

# Troubling National Discourses in Anti-Racist Curricular Planning

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The narrative of the Canadian prairie context is invested in intercultural relations that privilege whiteness and marginalize Aboriginal people and other racial minorities. We maintain that anti-oppressive curriculum on the Canadian prairies must examine how racial identifications are constructed through commonplace national discourses. A curriculum that is anti-oppressive needs to examine the production of racial identifications, including the construction of whiteness in a Canadian context, where racism often exists in denial. Without a critical race analysis, the “celebration of diversity” and other popular narratives have every possibility of reinforcing relations of domination.

Key words: anti-oppressive education, Aboriginal education, critical whiteness studies

Les textes au sujet des Prairies canadiennes font surtout état de relations interculturelles qui privilégient les Blancs et marginalisent les peuples autochtones et les autres minorités ethnoculturelles. Selon les auteures, il faut analyser le mode de construction des identités ethnoculturelles à travers les discours nationaux très répandus. Un programme scolaire qui se veut antioppressif doit tenir compte du processus de production identitaire, notamment chez les eurocanadiens où le racisme existe souvent, même s’il est nié. Sans une analyse critique portant sur l’identité ethnoculturelle, la promotion de la diversité et les autres discours populaires risquent fort de renforcer les relations de domination.

Mots clés : éducation antioppressive, éducation dispensée aux autochtones, études critiques sur les eurocanadiens.

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We wish to trouble the way that particular narratives of Canadian nationalism and the discourses of multiculturalism have every potential to reinforce relations of domination. When power relations are not acknowledged in the production of racial identities and the nation,

minorities are too readily blamed for the effects of racism; in contrast, the rhetoric of multiculturalism is enacted as a symbol of the “good” nation. We argue that the celebration of “cultural difference” and the narrative of the nation as raceless, benevolent, and innocent has implications for the reproduction of racial privilege. We are not alone (Bannerji, 2000; Britzman, Santiog-Valles, Jimeriz-Muñoz, & Lamash, 1993; Calliste & Dei, 2000; Dei & Calliste, 2000; Mackey, 2002; Razack, 1998) in arguing that, by way of promoting racial equality and anti-oppressive curriculum in schools, discourses that do not take into account the effects of racial discrimination, such as multicultural discourses, are not only insufficient but even counter-productive. Without acknowledging racism and race privilege in curricular practices, the effects of colonization continue.

We wish to reaffirm the need for a race analysis for both students and faculty in preservice teacher preparation to counter commonplace tropes or mythologies that are part of a Canadian narrative. An analysis of racial inequality is necessary to counter the commonplace myth that the effects of racism can be overcome through assimilation or meritorious achievement. In the well-known trope of blaming the victim, the one who feels the negative effects of inequality is the one who is burdened with overcoming the discrimination. Another trope, that of ethnicity or cultural difference, is cited as a temporary disadvantage whose effects can be lessened over time (Sleeter, 1993). What these and other commonplace narratives do not account for is that access to privilege — such as white skin privilege — greatly improves one’s chances of avoiding systemic discrimination and overcoming disadvantage. Furthermore, the effects of racism are not addressed by outmoded, but perhaps well intended, themes that promote a raceless or colour-blind version of Canada. Against these tropes, perhaps the greatest challenge in the planning and theorizing for curricular practices in Canadian schools is the discovery of *how* and *why* race matters<sup>1</sup>.

Because discourses produce social identifications, we reference national, local, and personal narratives for insight into how we might understand the nature of racialized identifications. On a personal level, as joint authors and research collaborators, we have considerable overlap in our commitment to anti-oppressive teacher education. At the same time, as one Cree/Métis woman and one white woman, and through

other differences in our social locations, we are socially positioned to know differently. Our research follows from our personal understandings of the difference that social positioning makes as well as from post-structural theories of identity formation. Our scholarship is grounded in several years of joint research, planning, and observation of how and why race matters in anti-racist curriculum. Local narratives are no less important than those of the nation that are broadly construed for tracing discourses of identity formation. An example of local difference is that, on the Canadian prairies where this research originates, migration patterns are in contrast to the higher rates in central Canada, including southern Ontario and Montreal, and the west coast. The comparatively small amount of in-migration to Saskatchewan has produced a stable population of mainly third and fourth generation families of European descent. The presumed stability of a white population serves dominant discourses that marginalize indigenous land claims. The largest population produced as "Other" are First Nations peoples. In this Canadian prairie context, Aboriginal peoples form the greatest critical mass to challenge normative practices of a dominant white culture. The "other" is typically understood to be Aboriginal peoples, even though other visible minority groups also make the area their home. Although the discussion in this paper takes into account the needs of local populations, the identities that are produced are also responsive to national histories and narratives of multiculturalism found across Canada. Indeed, the discourses are at once global and specific in the negotiation of power relations and identity formation.

