Stop Whitewashing Social Work History: Tell the Truth – Kelechi Wright, LCPC & Kortney Carr, LCSW
Episode 49
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Shimon Cohen:

Welcome to Doin' The Work: Frontline Stories of Social Change, where we bring you stories of real people working to address real issues. I am your host, Shimon Cohen.

Shimon Cohen:

In this episode, I talk with Kelechi Wright and Kortney Carr. Kelechi is a full-time doctoral student at the University of Kansas in the School of Social Welfare. She has expansive clinical experience in mental health with BIPOC communities. Her research focuses on immigration, criminal justice, and the criminalization of immigrants. Kortney is a third-year doctoral student at the University of Kansas and a Professor of Practice in the School of Social Welfare. She has a lengthy practice background in community mental health, mental health, and private practice, with an emphasis on trauma. Her research focuses on how Black men have survived social isolation in the US.

Shimon Cohen:

We talk about their article, co-authored with Dr. Becci Akin, The Whitewashing of Social Work History: How Dismantling Racism in Social Work Education Begins With an Equitable History of the Profession, published in an open-access, special double issue of Advances in Social Work. This article should be required reading in all social work programs! It is an interrogation of how social work history – what gets to be told as history, who tells it, what gets valued, what's considered evidence, what's considered professional, who is considered a social worker – all of it – is racist and whitewashed.

Shimon Cohen:

They talk about how social work history often focuses on social work being created by privileged White women who helped the poor and oppressed, but does not talk about Black social welfare leaders and community organizers and activists who did this work in their own communities and beyond, and who should be held up as social work and social welfare leaders and founders. This inaccurate history portrays White people as saviors and Black people as passive receivers. To continue to teach this whitewashed history perpetuates white supremacy, which has serious consequences for social work students, faculty, social workers, and especially communities where we practice.

Shimon Cohen:

As Kelechi and Kortney explain, we need an accurate telling of history so that our foundation is solid and our present and future are built on that foundation, rather than furthering racism and inequity. We need to honor the legacy of Black social work and social welfare leaders and teach about the critical theories, knowledge, approaches, practices – work – that they and others have done – and continue to do – to impact communities and the social work profession. And always remember and focus on the communal nature of the Black community and how Black social work and social welfare movements are in that same communal tradition.

Shimon Cohen:

We also talk about racial justice work for educators and practitioners, who should be doing this work, who shouldn't be expected to do this work, DEI committees, syllabi, and so much more. I could say so

much more about what we discussed, but I'd rather stop here and get you into the interview so you can hear directly from Kelechi and Kortney. I hope this conversation inspires you to action.

Shimon Cohen:

Before we get into the interview, I want to let you all know about our episode's sponsor, the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work. First off, I want to thank them for sponsoring the podcast. UH has a phenomenal social work program that offers face-to-face master's and doctorate degrees, as well as an online and hybrid MSW. They offer one of the country's only Political Social Work programs and an Abolitionist Focused Learning Opportunity. Located in the heart of Houston, the program is guided by their bold vision to achieve social, racial, economic, and political justice, local to global. In the classroom and through research, they are committed to challenging systems and reimagining ways to achieve justice and liberation. In 2022, they will continue their ongoing series, Eyes On Abolition, that explores abolition as practice and as a critical framework to bring about change, and invite you to join them in April when they host Becoming Abolitionists author, Derecka Purnell. Go to www.uh.edu/socialwork to learn more. And now, the interview.

Shimon Cohen:

Hey, Kortney. Hey, Kelechi. Thank you so much for coming on the podcast. I know you both are super busy. Really want to jump right into your article from the Advances in Social Work double issue, Dismantling Racism in Social Work Education. Your article is fire. It is phenomenal. We're going to link it in the show notes so people can check it out. So the Whitewashing of Social Work History: How Dismantling Racism in Social Work Education Begins With an Equitable History of the Profession. There's a lot to discuss. So I'm going to put it on to you two. Where do you want to start?

Kelechi Wright:

I think we can start with how the concept came up and the direction, just kind of where the origins of it started.

Shimon Cohen:

Sounds good. I should add that Dr. Becci Akin is the third author on this article. She was supposed to be here, but that part didn't work out. So we're super grateful to her as well.

Kelechi Wright:

Yes, yeah. So really how I got the concept last year, and this is all kind of in the midst of the pandemic. So as you could imagine, I think a lot of our brains are swimming in the midst of all of the shifts and changes. Kortney and I are in the midst of the doctoral program together. One of the things that I was noticing was jumping in and learning deeper theories surrounding social work and the history of social work and seeing the gaps in BIPOC voices and especially, obviously, Kortney and I both identifying as BIPOC.

Kelechi Wright:

When you are from a community that you inherently know your own resiliencies, ethnically, and you know the inner workings, though it might not be empirically tested and it might not be, by mainstream society, accepted in historical books, it's challenging when you're hearing a lot of the ethnic perspectives historically that you represent, not in history. That's something I felt really passionate about, seeing the way that social work frames early founders, discusses early founders, seeing how these people won

Nobel Peace Prizes, but not seeing, well, where's the emphasis on the resiliencies historically on how people of color have survived evil, really?

Kelechi Wright:

So that probably really fueled my passion towards looking at, well, how do we excavate these voices? Because continuously teaching, Kortney's a Professor of Practice and I teach in our social work program, too, and continuously reinforcing this narrative as if social work was founded by these White women who were these great heroes and reinforcing that to new students, it really felt like we were really furthering white supremacy and not incorporating the voices of BIPOC communities that, again, have been resilient, have endured. They didn't get Nobel Peace Prizes for it. They didn't get recognition for it.

Kelechi Wright:

So that really fueled the passion to write something that would challenge social work history to revise how we view it and stop perpetuating the same narrative over and over again, as if BIPOC communities were these receivers and these White sacrificers came in and helped us, and now we have social work. So that really was kind of what started it all. And then I invited Dr. Akin and Kortney in. You jumped in, and here you have the manuscript.

