

Social Work as “White Woman’s Burden”? Imperial Translations of the Profession between Germany and Latin America in the 1930s and 1940s – An Archival Study

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Summary: This article examines the transnational entanglements of social work between Germany and Latin America in the 1930s and 1940s through an archival study of German Catholic women social workers involved in founding social work schools in Chile, Uruguay, and Peru. Drawing on letters and reports preserved in German Catholic organizational archives, the authors analyze how these actors framed their activities as civilizing and Christian missions while reproducing Eurocentric knowledge orders. Using postcolonial feminist and women-of-color feminist perspectives, the article shows that these early forms of international social work were deeply embedded in colonial and racialized hierarchies and can be interpreted as a form of ‘white female saviorism’ or the ‘white woman’s burden.’ Methodologically, the study combines close archival reading with the approach of ‘reading against the grain’ to uncover both explicit and implicit colonial narratives within the documents. The article concludes by arguing for a critical historiography of social work that addresses colonial continuities within the profession and integrates marginalized perspectives into its collective memory.

Keywords: history of social work, postcolonial theory, feminist social work research, archival research, transnational social work, colonial knowledge production

Titel: Soziale Arbeit als “White Woman’s Burden”? Imperiale Übersetzungen der Profession zwischen Deutschland und Lateinamerika in den 1930er- und 1940er-Jahren – Eine Archivstudie

Zusammenfassung: Der Beitrag untersucht die transnationalen Verflechtungen der Sozialen Arbeit zwischen Deutschland und Lateinamerika in den 1930er und 1940er Jahren anhand einer archivbasierten Studie zu deutschen katholischen Sozialarbeiterinnen, die an der Gründung von Ausbildungsstätten für Soziale Arbeit in Chile, Uruguay und Peru beteiligt waren. Auf Grundlage von Briefen und Berichten aus deutschen katholischen Organisationsarchiven analysieren die Autorinnen, wie diese Akteurinnen ihre Arbeit als zivilisatorische und christliche Mission darstellten und dabei eurozentrische Wissensordnungen reproduzierten. Mit postkolonial-feministischen und Women-of-Color-feministischen Perspektiven wird gezeigt, dass diese frühen Formen internationaler Sozialarbeit eng mit kolonialen und rassifizierten Hierarchien verbunden waren und sich als eine Form von ‘white female saviourism’ beziehungsweise als ‘white woman’s burden’ verstehen lassen. Methodisch verbindet der Beitrag eine quellenkritische Archivlektüre mit dem Ansatz des ‘reading against the grain’, um sowohl explizite als auch implizite koloniale Narrative in den Dokumenten sichtbar zu machen. Abschließend argumentiert der Beitrag für eine kritische Sozialarbeitshistoriographie, die koloniale Kontinuitäten im professionellen Wissen reflektiert und marginalisierte Perspektiven stärker in das kollektive Gedächtnis der Profession integriert.

Schlüsselwörter: Geschichte Sozialer Arbeit, Postkoloniale Theorie, Feministische Sozialarbeitsforschung, Archivforschung, Transnationale Sozialarbeit, Koloniale Wissensordnungen

1 Colonial Translations: German *white* Catholic Social Work and its Entanglements in the Americas

In 2023, we¹ began engaging with the work of several German women social workers who, starting in the 1920s, established Catholic social work schools for women in various Latin American countries. We were guided by the question of what purposes these women pursued with the establishment of these schools and – aligned with our overall research question in our project – to what extent colonial entanglements of the *western* social work profession played a role (cf. Lau 2024). After delving into letters and reports these *white* women left behind and sharing our impressions with each other, we realized that we had developed similar yet also differing affects and approaches to the material deriving from our situated knowledges, (familial) experiences and distinct vulnerabilities concerning racist and colonial violence, as we will elaborate later on. While dealing with the colonial narratives in the documents we could rely on our specialized expertises to place varying emphases in our analyses, either delving deeper into their motives and perspectives or focusing more on what was left unsaid and undocumented. Thus, the ‘we’ that speaks in the following represents these different perspectives, which we do not intend to cover as one.²

Let us begin our journey through the history of social work – one that critically examines the very notion of professional travel as a social and cultural act. This journey spans continents, following the paths of *white* German Catholic women social workers who, in the mid-20th century, were asked to found schools for social work across various Latin American countries.³ In doing so, they entered postcolonial societies, shaping and being shaped by the complex local contexts they encountered, while simultaneously reproducing and representing eurocentric knowledge and power dynamics. Following their traces, we encountered archival documents filled with narratives of superiority, replete with demeaning and dehumanizing

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2 We thank Anna So-Shim Schumacher for the insightful impulses to make transparent the authors differing experiences concerning privileges around *whiteness* and experiences of racism, as well as to address the structural exclusions of BIPOC students and scholars in the field of academic social work training today.

