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WHO CAN/SHOULD DO THIS WORK?

The Colour of Critique

INTRODUCTION

A primary element of the Canadian multicultural discourse is the idea that we live in a “raceless state” and as such, race does not factor into the ways in which we see and interact with each other, hence individuals’ participation and achievements in the society are understood to be products of their own efforts. Insofar as race is identified or acknowledged—as in census data and/or equity census reports—it is assumed that doing so is to find out about, or report on, the representation of the “cultural” make-up of our society. In this multicultural discourse, as I have written earlier (James, 2005), race tends to be acknowledged mainly because of its “visibility,” and as such, “the behaviours, practices, values, attitudes, and aspirations of racial minority members are considered to be part of their race culture” and not a product of their raced experiences or racialization in the society (p. 11). In other words, in this discourse, it is culture and cultural differences—particularly those of racial minorities—that are at issue, not race. This is reflective of a colour-blindness paradigm, or more appropriately, “White-normed” ideology, in which taking up issues of race, and concomitantly racism and discrimination (as in our classrooms and/or interactions), would seem contrary to the notion of cultural democracy and harmony that is believed to exist in society.

Furthermore, that most of those who identify issues of racism and discrimination in the society tend to be those who are not members of the ethno-racial group (Whites) on which the norms are constructed, points to the ways in which racism is experienced. Indeed, as Lisa Delpit (1988) writes: “The rules of the culture of power are the reflection of the culture of those who have power…. Those with power are frequently least aware of—or least willing to acknowledge—its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence” (p. 282). This notion is also captured in the old adage: “birds and fish… take the sky and water for granted, unaware of their profound influence because they comprise the medium for every act” (Barnlund, 1988, p. 14).

In this chapter, I explore the ways in which individuals take up issues of race, racialization, and racism in a context where Whiteness, which is embedded in notions of normalcy, is often taken for granted or ignored in prevailing discourses of race. In particular, I focus on the question: Who can/should do this work given
our context in which particular bodies are “raced,” consequently positioned and
read as conveyers of race knowledge based on assumptions about their experiences
with racism? I propose that Whiteness—structurally, culturally and institutionally
speaking—functions as a lens through which all members of our society can expect
to interpret and experience daily life, and as such “must be studied, named, and
marked so as to uproot it from its position of normalcy and centrality” (Hyten &
Adkin, 2001, p. 439; see also Kincheloe, 2005; Steinberg, 2005).

In the context of my work, and in this discussion, Whiteness serves not simply
as an identity that is lived, learned, relearned, contested, and struggled-over, but as
force within the institutional contexts in which I work as an educator and researcher.
I recognize that Whiteness is mediated by and exists in relation to all other racial
identities/identifications, and like all other identities, is not fixed, but is unstable
and always in transition enmeshed in “conscious reflective struggle” and an active
process of construction and reconstruction—the meanings and understandings of
which continuously shift in relation to structural and cultural contexts (Beach, 1999;
Presmeg, 2002; Levine-Rasky, 2000; Steinberg, 2005). The notion of transition is
significant since, as a learned and acquired identity, Whiteness is embedded in a
discourse characterized by subtle ambiguities and murkiness that is most powerful
in its “embodiment of the normal as opposed to the superior” (hooks, 1992, p. 169).
Furthermore, as Frankenberg writes: “Whiteness as a site of privilege is not absolute
but rather crosscut by a range of other axes of relative advantage or subordination…. [and] the relationality and socially constructed character of Whiteness does not, it must
be emphasized, mean that this and other racial locations are unreal in their material
and discursive effects” (p. 76). Hence, in this discussion, I recognize that Whiteness and
other race identifications and statuses are contextual, complex, and dynamic—always
in an ongoing, relational process that is mediated by historical, social, political, and
cultural factors (Aveling, 2004; Bedard, 2000; Kevil, 2002; Levine-Rasky, 2000).

In what follows, I use my experiences and references to students’ comments to
make Whiteness visible, noting how Whiteness instructs the ways in which issues
of race, racial identification, racialization, and racism are viewed, interpreted,
experienced, and engaged in postsecondary settings. I undertake this project with
the knowledge that just as the issues I raise might contribute to the visibility of
Whiteness, there are “mechanisms of Whiteness, especially privilege and ‘rationality’
[that] come into play” to disrupt or destroy that visibility (Hyten & Adkins, 2001,
p. 435). Further, I expect that my discussion will reflect the limits, strengths, and
specificity of my perspective as a Black-person and the subject positions from which
I have been experiencing, observing, studying, and engaging Whiteness.

“IT’S NOT JUST ABOUT RACE”

Students come to our courses thinking that they are going to learn of the other,
to learn how they can be helpers, to discover how to incorporate the dominant
society’s gestures of benevolence toward those designated as others. This is