Kortney Carr:

I think, for me, to add on, when Kelechi asked if I would be interested in joining and writing this, I was like, "Yeah." But for me, I come with a little bit different experience, and Kelechi and I talk about this. Both of us identifying as Black or African American, but Kelechi has connection to culture that I don't have connection to. Kelechi's first generation, whereas I identify as Black American. My parents are Black American. I don't necessarily have connection to culture other than American culture.

Kortney Carr:

So considering that, I'm coming in from a different lens with a social work education, and none of these things have ever been taught. It's interesting that coming into doctoral education is the first time that it's like, "Oh, let me begin to actually question this history that we've been taught. Let me actually begin to look into this history and determine what may be different than what I've been taught."

Kortney Carr:

So for me, it was kind of coming in and then being super excited, going down rabbit holes, and then also being super pissed, for lack of a better word of what you're uncovering, what you're learning and thinking about. Why is this just now being introduced or being exposed to at the doctoral level? I've been a practitioner for 15 years at this point and have never been exposed to history as such.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. I think it's really powerful. One quote that you have from the article hits on exactly what you're saying. I just want to read it to you and get your thoughts because it gets into what you were just saying. So this is from the article, "An inaccurate view of the past always distorts efforts to make a more just future." That just hits so hard and so on point. You're right. Why is this now coming about? You at the doctoral level and just how social work education, like you all talk about, perpetuates white supremacy and reinforces it over and over by this whitewashed history. I was hoping you could speak a little bit about that.

Kelechi Wright:

When you say that quote, so my husband and I have three small children between the ages of eight and two, and I homeschool them. One of the main reasons that we homeschool them is because of things that we're talking about right now, the idea of when having children and you imagine them learning their history most likely from someone who doesn't look like them and then learning this distorted view that you know is not accurate historically, you know does not take into consideration people that represent your culture and even how we perceive our own selves.

Kelechi Wright:

So when you're looking at even history books from that angle for children, it's something that, similar to Kortney, when I was in the midst of coursework in the doctoral program when we were taking courses and just thinking, it's the same thing that I'm thinking as I'm talking to my children about slavery. To be a Black parent and to describe to a Black child for the first time slavery is the most heartbreaking thing ever. I can't even describe the feeling of seeing and their questions. "Well, why? Well, why would they ..." And just all of that being there.

Kelechi Wright:

A big thing for me was I really want, not just for the sake of social ... Obviously, this is focusing on social work history and students, but I kind of want this to be revolutionary in the sense that I think all professions need to do this. I think all professions need to, medical professions. My hope is this is an interdisciplinary revolution where everybody looks at who are your framers? Who are your earliest founders? If you don't have an accurate view of history, as that quote said, then how you're continuously going into future narratives is going to continuously ... It's like the foundation's going to be off.

Kelechi Wright:

It's going to continuously build the wrong thing. Students of color, my heart is always sensitive to thinking of students of color in educational institutions that are constantly hearing the same messages disseminated to them as if they're the receivers, and these White sacrificers come into their neighborhoods and help and Great White Hope narratives and all these kinds of things. It's the wrong view of history. It's the wrong view of history.

Kelechi Wright:

An interesting thing is Kortney and I, on the side, we've discussed even, like I said, how we, as people of color, know our resiliencies. We know these narratives. But it's so interesting that, again, because it's not empirically or it's not written down, it's not the focus of the written word, even talking about in the manuscript, which is an emphasis on White culture. Not as if people of color can't write but, historically speaking, the thought, if it's not written down, it doesn't exist, even in our professions, those kind of narratives being passed on to you.

Kelechi Wright:

But people of color know certain things about our histories, know strengths, know achievement, yet when it's not recognized, it's almost like it doesn't really exist. In social work, we really have to change disseminating the same thing over and over again.

Kortney Carr:

I think also looking at this as looking at how it shapes our connection to the field and also how it shapes how we practice, as a practice-oriented field. I think about how, yes, I learned about Jane Addams all throughout my MSW program and yet, I cannot tell you much about Jane Addams, other than her connection to social work. But that's more so from the perspective of that history didn't resonate with me. It didn't resonate with me then. It doesn't resonate with me now. Therefore, it wasn't something that I held onto.

Kortney Carr:

So that shapes our foundation, our connection to the field as well as then, if we're learning how to practice based on these things, I've always felt a disconnect there. I would say I've never practiced based on textbook or how we've been taught. I've always had to make adjustments. But that's because how we practice has been shaped by these racist views and perspectives. But that was something that I never made the connection to.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. If you write about that in a paper, a different way to practice, I've had former students be told, "Well, your intervention's not evidence-based, so you're not going to pass this assignment," even though the intervention or maybe it shouldn't even be called an intervention, the work was what was rooted in the Black community, for example. And then also we've got the licensing exam, which is another example of if you don't do it this very specific way, which is rooted in Eurocentricity and Whiteness, you don't pass, which then so there's this conformity to this as well.

Shimon Cohen:

So for all students, but especially Black, Brown, Indigenous students, but White students, too, who are learning to do this in a very oppressive way, but then for students from those very communities who are like, "I got into this because I want to help my community," but then they're taught to do social work in a way that actually could be harmful. But they're in with their community because they're Black in the Black community, yet they're calling to get people's kids taken away and things like that.

Kortney Carr:

Right.

Kelechi Wright:

Right. Right. You're really hitting on how, again, the foundation of how we're retelling the same history over and over again. We're training. We're teaching. We're instructing. It's perpetuating the same problem over and over again. So I think we could talk about just changing policies, which we need to because we really need to. We need to change a lot of policies institutionally because institutional racism really does exist, even if you just change certain words and names. Things are done that we know at that level really hurt BIPOC communities.