3 Luise Jörissen (1897–1987), was engaged in Catholic social work and welfare training in Germany before beginning her work in Santiago de Chile in 1929, where she contributed to the establishment and professionalization of social work education within Catholic welfare institutions. In 1937 she moved to Lima, Peru, to found and direct a Catholic social work school, a role she held until 1942. Augusta Schroeder (1899–1979), a German social scientist and educator, emigrated to Uruguay in 1939 and took over the leadership of Peerboom’s school in Montevideo. After twenty years of leadership, Schroeder returned to Germany to lead a Women’s Seminar for Development Aid.

depictions of those whom these women social workers met or, in many cases, merely imagined. Even in some rare expressions of recognition for “the bravery of the Chilean Woman” (Jörissen 1932⁴), constructions of insurmountable ‘otherness’ persist as well as a construction of the category of ‘the Chilean’ women that includes poor and working class, elite and middle-class women but excludes and erases peasant and indigenous e.g. Mapuche subjectivities and realities. At the same time Jörissen paints working class, elite and middle-class women in Chile each as homogenous groups that are characterized as brave in their ways but flawed and irrational (ibid.). These sometimes covert violent constructions, as they unfold in archival records held in Catholic women’s movement and social work archives, deeply characterize our research field and our ambivalent affective responses as researchers: the records contain elements that are both fascinating and repelling, drawing us in while simultaneously pushing us away, as they reveal scarcely acknowledged facets of social work history. It might be tempting to dismiss these violent histories: after all, these texts are nearly a century old, and the women behind them have largely been forgotten. Yet the engagement of these *white* German social workers in translating their ‘idea’ of social work and concepts of ‘the good Christian life’ to the former Spanish colonies in the Americas not only carry a strong imperial taste⁵ but, as we will argue, leave a lasting impact on the profession (cf. e.g. Huenchucoy Millao 2020).

How it all began⁶: In 1925, under significant German influence, the Union Catholique Internationale de Service Social (UCISS), an international association of Catholic social work schools, was established (Walpuski 2023).⁷ Shortly after its founding, UCISS representatives initiated efforts to establish Catholic social work schools in various Latin American countries. Between the years 1929–1937, these efforts facilitated the arrival of several *white* European women to support the initiatives, particularly in Chile, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

So, we turned our attention to Chile, as it was home to the first Catholic school of social work (for women) in Latin America, which was led by a *white* German woman. While exploring Chilean history, we came across the sisters Rebeca and Adriana Izquierdo, who were members of the national elites and became acquainted with the work of German and other European social work schools through their travels and their studies (cf. Miranda et al. 2018; Jiménez 1979).⁸ Motivated to address the social and welfare issues affecting the

4 All translations from German into English have been carried out by the authors.

5 In this article, we use the term ‘imperial’ not only to refer to formal structures of colonial rule but also to practices that position Europe as the unquestioned source of superior knowledge, morality and professional authority. We understand ‘cultural imperialism’ as the attempt to reshape social worlds by exporting European social work concepts, Christian-bourgeois family norms and gendered notions of respectability as universal standards, while erasing local knowledges and practices.

6 Content Note: We will share quotes and language that are drenched in European *white* supremacist attitudes about former colonized countries, that are problematic, aggressive and violent. Our striking out racist terms in historical documents, that are clearly *not* written from a contemporary critical race theory perspective, is a cautious attempt to interrupt and problematize language, that if left unmarked tends to normalize colonial racist thinking and discourses (cf. Arndt 2022).

7 UCISS functioned as a transnational coordinating body for Catholic social work schools that standardised curricula, facilitated the circulation of teaching materials and selectively placed European directors in newly established institutions across Latin America. Far from being a neutral professional association, it operated as an institutional conduit for Eurocentric understandings of welfare, morality and gender roles, shaping which forms of social work were recognised as legitimate and which epistemologies were sidelined.

8 When we describe Rebeca and Adriana Izquierdo as part of the national elites, we refer to their location within upper-class, predominantly *white* and Catholic segments of Chilean society, which afforded them access to higher education, international travel and transnational Catholic networks. Their ability to invite UCISS representatives and to mobilise state and ecclesial support for the foundation of a social work school illustrates how

impoverished masses, they envisioned establishing social work training and education in Chile, inspired by what they had observed in Europe in the 1930s.

Seeking support, they reached out to the UCISS, where Marie Baers (1883–1959), recommended Luise Jörissen from Germany – a young woman who had previously led a Catholic social work school for women in Munich – as the ideal candidate for this initiative (cf. Jörissen n.d.: 2). In 1929, Jörissen became the head of the *Escuela de Servicio Social Elvira Matte de Cruchaga*, the second social work school in Santiago de Chile and in all of Latin America, alongside the first, secular school founded in 1925, also located in Santiago de Chile (cf. Berger 2022).

