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# DEI Undone

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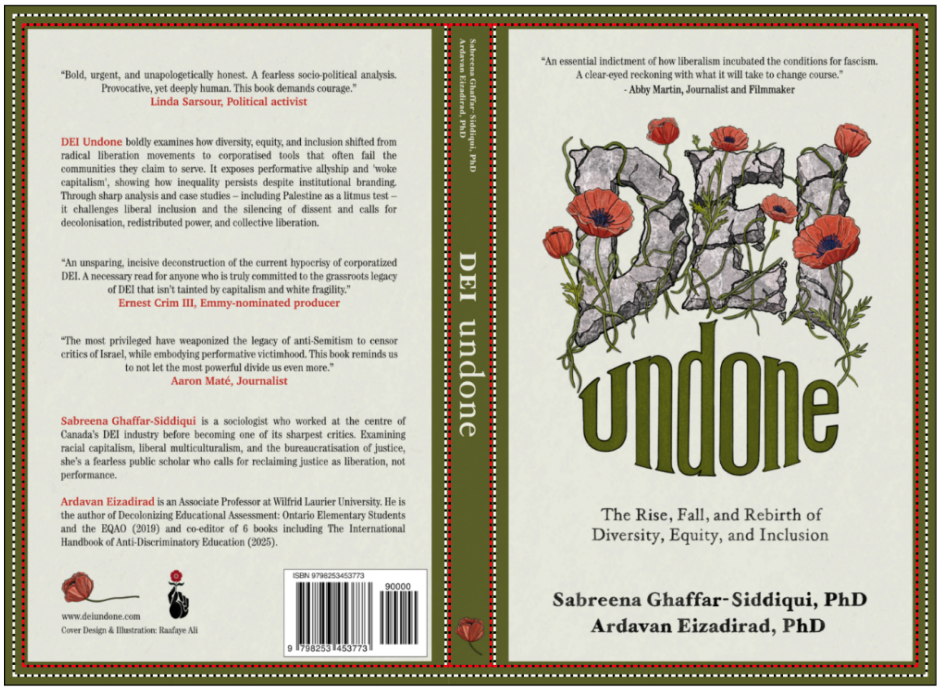
**Abstract.** This interview with Drs. Ardavan Eizadirad and Sabreena Ghaffar-Siddiqui examine the methodological foundations and central arguments of their 2026 book titled *DEI Undone: The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion*. The authors outline how cultural critique, historical analysis, case studies, lived experiences, and public discourse informed their account of DEI's transformation from liberation movements into institutional branding and corporate compliance. The conversation explores the possibilities and tensions of collaboration across institutional and community spaces. Palestine emerges as a political and ethical litmus test which exposes selective institutional commitments to justice and connected to settler colonialism in Canada. The authors further describe self-publishing, community peer review, and artistic collaboration as a decolonial process of self-publishing the book.

**Keywords**: DEI, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Cultural Critique, Historical Analysis, DEIcolonization.

**Book Description (published March 2026):** *DEI Undone* is a fearless excavation of how diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI0 rose from radical liberation movements, and how it was co-opted, corporatized, and ultimately weaponized against the very communities it claimed to serve. Tracing DEI's evolution from grassroots struggle to institutional branding, this book exposes performative allyship, tokenism, and "woke capitalism," revealing who truly benefited while structural inequality remained intact. Through sharp analysis, real-world case studies, and an unflinching examination of Palestine as DEI's ultimate litmus test, DEI Undone names the limits of liberal inclusion and the politics of silencing dissent. Refusing despair, it charts a path forward toward decolonization, redistributed power, and thriving communities rooted in justice, truth, activism, and collective liberation. This is not a defense of DEI as it exists, but a demand to radically reimagine what liberation actually requires and how it can be implemented.

**Readers can purchase a copy from the authors directly at:** https://deiundone.com/



## From Performative DEI to DEIcolonization: A Critical Conversation with Authors of DEI Undone

This interview was recorded via Zoom on September 2, 2026 with Dr. Dionisio Nyaga as the interviewer.

Dr. Nyaga: Thank you, Sabreena and Ardavan, for joining me to discuss your recently published book titled "DEI Undone: The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion." Please briefly introduce yourselves and then we will get into some discussion around the methodology and big ideas from the book.

Dr. Eizadirad: I am Ardavan Eizadirad, an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at Wilfrid Laurier University and Canada Research Chair in Inclusion and Inclusion for Thriving School-Community Ecosystems.