Kelechi Wright:

But how people groups are communicated about is very significant. If you're in a field like social work where majority of students being White are getting trained to work in oftentimes majority BIPOC communities, how they're perceiving them ... And I'm glad that you even used that example of

something like child welfare. Dr. Akin, who's not on the call now, I actually work with her. She's the principal investigator of a multi-site federal grant working on racial disproportionality studies in child welfare, and I work with her on that.

Kelechi Wright:

Some of the things that we've discussed is how social workers are trained to perceive people in BIPOC communities and looking at things, doing institutional analyses where you look at things where you actually look at the notes and how they're trained to write notes about BIPOC communities. One of the things we noticed, for example, was oftentimes people of color are perceived as angry, as despondent, as disconnected. And then we would interview some of those actual people that their case notes were on, and those people would say things like, "I didn't want to seem angry because then I wouldn't get my kids back. I didn't want it perceived, too much emotions because then it would be perceived a certain way."

Kelechi Wright:

So seeing all those disconnects in terms of perception is huge. We're not robots, let's be honest, this whole facade of objectivity. I appreciate, and I think that there is great things I'm doing in quantitative dissertation. I appreciate those sides of empirical studies and analyses. Yet, we are not robots. I think that even Kortney and I have had conversation about moving towards professionalization. I think we have to talk about that.

Kelechi Wright:

Kortney has some really good ideas, well, perspectives theoretically, because I think we need to talk about how when you have a field that's focused on social justice in a lot of ways, but we're trying to make status quo ranks professionally. It's almost like you're contending against two worlds.

Kortney Carr:

Yeah. There's a lot that could be said there. I don't even know where to start. But I mean, yeah, our system even within the university system is still set up in that way. It's a push and pull oftentimes. Like Kelechi said, while I understand I can go along the spectrum of understanding quantitative, empirical work to transformative work. But it's like, how do we do all of it and consider all instead of just being blinders on, focused in this one area, and it has to look like this. This focus on it has to look like this.

Kortney Carr:

This is how we quantify it. This is how we know it's true. This is how it's evidence, but it's impossible to consider one way to show something as evidence or to consider something as true. So we put ourself in this box of like, "Yes, we know this," and, "But it has to look like this," or, "It has to meet these standards." It just puts us right back in that racist white supremacy mindset.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. 100%. So I want to throw something out to both of you. I had written this to you, but I'm going to try to work my way through this thinking and get your thoughts on it. Because even before reading your article, and this is part of why I just am so excited about your article and sharing it with the world. As you've shown in the article, the whitewashed history of social work defines who is a social worker, who was part of social work's beginnings, and these are typically White folks.

Shimon Cohen:

Black people who were doing this work have been excluded from this dominant history, the mainstream history, which is typically what's taught in social work programs, like what we're talking about and what you write about, not all, but most. Folks ranging from Eugene Kinckle Jones to the Black Panther Party, even concepts like empowerment that were developed by Black people get talked about in social work education without giving credit. It's just this accepted concept now that doesn't get credited back to folks like Barbara Solomon. I heard about empowerment a lot, but I never heard about Barbara Solomon, for example, in all of my education.

Shimon Cohen:

Like I've said, you've covered this so well in the article, and it's really phenomenal. So this question that I've been wrestling with, and I guess this is a theoretical thing, but so much is that we talk about. Justin Harty and I were actually having a talk about this is... When we say mainstream social work, is that White social work or is me even thinking that rooted in this whitewash? All of this Black, Brown, and Indigenous social work that's been excluded and covered up, so what I'm even thinking is social work is actually those folks but I'm thinking of it as mainstream White social work because that's what it's talked about as.

Shimon Cohen:

I don't know if that's totally making sense, but that's just something I've been thinking about. Your article really brought all that to the surface because what is social work? Whose social work is this, I guess, is what I've been thinking about?

Kortney Carr:

Yeah.

Kelechi Wright:

Yeah. That's interesting. Kortney, go ahead. Were you going to say something? Go ahead.

Kortney Carr:

I mean it's a great and an interesting question and not necessarily sure how to answer it. I think there's this space that the social work that we have traditionally learned has been White social work. So considering that, I wouldn't say that that is social work, but that is the social work that we have learned. Maybe that's the language to use. I don't know. But there's so much missing from what we've learned. I think that's the important part to capture. It's like a yes and, like yes, this has been a part of social work history and there has been so much left out of social work history.

Kortney Carr:

So it's those missing truths, those missing pieces that we have to incorporate in order to fully understand what social work is and what it can look like. Thinking about going back to empowerment, there's pieces of that, of what's considered empowerment. So there's pieces when we talk about BIPOC communities, empowerment is dismissed because it looks different. Strengths is dismissed because it looks different. So we have significant pieces.

Kortney Carr:

So I would say, just based on my experience, none of us have a full broad spectrum, education, or understanding of social work history, what it is, and what it could look like.

Kelechi Wright:

I'm going to go even further with that because I think that what it makes me think about is I think theoretically, and I'm getting ready to write something surrounding all these concepts of deconstruction versus reformation because we have a lot of areas in social work and even criminal justice where people are talking about defunding, let's get rid of, let's dismantle, same thing. I don't know if you've heard of the upEND Movement with child welfare. Let's just get rid of it versus some people are like, "Let's reform."

Kelechi Wright:

So I'm going to be exploring that and writing on something on that pretty soon and just both sides of those thoughts. It kind of makes me think of this conversation right now because I feel like the feeling is, well, if this is this White social work, then let's just get rid of it and start something else. Are we kind of looking at both ends and let's kind of find a way forward and accept that this is the past. This is what the future needs to look like, and let's just incorporate ...

Kelechi Wright:

I don't have an answer to that, but I think about it a lot. But I think that at the end of the day, the biggest piece that's missing is BIPOC voices in the conversation, period. You know what I mean? The theoretical conversations, the philosophical conversations that oftentimes whatever direction we take in thinking of what social work should look like, how we talk about the history, how we talk about the future, we have to have BIPOC voices at those tables and be really mostly some of the dominant voices at those tables.