Jörissen can be considered a forerunner, as other *white* Catholic German social workers later followed her example and travelled to the continent. One of them was Augusta Schroeder from Cologne. Schroeder took over the leadership of the Catholic *Escuela de Servicio Social* in Montevideo, Uruguay, from Else Peerenboom, who had also been responsible for its founding on behalf of UCISS in 1937, again influenced by the Izquierdo sisters (cf. Ortega 2005). When Schroeder arrived in Uruguay with limited knowledge of the local languages and the country, it did not stop her from immediately embedding herself in the postcolonial elites: “I’m proud as a Spaniard! They are really proud and have a natural dignity, grace, and good knowledge, even in any ~~racial mix~~, that you almost feel clumsy and insecure,” she wrote in a letter home (Schroeder 1939: 2).

A little later, this insecurity seems to have dissipated. Schroeder reports that she and her ‘European wisdom’ were appreciated by the locals. This acknowledgment seems to her unexpected, noteworthy, and perhaps even a relief, suggesting a promising endeavor ahead: “There is a belief in the greater wealth of knowledge in Europe, and that is why European scholars, institutions, teachings, etc., always have unquestionable authority. [...] This willingness to accept and learn is a very special advantage of Uruguay” (Schroeder 1940: 3).

Schroeder describes here how she and her German peers were met with significant receptivity to European knowledge and scholarship, as well as a strong willingness to submit to their leadership. This ‘fortunate’ circumstance seems to be paired with a strong sense of unity among Catholics, as well as the fact that the people of Uruguay were Christianised by the colonial rulers.

Jörissen, who after leaving Chile in 1933 and staying briefly in Germany continued her journey to Perú in 1937, relied on connections to European elites. Jörissen’s task in Perú was to establish another social work school. To do so, she maintained close ties to the fascist President General Óscar R. Benavides and his wife, Francisca de Benavides, both descendants of the royalist General de Benavides y Moscoso. The latter had been a member of the *Ejército Realista de América*, the military forces defending the integrity and unity of the Spanish monarchy against the independence movements in the early 19th century. This connection positioned the Benavides family within the Catholic political elites of Perú, strongly aligned with the notion of ‘European Epistemic Supremacy’ (cf. Ciccarelli 1990; Castillo-García 2022).

elite women could act as powerful brokers, while their projects still rested on racialised and classed distinctions that excluded peasant and indigenous women from the category of the ‘modern Chilean woman.’

- 9 Interpreted within the context of her writings from the 1930s, Schroeder appears to adhere to the belief in biological human categories, a perspective that was normative and deeply embedded in the German common sense of that era.

Through legislation and personal engagement, the Benavides family ensured that social work and Jörisen’s state-funded Catholic school for social work became integral to the vision of a ‘rising’ Peruvian nation. In her letters, Jörisen expressed gratitude for this support, noting the overwhelming amount of work required. This alignment with the ‘powerful old Europe’, represented by local elites in the Americas, particularly in Perú, made Jörisen’s overseas mission feasible and sustainable. However, the establishment of the school for social work for women was not driven solely by social commitment or Christian charity (as some authors suggest, cf. e.g. Berger 2022). It also served political purposes: the re-education and strengthening of conservative forces within the country, as well as functioning as a tool for population control and surveillance. Jörisen’s own writings reflect that alignment. In one of her comments, she noted: “Of course, the earlier Spanish influence is often viewed as disastrous; but it still remains that the Spaniards gave birth to Christianity – and wherever the Spanish spirit prevails, an ideal of heroism will be alive” (Jörisen n.d.: 5).

This statement reveals Jörisen’s pronounced “feminismo eurocentrico” (Guzmán 2019: 2), as she romanticized the Spanish colonial legacy, portraying it as a source of Christianity and ‘heroism.’ In doing so, she perpetuated an imperial narrative that erases the brutal violence, systemic exploitation, and cultural destruction imposed on indigenous peoples such as Quechua, Aymara, Asháninka, Uru.¹⁰

2 Colonial Ambiguities in Archival Letters: German Catholic Women Between Praise and Blame

With this prologue in mind, we delve deeper into the archival traces left by the founders and leaders of the social work schools we are examining. These women extensively documented their journeys to the Americas through letters and reports sent to colleagues, friends, and families in Germany. Their writings, ranging from personal accounts to more formal reports such as *Rundbriefe*, offer both compelling observations and deeply problematic imperial value judgments. On one hand, they spark curiosity and fascination with us as readers today; on the other, they provoke strong reactions of disgust and anger due to their inherent Eurocentrism.

