

EDUCATION GRADUATE STUDENTS OF COLOUR

COUNTER-NARRATIVES

A CASE AGAINST THE RACIALIZED REACTIONS

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When I was ten years old, I shyly approached my Trinidadian Granny and Aunt and sat down to ask them a question. “Are we Black?” They looked at me puzzled as if I had asked them what year we were in. Such obvious realities to them seemed so perplexingly difficult to me. “Of course we are Black, wise up child” my Granny Margaret replied in her sing-song Trini-Bajun accent. She was a wonderful, educated woman who I looked up to immensely. I always loved it when she told me that, ‘wise up!’ like everything could be solved by designating just a few more minutes thinking about it sensibly. I only spent summer days here and there with my Trinidadian family and lived full time with my Nana and Papa in Peterborough. Both of whom had parents from England and Newfoundland. At school, this troubled me as I would be berated for my skin and curly hair and would go home to grandparents who seemed so distant to the racisms I was facing in the playground. I can recall asking my Nana and Papa about my mixed existence, to which they replied, “You’re mulatto.” Later, I would recite this to the kids at school who would ask me similar questions I asked my family. “Are you Black?” “What’s your background?” “Where are you from?” They would ask. “I’m mulatto!”

Introduction

My sense is that, at times, my existence is paradoxical. As a mixed racialized man, I speak for myself and not the existence of those who may accompany me on this, confusing journey of privilege and discrimination. I am torn between honouring and identifying the parts of myself that

arbitrarily fasten me to the gaze of otherness. In *Black Skin White Masks*, Franz Fanon (1986) speaks of being seen by others, particularly as a Black man with all the historicity of race. Awad Ibrahim (2017), remarks on the process on becoming Black with all the fixities of racializations. Both of these scholars are acutely aware that when one is labeled ‘Black’, it comes with the cost of racisms. This labelling process, for Ibrahim (2017) occurs upon entry into colonized land of North America, and for Fanon (1986) it occurs at birth. Both, in ways, are inescapable. For many Black men and women in these same lands, it is deadly.

Cathryn van Kessel, in her podcast interview with Nicholas Ng-A-Fook reminds us, that if we are not standing up against the evil banalities of everyday life, we fall privy to believing that atrocities are behind us, and not possible in today's context. I will be drawing upon van Kessel's (2019) Terror Management Theory (TMT) to work through my understanding of her four defensive reactions. I will be framing these four defensive reactions in light of my autobiographical story, as well as the protests taking place around the world today in response to the murder of George Floyd and many other innocent Black men and women.

Literature Review

Terror Management Theory

TMT, a relatively new addition to educational research (van Kessel, 2019), suggests that individuals invest in cultural beliefs as a means to mitigate their anxiety regarding their own mortality. van Kessel (2019) notes that one's cultural beliefs are tied so closely to one's sense of self and is used as a means to reduce anxiety at the fear of death. Thus, when an individual's cultural beliefs or worldviews are challenged, one comes closer to their understanding of mortality, their anxiety is heightened, and their sense of self is compromised. van Kessel (2019) draws on empirical research in the field of TMT to support her arguments in this text. Primarily, she pulls forth the *mortality salience hypothesis* and the *death-thought accessibility hypothesis*. The first hypothesis reports that individuals will judge an individual more harshly when asked to consider their own death. Such evidence is supported by a case study wherein a control group of judges had to provide a sentence to a crime. van Kessel (2019) states “The results supported this prediction. Judges in the [Mortality-Salience] condition suggested an average bond of \$455, whereas the control judges suggested an average bond of only \$50” (p. 3). The second of these

hypotheses had a group of individuals who had had their sense of Canadian culture belittled, fill in a set of word fragments (eg.:‘S K _ L L’). These individuals had more readily filled in the set of word fragments more closely linked to death, than a group of individuals who had *not* had their Canadian culture belittled. Van Kessel (2019) notes “If cultural worldviews function to buffer individuals from thoughts of death, then threatening or weakening these psychological structures should increase the accessibility of death-thoughts”. As a result of world views being challenged Van Kessel (2019) states that individuals use four main defensive reactions to protect their own beliefs. These are Assimilation (the process by which a person’s views are made palatable in the context of one’s own beliefs), Derogation (The process by which a person belittles another for different world views), Annihilation (the killing or injuring of someone with different beliefs), and Accommodation (the modification of one’s own world view to incorporate only some of the other’s world view). These are the defensive reactions I will discuss in relation to anti-racisms and Blackness in our current lived contexts.