Kelechi Wright:

So whatever direction, that's my thought. That's kind of my interjection in the whole thing because I think oftentimes well-meaning people, whatever, different motivations, but if you don't have the people and the communities that had experienced the marginalization and the harm at the table to talk about it, you're going to just keep chasing your tail. it's not going to be any picture, I think, of what a lot of us want moving forward for the future.

Kortney Carr:

I think there's also a piece to add to that. It's acceptance without question. It's like, yes, those people need to be at the table and you need to accept their experiences, their truths without question because-

Kelechi Wright:

That's right.

Kortney Carr:

... oftentimes you have those people at the table, and then you want to question their experiences. You want to question their truths. You want to ask for proof of that, and it's like you don't get to do that. So that also leaves us in this space of, well, am I going to actually join this table if all I have to do is continue to have to prove myself? So there's that piece of it, too.

Kelechi Wright:

Right. Right.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. I think that's so important, which is why I wanted you both to be on here to elevate this conversation. I guess what the article really made me think about is maybe even though I think critically of this history and of social work, maybe I'm looking at it the wrong way. That's what I was kind of getting at because the strengths perspective that I was taught, the empowerment model, even though there are problems with the actual implementation and practice of it, those come from Black folks.

Shimon Cohen:

There's perspectives that come from Indigenous folks that have been stolen. I don't even want to say co-opted, straight up stolen and then taught by White folks packaged as mainstream social work. So when I read it, I was like, "Oh." It was very eye-opening for me where I'm like, "I've got this history." Even though I've said and I teach about the Black Panthers and say... I don't know if they'd consider themselves social workers because they probably had some issues with social work, but they were doing community-based ... They were doing the work that should be getting done, right?

Kelechi Wright:

Right.

Shimon Cohen:

And they were destroyed for it. So I like that idea of just the whole way you approach this. If we don't have an accurate history, everything we build on top of that is going to be problematic.

Kelechi Wright:

Absolutely.

Kortney Carr:

I think it's even this space of going back to White people don't get to tell communities of color how these things should look or how these things should be implemented. Going back to you speaking about the Black Panthers, the history that is taught in the U.S. about the Black Panthers is always negative. It is always negative comments, negative connotation, negative history. But the fact is, like you said, they were doing social work. They were protecting their communities.

Kortney Carr:

They were providing services to their community, but that part is never talked about. You really have to do your own education and research to even begin to understand that that's what was going on. But in coming from KU, who has some significant scholars that have contributed to social work, we have to step back and question that. We've had to do that as a school and think about that, talking about strengths perspective and the roots and foundations of that and being called out on, "Hmm. Let's really think critically about the strengths perspective and how it's taught and how it's communicated."

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. 100%. So a couple folks that you talk about in the article that I was hoping you could share on, in your section called the "Crowned White Fathers of Social Work," which is just such a great heading, you talk about W.E.B. Du Bois and Frederick Douglass and why they should actually be considered some of the founders of social work. Could you talk about that?

Kelechi Wright:

Yeah. I mean I'll talk about Du Bois. I want to say something before even just highlighting those two people because I think that this is part of the challenge. We are, by nature, ethnically a communal people group. So it's hard. It almost feels like kind of doing the framework of what's passed down in White community like, "Let's highlight a name," when you know that there are tons of mothers, fathers, grandfathers, and it's part of even African tradition, too, in that regard, that sustained communities, that fed communities, that protect communities, that provided education and healthcare and all these things.

Kelechi Wright:

So I do want to say that because I mean I think that you almost kind of give the names because that's the way that we do things, but I don't like giving the names. To me, it's kind of like, I don't know. It's kind of like, why do we need to give the names? Why do we have to be prized for helping people? That in itself, I think, is part of the social work kind of like... I get it though. I get that we want to recognize. I think that also helps us to pattern ourselves off of great work that people have done.

Kelechi Wright:

But I just want to put that out there, too, that I think also if we're going to do this in a reformist way, we want to be mindful that communal people groups, that's not traditionally how we do it. You know what I mean? But with that being said ...

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. That's a really important point, and I know that you get into that in the article, too, just like what you're saying. I mean I'll leave it up to you because you could talk about just that work in general, not necessarily naming names if that's what you feel more in line with, but that kind of work and how that work just isn't taught and what that means for social work today.

Kelechi Wright:

Yeah. Well, I'll say that I like that in terms of that kind of work is I think that the people that we referenced, those gentlemen along with some other women as well that are part of the Black community over history and intentionally referencing people that during the timeframe that people like Addams were alive or other White social work founders, the kinds of work that were done were, I guess, what social work felt the need to professionalize, helping and assisting the community with all of the social outcome issues that we talk about today, from healthcare to reformist activity, obviously, civil rights activities in terms of continuously petitioning for the rights of not just Black people, but people in general who experienced marginalization.

Kelechi Wright:

We referenced people in the article who sacrificed a great deal to create institutional systems to educate Black communities when they were not allowed into White institutions, from healthcare to education to other social frameworks. Those are many of the ways in which we highlight the Black community. I think that, especially going back to the point of not focusing on the one, because when you think about it from a communal perspective, nothing can ever be done by just one person, so even just the fact that we do the whole Addams.

Kelechi Wright:

Who knows who are the nameless people that helped those people? So I think that that's even some of the ways that we want to reform how we perceive social justice work, how we perceive social reform. The kind of things that we do within the profession is how can they be done by just one person? It's impossible. I think even it's interesting. Kortney talked about coming into a doctoral program. I know, for me, looking at the academy and how much is so focused on the individual, furthering your career as an individual, writing things as an individual, presenting things as an individual, all those things.

Kelechi Wright:

Even in the academy at the doctoral level with social work, we need to really question and challenge how we're doing all of these things, even how it trickles down to as we're teaching students to look at our history. So I think it has an effect in all these ways.