Many of these correspondences resemble broadcasts of information, sharing ‘knowledge’ about Latin American people and culture, effectively producing and distributing colonial discourse. The personal letters contain ‘studies’ of societal issues faced by the new generation of social workers and students. These documents reveal the tension between the women’s colonial beliefs and the socio-political uncertainties they encountered. In their efforts to reconcile these conflicts, they sought to establish a semblance of ‘order’ in social work education for women, aiming to make it compatible with their ideals. As our analysis will demonstrate, these letters could just as easily be signed with ‘colonial greetings’ instead of ‘best regards’ (cf. global e.V. 2013). The underlying racist sentiment of cultural and mental

10 This cultural destruction goes as far as the fact that indigenous populations interviewed for a study by Marisol de la Cadena (2004) didn’t identify as indigenous because the term had a pejorative weight, and people didn’t want to be associated with this category (cf. Alfaro 2006: 20). An internalized racism that was backed by Peruvian elites who tried to justify their political and economic rule through racist and biologicistic narratives, arguing that indigenous and afrodescendant people had “smaller brains” and “lesser intellectual capacities,” argues Santiago Alfaro (2006: 20). This promoted a “monocultural structure” (ibid.), with Castellano as the primary language spoken and used by the state.

superiority is woven throughout these accounts, providing a window into the everyday life of *white* Catholic feminist¹¹ social work school founders and directors in the Americas.

We retrieved these archival documents, dating from the 1930s to the 1960s, during visits to Catholic (women's) organizations in Germany, such as the archive of the Catholic German Women's League (*Archiv des Deutschen Katholischen Frauenbundes*, KDFB) in Cologne and the General Caritas Archive in Freiburg (*Archiv des Deutschen Caritasverbandes*, ADCV). However, the archives primarily present the perspectives of *white* German women, revealing *their* attempts to create 'order,' *their* self-images, and feelings of alienation, while the reactions of their local counterparts remain largely absent.

The writers also described personal 'adventures,' recounting their travels through the Americas not only for relaxation but also to explore exotic, cultural, and often touristic sites, such as the Amazon Rainforest. These accounts present the women as both travellers and reporters, carrying with them a Eurocentric knowledge which was used to interpret the environments they encountered. This knowledge, deeply rooted in colonial frameworks, was used to explain the world they saw – a world that was, to both them and their audiences back home, perceived as 'other' and less fortunate.

The discourses in these documents perpetuate the narrative of a developed and enlightened Europe and the *West* juxtaposed with a 'to-be-saved' *Rest* (cf. Hall 1992). Although there exists a notable Northern European (German) superiority discourse towards Southern European countries such as Portugal and Spain today – portraying them as 'poor' or 'less modern' – Spain and Spanish colonialism are depicted in the writings of the women who established Catholic social work schools as a respected and admired European and Western force. These accounts portray Spain as having successfully brought Christianity, Catholicism, and Modernity to the Americas, reinforcing the image of a benevolent imperial power.

The 'admiration' they describe receiving from local populations, colleagues, and students is coupled with a sense of imperial entitlement. Schroeder, for instance, describes Uruguayans as having "a lot of fresh, tireless intelligence, great memory power, easy comprehension and appropriation" and a "lively and eager-to-learn intelligence" (Schroeder 1940: 3). Later, she portrays them as being both "afraid" and "fascinated" by what she calls "the German *Geistigkeit*": "They all have a bit of respect for German spirituality here that is mixed with a slight sense of horror [*leisem Gruseln*] – they are afraid that its depths are lightless and pathless" (Schroeder 19[39]: n.p.).

This perception reflects Schroeder's belief that people are 'afraid' of deeper intellectual engagement, preferring simplicity due to what she deems 'simple minds.' She even expresses her own temptation to succumb to this 'timidity' (Scheu), but hopes to conquer it:

"At first you are tempted to allow yourself to be dominated by this timidity, to retreat into simplicity. But then I hope to overcome this temptation and, through really harder work, to get German 'depth' and mental clarity to prove themselves in the best possible way" (ibid.: n.p.).

11 We refer specifically to the feminism of *white* German Catholic women, as we operate from the understanding that there are multiple feminisms rather than a singular, universal feminism. This perspective resonates with critiques of dominant 'white feminism,' which often universalizes the experiences and priorities of *white*, Western women while marginalizing the voices of Women of Color and those from former colonized countries (cf. Zakaria 2021).

3 Feminist, Postcolonial Perspectives: *white* Women Social Workers and the Need for Racialized ‘Others’ in Envisioning their Emancipated Selves

Our readings of the narrative content of the archival material, as well as our analysis of the social, political, economic and cultural contexts in which Schroeder and Jörissen found themselves in Germany/Europe and the Americas in the mid-20th century, are informed and guided by postcolonial feminist frameworks and what Black German historian Fatima El-Tayeb names “women of color feminism” (cf. El-Tayeb 2011¹²).¹³

These frameworks helped us analyze these early and seemingly ‘innocent’ cases of international social work, not only as examples of the imperial translation of Western social work into previously colonized countries, but also as vivid representations of social work as a “white woman’s burden” (Burton 1994). Through their writings we can trace two *white* German social workers¹⁴ who operate within and respond to *white* feminist European colonial traditions trying to ‘(up)lift’ (*heben*), ‘develop’, ‘civilize’ and patronize the so-called ‘unfortunate’/‘poor’/‘other’ in the ‘metropolises’, but also in the colonies. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991) explains the problematic way *white* European women invented the so-called “third world women” as a homogenous and constrained group in need of saving as follows:

“This average third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being “third world” (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.). This, I suggest, is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of *Western* women as educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions” (ibid.: 56).