In the context of Aboriginal and white relations on the Canadian prairies, the salience of race as a social formation (Winant, 1994) is problematic. In curricular planning for anti-racist pedagogy, we recognize the need to explore the racialized positioning of white preservice teachers with respect to Aboriginal peoples. Although racial identifications are incorrectly thought to be something that racial minorities alone possess, the identifications of all students and teachers are invariably produced through the curriculum (Britzman, 1993; Willinsky, 1998). To varying degrees, students and teachers learn to dis/identify with the history, images, and language of schooling. These discourses inform them of the extent to which they do or do not belong

in this particular public institution. Students who easily fit within dominant cultural practices of the classroom see the school reflected back to them. We maintain that the construction of racial dominance is a significant part of what students learn in schools no matter who is in the classroom. In spite of many fine efforts to make schooling more inclusive, public education largely remains reflective of white, Western, or Eurocentric interests. A difficult learning for white preservice teachers is that the racial positioning of the white teacher does matter, even if all of her students are also white.

White privilege is a discursive practice active in the construction of race-based hierarchies. Exposing the seeming “naturalness” by which whiteness is produced is a major part of the foundational work we do with our students and ourselves. We must ask what whiteness, as a privileged signifier of difference, produces and keeps in place. What does whiteness secure in public schools and in the social order? Examining the constructed nature of whiteness allows us to demonstrate that racial identities — including whiteness — are neither monolithic nor stable. Rather, racial identities are sets of multifaceted relations produced through social class, ethnicity, language, geographic location, history, politics and so forth. Because white privilege is institutionalized as well as personal, nothing less than a social, historical, and political analysis will be able to describe its success as a discursive marker of material, symbolic, and psychological worth (Dei & Calliste, 2000; Frankenberg, 1997; Howard, 1999; McIntyre, 1997; Roediger, 1991).

Curriculum is one of the significant discourses through which white privilege and “difference” are normalized. The construction of whiteness depends on a contradictory process familiar in Canadian society: whiteness seems to be invisible even while being the necessary standard against which otherness is marked. Curricular discourses for talking about racism in Canada must contend with what Roman and Stanley (1997) identify as the discourse of “Canada the Redeemer.” In contrast, our post-structural, post-colonial reading of social and historic Canadian landscapes challenges national mythology that Canada has always been a fair country. We argue for the necessity of interrupting these national narratives in which marginalization and difference are taken as given rather than as productions of unequal social relations. Our foundational

questions concern the challenge and improbability of doing anti-racist curriculum as well as the necessity of attempting to do so.

Although our foundational thinking is germane to a particular geographic location, our curricular considerations are not only a regional concern. Nor are they of concern only to educators; what we are describing also affects those in the justice system, including police services and other human service industries. Our analysis is less a reflection of regional differences than evidence of the normative practices to which white preservice teachers and others have access as Canadian citizens.

#### THE INVISIBILITY OF WHITENESS AND THE NECESSITY OF THE OTHER

In the prairie context where our work is set, having white skin privilege has generally meant that one does not have to think about one's own racial identity: race and culture are things other people have as departures from the norm. One privilege of whiteness — to pass invisibly for the norm — depends on marginalized identities against which the norm can be compared. A dominant group is positioned to define itself as a blank, unmarked space vs. a marked outside "other." The unmarked norm is the space of privilege, an identification that gets to define standards according to itself. Hurtado and Stewart (1997) claim, "privilege has the semblance of naturalness that in itself defends it from scrutiny" (p. 300) That is why it is difficult, especially if occupying a normative position, to scrutinize or examine one's own identity. This is precisely the challenge that we and other anti-oppressive writers (Ellsworth, 1997) have identified as significant in teaching and devising anti-racist curriculum — that addressing racism means more than examining the experiences of those who experience racism. We are in good company in this regard if we listen to Toni Morrison (1993) who unequivocally states that progress in racial discourse should also include a study of "the impact of racism on those who perpetuate it" (p. 11).

