

Radical Care in Practice: A Review of *Anti-Oppressive Child and Youth Care*

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This review examines Anti-Oppressive Child and Youth Care: Critical Conversations, edited by Andrea Christensen, a collection that brings together scholar-practitioners and youth to interrogate child and youth care in Canada. Grounded in storytelling and critical frameworks such as critical race theory, intersectionality, Indigenous relational ethics, fat studies, and anti-oppressive practice, the book addresses issues including anti-Black racism, ableism, anti-fat bias, and toxic positivity. This review highlights how the text moves beyond theory toward applied, reflexive praxis, particularly through its pedagogical design and critical reflection activities. It also considers the book's Canadian focus and its relevance beyond that context.

Key words: *anti-oppressive practice, early childhood education, transformative education, praxis, radical care, child and youth care*

Anti-Oppressive Child and Youth Care: Critical Conversations (Canadian Scholars, 2025) is a powerful textbook that brings together an array of voices, including practitioners, scholars, and youth with diverse lived experiences, to encourage readers to critically examine the structures, practices, and assumptions influencing child and youth care (CYC) in the settler colonial and racialized contexts of Canada. Andrea Christensen, a longtime CYC scholar-practitioner, curates this book, framing it in a way to highlight radical care, unsettle whiteness, and embrace discomfort as a site of growth for both scholars and practitioners. In doing so, the book pushes beyond theoretical discussions of anti-oppressive practice (AOP) and into the realm of applied, reflexive engagement, or, as Christensen puts it, “actually doing it” (p. 8). This sets the stage for how each chapter is formatted.

Grounded in a storytelling methodology, the book includes 10 chapters written by an incredibly

diverse mix of scholar-practitioners. Each chapter invites the reader (CYC practitioners, social workers, and those enrolled in education programs) to critically reflect and act with a transformative level of intentionality. Contributing authors address a range of topics, from anti-Black racism, toxic positivity, and anti-fat bias to Indigenous relational ethics and rethinking intervention approaches. Theoretically speaking, across all 10 chapters, authors utilize and center critical theoretical frameworks on the variety of topics discussed, from critical race theory (CRT), fat studies / anti-fatness, and intersectionality, to critical pedagogy, decolonizing and Indigenous relational ethics, and of course AOP. This use of critical frameworks creates a cohesive feel along the entirety of the book. Readers of this book will walk away from it feeling challenged, determined, and equipped to move forward with a critical, transformative, anti-oppressive lens towards CYC.

In Chapter 1, Beltrano et al. use personal/professional narratives to center the lived experiences of Black youth and practitioners as they navigate systemic anti-Black racism in CYC spaces. Using multiple voices sharing personal

experiences and sections of group reflection on said experiences, the authors drive home the point that no matter your positionality or role, there is work to be done in implementing praxis with an intersectional and CRT lens to challenge systems of oppression and anti-Black racism.

Nash examines oppressive mechanisms rooted in the Canadian CYC system in Chapter 2, specifically in the ways they have affected Indigenous communities and youth, and positions relational practice as an effective tool of resistance. The author, an Indigenous researcher, educator, and community worker, makes clear that to integrate such worldviews and ways of being into CYC practices would involve a radical reimagining of how care is “conceptualized and practiced” (p. 65).

Reddington and Alarcon’s Chapter 3 urges a rethinking of early learning and care intervention practices, one that moves away from individualistic to more sociocultural models that foster a greater level of inclusivity. The authors implemented a focus group methodology to garner the perspectives of five childcare practitioners who support children with disabilities. The data highlighted the “exclusionary effects that medical language and ableist intervention approaches have on the lived experiences of children with disabilities” (p. 92). The chapter concludes with a call to foster disability pride within CYC spaces to disrupt ableism and harmful perspectives on disability.

Chapter 4 looks to search for answers, while admitting there may be none, to questions about the use and effectiveness of anti-oppressive approaches in CYC and pushes practitioners to reflect on how they may unknowingly replicate harm like that of the oppression they aim to target. The author, Gharabaghi, urges practitioners and other CYC professionals to search beyond AOP rhetoric to face the underlying truths found in practice. While the chapter poses critical questions about the impact and effectiveness of AOP within CYC spaces, it is ultimately asking that those engaging in it consider the lives and experiences of the youth and families they claim to be liberating and ask themselves if their actions are truly for their benefit.

Rwigema, in Chapter 5, links radical youth work with resistance movements against anti-Black racism, emphasizing youth-led care and activism. The chapter opens with three stories depicting experiences of Black youth and families within the CYC and social work sector. The author uses the anecdotes as a primer to go on to explain anti-Black racism, how it is present and shows up in CYC and social services, and how these systems might be transformed through abolitionist antiracism approaches.

In Chapter 6, Roberts uses a case study to aid in evaluating postsecondary CYC programs and how they address, or not, anti-Black racism in the preparation of future professionals in the field. Roberts pulls from an experience that occurred in a graduate-level course within his university’s CYC program, one in which he was the professor. Using the case study, Roberts pinpoints ways in which his Black students faced harm and were made to feel attacked by white students during class presentations that presented non-Eurocentric points of view and perspectives. Roberts lays out sites of intervention, including a realization of Canada’s history with transatlantic slavery, citing the misconceived notion of Canada as a safe haven for Black people.