María Lugones (2007) highlights how closely the construction of *white*, fragile, bourgeois femininity is based on the devaluation of racialized women from colonized countries. Consequently, even the supposed ‘rescue’ or ‘uplift’ of colonized women, which Jörissen and colleagues invoke as a purported motivation for their civilizing mission and which, as the ‘burden’ of *white* women, fits seamlessly into the expansion of Eurocentric capitalism, never truly aimed at improving these women’s situation, which was itself first created by the colonizers:

“It is part of their history that only white bourgeois women have consistently counted as women so described in the West. Females excluded from that description were not just their subordinates. [...] They were understood as animals in the deep sense, sexually marked as female, but without the characteristics of femininity. Women racialized as

12 “For the first time systematically theorizing intersectional identities and power structures (cf. Crenshaw 1991), women of color feminism represented a crucial break in gender studies discourse in which any naïve positioning of gender as the primary and singular node of difference within feminist theory and politics was irrevocably challenged” (Munoz 1999, cit.after El-Tayeb 2011: 48).

13 The comments of one peer reviewer made us realize that we had overlooked referencing decolonial feminist thinkers who have made significant contributions to analyzing colonial violence and the legacy of *white* Western feminisms in the Americas, such as María Lugones. In this revised version, we have incorporated some of these perspectives. The term ‘the Americas’ is further considered a *white* European concept which centers the ignorant practice of early colonizers like Amerigo Vespucci who named the lands ‘America’. At that time different peoples and local groups already had their own names such as ‘Abya Yala’. Abya Yala is a name that is derived from the Kuna Community that especially describes ‘South America’ (cf. Espinosa Miñoso, Gómez Correal and Ochoa Muñoz, 2014: 13).

14 When we refer to Jörissen and Schroeder as ‘feminist’ actors, we do not suggest that they would necessarily have used this label themselves or that their practices align with contemporary emancipatory feminist politics. Rather, we use ‘feminist’ as an analytical shorthand for a historically specific strand of *white*, Catholic bourgeois women’s activism.

inferior were turned from animals into various modified versions of “women” as it fit the processes of global, [...] capitalism. [...] But the work of Oyewùmí and Allen has made clear that [...] colonized] females got the inferior status of gendering as women, without any of the privileges accompanying that status for white bourgeois women. [...] The history] Oyewùmí and Allen have presented should make clear to white bourgeois women that their status is much inferior to that of Native American or Yoruba women before colonization” (ibid.: 202 f.).

Antoinette Burton (1994) corresponded with these analysis when she developed the concept of the “*white woman’s burden*” pointing to *white* feminists:

“[F]eminism, like imperialism, was structured around the idea of moral responsibility. [...] Feminism [...] virtually dictated the existence of dependent clients on whom to confer aid, comfort, and (hopefully) the status of having been saved. [...] Nor could a sense of mission be divorced from the evangelical Christian enthusiasm which informed mainstream feminism. But once again, feminists deliberately cultivated the civilizing responsibility as their own modern womanly burden because it affirmed an emancipated role for them in the imperial nation state” (ibid.: 296).

Furthermore, these feminist approaches proved themselves invaluable to us as we navigated our own emotional responses to the historical documents we uncovered in the archives. They also enabled us to critically engage with seemingly harmless and routine social worker stories and reports that, without a postcolonial feminist lens, might have been dismissed as unremarkable or irrelevant to our argument. The events and procedures depicted in the archival documents needed to be read against the grain (cf. Spivak 1993), paired with further research on regional history and the people that collaborated with them, always keeping in mind the violent and unfinished colonial histories (cf. Ahmed 2006) that may have been absent in the texts, but haunted every word Schroeder and Jörissen brought to paper (cf. Attia/Popal 2018). At the heart of these postcolonial and women of color feminist approaches lies the call to envision our work as researchers as part of or at least entangled with colonial, neocolonial, eurocentric discourses as we were educated and are still situated in *Western*, European academic institutions. We are tempted to point to ‘them’, the racists from 100 years ago, and feel safe or free from reproducing colonial thinking. It is this kind of reifying binary thinking like ‘we’ and ‘they’, ‘the good’ and ‘the bad’ that is a trap. Ergo: We the authors, and you the readers, need to be open to reflect on our own biases, the reflex or the need to identify racist, colonial entanglements in the doings of social workers in the past century, but not noticing our own (fateful if ignored) affects, fantasies and longings.

4 Our Readings against the Grain

Methodologically, our analysis is based on a close reading of the archival letters and reports, which we understand as an iterative process of re-reading and juxtaposing passages within and across documents. First, we identify recurring narrative patterns, metaphors and evaluative terms through which the German social workers construct hierarchies between Europe and Latin America. In a second step, we contextualize these passages with historical and socio-political scholarship on the respective countries and on Catholic social work, in order to situate the documents within broader imperial, gendered and racialized formations. Third, we draw on postcolonial and women of color feminist work to make sense of these patterns, focusing on what is said and what remains unsaid, on contradictions within the narratives, and on the ways in which our own locations and affects guide what we recognise as colonial or imperial in these documents (cf. Spivak 1988; Stoler 2002: 91). While our primary framing draws from

feminist postcolonial theory, we also incorporate broader postcolonial methodological tools such as ‘reading against the grain’ to capture the material’s multiple discursive layers.