Dr. Ghaffar-Siddiqui: I am Dr. Sabreena Ghaffar-Siddiqui, a public intellectual.

Dr. Nyaga: My first question is what methodological approach guided the writing of the book together and how did you determine that this approach was best suited to studying DEI's rise, fall, and potential rebirth?

Dr. Eizadirad: Our methodological approach combines cultural critique, historical analysis, and case studies. We brought these together because we wrote the book not only for an academic audience but also for the public. We wanted the language to be accessible rather than overly technical. Through storytelling, we centred our own experiences, achievements, and struggles, as well as critical moments and struggles across sectors and contexts in different countries such as within Canada, the United States, and Palestine. We encourage readers to form opinions, critique systems, and consider solutions as they engage with the book. The project originally began as a collaborative article, but so much was happening so quickly, that it grew beyond that scope of an article into a book. Over two years, we recorded and transcribed many of our conversations, then turned them into a manuscript. We organized the book around the rise of DEI, when it was popular; its fall, when it became co-opted and weaponized; and its potential rebirth through strategies and approaches rooted in decolonization, justice, love, and activism.

Dr. Ghaffar-Siddiqui: I'll add to what Ardavan said. As we answer the questions and explain our approach, you'll hear that Ardavan's voice comes from within academia, which is important because of his position and role. In the insider–outsider framework, his is an insider voice. Because I was exiled from academia due to my activism for Palestine, my voice comes from outside it. Methodologically, I use ways of knowing and analyzing

information that sit outside conventional academic practice. Ardavan and I had not discussed this when planning the book, but we realized that knowledge is consumed and shared very differently today than it was even 15 years ago. In many ways, academia has not adapted to the needs of contemporary audiences.

It became clear to me that social media is now a principal space in which knowledge about Palestine, current events, and political discourse is produced and circulated. Academia often responds to conversations already taking place online. Writing this book was therefore especially interesting because we combined both methodologies. We analyzed existing articles and intellectual commentary on race, ethnicity, identity, racism, decolonization, and colonialism. We incorporated what we already knew, but we also devoted considerable attention to discussions taking place online. For example, relatively late in the writing process, we added a section on Charlie Kirk's death because it was a current, significant, and divisive event that illuminated debates about DEI. Jordan Peterson was also a major figure in attacks on DEI, and much of his work occurred in the public online sphere. In the book, we discuss and critically analyze his campaign against DEI. So overall, methodologically, the book takes on an unconventional approach connecting the past to the present and discussing implications for the future.

I believe readers would appreciate this approach because this is not an academic book intended only for academics. It is written for the broader public and for the people affected by these conversations and social issues. The book is decolonial not only in its approach to social justice, but also in how it gathered and shared knowledge. We took a position that these forms of knowledge-sharing are credible, even though the book was self-published. Although much of the information came from online sources and discussions, we are asserting as scholars that these are credible forms of knowledge grounded in literature. We are taking a stand to decolonize how knowledge is shared.

Dr. Nyaga: Sabreena, as you speak, I notice that you are walking outdoors. It makes me think not only about research but also about curation. Ardavan is situated within an institution, while you chose a more nomadic position outside it. What challenges did you encounter while moving between those positions: bringing Ardavan into public spaces while also returning to his institutional context? What methodological challenges arose during the writing process?

Dr. Ghaffar-Siddiqui: It is interesting that you noticed that. Ardavan is also outward-facing and can often be found in community spaces. At this moment, I am outside because my children are home from school, I wanted to avoid interruptions, and I needed fresh air because I was not feeling well. Your observation is nevertheless important. I am outside the institution, while Ardavan remains inside it. I would never advocate that everyone

should leave institutions entirely. I'm incredibly proud of Ardavan and supportive of his work inside the institution. I shed tears when he announced that he had become a Canada Research Chair. Although I'm a decolonial scholar who often wants to challenge or dismantle the system, I also recognize the importance of having people like Ardavan working within it. We need multiple approaches as we cannot all leave and work only from the outside.

At the same time, being outside is also important. Being outside provides a very different perspective. That is why the book and our collaboration matter because it demonstrates that someone within an institution and someone outside it can work together as comrades rather than antagonists. Working outside the institution gives me freedom because I no longer answer to a particular organization or surveilled by it. I therefore wrote my portions of the book without substantially restraining myself or limitations on risk-taking.