Anti-Racisms and Blackness

To better understand how I use the terminology surrounding Blackness and anti-racism, I draw on Awad Ibrahim’s (2017) article *Don’t Call Me Black! Rhizomatic Analysis of Blackness, Immigration, and the Politics of Race Without Guarantees*. In response to Zahida Sherman Ewoodzie (2014), Awad Ibrahim (2017) creates a critical pedagogy within which he analyzes the North American racialization process. In this piece, Ibrahim refers to the process by which racialization is manifested for immigrants of colour. Ibrahim notes that people who would consider themselves by membership of their country, *become* Black as they enter into Canada and the United States. Ibrahim (2017) reviews three articles that illustrate process of racialization onto the Black body, and how it is different in Canada and in the United States. By doing this, Ibrahim (2017) highlights the multiplicity of ways Blackness is constructed, perceived, and heterogeneous. Ibrahim concludes that it is important for us as educators to arm our students with the knowledge to analyze and deconstruct the racializing structure that identifies our Blackness on our behalf. Ibrahim argues that we as people of colour ought to take the necessary precautions in this process as we unravel and untangle the threads that unify our 'oneness' or Blackness. Ibrahim (2017) urges us to be aware that in doing so we enter into the dangerous territory of identity politics where one 'Blackness' is pitted against another ‘Blackness’. Ibrahim (2017) notes on this matter “process of

Americanization is synonymous with racialization: to be become American means to become Black American [...] once in North America, these adjectives become secondary to their Blackness. They retranslate themselves, hence becoming Black” (p. 215). Ibrahim (2017) finally calls for a pedagogy that empowers and allies Black students before recreating a decolonized and less violent category for Blackness.

The Defensive Reactions

Assimilation

Assimilation describes the process of a person holding alternative, and often times, countering worldviews to one's own attempting to convert the latter into the former's belief system (van Kessel, 2020). Former Breitbart employee, and current HuffPost employee Michelle Fields, pries fellow journalist Juan Williams in pleading that Black Lives Matter is simply a politically correct statement that should truly be 'All Lives Matter' ([foxnews, October 15, 2015](#)). "Yes there are lots of Blacks who are suffering here in America. There are also lots of Asians, Caucasians, and Latinos who are suffering..." (foxnews, 2015, p.1). Such an effort to call for 'all lives matter' is a clear declaration of assimilation. It dilutes the potency and messaging implicit in the Black Lives Matter movement, and ultimately prevents the voices of the 'opposing' perspectives to be challenged. Carl James (2019) objects against our current model of schooling due to its inherent assimilative practices. James (2019) remarks that the inclusion of the Black body into the white institution does not acknowledge the lived experience of Black youth. Essentially, such a structure will ultimately leave Black youth struggling in ways that white youth will never struggle. James (2019) states “The deviance and out-of-placeness imposed by anti-Blackness upon Black students, and the draconian punishment and exclusion that result, are demonstrated in their radical over-representation in suspensions and expulsions” (p. 318). As I think back to my first year living in Peterborough, Ontario. I remember finding myself in the principal's office, in trouble for what felt like the colour of my skin. Sitting beside a white school mate after he had thrown racial slurs at me, I looked at my skin and saw myself for what I would always be: racialized. I would be suspended for fighting back against this, for pushing, for yelling insults back, and my skin would thereafter be a source of punishment. The school was not able to

understand what I was experiencing. The assimilation was failing me for derogation I could not control.