4.1 White female saviourism

The archival accounts of Jörisen and Schroeder provide a striking example of what we interpret as ‘white female saviorism’ and, consequently, cultural imperialism. These women’s work exemplifies what can be described as the ‘white woman’s burden,’ echoing colonial narratives that frame their interventions as both necessary and virtuous.

Louise Jörisen, for instance, articulated her mission in Perú in remarkably candid terms. Writing in the late 1930s from her position as director of a Catholic social work school in Lima, she reflected on the challenges she perceived in the nation:

“As a Spanish colony, inadequately supported, [...] the independent national life [*das selbständige Volksleben*] of a century could not reach the level of modern prosperity. A field of commitment [*Einsatz*] and trial [*Bewährung*] remains reserved for the coming social work, something that is hardly known so far [...]. This is therefore a matter of public education [*Völkserziehung*] in the full sense of the word, which can probably be brought to a decisive effect through the work of social workers if capable people decide to take up this profession and are trained in the welfare school in such a way that they can, through their ability and their reputation, significantly influence the people and the authorities” (Jörisen n.d.: 4f.).

The concept of *Völkserziehung*, as used by Jörisen, goes far beyond public education. It conveys the notion of a cultural remodeling project – a reformation of a ‘backward’ population into a modernized society, adhering to Western standards and norms. Implicit in her vision is the belief that social workers, under the leadership of a German director, could elevate Perú from its perceived stagnation.

This rhetoric strongly aligns with Homi K. Bhabha’s definition of colonial discourse:

“The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction [...] I am referring to a form of governmentality that, in marking out a ‘subject nation,’ appropriates, directs, and dominates its various spheres of activity” (Bhabha 1990, quoted in Escobar 2012: 9).

Jörisen’s framing of Perú as a ‘lost nation’ fits seamlessly into this colonial discourse. By constructing the Peruvian nation and its people as underdeveloped and in need of guidance, her presence and mission are legitimized as acts of salvation and cultural improvement. Her concept of *Völkserziehung* underscores her ambition to remake Peruvian society, casting German-led social work as a civilizing force to rescue the population from their supposed decline. In line with this, Rita Segato’s notion of ‘pedagogías de la crueldad’ highlights how such educational and social projects can function as instruments of domination and control, embedding structural violence under the guise of care and improvement (Segato 2018).

What emerges from Jörisen’s writings is not only an openness about the ‘deficiencies’ she identified in the country but also a grandiose belief in the transformative power of German, social work. Her narrative represents a form of cultural imperialism that sought to reshape the Peruvian populace, reinforcing hierarchical dichotomies of modernity versus backwardness and Europe versus the ‘Other.’

4.2 Social Workers as Promoters and Custodians of Heteronormative Christian-European Rules and Family Norms

Surveillance was a central tool in Jörissen's vision for social work, designed to 'correct the course' of the 'young nation' of Perú. In her correspondence, she detailed how her students' fieldwork should intervene directly in the lives of families:

"Through constant monitoring on the part of the school, it finds out about the cases in which immediate help is needed and instructs the relevant interns to do so. [...] The actual achievement [...] is that illegitimate but stable relationships are converted into marriages and children are legitimized, registered in a civil registry office, and baptized, all of which are prerequisites for orderly family relationships that are largely missing and usually without a deeper reason than ignorance and negligence. [...] the students should also work towards better care of the children, cleanliness of the apartment, sensible meals, and distribution of wages" (Jörissen n.d.: 4).

Jörissen's words reveal how moral and cultural 'striving' were integral to her vision of social work. In her analysis, Perú's social issues were framed as stemming from the people's supposed ignorance and negligence, rather than being linked to colonial exploitation, imperialist politics, or socio-historical conditions. Reading Jörissen's words on Perú through the decolonial feminist lens of Rita Segato (2018), we can state that Jörissen's fatally fails to acknowledge the effects of colonial rule in Latin America (Abya Yala) had on gender relations, especially on the oppression of working-class and peasant women in their own homes: where "el hombre del hogar indígena-campesino se convierte en el representante de la presión colonizadora" (Segato 2018: 14) – which might as well apply to the everyday experiences of Peruvian women. This reveals Jörissen's vision for social work as complicit in patriarchal-colonial continuities.

Jörissen's insistence on Christian marriage for 'illegitimate' indigenous relationships reveals not only moral universalism but also a specifically gendered form of colonial governance: indigenous women are constructed as both racially degenerate and insufficiently 'feminized,' requiring *white* German social work to impose proper heteronormative family structures.