My principal concern was how my more radical writing might affect Ardavan within the institution. Several times, I asked whether he was sure it was okay. He consistently told me, "No, sis, we're in this together." By co-signing the arguments from his position within the institution, he strengthened the book. If I had written it alone, people might have dismissed it as the reaction of someone who had left academia and lost her job. Ardavan's participation changed how the argument would be received. His voice required readers to engage with a critique articulated from both inside and outside the institution.

Dr. Nyaga: Sabreena, are you saying that Ardavan's participation made the book more readily accepted rather than allowing it to be dismissed as an expression of frustration? Could you elaborate?

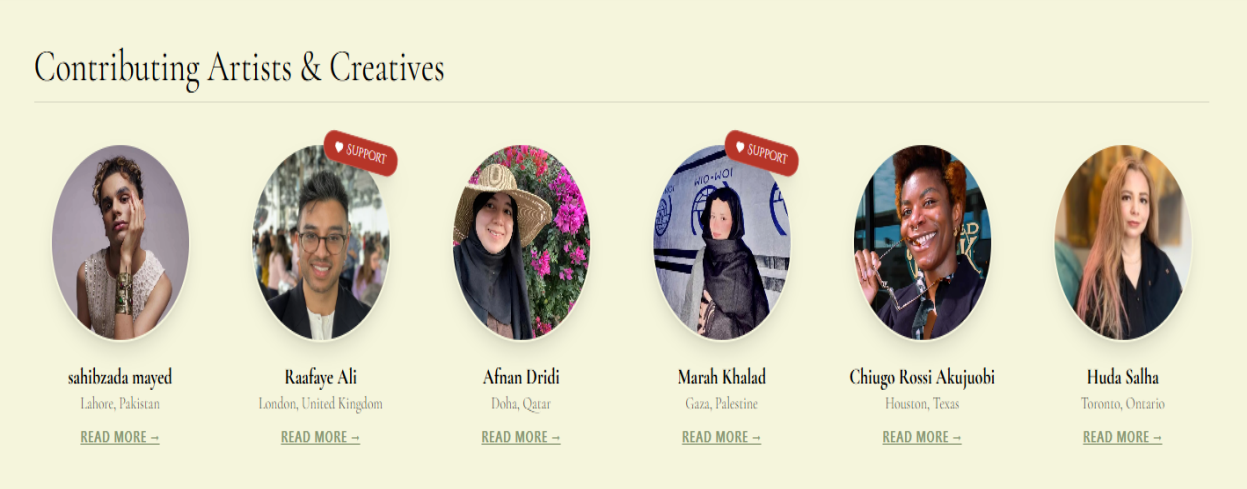
Dr. Ghaffar-Siddiqui: I am not saying that I would necessarily have written this particular book alone. I could have written a book about the fall of DEI independently, and it could have been radical, but it would not have carried the same power. This book emerged through our collaboration and continuous discussions about the needs for systemic reform. The final part of the book, on DEI's potential rebirth, especially reflects Ardavan's voice. He is more optimistic than I am. Had it entirely been my decision, the book might have ended with DEI's rise and fall and a rejection of the concept. Ardavan approached the issue differently. He maintained that there had to be a rebirth, that we needed to leave readers with hope rather than simply telling them to walk away. This reflects the strength of a collaboration between people with different experiences and different degrees of radicalism. Different levels of radicalism are visible throughout the book. Some sections clearly reflect Ardavan's voice, while others clearly reflect mine. It truly is a collaboration in both writing and approach.

Dr. Eizadirad: Yes, we pushed each other because we wanted to move from critique to practical solutions across different contexts and sectors. We considered how people in different spaces such as community members, parents, or coaches could engage with and apply these ideas. Therefore, once we had a first draft of the book, we then returned to define key terms and added prompts and activities to invite readers to reflect on their own lived experiences, roles, and emotions including experiences of pain and suffering. The language of suffering is universal, although its forms differ inside and outside academia.

We also recognize that language of equity shifts over time. We cover at the onset of the book how the language and lingo of DEI is constantly changing: from equity-seeking to equity deserving, to now equity-denied for example. Near the end of the book, in discussing rebirth, we incorporated "DEI" into the word "DEIcolonization." This signaled that a particular approach is required. DEI became problematic because institutions were permitted to perform it symbolically rather than substantively without systemic accountability. That symbolic performance contributed to the backlash and division we see exist now. Had it been challenged earlier and called out, we might not be in such a culturally and politically divisive environment.