Kortney Carr:

I think, too, another reason to be kind of cognizant with identifying individuals is even within that, the individuals who are often identified are people who have been okayed by White people.

Kelechi Wright:

Yeah, that's right. Socially acceptable to White people.

Kortney Carr:

Yeah, yeah. These are the people that we have identified that it's okay for you to talk about or it's okay for you to reference, but not these other people, especially thinking about the nameless people or the people who did the work and it looks differently. I am a person who often talks about the debate between Dr. King and Malcolm X. Dr. King has been portrayed or accepted as more socially desirable versus a Malcolm X who did a lot of great work in the community as well. So it's even considering that, we have to be careful to not just talk about individuals who have been socially accepted by White people.

Kelechi Wright:

Right. Yeah. Because there's also patriarchy, just even how women were perceived at those times, so whether a male would be more easily accepted at a table than a Black female at that time and just all those things are there when you talk about that. I was talking to somebody, actually, who's not in social work about this when I was first starting to write and I remember just saying ... A person who's a part of the Black community, I was asking him and I was saying, "What do you think about this when you think of how social work does this and how the Black community does this?"

Kelechi Wright:

What he said was so just direct where he was like, "We do these things. We just don't call it social work." You know what I mean? We've always done these. We just don't call it social work. He's like, "Why do we have to call it social work?" So I think that that in itself needs to really, again, the professionalization and the recognition and all those reasons why we want to be able to put this in this box.

Kelechi Wright:

Okay. For the sake of making that easier and putting it in a box, does that affect our ability to create true social change, to create true social justice? And if it does, then we need to just throw the box away and stop doing it.

Kortney Carr:

I think there's also space, too, to question how much of this is intentional, intentionally left out? I say that from the perspective of in the article we identified a Black man who, as we were talking about the struggles and the problems with the professionalization of social work and he was also a part of some of the professionalization of social work. I had never been exposed to him, heard about him until doing my research for this article.

Kortney Carr:

So it's like even in that, as much as we talk about Jane Addams, Mary Richmond, we have this Black man who we can identify was a part of this work, and he's never discussed. So I mean, to me, there has to be some intention behind leaving out that history.

Shimon Cohen:

It's totally intentional. It's so intentional that now it seems not because it's been gone for so long that it's become normal, as if these are natural processes that happen, kind of like segregation, where people are more friends with people who are like them. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva talks about that, this concept of naturalization. Racism is hidden because it's so natural at this ... It's portrayed as natural, if that makes sense?

Kelechi Wright:

You hear people say things like that, too, "It's natural to want to be with people that just look like you." It's like, wow.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah.

Kelechi Wright:

Really? Where did we get that from?

Shimon Cohen:

It's like maybe if redlining hadn't happened and we lived in mixed neighborhoods-

Kelechi Wright:

How about that?

Shimon Cohen:

... we'd actually not feel that way.

Kelechi Wright:

That we wouldn't feel that way.

Kortney Carr:

Yeah, that is very interesting because of some of my religious background and experiences, I have been exposed to people of multiethnic backgrounds, races, et cetera, and never once have I ever thought about just wanting to be around people who look like me. I honestly come from a different perspective where sometimes I miss what other people notice because I'm like, "Well, that is normal to me." It is normal for family to look very different and it not necessarily mean that they're mixed or biracial.

Kortney Carr:

It is normal for me to be around people of different racial, ethnic backgrounds and interact. I don't necessarily think anything of it, but that is not necessarily normal for the rest of the U.S.

Shimon Cohen:

I just want to get back real quick to the Dr. King part because part of what is ... I don't know the right word. I was going to say amazing, but it's not amazing, is how White folks are constantly misusing his words and leaving out his critique of classism and capitalism and imperialism and war.

Kelechi Wright:

Many speeches are left out. It's funny. The I Have a Dream speech, of course, but I listened to a sermon where somebody actually played his speech on I think it's called Wait. Basically, Dr. King is talking about how the Negro, in his words, the Negro's often told to wait. Every time you want to bring change, wait, wait. It's not at all like this mainstream Dr. King we know, that most people would hear about. I mean the intensity, the passion, the drive, it's interesting. But it's whitewashed. A lot of what we hear even from Dr. King is whitewashed.

Kortney Carr:

I think, too, with him it's like the emphasis is the peaceful. Let's be peaceful. That's the part that they want to emphasize is turn the other cheek. Let's be peaceful. But you missed other things that he said, and you're completely missing that a lot of times these things don't warrant a peaceful response.

Kelechi Wright:

Well, Dr. King also was, for someone that was supposedly so peaceful, why was he on the FBI watch list then, just like Malcolm X? Maybe he wasn't as peaceful. Maybe some things he said were more radical. So I don't-

Kortney Carr:

But how often do you actually hear people talk about him being on the FBI watch list?

Kelechi Wright:

Yeah.

Kortney Carr:

That's the part that it's like, "Leave that out."

Kelechi Wright:

Right. Right. Which I think, even thinking about our article, thinking about this concept, it makes me think that a lot of the people in those ... The FBI wasn't constructed at that point. But a lot of the people that would have probably spoken out about social justice would have been Black people, would have been on the FBI watch list. You wouldn't have been able to be as radical in some ways about petitioning for the poor, especially poor BIPOC communities. But yeah.

Shimon Cohen:

He owned guns, too. MLK owned guns.

Kelechi Wright:

Yeah. You might get in trouble saying that, Shimon. I don't know.

Shimon Cohen:

He did.

Kelechi Wright:

Because all we hear is he quotes Gandhi and peace and passive resistance and ...

Shimon Cohen:

You said it, whitewashed just like social work education. I love how you draw that connection right at the beginning of the article of U.S. whitewashed history and what that means. And then you put social work right in that context. I think that's such an important connection that often doesn't happen even though it's so ... Once you see it, it's like, "Well, yeah." But I think it's the social justice part of social work that covers this up. It's that good White people, innocent White people. Well, we do this. We already do this. We don't do that. We do this with social work because we're all about social justice.