Even more, her approach to 'orderly family relationships' highlights the heteronormative, patriarchal framework underpinning her mission, equating Catholic-Christian norms with proper societal organization. Tasks such as promoting church-sanctioned marriages and baptisms enforced a Christian worldview as the normative standard, leaving little space for the recognition of non-Christian populations. The exclusion of non-Christian subjects from her narrative effectively erases their existence and the historical violence inflicted upon them.

Such omissions are significant. They reflect not only the colonial mindset of Jörissen's era but also the ongoing marginalization of indigenous peoples and non-Christian populations in the region. Even today, indigenous communities such as the Mapuche are criminalized for asserting land rights, labelled as state enemies or terrorists, and constructed as threats to national security (cf. Muñoz Arce 2019; e.g. Amnesty International 2023).

4.3 Racial Hauntings: Racism as a Problem of 'the Others' in Perú

'Assimilation' as an unmarked norm speaks through all the accounts of our German reporters, like a haunting. In the following quote we learn how these racial hauntings show up in Jörissen's accounts of her school building process, which is part of an official report:

"The selection of students was much more difficult than in Chile. In Perú, in addition to the so-called class problems, there were also ~~racial~~ ones. In the board of trustees, thank God, they hardly commented at all. Only when they insisted that students from the provinces also had to be found did the objection arise that they were 'I*' with whom the young girls from Lima could not work together. The question of who should do social work on behalf of social security in the province, where it would be particularly important, for example in the mines and other companies, became clear to the questioners. [...] The view that Quechua, the language of the I*, should be taught and learned in school was almost even more strongly rejected. But this too was understood after similar arguments and a local lecturer was accepted for it" (Jörissen n.d.: 2).

Jörissen criticizes the racism of the Peruvian authorities, urging them to be more inclusive and supportive of the idea that non-indigenous urban students learn and work alongside students from historically marginalized indigenous communities, many of whom trace their roots to Quechua-speaking regions of the Andes. In doing so, Jörissen can portray herself as 'generous' and seemingly concerned with racial inclusion, yet her call functions to deflect attention from her own racialized assumptions by emphasizing the supposed racism of the 'Others.' In other words, by critiquing the prejudices of Peruvian authorities and society, she positions herself as morally superior, while her framing still rests on hierarchical and colonial understandings of indigenous populations. When at the same time indigenous social work students structurally are at risk of being used as tokens, to gain state access to 'their' communities. If you look at the oppression and exclusion these groups have faced over centuries and still face in postcolonial Peruvian society, learning or teaching in Quechua does not seem just noble. Of course, it was and still is crucial that there is access to services and resources for Quechua speaking groups – providing emergency relief after earthquakes or other natural disasters.

In the following, Jörissen proudly describes the benefits of her insistence on including Quechua lessons at her social work school:

"At that time, the school was asked to provide disaster relief, and those in need were amazed that they could converse and communicate in their language. Already in class, but even more so during this experience, the students' mutual respect grew as they learned in practice that they were equal in intelligence and maturity and could enrich each other through different opinions. The collegial and friendly connections have continued in subsequent generations and are maintained to the present day" (Jörissen n.d.: 3).

Jörissen presents herself as a benevolent and morally conscientious teacher, emphasizing harmony and equality among her students. She frames her role as a mediator and peacemaker, in line with her Christian duty to cultivate moral and social order. In her own words: "There were no ~~racial difficulties~~ at school. During the introductory course, the city residents learned to understand why they must not exist in a Christian social school – and those from the provinces were happy that they were accepted so naturally" (Jörissen n.d.: 3).

Racism must not exist in a Christian social school. This declaration does not seem to apply to Jörissen herself and her Christian German colleagues who not once question their own biases and racist notions of social order. This colourblind attitude makes it impossible to imagine discrimination or exclusionary practices that are inherent in the whole endeavour of coming from Europe to save 'brown bodies' by 'white angels' (cf. Spivak 1988), from moral and cultural decay by building and leading Social Work Schools.

It also makes it impossible for indigenous students to complain about historical injustice and colonial violence because they are included 'now' and there is no racism in Christian led

15 The racist term for indigenous women in Perú is abbreviated here and not spelled out or struck through, in order to avoid reproducing the offensive language.

countries or schools. Such assumptions can be critically examined as ahistorical, disregarding the integral role of European colonization and imperialism as projects deeply intertwined with Christian, particularly Catholic, doctrinal agendas. When merely 400 years ago Christian theologians and lawyers debated whether the people of the so-called New World ‘had souls’ (cf. Quijano 2014: 759) and could be considered human, only because they did not know Jesus. This debate – also known as the debate of Valladolid (cf. Castro Varela/Dhawan 2015: 25 f.) – highlights the extent to which theological discourse influenced perceptions of human worth and the justification of colonial enterprises.

