

EDUCATION GRADUATE STUDENTS OF COLOUR

COUNTER-NARRATIVES

I AM AFRAID OF WHITE PEOPLE: NOTES FROM THE MARGINS

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White privilege and white supremacy seep into the conclaves of everywhere. According to Ross (2016), “[i]t has evolved into a totalizing system — a toxic sea in which we all swim” (p. 3). Therefore, it also pollutes the classroom context and materializes in all its facets. Like a dagger, then, schooling and society can wound — traces of blood trailing here and there. It can be a dangerous place — a shotgun fired in the barrel of a throat — to silence those who defy and resist the dominant culture. Here, I reflect on my own experiences — ones that remain with me like the residue of ancestral bloodshed — with/in the realm of “formal” education in relation to race and racism, as I migrate between the hybrid and the margins as a Brown body.

In elementary, I learned to be afraid before I learned to read and write. For instance, the first-grade teacher would strike us with a ruler to “manage” behaviour. This was in Montréal in the early 1990s. What pain and trauma did my teacher, as a Black woman, experience to want to do the same to me? This use of abusive punishment maintained the power of dominant parties (hooks, 2000), which preceded learning. In that manner, schooling seemed to be a place of contrition, where the affixation of abuse and violence had been attached to the confounds of the classroom. I slowly internalized this notion of “knowing” my place in fear of punishment. Soon, the soft palette of my name, Shyam — one of the many names of the Hindu God, Krishna — became butchered to appease the white tongue — one syllable broken into two. To add to this sacrilege, I decided to have a “home” name and a “school” name. In other words, I severed my own tongue before anyone else could slaughter it first. Perhaps I had internalized the racial microaggression (Kohli & Solóranzo, 2012). Said differently, I started to internalize negative messages about my own culture and identity (Kohli, 2008). I refused to eat Indian food at school. I wanted to have a “Canadian” lunch because I lived in fear of the “smells like curry” racial epithet that could have been placed on me. These transgressions, as they accumulated, rendered me as invisible.

Leaving the elementary years wounded, I embarked towards new beginnings in high school. The possibilities, however, came in the form of being punctured by hateful words — ones that were meant to belittle and violate me — like ‘fag’ or queer (pejoratively used), shit skin, and terrorist. I could not dissect the intent of these remarks, but the impact felt like suffocating lungs, with the air so close yet just out of reach. According to Ahmed (2004), “[s]uch words and signs tend to stick” (p. 59). It struck more — almost like a blow (remnants of the first grade still trialing [after] me) — when the words were from a teacher. I recall a white teacher pointing out that all the Brown students always sat together, although she never mentioned the fact that she sat (perhaps subconsciously) with all the white students. During an economics project, that same teacher put most of the students of colour in low-income households (*was it still subconscious?*) while the white students were given affluent and wealthy narratives. Racism, even in covert forms like this, can foster disempowerment (Kohli, 2008); it “can lacerate the spirit, scar the soul, and puncture the psyche” (Hardy, 2013, p. 25). In her own way, then, the teacher had fired a bullet to remind me to remain afraid of white people.

The curriculum, as well, upheld white privilege and white supremacy, which according to Carr (2016), has permeated the educational setting. For example, I did not learn about the Residential School System, the Komagata Maru incident, and the enslavement of Black peoples in so-called Canada, among many other instances of abuse and violence towards oppressed communities. Instead, I learned about colonialism as an event — a [positive] thing of the past — even though it has been, in fact, a social formation (Wolfe, 2006). These curricular experiences have not been unique to me. James (2007) has drawn attention to a group of high school students mentioning the lack of curriculum about Black and/or Indigenous and/or People of Colour. This happened to be a pervasive reality for most of the people of colour in my life. In the tenth grade, for example, we read *To Kill A Mockingbird* by Harper Lee without contextualizing racism in the so-called Canadian context or without critiquing the role of whiteness in (re)perpetuating racism. To make matters worse, the troubling notion of multiculturalism plagued the curriculum, which had often been superficial (Gérin-Lajoie, 2008) and did not address structural inequalities (James, 1995). Rather, multicultural education often has been “defined by the celebration of difference on special occasions or dates, which is typically accomplished as an add-on to the regular curriculum” (Kirova, 2008, p. 107). Gérin-Lajoie (2012) reiterates this by explaining that white teachers, in particular, have integrated it as the “sharing of each other’s culture” (p. 215). I had participated in multicultural events, but it was always fetishized or tokenized by bringing samosas, dressing up in Indian clothes, and sharing Bollywood music. Yet, outside of those events, my culture and identity were never to be seen. As a result, hooks (2003) explains how children of colour internalize/d this notion of inferiority when *counter-narratives* are not presented. As such, I have had to not only “enter” the curriculum, but rather, “work with and against the grain of a moribund curriculum” (Morawski & Palulis, 2009, p. 12).