Thompson’s “Anti-Oppressive Practice in Post-Secondary Child and Youth Care Classrooms” (Chapter 7) remains centered on postsecondary programs but focuses on anti-oppressive pedagogy in CYC spaces and confronting whiteness in educational environments. The author lays out several detailed steps they see as imperative in doing AOP in postsecondary CYC classrooms. Starting with “First, Acknowledge” and ending with “Bring Joy and Celebration to the Classroom,” Thompson pulls from her own experiences and cites multiple frameworks throughout each section. The author mentions Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Kevin Kumashiro, and Kimberlé Crenshaw as all having had a great impact and influence on this chapter and her own practice.

Khun, in Chapter 8, discusses anti-fat bias and the ways it plays out in CYC, highlighting how body-based

discrimination intersects with race, class, and gender. Kuhn takes a strong and personal stance at the start of the chapter, speaking directly to “fellow fat practitioners” (p. 181). This opening sets the tone of the chapter and forces readers to lean in close and pay attention. Kuhn provides insight on language like *fat*, *obese*, *diet culture*, and *healthism* before diving into the history and current impacts of fat bias and elevating the role of CYC practitioners in implementing AOP to combat these biases and protect all body types and individuals.

Chapter 9 introduces and explains the “Four Pillars Safer Spaces Framework” and how it may be a useful tool in supporting youths’ agency and emotional safety. Khanna et al. provide a detailed layout of the framework, which comes from the Students Commission of Canada (SCC). The framework refers to “a dynamic and intentionally designed environment intended to support social identity formation, belonging, and critical thinking, where young people can put their ideas for addressing injustice and improving their communities into action” (p. 205). The four pillars—respect, listen, understand, and communicate—are grounded in the four directions used in the Indigenous medicine wheel (north, east, south, west). The chapter provides useful illustrations and charts that provide a visual cue in understanding the framework and uses anecdotes to highlight different aspects of the framework in use.

Dasilva et al. (the Research Writing Collective [RWC]) close the book with Chapter 10, a piece that uses the perspectives of youth and allows them to speak on their experiences with toxic positivity in the context of mental health care. The authors define toxic positivity, highlight how it shows up in and is perpetuated by institutions, and share the voices of youth who have experienced it. The RWC emerged from a group of youth researchers who were brought in as part of a larger research program studying mental health in children and youth. This chapter came to be the group’s first writing project and was focused on a topic the youth in the group felt was important for them to study. The chapter ends with a call for those who look to engage in AOP do so *with* youth in a participatory manner that allows for an equal share of problem solving and decision making.

What I found most compelling about the book is that after the conclusion of each chapter, contributing authors include a Critical Reflections box containing a 5-minute journal prompt, a reflection activity (reflection questions, sharing circle, viewing a documentary, etc.), and an integration into child and youth care practice section. This gives the collection the textbook feel for which it is striving. The critical reflection work, coupled with the learning objectives shared at the start of each chapter, allows readers to take the discussed topics, frameworks, and concepts and expand on them within their own unique circumstances. This allows for a more active and participatory role for the reader, in which they have the option to not only read and digest but to also act.

With an explicit focus on Canada’s CYC system, the textbook—an educational resource focused on anti-oppressive practice—positions itself as a tool to spark critical conversations and continue to build upon. In future volumes, the editor may want to consider broadening this book’s scope to take a more global stance. The book and all chapters included are situated in the context of Canadian CYC. While it is certainly not the case that all literature needs to serve a global audience, the work and topics discussed in this textbook can easily be applied and contextualized across continents, helping to bring these transformative and critical conversations to a larger audience.

These insights resonated deeply with my own research, which seeks to highlight and center Latino/x male perspectives and identities within early childhood education and examine how these identities have historically been marginalized in early care spaces. Chapter 1’s use of personal narratives and experiences with anti-Black racism powerfully demonstrates how storytelling can reveal the entrenched nature of oppressive practices and policies. It reminded me of the necessity of continuous reflection on one’s positionality. The act of critical self-reflection should be central to the work of all educators and early care workers. Developing a sustained critical lens not only strengthens individual practice but also equips the field to interrogate and hopefully transform the

policies and dominant discourses that continue to oppress historically marginalized communities.

As I reflect on this, I find myself asking: *How do I continue to show up and strengthen my critical lens? How do I work with preservice teachers to develop their own?* While these questions do not have simple answers, this book holds important pieces that can help guide both my personal practice and my work in preparing future educators.

Anti-Oppressive Child and Youth Care: Critical Conversations is unwavering in its determination to shine a level of criticality on the Canadian CYC system through diverse voices, narrative methodologies, and reflexive practices. Whether one is engaged in frontline practice, pursuing a career in child and youth care, or teaching in postsecondary programs, this book offers critical insights that should not be overlooked.