5 Conclusions: Colonial-Racist Traces in Thought and Action

Postcolonial feminist analysis, especially our application of Antoinette Burtons concept of the ‘white woman’s burden’ to reframe the travels and work of Lousie Jörissen and Augusta Schroeder might feel unsettling, as it brings uncomfortable and problematic facets of social work history to the forefront: a history that usually centres *white* saviorism and *white* (feminist) protagonists in an uncritical way. Their work and travels are very often solely interpreted as fascinating early cases of transnational engagements of social work – as shining examples of the early internationalization of the profession (cf. e.g. Berger 2022). These incomplete representations can be seen as symptomatic for Western, European and especially German social work historiography that is permeated with “Germany’s colonial amnesia” (cf. Florvil 2020: 167), particularly regarding the entanglements of *white*, feminist, bourgeois social workers in the first half of the 20th century, which are frequently trivialized or dismissed as irrelevant, underscoring the profession’s historical complicity in colonial hierarchies.

Our approach to interrupt these tendencies of colonial amnesia, seeks to inspire localized, practice-oriented research and teaching projects that address these critical gaps in the profession’s historical narrative, embedding these reflections into the collective memory of social work. Following the idea of “dig where you stand”¹⁶, we argue to take a closer look at our own social work schools and universities, and to pause and wonder, at whose expense our own social work education, as well as the work of celebrated historical figures like Jörissen and Schroeder occurs and occurred. Focusing the latter, we urge to ask: Where are the voices of those who opposed the social work school founders in the Americas?¹⁷ Where are those who were imagined as recipients of both the training and the practice of social work? How do these stories enter the collective memory of the profession, and what lessons are to be learned from them?

As we showed above, postcolonial feminist analysis can help close such gaps in the historiography of social work, critically examine its oppressive roots, and integrate margi-

16 We thank Friederike Mehl, archivist at the Alice Salomon Archiv of Alice Salomon University Berlin, for drawing our attention to the UK-based archival justice project “Dig Where You Stand”, which “unearth[s] untold stories of people of colour living, working, and putting down roots in South Yorkshire over hundreds of years”. URL: <https://www.dwys.co.uk/> [accessed on: 14.03.2026].

17 We do not know whether there was any resistance to the establishment of the school. The records contain – if at all – only a few hints that might suggest discomfort or withdrawal among the intended recipients, such as occasional mentions that it has been initially difficult to recruit students. However, such hints should be taken all the more seriously (cf. Hartman 2019, who creates powerful counter-narratives about the lives of Black women in the United States, opposing the power-laden, racist, sexist and classist archival documents written by members of surveillance and punitive institutions).

nalized histories into the profession’s collective memory. To this day contributions by BIPOC¹⁸ protagonists are often sidelined. This reinforces “single stories” (Adichie 2009) and colonial narratives, failing to adequately reflect the diverse and heterogeneously situated experiences shaping the profession. A critical historiographic perspective must go further, it is easy to condemn the actions of those we now problematize while avoiding the more challenging question: What does this have to do with us?

We as social workers need to question the colonial, *white* trajectories that guide our actions, often without our awareness (cf. Alcoff 2006; Ahmed 2006), that manifest in the topics and perspectives we include or exclude in our curricula. Those trajectories normalize the exclusion of BIPOC faculty and scholars from our schools, and fail to cater to the needs of students of Color, Black students and other historically and intersectionally marginalized subjects, that would love to learn in social work classrooms, but are often stopped or gaslighted when they address oppressive and discriminatory behavior.

Often, as (*white*) social work students, scholars, and teachers, we perceive ourselves as ‘the good ones’ who simply want to help and thus cannot possibly be racist or complicit in racism. This denial obstructs the ability to address racist incidents and engage in critical self-reflection. Reading the archives of social work knowledge ‘against the grain’ is a crucial step, as it confronts us with the oppressive origins of the profession and the gaps in its historiography that we analyse as epistemic violence. It raises questions about the prerequisites and skills needed to analyze one’s entanglements, apply this analysis productively, and simultaneously unearth historical predecessors of social work within BIPOC communities in Germany, like the *Afrikanische Hilfsverein*, that existed 1918–1925 in Hamburg and Berlin¹⁹ and developed resistant solutions for greater social solidarity and inclusion against systems of inequality and domination. These essential processes of unlearning and power critical, inclusive memory work originate from BIPOC civil society initiatives, which operate under precarious conditions, with minimal support (e.g. Initiative Schwarzer Menschen in Deutschland e.V. (ISD), Each One Teach One e.V. (EOTO)).

In our teaching, these questions and unlearning processes are the focus we aim to bring into the classroom. By engaging with archival documents of (mainly *white*) social workers, we examine the continuities of (colonial) racist thinking.

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- 18 BIPOC refers to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. It is an intersectional umbrella term that centers the historical and ongoing effects of colonial racism on these specifically racialized groups.
- 19 Check out: <https://blackcentraleurope.com/quellen/1914-1945-deutsch/die-grundung-eines-afrikanischen-selbsthilfvereins-1918/> for more information.

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