Shimon Cohen:

And then you put it, but the U.S. Says the same stuff. It's like we're all about liberty and justice ... I mean it's the same. It's the same thing.

Kortney Carr:

And it's not. It's like we want it to be the same thing. But I mean I think we have to recognize that it's not because when those things were written, they weren't written for BIPOC people. They were talking about liberty and justice for White people. I struggle. I go back and forth with feminist thought and

feminist movement, thinking about that. I shouldn't say not originally. In its professionalization, for lack of a better word, it was rooted in helping White women. So it's like, yes, we use that language and we have to recognize historically that that language was not meant for people who look different than the White people.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. 100%. That's what I'm saying, social work using that same type of social justice language, I think, covers up the reality of who was this really meant for and drawing that parallel to how the U.S. started and is still going, because social work came out of here. But then that made me think, again, what you all are talking about is, what is social work? Who has been doing it, and who gets credit? That credit thing-

Kelechi Wright:

Right. There you go.

Kortney Carr:

Yeah.

Shimon Cohen:

But it influences the practice, and so I want to make sure we get into that a little bit, too, of so where do we go from here with this? What do people do with this? What are you all doing, and what are your recommendations for folks?

Kelechi Wright:

Yeah. Well, I think there's a couple. I'm sure Kortney and I both kind of go back and forth here with a couple of different remedies. But similar to that discussion, like we talked about those upEND Movements or reform or defund versus do you change institute policies? Regardless of the direction that's taken, a first number one step, I think, BIPOC people have to be part of driving the conversation, leading the conversation. So that's the first step. So when I say that, I mean so when you have, practically speaking, at the ground level, when you have social work educators, social work practitioners that are making policies, making decisions, and they're standing there forming ...

Kelechi Wright:

Everybody's scrambling to do their DEI committees now and whatever. Do you have BIPOC people who are part of these conversations? You know what I mean? I think it's cute to have all the committees everyone's forming, but that's the reality. If you don't have those people there, I don't see how that's going to be effective. Again, like Kortney kind of said, and then when those people are sharing things, is that going to be, well, we need to show studies, show evidence where that's empirically tested that we should do this and take this step and do that? Who has supported that with evidence that that will be effective?

Kelechi Wright:

So we have to be mindful of the ways in which we're using ... If we want to bring racial-related social justice and change, are we going to use White tools to do it? How is that? And then I think when we do use White tools to do it, really it's a facade that's really just we're just trying to feel better about what

we're doing. We're not really trying to bring change. So I'd say that's one of the first steps in terms of change. And then I would say even for social work educators who might listen to this, is that I know when you're constructing your syllabi and you're getting all of your materials together, it is easier to just pull on the resources that are readily available for you. That might just be White framers historically or White sources, articles.

Kelechi Wright:

But do the work and get the BIPOC voices in the conversations, so when you're giving and you're referencing people to your students in the syllabi and in your core things, too, you have people of color that are a part of talking about the history and conversations like this that are challenging the history. So those would be my main two right now.

Kortney Carr:

I think to add on to your last point, Kelechi, too, is being mindful that sometimes the knowledge and the education that we need to include doesn't look like what we consider normal educational tools. So that may mean that this may not be a empirical or theoretical article that you find in a journal, recognizing that knowledge and dissemination for these communities looks a lot different, and it doesn't make it less evidence-based. So going outside those traditional methods of knowledge in dissemination and education is going to be important.

Kortney Carr:

I also think stepping back and really doing a lot of self-critique and reflection. There's a very real space in this that I also am completely open and honest with, that despite the fact that I am a Black woman, I am a Black woman born and raised in America. That means that I perpetuate and have perpetuated a lot of these things because that is how I have learned. So there's a lot of self-work that has to be done to recognize these things, to challenge, to critique these systems, who we are, how we practice, and being okay with saying that, "Yes, this is how we've done it, but it doesn't have to be done like that anymore. It doesn't have to look like that, and it can look like this, also."

Kortney Carr:

So really taking a step back and looking at how are we really projecting these same things that we're saying that are not healthy or not right or not good. That work has to be done and not saying the buts with that.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. I'm so glad you talked about that self-critique. I just know, for me, there's so much unlearning that I've been doing the past number of years, and it just keeps going deeper. It's like every time I feel like I figured something out, there's 100 more feet deep I got to go. And then behind that, there's 1000 that I didn't even know that was there yet, because I can't even see it yet till I've unlearned all those things that got me to be able to see something that I couldn't even see, if that makes sense?

Kortney Carr:

Yeah. I think there's a very real blind spot, too. I know when I teach, it doesn't matter what class I'm teaching, I always discuss values and ethics. But I have a really big pet peeve because students always want to discuss and incorporate social work code of ethics when we talk about values and ethics. I'm

like, "Yeah, nope, put that away because that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about your personal values and ethics because we forget that those are present no matter what."

Kortney Carr:

I don't care what you tell me about the social work values and ethics, at the end of the day, you're going to lean on your personal values and ethics, whether you realize it or not. So let's talk about those and what those look like in your practice, how those relate to work with or not work with our professional code of ethics as well as how our professional code of ethics, not 100% right and need to be critiqued.

Shimon Cohen:

Totally.

Kortney Carr:

So it's all of those things-

Kelechi Wright:

Are you trying to say we can't be objective, Kortney? I can't be objective in my practice?

Kortney Carr:

No, we definitely cannot be objective at all in our practice, no matter what we think or believe about that. I talk a lot about, too, dual relationships, how that is talked about in our code of ethics. I'm like, "Yeah, my thought about that does not align at all with our code of ethics because when we're talking about communities of color, communal communities, small communities, there's going to be dual relationships." Yes, there are things that we need to know and how to navigate those things appropriately. But we cannot say that there just cannot be dual relationships. It is not possible when we talk about these kind of communities.