Another important feature of the book is the integration of our personal commitments into the methodology. We connected ideas through our life experiences, identities, families, and backgrounds so readers could understand how we entered this work. The book therefore begins with our life stories, how we met, our struggles, and the project's purpose.

Through Sabreena's social-media platform, we also issued a call for artists because we wanted to highlight art as a form of storytelling connected to the book's central ideas. We featured racialized artists, including Marah who is an artist living in a refugee camp in Gaza, and highlighted their work on the website (see link to learn more about all artists whose work is featured in the book: https://deiundone.com/gallery).



Self-publishing was also methodologically important because it protected our freedom of voice and vision, although it created some additional layers of work which we had to do instead of relying on a publisher. For example, we conducted our own peer-review process through our networks and Sabreena's extensive social-media connections. We consulted people with varied perspectives and lived experiences doing DEI work across different sectors, including Jewish reviewers. We did not simply write the manuscript and release it as self-published. We selected respected leaders to provide feedback and, where they were willing, publicly endorse the work. This was part of pursuing a decolonial process for publication. We had learned that conventional publishing can itself reproduce colonial and gatekeeping practices.

Dr. Ghaffar-Siddiqui: Our decision to self-publish and manage the process ourselves was a form of resistance to a system that treats peer review and publication through journals of particular academic standing as the only route to credible, verified knowledge. My decolonial work has always asked who determines a journal's credibility, who controls and funds it, and why a small group of reviewers should automatically be regarded as the most qualified authorities. Indigenous and racialized academics have often entrusted everything to systems shaped by colonialism. My parents and grandparents came from what was British India and lived with the legacy of the British Raj. I was born and raised in the United Kingdom, where I experienced considerable racism. I have therefore always approached academia by questioning why it determines which voices deserve recognition and expertise and consequentially who is left out or dismissed.

During my PhD scholarship applications, I went through two rounds of deliberation, beginning with the department. A proposal could not be considered nationally unless the department first deemed it worthy. I never advanced through my department nomination process when applying for Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funding. The Trudeau Scholarship, however, did not require departmental nomination. The same anti-imperialist and anti-colonial research topic, submitted directly to the central body, made me a finalist for that scholarship. This clarified the departmental barriers I had faced and raised the question of who should be empowered to make such decisions.

Therefore, when we committed to making this a decolonial project, we also decided to develop our own peer-review process. We contacted people across social-justice and advocacy spaces, including critics, rather than limiting ourselves to friends. One Jewish scholar offered criticisms that we seriously considered and in response we incorporated new content through revisions to address the points raised. We approached more than 30 people and ultimately received 25 reviews with feedback about strengths and areas for improvement for the book. Why should review by three academics automatically be considered more credible than review by 25 people working across public and professional sectors? Our reviewers came

from journalism, scholarship, academia, law, and both decolonial and non-decolonial spaces. Methodologically, the review process itself was deliberately decolonial and challenged conventional assumptions about credibility.

Dr. Nyaga: Thank you for sharing that. Furthermore, how did you define the book's scope, especially when tracing DEI from liberation movements to its institutional and corporate forms?

Dr. Eizadirad: We wanted to establish a timeline. Although we could have begun much earlier, we decided to start with the civil-rights movement and the relationship between DEI and activism. We considered the civil-rights, feminist, and disability-justice movements, along with other liberation struggles and highly publicized case studies, such as the Starbucks racism incident and, more recently, Palestine. Throughout multiple rounds of revisions, we remained concerned about whose voices and experiences might be omitted and therefore added more subsections as relevant critical events came up. Overall, we placed social movements alongside critical incidents and used critique to connect them. Readers may enter through familiarity with one movement or incident, but we wanted them to move beyond a narrow view and see how these events relate to diversity, equity, and inclusion in relation to its reach, popularity, and opposition. This accessible, large-scale mapping became the book's scope, while allowing us to work through its tensions and contradictions within the DEI movement.

We did not take a binary position on whether DEI is simply good or bad. Instead, we asked what is lost when authentic liberation movements are appropriated and weaponized by institutional programs, policies, departments, and brands that prioritize compliance and organizational interests over social justice. We wanted readers to recognize that DEI can be pursued effectively and sustainably with communities rather than imposed on them.

