poverty trap (Sundstrom & Allen, 2019). I had released my previous expectations of myself, my ego, sense of superiority, and false understanding of being a good person. I reorganized myself enough to know that I needed to change my understanding of my actions and to re-learn my identity, but I found that I had no clue on how to do this. I completely lacked an understanding of how to evaluate, reflect, and grow myself. I was unable to generate new ideas about myself, my identity, my role in racism, etc. This resulted in my taking some time to come to terms with my behaviours, healing a little, but never really moving beyond this understanding of needing to change.

I was in Helm's Pseudo-Independence stage, where I now had some concept of racism, and I was able to heal to the point that I did not despise myself for being a white person, where I held no blame for others or for myself (Silva Parker & Willsea, 2019). I also did not have any concept of understanding what my responsibility was in racism

and anti-racism. I did not understand that I held accountability to be a part of the solution. I found myself still operating from a colour-blindness framework, not truly understanding the power dynamics of white dominance and superiority. I did not understand my motivations, implicit biases, hidden racialized and colonized mental models. I still did not fully understand what racism was, how it could be further systemic and obscured. I was leaving the entire anti-racism fight to people of colour, to Indigenous peoples. I was still indoctrinated into colonial values, power dynamics, and the notion of assimilation and white normalcy. I recognized that racism was an issue that we were socialized to be blind to, and I wanted to be anti-racist, but I could not understand how being a white anti-racist was in any way achievable or realistic.

Illumination

I lived in this Pseudo-Independence stage for almost two years before I found myself presented with the opportunity to be a part of the Catamount fellowship. During this time, I took some classes and tried to learn as much about doing traditional academic research on Indigenous Peoples. While I had worked hard on checking my superiority and internalizing the colour-blind notion of equality (we are all the same, that no one is more special than the other) I still had a bit of an ego. I went into this fellowship wanting to learn but feeling like I had a good grasp on how to avoid harming Indigenous peoples.

Originally, my topic for the fellowship was looking at how organizations could engage with Indigenous youth, but we quickly found our topic heading in a direction that my community partner, faculty advisor, and myself were becoming uncomfortable with. While my mentors were better equipped with articulating their concerns, I knew I felt exploitative, and I felt a lot of the superior and egotistical emotions that I had felt before the arrest. We discussed it, discovered that we needed to reflect on our path, and then course correct. I had to release and reorganize mental models, motivations, and my perceptions of my identity as a white person (Biggs et al., 2010).

I privately worried that I was stuck and would not be able to ever reach a point where I could honestly claim that I was inclusive, that I was an ally, that I was anti-racist. Together, my advisor and community partner helped me to reorganize and get past the progression trap by working with me on a new topic for research: understanding my own racial identity, my path of allyship, and inner work (Sundstrom & Allen, 2019).

Inner work became my resource, my new idea generator, and the last step in reorganization. Inner work gave me the tools I needed to return to the growth stage of the adaptive cycle. With my reorganized understanding of my world, my actions, etc. I was then able to grow and learn about how to be a proper ally, develop my awareness, compassion, and understanding (Milligan & Schwab, 2017).

We need to recognize that because we are a part of the larger system, we must cultivate the changes we wish to see in the world within ourselves, thus we must use inner skills to effect outer changes (Chima & Germano, 2020). As Briney (2019) says, “the issues that exist in the world also exist within us” and therefore we need to understand our own narratives, perspectives, and vulnerabilities before we can support others” (para. 3). Inner work is both personal and professional and includes activities such as meditation, journaling, spiritual work, therapy, and retreats (Chima & Germano, 2020; Bell Grdina, Johnson, & Pereira, 2020).

Inner work requires that you take an honest and painful look at your self-perception and how it differs from how others perceive you (Milligan & Schwab, 2017). Inner work encompasses many skills including increasing your self-awareness, healing past trauma, increasing your ability to be present in the moment, relief from self-judgement, to understand your identity, shedding false images and narratives of yourself and others, gaining emotional strength/maturity, and the ability to be vulnerable, kind, and to have patience while also granting clarity towards your desires, needs, and motivations (Bell Grdina et al., 2020). Inner work compels us to explore your passions, driving values, sense of identity, and understanding of the work you are engaged in (Milligan & Schwab, 2017). By engaging in inner work, we are optimizing our own resilience; psychological, emotional, social, and physical flourishing, which integrates skills in our own well-being, contemplation, listening, engagement, and relationship building (Chima & Germano, 2020).

According to Milligan & Walker (2020) by engaging in inner work, we experience shifts in our self-perception, emotional awareness, ability to partner with other changemakers, groups, and organizations, and increase our systemic awareness. Therefore, it is important to realize that this cannot be done in full solitude, as you need to expand your own awareness by bridging relationships, facing uncomfortable social and cross-cultural situations to gather context for other perspectives and understandings. We must reach out and build connections in order to foster understanding, connection, and empathy. When we do inner work in solitude, we risk becoming self-centred, reinforcing our egos and superiority complex, heroism paradigms, and engaging in narcissism when what we are aiming for is humility, understanding, and engagement.