Kelechi Wright:

Yeah. I think you're really hitting the nail on ... In terms of I've had experience, too, where I've actually had more experience teaching in BIPOC communities right now than I have where we are in the Midwest and predominantly White settings, institutions. So it's interesting for me because until Kortney said that, I just started to think about my conversations predominantly teaching human services classes for social work and counseling amongst Black students in Philadelphia versus now here in Kansas.

Kelechi Wright:

It's interesting because I'm just now thinking about I didn't have certain conversations that I have about DEI. You know what I'm saying? In Philadelphia years ago, I was working and talking to people who were going to be working directly with people that were in BIPOC communities. Not to say that, obviously, we don't have those biases, like you just said. Even though we're people of color, we still are entrenched in a racist system and have lenses that we have to even challenge ourselves.

Kelechi Wright:

But it is an interesting thing when you talk about knowing that a White student is going to be working with communities of color and the potential damage they could do in terms of the harm they can do. I think it's a very real reality. So this whole facade of objectivity, I mean I'm just thinking. I don't even

think that I talked about it as much in teaching communities of color versus with White communities because there is a facade in White communities that you can be objective, professionally. Doctors can be objective and social workers can be ... Teachers can be objective.

Kelechi Wright:

It's interesting, culturally. I didn't think about that till right now. But you really have to challenge and dismantle that mentality of objectivity. It's almost like this badge of honor, as if I professionally can be objective when I go into a scenario. When I see a child that is in need and I'm doing a removal, I'm just ... Wow. Yeah.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. That phrase, check your bias at the door. I'm just like, "What? What?" Actually, something I have in this workshop I do is questions that we actually need to ask ourselves. I'm saying at least for White social workers, because I don't have the confidence that folks have the level of self-awareness to see when harm is being done, and so there almost needs to be a checklist of: Who is being harmed? Who is this helping? Who is this hurting? Critical race theory has this concept of look to the bottom, which I know maybe is not the best terminology, but it is look at who's the most oppressed. Is this helping to liberate or is this reinforcing oppression?

Shimon Cohen:

I think those things need to be more taught rather than, "Just be self-aware. Write a journal and reflect on yourself." Because it's like how do I know? I know I've taught in ways that have been harmful. I can admit that. I can say that I know that. I know where that came from. I know how I learned it. I know how I don't do it anymore. We need to be able to have those conversations.

Kelechi Wright:

Yeah.

Kortney Carr:

It is so hard to accept change in systems, thinking about we can ... I think that's another thing as well. It's like we can have conversations all day. What is the action? What is the change? Sometimes that looks like changing the way we do things, despite the fact that that's what we're comfortable with and that's how things have been done. I utilize my teaching. It's become a topic of conversation more and more, but an un-grading approach. I think it's more from a socially just perspective. People will like, "I don't know how to do that," or, "That's uncomfortable for them."

Kortney Carr:

But it's just like, why do you have to stay in this system? Are you really getting what you need to out of just assigning a grade? Those kind of things, it's like people can't begin to think outside of what they know and what's comfortable to them.

Shimon Cohen:

One thing you talked about was as faculty. Creating syllabi and what's readily available, but this double issue of Advances, I mean it's open access. There is enough in that double issue to completely redo and

really get a incredible start on ... Because then you go into all the references from each of those articles and you've got enough for years. I mean you've got enough in there.

Kelechi Wright:

Yeah. If you want to do the work, you got enough. Yeah.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. No excuses. It's there. It's there for those who want to do it. So just as we're getting closer to wrapping things up, just since you both, you're on here with this platform and you've written this article and I know you're doing all sorts of other amazing work, I'm just kind of wondering what you want to put out there for the rest of the time. Use this space to get across any message you think needs to get across.

Kortney Carr:

That's a hard one.

Kelechi Wright:

You can go first, Kortney. I got to gather my thoughts here.

Kortney Carr:

Yeah. So, well, first I think I would just like to say that this experience with writing this article, getting it published, and just the response to it has been great. I think I didn't necessarily expect that. So that gives me some warm and fuzzy feelings, that it is being received. It is being disseminated. I struggle sometimes with dissemination and how things are disseminated. So I like that also, too, that it's getting disseminated in more non-traditional ways, such as this podcast.

Kortney Carr:

So I think, for me, it's kind of thinking about those things, as we're talking about how history of social work has been whitewashed and history in the U.S. has been whitewashed, thinking about how we can do things differently, not being stuck in the same old ways, but really just taking time and energy to do this work and really reflecting on what that even means or looks like. Considering that when you talk about, like you mentioned the statement earlier, leaving your biases at the door, we have to recognize that a lot of times we don't even know what those biases are or that they're present. So it takes a lot of energy to start there.

Kelechi Wright:

Yeah. I think, for me, there's a lot of things swimming in my head. But I know that one of the pushbacks I get sometimes from White students is, well, especially things like critical race theory, we all know how controversial that has been in a lot of different circles. We're in Kansas. But the reality is that there has to be an acknowledgement that, yes, this is a very daunting task, what we're talking about, challenging racism, people even having to reassess how their history has damaged other people. Because there are some ways in which these kinds of conversations bring that up because that's been the major narrative in the news is ...

Kelechi Wright:

We talked about this when we did a presentation on this article at a social work conference, that some of the relics of White supremacy are not just the statues of slave owners that are all over this country that need to be torn down. They're not just those things or Confederate flags. They are in our history books. We have to realize that it is a deep work, but things that are worth fighting for, like this, are deep things. They're hard things. I think that I see students, a lot of fragility comes out when it comes to these kind of conversations where it's like, "This is too difficult," or. "Why do we have to do that? Why do we have to look at this? Let's move forward."