Dr. Ghaffar-Siddiqui: We paid close attention to chapter titles and subheadings, and Ardavan developed several memorable ones. One addressed the "pornographic voyeurism" of hashtag activism. We used that phrase to describe hollow forms of engagement with social justice through social media likes or reposts. Another section examined the corporate takeover of DEI and the capitalist logic that came to drive institutional departments. Organizations often pursued Black or women's representation because appearing equitable could improve their public image and profitability rather than because they had substantively changed.

The insider–outsider framework also clarifies Ardavan's contribution. The activities and reflection questions added throughout the book to engage the readers reflect his experience as an educator (both K to 12 and as a professor) and his focus on facilitating discussion on divisive

topics through cultivation of brave spaces. Readers so far who have provided feedback have responded very positively to those features. My instinct was primarily to identify problems, analyze them, and tell the story. Ardavan emphasized that the book should also invite readers to become part of the conversation and engage with the experiences being shared so they take meaningful action within their community given their respective identity and role.

Dr. Nyaga: Sabreena, your comments are compelling because your language is often explicitly anti-establishment. References to the street, nomadic research, and even movement as methodology suggest that you are not simply reproducing an insider–outsider duality. Both of you move in and out of institutional and public spaces. Rather than treating one person as situated in academia and the other in the street, you approach situatedness in a more intersectional way. Does that interpretation make sense?

Dr. Ghaffar-Siddiqui: It does. We are also both insiders in other respects. During my master's degree, a research-methodologies course addressed outsider knowledge production. The course, taught by a white professor, relied on dated articles from the 1970s and 1980s while overlooking contemporary Indigenous and racialized scholarship. I challenged the notion that an outsider perspective is inherently more objective, because it can reproduce the colonial lens through which Indigenous communities are viewed and described. I argued that communities should not be treated as objects for outsiders to interpret under the assumption that distance guarantees neutrality. That position created considerable tension during my master's program. My longstanding tendency to challenge institutions may have meant that I never fully belonged within them.

Ardavan and I are both insiders in that we are Muslim, racialized, and connected to immigrant experiences and communities. We rejected the assumption that the book required an outsider voice to be objective or unbiased. Again, we asked who determines what counts as credible and verifiable knowledge, including in relation to Palestine. We wrote from a clear position and invited Jewish and anti-Zionist reviewers into the process. We determined that this was a legitimate way to proceed. Self-publishing was necessary because conventional publication would likely have introduced too many controls and constraints. There was also urgency. Given the violence and the genocide in real time we were witnessing, we did not believe we could wait through a lengthy institutional process before knowledge about oppressed communities could be produced and shared.

Dr. Nyaga: That delay can function as a form of postponement.

Dr. Ghaffar-Siddiqui: Yes. We could not wait years for institutions to acknowledge what had occurred.

Dr. Eizadirad: It is important that we explain why Palestine serves as a central methodological case in the book. Sabreena's highly public advocacy allowed us to explore those tensions more fully. After the book was published, someone asked me, "what does Palestine have to do with DEI?". The question made me pause because many people may not readily make those connections. The book demonstrates how injustices beyond North America still have consequences here such as which corporations fund war, which expressions of resistance are acceptable by institutions, and so on. We examined institutions that publicly endorse justice while selectively deciding which injustices to support and which to avoid. That tension reveals the influence of power, resources, and media. Palestine is not merely a metaphor. It is a substantive political and ethical case that exposes the limits of institutional DEI when organizations pursue symbolic justice for brand or organizational benefit. When advocacy threatens profit or influence, institutions often become selective and silent on critical social justice issues and topics. We are not comparing the value of lives, but we can compare institutional responses to Palestinians with responses to Ukrainians affected by war. The responses and consequences have significantly differed. That is why we describe Palestine as a litmus test and unpack the notion of the "Palestine Exception".

Dr. Nyaga: Let me ask a related question. During the pro-Palestinian encampments, some universities outside Toronto appeared reassured that they did not have encampments on their own campuses. Yet these institutions stand on Indigenous lands, and we know that children died within the residential-school system. Is there a connection between that history and what has happened to children in Palestine during this war?

Dr. Ghaffar-Siddiqui: There is a reason that the book includes substantial discussion of Indigenous history in Canada. One case study examines land acknowledgements, including their limitations and potential co-optation. We are on stolen Indigenous land in a society shaped by settler colonialism, and we explicitly connect that history to the settler colonialism occurring in Palestine. It is difficult to expect yesterday's colonizer to criticize today's colonizer.