Derogation

By degrading, belittling, or insulting the opposing perspective, it becomes easier to maintain one's own worldview, and ultimately reduces the anxiety that van Kessel (2019) notes is held at bay by one's beliefs. Fox News anchor, Tucker Carlson on June 9th, 2020 stated on air, "This was without precedent in the modern era. A small group of highly aggressive emotionally charged activists took over our culture" ([Foxnews, June 9th, 2020](#)). Regard the language here "small group..., aggressive..., emotionally charged..., *our* culture." What Carlson is doing here is positioning the Black community as separate from his own, and in his position as a *patriotic* American sitting in front of red, white and blue and a backdrop of the pentagon, the views of *those protestors* couldn't possibly represent *our* beliefs. In one fell swoop, Carlson degrades the Black lives matter movement, creates a binary between right and wrong, and separates the demands of justice from the beliefs of the *greater* United States. The rest of the 'news' show (if one can call it news) espouses condescension and undermining that his viewers will absorb and churn into apathy.

Annihilation

Annihilation is tragically the spark that ignited the flame with respect to the Black Lives Matter movement. In Canada, the list of names grows larger: Regis Korchinski-Paquet, Jason Collins, D'Andre Campbell, Orlando Brown, Andrew Loku, Jermaine Carby, Kwasi Skene-Peters, Marc Ekamba-Boekwa, Sammy Yatim, Ian Pryce, Alain Magloire, Nicholas Thorne-Belance, Phuong Na (Tony) Du, René Gallant, Abdurahman Ibrahim Hassan, Bony Jean-Pierre, Abdirahman Abdi, Pierre Coriolan, Brydon Whitstone, Josephine Pelletier, Nicholas Gibbs, Jaskamal Singh Lail, Chad Williams, Greg Ritchie, Machuar Madut, Sean Thompson, Randy Cochrane, Eishia Husdon (CPEP, 2020), are an unforgettable group of people who have lost their lives to police annihilation. It isn't hard to see the connections between these names and the actions that have been pushing this movement towards justice. Here van Kessel (2020) reminds us:

If groups of people with opposing beliefs can be injured or killed, the implication is that their beliefs are truly inferior to our own. Further to this point, by eliminating large numbers of people with a different version of reality, the threatening worldview may cease to exist, and thus no longer pose a threat. (2019, p. 6)

In June of 2020, I attended the march for Abdirahman Abdi, a Black man who had been murdered by police outside of a Bridgehead coffee shop in Ottawa. Lining up at the Police Headquarters we walked towards city hall shouting ‘Justice for Abdi!’ and ‘No justice, no peace, defund the police!’ It’s hard to describe the feeling of that moment. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, what felt like hundreds gathered, all in masks, to mourn, and to demand that his life not be forgotten. Almost eight months after this, Abdi’s murderer Daniel Montsion was found not-guilty of manslaughter and was acquitted of all charges (CBC, October 20, 2020) In November of 2020 a peaceful demonstration was held on the corner of Nicholas Street and Laurier in Ottawa (CBC, November 21, 2020). I had the pleasure of watching Indigenous elders and community members, Justice for Abdirahman, and Black Lives Matter supporters singing, dancing, lighting sage, drumming, and demonstrating solidarity for the lives lost at the hands of racial injustice. As I read that last clause of the above van Kessel (2019) quote “the threatening worldview may cease to exist, and thus no longer pose a threat” (p. 6). For those unfamiliar with the intersection of Laurier and Nicholas, it stands firmly under the University of Ottawa’s gaze. Under its watchful eye, the first night after the demonstration, while protestors slept, Ottawa police crossed the picket line for the first time and arrested 12 protestors and one minor. I think back to that day in the March. I think about standing in solidarity to demand more from inaction, I think about the life, the passion that surrounded me that day, and I know that we will never cease to exist. Despite the annihilation of police officers across Canada and the United States, in March, in November, and likely in the years to come, community members gathered outside of the police headquarters in Ottawa and demanded the immediate release of our Black, and Indigenous brothers and sisters. I re-read van Kessel’s (2019) quote once more. “the threatening worldview may cease to exist, an thus no longer pose a threat” (p. 6).