Kelechi Wright:

Again, that's why the quote is in there that I wrote because you can't move forward if you're constantly telling these same narratives of the past. If my kids are going past the statue at a courthouse in Kansas as if this person is a hero, then that's consistently reinforcing something that is not going to create an equitable future for us. So we have to do those hard things for the sake of what we're supposedly saying we all want. Now, I'd rather people just be real and say they want power to be a certain way.

Kelechi Wright:

But if we're going to say we all want it to be this way, if we're going to say we want social justice in this direction, then we have to do the work. We have to do the hard things. For educators, for practitioners, we have to look at what we're saying, disseminating, sharing, talking about. I just want to say in this, doing the work, how it can be difficult for people, but I don't think it's harder than being Black. I just have to be honest about that. I don't think it's harder than being Black. I don't. I don't think that reviewing your syllabus and looking at the way you do your practice in social work, I don't think so. I don't. I don't think it's harder than being in an Indigenous community. That's all I'll say on that.

Kortney Carr:

I think being present. This is going to be uncomfortable, no matter what. It's going to be uncomfortable and just leaning into that discomfort and being present in it. As we talked about the boom of DEI committees and DEI work, but my experience with those is that we're talking about racism, racial equity, supremacy, privilege, all of those things. What my experience has been is that those committees don't address that work. They're comfortable, because we're talking about who's on those committees, who's leading those committees. They're comfortable addressing social justice issues that also impact White people. They are not comfortable addressing social justice issues, such as racism, that do not impact White people.

Kortney Carr:

That is still very much a thing to this day. I've left committees for that reason. So stepping back and doing that work, are you only comfortable addressing social justice issues that impact White people? Because that's what happens a lot.

Shimon Cohen:

I've overwhelmingly heard from folks, especially Black women, that they've had it with these committees, and a lot have left because it's... People aren't listening, White people aren't listening. I think just something that needs to be said, which you all were talking about earlier, is that there's obviously ... Malcolm X said it. Garland Jaggers, who was one of the founders of NABSW, said it. A recent

guest of mine who's a former Black Panther, Black Liberation Army member, Jalil Muntaqim, said it. Racism was created by White people, so White people have to be the ones to eradicate it.

Shimon Cohen:

I don't know if that's going to happen, but there's also got to be times where White people, especially faculty, since we are focused more on social work education with this, need to get out of the way, just get out of the way. Yeah, there's work that needs to get done. So if folks want you to do that work, okay, cool. But otherwise, stop being a barrier to this happening. Just stop.

Kelechi Wright:

You made a good point there, too, though about where this was created. The space for the collaborative effort is there in terms of remedies and talking, as BIPOC people want to share because it shouldn't be expected just because you're Black that you need ... We just came back from a social work conference and someone had asked me, "Well, I'm sure you're on the DEI committee at your school." I was like, "Why?" I told them. I went to another session and they were talking about ... It was a school that is doing a lot of DEI work and they were giving examples of how social work programs can pattern the way they're doing it.

Kelechi Wright:

They were saying a lot of the Black faculty coming together really enjoy this. I was like, "Well, what about the faculty who don't enjoy it?" Let's have real conversations about this. You know what I mean? Because the exhaustion, the fatigue that can come with this when you live this and you teach about it and you talk about it, it's real. So I think even we want to be careful about putting these unrealistic expectations on even Black faculty and other people who can come in and speak and share and do things, whether they want to do it, how long they want to do it, how they want to be compensated for it, first of all.

Kelechi Wright:

All those things need to be there. That was my thing, similar to the quote you said. I was like, "I didn't create racism, so I'm not going to sit on every DEI ..." That's just not how I want to expend my academic energies all the time. I might write something about it sometimes. And then there's a reality. Again, this is where we need to move from the stoic objective. This hurts. You know what I'm saying? I have Black children. I have a Black son. I have a Black husband. This is not just a philosophical conversation to have another academic genre about.

Kelechi Wright:

This might sound controversial, too. I think, also, we want to be mindful of how we're taxing Black faculty to speak on racial issues because I think, also, there are topics that Black faculty can speak about, too, because of some of our experiences internationally. There are theoretical concepts that I think a lot of BIPOC voices could speak a lot to as we do quantitative and qualitative studies, too. But I think the there's expectations around this area, which if someone chooses to, great, because I think, again, there's a wealth of information there, and they can do that.

Kelechi Wright:

But I think we also want to be careful even how we categorize and just a lot of that's there. We want to give agency to BIPOC faculty, practitioners to do what ... I appreciate Dr. Akin. She's not on this call. But

she actually does something, even in groups we do, called race caucuses where when we discuss and we actually do in our research team meetings, we actually read articles on the characteristics of white supremacy and talk about how we can decolonize how we do research. We read articles on how we can challenge racism in the system that we work in in social work, and then we talk about it.

Kelechi Wright:

But sometimes we also do race caucuses where we have just the White people get together on the Zoom calls and just the Black people, because the fatigue is real to have to carry the conversation. Sometimes you don't want to say anything. Sometimes you don't have anything to ... It's complicated. It's very complicated. We have to sit with that complication and be okay with that as well. So even I say that also for... I'm conscious of when there's BIPOC students when I'm teaching and there's Black students who might not want to share or do want to share or ...

Kelechi Wright:

It's very complicated, what they share, where it's personal, where it's professional, where it's experience. We want to be conscious of that as well for students who are going to be listening to these kind of things and having conversations, too.

Shimon Cohen:

Definitely. Thanks so much for saying all that. I feel like we could keep this going. There's so much. I want to thank you both for taking the time to come on here and talk about your article and so much more about teaching social work, community work. I want to thank you all for doing the work. Also, I hope folks will read the article and get deeper into this work.

Kortney Carr:

Thank you so much-

Kelechi Wright:

Thank you.

Kortney Carr:

... for having us and doing your part and doing the work as well.

Kelechi Wright:

Thank you. We appreciate it.

Shimon Cohen:

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