As a racial category, whiteness is a challenge to observe and to mark. Richard Dyer (1988) explains the category "white": it "is not anything really, not an identity, not a particularizing quality, because it is

everything" (p.45). This includes day-in, day-out school activities that occur before and after particular multicultural events. The normative cultural practices of whiteness are pervasive throughout levels of schooling from administration to textbooks to all manner of interpersonal actions. The absence of racial recognition renders the whiteness — as normative — of most school activities invisible.

Whiteness operates so that white teachers and students benefit simultaneously from two seemingly contradictory processes. First, dominant cultural practices are always 'on,' always the standard or fallback position for 'the way things are done.' This gives enormous privilege to those whose histories, ethnic backgrounds, social class, family assumptions, and personal knowledge are in line with these dominant practices. Second, the fact that these practices are not the norm for everyone and that one's achievements may be at the expense of others is often an invisible reality for privileged groups. For example, students we teach claim that hard work and desire were alone sufficient for them and their ancestors to succeed in school. They are not aware that the racism that limited Aboriginal education enables the success of white students like themselves to appear self-made. The invisibility of their social privilege allows our students to say that their families' positive attitudes toward education account for why they are successfully enrolled at university. By implication, if one's success is self-initiated, then the lack of success is evidence of failing to try.

Fine (1997) says the following about the production of whiteness:

whiteness is actually co/produced with other colors, . . . in symbiotic relation. Where whiteness grows as a seemingly "natural" proxy for quality, merit, and advantage, "color" disintegrates to embody deficit or "lack." . . . "[W]hiteness" and "color" are therefore not merely created in parallel, but are fundamentally relational and need to be studied as a system. (p. 58)

Whereas Fine describes whiteness as symbiotic and "created in parallel" with other identities, others say that whiteness is "parasitically co-produced" through relationships with others and reliant on the boundaries that can be constructed as designations of difference: "[W]hite men name and mark others, thereby naming and marking themselves" (Weis, Proweller & Centrie, 1997, p. 214). Wendell (1989)

says:

When we make people “other,” we group them together as the objects of *our* experience instead of regarding them as fellow *subjects* of experience with whom we might identify. . . . We can all do this to each other, but very often the process is not symmetrical because one group of people may have more power to call itself the paradigm of humanity and to make the world suit its own needs and validate its own experiences. (p. 116)

It would be a mistake to portray racial minority and white identifications as if they were simple binaries. Although whiteness is not a singular or fixed identity, whiteness is produced through the construction of an “other” — one that is outside one’s own experience. Whiteness depends on the discursive production of other(ness) (Frankenberg, 1996; Said, 1993) and difference, even where no “difference” exists. Processes of racialization used to designate difference are familiar to schools even as they are also part of the Canadian national historic narrative.

Toni Morrison (1993) brilliantly describes the use of whiteness in works of literature to reflect the hegemony and production of white supremacy in the United States. Canadian parallels are easily suggested. Morrison demonstrates the way in which the formation of white identity in the United States can be read against the image of African Americans in the literary tradition of that country. She argues African American presence is not only available in the national narrative, but it is indispensable to the white identities that are celebrated and lionized. Major themes in United States literature, as those of any country, are derived from a country’s historic, economic, and social figurations. Morrison cites major U.S. themes like individualism, freedom, and power, arguing that they are indebted to the presence of the Black Other who was neither free nor powerful in the conditions of slavery; furthermore, these themes continue as “responses to a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence” (p. 5). This abject other is always present as the “social enemy” or the enemy within. It is these conditions and the presence of African Americans against which the nation defines itself; the abject other is a necessary part of every discourse by which a nation forms its narrative.

Although the presence of African Americans in the United States is the necessary basis for the definitive, autonomous, free individual, a white Canadian identity similarly depends on an abjected image of Aboriginal people compared to white settlers who have become entitled to own the land. The identification of whiteness and privilege in both the United States and Canada depends [on] an Other to define — in relational terms — who is free: that is the not-slave; or in Canada, who is tolerant: that is, the already entitled.<sup>2</sup> These claims on freedom and tolerance as parts of the modern national narrative (Bhabha, 1990) are predicated on forgetting parts of traditions that do not add up to a heroic stature — parts of traditions that the national narrative would just as soon forget. As Morrison (1993) says: “Nothing highlighted freedom — if it did not in fact create it — like slavery” (p. 38); to paraphrase for a Canadian context, nothing highlights land ownership — if it does not make it possible — like expropriation.