If Canada condemns settler colonialism in Palestine, it must also confront its own dark history. Current settlements and ethnic cleansing in Palestine place a spotlight on that history. The book makes that parallel. In the final chapter, where we discuss moving forward and DEIcolonizing DEI, we draw extensively on Indigenous leaders, academics, intellectuals, and community members. Those communities have undertaken this work far longer than the acronym DEI has existed. The connection is therefore not only historical but it also informs the future. Indigenous knowledge, ways of being, relationships to land, and practices of collective care can

guide how we relate to one another and how we understand foreign policy concerning Palestine.

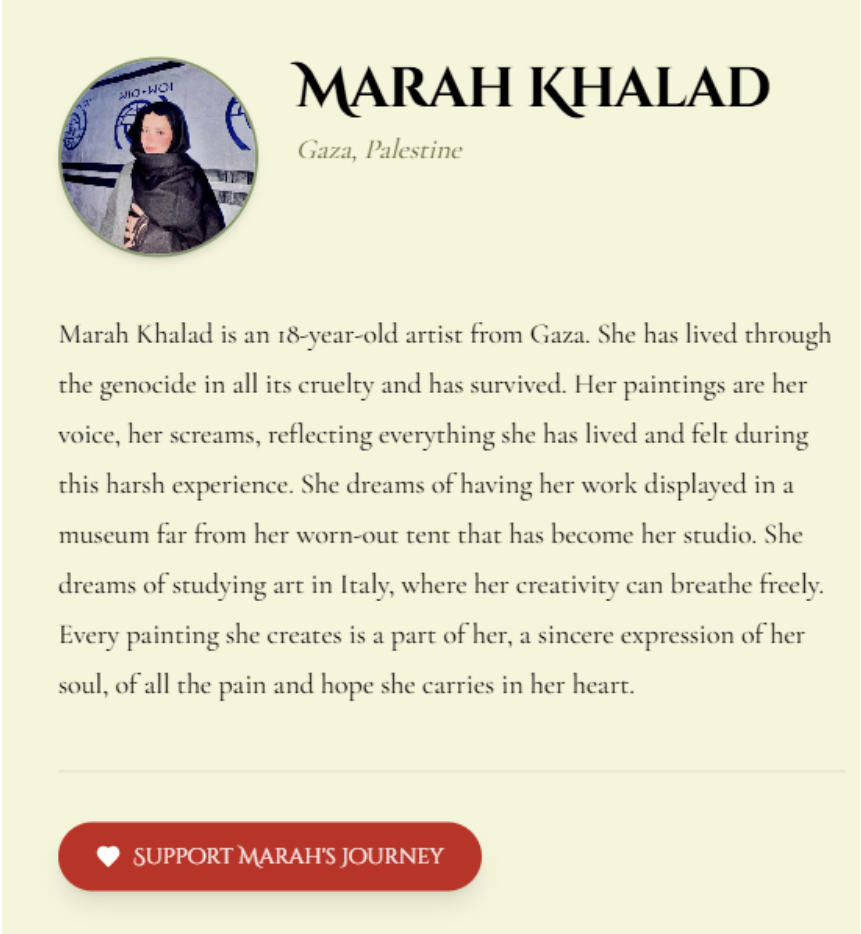
I initially did not want the book to center my own experience of losing my position due to my Palestine advocacy efforts. One reviewer noted that many readers knew fragments of my story through social media and would want to understand what had happened and how it connected to the book. I therefore added that account as we finalized the manuscript. In the section critiquing land acknowledgements, I explain that a land acknowledgement contributed to my losing my job as a senior DEI adviser. I acknowledged events in Palestine as settler colonialism and argued that colonialism in the past cannot be separated from colonialism in the present. That statement generated the backlash that ultimately cost me my position. The book therefore connects settler colonialism in Canada and Palestine both explicitly and throughout its broader argument. Its vision of the way forward is strongly informed by an Indigenous lens and practices.