Inner work allowed me to transition from being aware but leaving the work of anti-racism to people of colour and into Helm’s immersion/emersion stage (Silva Parker & Willsea, 2019). This stage is marked by a white person actively engaging with their own white identity and with other whites who have or are developing their own anti-racist identities (Silva Parker & Willsea, 2019). I was fortunate to be able to connect with Alison, Alyssa, and Pattie through this fellowship. All three are white women, who were able to provide me with guidance and call me out when I was missing context and bulldozing ahead. During my research into inner work, a lot of the authors I was finding were also whites. I participated in as many webinars and listened to podcasts, who often involved at least one white presenter.

I began to expand my perspective from myself and other white anti-racists to hearing and learning more about the perspectives of people of colour. I began to interact more with people of colour, and I began to better respect their perspectives, to listen deeper, and really build that skill of listening and working the understanding muscle.

I still felt a sense of kinship with white anti-racists that I was not fully able to reconcile. I was skittish of accidentally further perpetuating oppression and harm; especially with the Indigenous Peoples, I was interacting with through Canada Bridges. I was still in the midst of starting to unlearn negative and oppressive mental models, to decolonize my assumptions, identity, and methods of interaction, but I was aware of the potential I had to hurt someone, to say something wrong. I still had little trust in myself and my actions, despite my intentions; fully realizing that intentions can never remove the real or perceived harms created by my actions. Thus, I was looking to my white peers, people who had more experience or who were also engaged in this process of decolonizing, unlearning, and relearning, of reflection and pivoting. I was also battling my gut instinct to find and connect with people who are like me, who understand my exact perspective, feelings, and situation because they have lived it. I found myself looking to them for answers, for things to learn.

Seeing Clearer

Luckily, I never found that checklist I was initially looking for; instead, stories were shared of their own journeys, reflection tools were shared, and I was encouraged to continue to devour information, both scholarly and not. I really learned to value storytelling as a way to connect, to soothe, to build up, reassure and inspire others. Listening to podcasts, webinars, YouTube videos, reading blogs, books, and attending conferences gave me the human touch, the personal connections that a lot of my academic sources were missing. The underlying support I found in these, from increasingly more diverse racialized people helped me to learn to see and understand other perspectives, become more self-aware, learn, and understand my actions from outside of myself, and to become more and more invested in anti-racism work. It helped me let go of that tiny spark of hero complex that was still flaring periodically, and to become realistic with my impact, the responsibility I hold to be an active anti-racist, but also the accountability as a white settler descendant.

I have unlearned and decolonized a large part of my current understanding of the world and my perceptions of the world. I better understand the

value of action, the power of words. I have started to let go of my ego and hero complex, learned to deal with my insecurities, desires, clarified my motivations, all while learning how to capitalize on them, not let them use me. I have more self-awareness, able to see and recognize the privilege and power I hold in society due to my skin tone, and that I and many other Canadians profit off the oppression of Indigenous Peoples. I can see that I do not really stand on the shoulders of the “white heroes” I was taught about in school, but on the shoulders of every single Indigenous Person, Black person, or another person of colour in Canadian history. I better understand what Colonialism and racism are and how they are wielded to obtain and hoard power and prestige.

I have clarity around what allyship is, how to be an effective and real ally, how I as a white person can continue to cultivate my anti-racist identity, and how to further spread this to other white people. I can see and connect with people outside of their race and outside of that fear I had of making further mistakes. I am content, self-aware, and comfortable enough now in my identity as a person and my identity as a white racial person to understand that I will likely make more mistakes, put my foot in it, and to continue to do work to be a better ally, to continue to unlearn, decolonize, relearn, and learn new things. Helm’s last stage, autonomy, is all about having this clear understanding of your white identity and being able to pursue, actively, social justice issues, such as anti-racism (Silva Parker & Willsea, 2019).

Forever Young

While I have done a lot of growth in the last six months, I also know that being anti-racist is not a destination, but a life-long path of learning, reflection, and growth. I know that I have much more to learn, people, to make genuine connections with, and skills to cultivate. I know that I am on a path of panarchy, with several more levels and cycles to experience of the adaptive cycle. I have dedicated myself to continuing to learn, reflect and develop my anti-racist identity, to continue to question, decolonize, unlearn, and relearn mental models.

Next steps for me include actively engaging and participating in organizations and anti-racism efforts. I am looking to cultivate both professional and personal relationships and genuine connections with Indigenous Peoples and other people of colour. I will continue to strive to be an active ally and to earn the title, not bestow it upon myself. I want to actively engage in supporting change beyond anti-racism, to work to build and repair the relationship Canada has with Indigenous peoples, to honour the spirit of the treaties that govern the place I call home. I will do this by actively learning about social issues that affect Indigenous Peoples and threaten their sovereignty, dignity, and human rights, then exercise my listening and understanding skills, to build connections, then to stand beside Indigenous Peoples to offer my support as and how they tell me they need it.

I do not know how many phases there will be throughout my life, or where they might lead me, but I do know that engaging in inner work to increase our understanding of who we are, what our roles are as well as how we interact, benefit, and contribute to the system of racism, anti-racism and equality are critical to be an effective changemaker, to be a beneficial system within the larger system.

I encourage everyone, not just white people to explore their identities, to understand their standings due to race or other interconnected traits that are the basis of oppression and difference. I encourage everyone to let go of colour blindness and actively seek out learning opportunities with people of different races and cultures. I implore every single human being to engage in inner work, as it allows you to learn about yourself, your identity, your values, and to live authentically.

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