The next day, the protestors were released (CBC, November 21, 2020).

The following week the council voted on an increased police budget of \$13.2 million (CBC, November 21, 2020).

All but one council member voted in favor of the budget increase. The one who voted against it was Rawlson King of Ward 13. The only Black council member (CAMSOTTAWA, 2020)

Accommodation

The fourth and final defense mechanism as highlighted by van Kessel is Accommodation. In the context of neoliberal oriented, bureaucratically run, meritocratically perceived country such as Canada, the stings of accommodation are nefarious, and deep. For van Kessel, this is defined as "By adopting aspects of a potentially threatening worldview, that threat is diffused and absorbed" (van Kessel, 2020, p. 6). But this may also take the form of policy making micro reforms in attempt to appease the respective demographic. This is likely to surface in the following weeks in light of the demands of Canadian and United States protestor's calling for a complete defunding of the police services under the hashtag #DefundThePolice (CPEP, 2020). One may also look back throughout history to acknowledge the ways in which accommodation was used to appease the threatening worldview. I think back to my younger years when I would respond to question of my existence by telling others that I was mulatto. Admittedly, it was a long time before I realized that I was using the language of the colonizers and the enslavers. In the late nineteenth century census data had changed as a response to the emancipation proclamation (Nobles, 2000). Meaning, after all those enslaved had been declared 'free' forms of categorizing Black people would have to change. Respectively, census information would then begin to accommodate Black individuals who had at once been 'Free Male' or 'Free Female' to a more nuanced categorization of racialization ([WashingtonPost, 2015](#)). This language, of course was still riddled with undertones of discrimination, tightly bound by the historically recent discourse and normalcy of slavery only a few decades prior. One census gave the following instruction to enumerators:

Write white, Black, mulatto, quadroon, octoroon, Chinese, Japanese or Indian, according to the color or race of the person enumerated. Be particularly careful to distinguish between Blacks, mulattoes, quadroons, and octoroons. The word 'Black' should be used to describe those persons who have three-fourths or more Black blood;

'mulatto,' those persons who have from three-eighths to five-eighths Black blood; 'quadroon,' those persons who have one-fourth Black blood; and 'octoroons,' those persons who have one-eighth or any trace of Black blood (Nobles, 2000, p. 188)

'Black blood', it states, as if our racialized skin leaks within us only to be diluted by whiteness; or perhaps the whiteness is what purifies our Black blood. With this, I'm reminded of Tim Stanley's (2019) remarking on the division of race. Stanley (2019) notes that such significance which is given to the imagined differences between racialized and non-racialized bodies perpetuates and upholds the racisms in which it inherits. Stanley (2019) notes "This organization is originally deliberate (Arendt 1973, 363); it is purposive and made by human beings, but over time can be taken for granted, seen as just the way things are" (p. 35). As I walked through the playground proudly espousing the language of accommodation, I was normalizing the very words that had tied my ancestors to racialization that I can only slightly imagine.

Conclusion

These words, among other fabrications of racialization, are very much alive and real today. They exist to assimilate, to derogate, to annihilate, and to accommodate the Black body in Canada and the United States. In this paper, I have attempted to explain the ways in which van Kessel's (2019) conception of the four mechanisms for defensive reactions may be framed in the context of racializations in Ontario. I have illustrated my way of thinking through such notions in relation to my own lived experience as a racialized body in Canada. Moreover, I have called upon others curriculum scholars to help me make sense of some of the ways they have taken up concepts of anti-racisms in the context of my lived experiences as well as those racisms witnessed in the education system. Given the scope and limitations of this writing, I have not been able to explore the ways in which racializations can be countered inside and outside of our current education experiences. However, I hope to stress the importance of coming to terms with how these racializations exist through these defensive mechanisms. For now, and throughout my learning, I adhere to the words of my Granny Margaret, and remember to 'wise up, child'.

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