Dr. Eizadirad: Land acknowledgements are a good starting point, but they are not a destination. Sometimes, I sit through six academic meetings with six different land acknowledgements all in one day, but the question is whether we have moved the needle since last year when it comes to advancing truth and reconciliation efforts. That is where the rebirth subsection of the book shifts the discussions toward accountability and data-driven decision-making, using both quantitative data and qualitative lived experience. We discuss how impact can be measured, how institutions can be held accountable, and how community work can be made meaningful. The book also recognizes tensions within marginalized and equity-denied communities. Colonial structures create barriers among us along lines such as socioeconomic status, race, gender, and sexuality. Advocacy focused narrowly on one identity can itself become a barrier to solidarity against larger systems and other intersectional issues. Those systems are deeply embedded in education, health care, and justice. We cannot simply live outside them as they surround us like the air we breathe.

Dr. Nyaga: Thank you, Sabreena and Ardavan. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Dr. Ghaffar-Siddiqui: This interview is important because it focuses on methodology, which we have not discussed much in previous podcasts or interviews about the book. One point I forgot to mention is our community approach. Through social media, we invited Black, racialized, and Indigenous artists to contribute, and we made sure the process was not extractive by paying the people we commissioned and amplifying their profiles through our book and the book website. We commissioned the front-cover art through an open process. Artists whose submissions were not selected for the cover were offered inclusion elsewhere in the book. Everyone who submitted art was included. We also raised substantial funds

for the artist in Gaza, Marah Khalad, who was displaced at 17 and was 18 when she contributed her work. We continued supporting her beyond the initial payment by inviting readers to contribute donations directly to her through the website and book purchases.




Therefore, our community-driven approach was not limited to our success as authors because it sought to support everyone who was involved with the project. Even our copy editor, Sahibzada Mayed, had never edited a book before. When I approached him, he was uncertain because he lacked formal experience, but I had seen his writing on LinkedIn and believed he would be well suited for the work. We took a chance and trusted him. He now copy-edits for other people. Rather than hiring only people with established credentials, we wanted to elevate those who had not yet received an opportunity.

**SAHIBZADA MAYED**

*Lahore, Pakistan*

I call myself a creative alchemist, one who cultivates tools of liberation. As a queer, diasporic being shaped by histories of colonisation, displacement, and migration, I am learning what it means to (un)belong to many places, or sometimes none at all. Growing up between worlds taught me to shapeshift, hold contradiction with care, and weave new forms from the in-between. My work across design, fashion, research, and storytelling is how I practise reclamation and imagine futures that can truly witness us in our collective be(com)ing. As I continue to evolve and transform, I question and remind myself what it means to be a good future ancestor.

Our decolonial approach has shaped the writing, methodology, collaboration, contributions, and distribution of the book. We initially avoided Amazon and created a website led by my high school aged son through which we ship books from my garage, because we did not want to finance the systems we were criticizing. It would have been hypocritical to criticize large corporate systems while funding them. We eventually listed the book on Amazon at a higher price to discourage purchases there, while making an electronic edition available for international readers. Despite that approach, the book reached number one in two Amazon categories.

Dr. Eizadirad: I would add that the process involved more than writing. As Sabreena said, we tried to practice the principles we advocate for. We came to know each other and our families more deeply throughout the process of writing the book. Cultivating relationships and trust was essential because the book is intimate and addresses emotionally charged topics. That process took time.

Also, based on reader feedback, the book has helped people find language to understand their experiences and create spaces to engage with ideas they could not discuss at work or within their families. So, the book can serve different purposes: healing, a critical framework for analyzing experiences of trauma, or practical ideas for navigating inequitable power dynamics at work or in community settings.

I will conclude with a question. The book is not a destination. It is intended to be a spark to strategically continue to challenge inequitable and unjust systems. Readers will encounter it from different points in their lives and identities. Therefore, "what would equitable, diverse, and inclusive research methodologies look like, if marginalized communities and identities rather than institutions, determined what counts as meaningful or impactful research? That question turns the conventional structure upside down and returns us to the grassroots foundations described in the book's account of DEI's rise.

Dr. Nyaga: Thank you for such an engaging conversation. I have taken many ideas from it. This journal includes an article I wrote about nomadic life as a research methodology. It grew from my experience as a Black African man from Kenya and from observing Indigenous communities, particularly the Maasai, move across the land. I asked how knowledge might be produced through nomadism. The society in which we live tries to situate us through property and fixed position. Property-making itself depended on mapping and surveying, while mobile communities continued to produce knowledge through movement. Seeing Sabreena walk reminded me of that inquiry. I appreciate how this conversation has reaffirmed movement as a methodology for interrogating forms of oppression within universities and other workplaces. Thank you both.

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