Travelling to university did not change these experiences and stories. Henry and Tator (2009) explain, “the university continues to be a place where various overt and covert forms of racism and other forms of oppression are practised” (p. 8). In Teacher Education, for example, a group of students of colour decided to sit together in the *Schooling & Society* course to challenge the lack of representation among faculty and the racial microaggressions perpetuated by white

teacher candidates and white professors. One peer referred to us as being intimidating. A few others did not understand why all the people of colour were sitting together; it made them feel uncomfortable while they sat in mostly white clusters. They did not have that same sense of discomfort, however, when we had been called ‘coloured’ people and creatures by two of our peers. They did not show the same conviction when white peers compared their own experiences of being grounded or being scolded to the Residential School System. Rather, they were too invested in restoring the white racial equilibrium, which DiAngelo (2011) explains is a form of white fragility, where racial stress leads white people to display a range of defensive moves. Reflecting on that experience now, it seems that the denial of racism — both covert and overt — is so institutionalized with/in the university that it reminds me of the power and privilege white people hold regardless of their position. In its own way, it is deafening, but these experiences have helped me probe what it means to be a person of colour.

Yet, the housing and trafficking of racism with/in education did not end there. In a graduate school course, I had been told to “soften” my language for an assignment, where I called out the faculty for being *inherently* racist and for referring to racism as being pervasive. In another course, I was critiqued for trying to be too “scholarly” in my writing. Like hooks (1994), then, “the classroom became a place I hated, yet a place where I struggled to claim and maintain the right to be an independent thinker. The university and the classroom began to feel more like a prison, a place of punishment and confinement rather than a place of promise and possibility” (p. 4). Graduate studies, in the same way, confined and constricted me. I had to write in a certain way. I had to defend the use of terms like *refusing* and *resisting* the university. In other words, it reverberated the following: “[w]hite supremacy is not only repressive or oppressive but also productive” (Bery, 2014, p. 336). The operationalization of whiteness seemed (and seems) to consume graduate studies, as well. In that manner, it functions like a malicious current in the river. It drowns out and leaves bodies afloat. But, despite this, graduate studies did not plunge me to the bottom of the ocean. My breath — in fact, every part of it — surfaced beyond all measure.

The aforementioned does not occur only with/in schooling. The drowning at the hands of whiteness emerge/d everywhere. In 2020, for example, I remember waiting at the bus stop near my family’s apartment in Montréal. As I had been waiting, a car with four white teenagers stopped in front of me, and one of them aimed a gun at me. The gun had been fake and so was the bullet that grazed my shoulder, but what if it had been real? This was one of the few times where I was unable to process what had occurred. I could not process beyond numbness. Is that how death occurred? Do we go numb before we die? In dreams, I had recounted this death over and over in different ways. Once, for example, I had dreamt that the students of colour I studied with during Teacher Education had been burned alive by our white counterparts. I, however, had been able to escape the fire, but I could not flee with the others. They had been left behind. Even in dreams, then, I have been told how the Brown flesh will be pillaged or how it will barely make it out alive. I wonder how many more dreams I will have before the flames consume me. Until then, I will forever be haunted by such memories. In the words of Roy (1997), “[i]t is curious how sometimes the memory of death lives on for so much longer than the memory of the life that it purloined” (p. 17).

Even now, I am afraid of white people. I live in fear of what white people can do to me just for merely breathing and existing. As a result, I enter the classroom always wary and worried about what will happen to me. I almost expect to be distilled and truncated towards death. However, I do not let the knife sever me entirely. I continue to live. Holding on, I trace the words of Palulis (2009), as she writes the following: “I have been trying to find a heartbeat in Academia—a pulse in the impasse” (p. 10). In the live/d curriculum (Aoki, 1993), I find that pulse — the rhythmic thumping of survival. So, even though academia has hurt me (Aoki, 1983), I practice writing as a form of healing to disrupt hegemonic narratives. I protest and make incisions — [scribbled] notes from the margins — in a history that tries to erase me. I do not let schooling and society suffocate me. So, yes, I am afraid of white people even now, but, in the words of Maya Angelou, “I can be changed by what happens to me but I refuse to be reduced by it.” And, most of all, I refuse to be erased.

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