The heroic story of Canadian nationalism needs this image of a welcoming and tolerant place. In popular imagery, Canada is constructed as generous and tolerant by “giving away” land to white settlers. The image is necessary to cover over and forget that the land was taken by coercive means through a process that depended on inferiorizing and racializing a people (Adams, 1999; Battiste, 2000; Cardinal, 1969; Monture-Angus, 1995). Indeed, as Ng (1993) says, Aboriginal people had to be racialized to justify their being economically exploited. Although Aboriginal people have been impoverished by material practices such as coercive “land transfers,” the subsequent poverty, however, is rationalized as evidence of inferiorization.

Dehumanizing Aboriginal peoples in North America is not different from processes that made possible white supremacy and acts of genocide in Europe. Churchill (1994) draws forceful comparisons between events in Europe and in North America. He says that the “conquest of territory belonging to the Poles, Slavs, and other ‘inferior’ peoples” (p. 245) happened not long after the American conquest in which 97.5 per cent of all Native land (United States figures only) was expropriated. Similar is the comparison between eradication of the Jews in Europe and the “physical eradication of some 98 percent of the continent’s Native

population between 1500 and 1900 (p. 245).” Churchill describes the resistance these and other comparisons evoke from people who would otherwise identify as activists, theorists, and First Nation sympathizers. We have found that many Canadians explain that words describing the effects of Nazi actions, white supremacy, and genocide are descriptive of events in other places, but not in North America, and certainly not in Canada. It is hardly surprising that Churchill’s claims evoke enormous resistance, including the suggestion that what he is saying is “misleading” or “oversimplified” (p. 245). His claims are an affront because they indict Canadian (and American) myths of innocence and compassion. His claims also challenge the mythology that says that it is meritocracy and not violence that secures white domination.

Philip (1993), who makes a similar argument in regard to the treatment of Africans in the New World, also says that the inability to accept the truth of these charges about white supremacy is reflected in the “river of silence running through the knowledge systems of the West [which] begins in language. There is as yet no word in English — Canadian English — for what has happened to First Nations people” (p. 81). Philip maintains that the treatment of Aboriginal peoples by the white supremacist society of Canada is the “bench-mark for the treatment of all other peoples of colour coming to this land [as seen in] the attempted genocide of Native peoples by Europeans” (p. 128). Ward Churchill says that, in wanting to explain ‘what really happened,’ many people suggest that Aboriginal peoples should be grateful for what has been done for them. This final expectation of gratitude is perhaps the most egregious and self-defining of the performance of the colonizer. Concerning white domination and entitlement, this presumption signals that “no more seamless ideological or psychic self-ratification of an imperial status quo is imaginable” (Churchill, 1994, p. 326). The legacy of colonial markers, such as residential schooling and outstanding land claims, contribute to the construction of identities of both colonizer and colonized.

Although the genocidal history of First Nations peoples in Canada is almost completely omitted from school curricula, it is never completely covered over. It is an underlying feature of anti-racist teaching whether it is acknowledged or not. How else can the massive inequalities be

explained? Inequality is not naturally occurring; poverty is not an innate cultural trait that accumulates at the feet of the marginalized. Unfortunately for many students, the popular images of our nation, found in media and schooling, already influence how students hear anti-oppressive teaching. The narratives of Mounties and peacekeepers have already solidified students' notions of which side of an artificial binary they are on (see Razack, 2000a; Mackey, 2002). Examining how the particular heroic stories gained their purchase is a central feature of anti-oppressive thinking and teaching.

#### (NOT)TALKING ABOUT RACISM IN CANADA

Through celebration and song, and with no need to mention racial differences, discourses of multiculturalism make their way into acceptable curricular practice. That racism in Canada often escapes scrutiny is one factor that makes anti-racist analysis a challenge in popular discourse, in the law, and in education programs. In addition to outright denial or designating discussion of racism as taboo, racism is often understood as something that took place primarily in the past or is associated with specific and unique examples (Roman & Stanley, 1997). Although it is easy to support official events such as the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, the de facto examples of racism that warrant public outrage are often limited to apartheid in South Africa, the Holocaust in Germany, and slavery in United States. These examples of racism and genocide form the basis of many educational programs in public schools across the country. As significant as these examples are, their continual referencing as examples of racism supports a belief that Canada has none of these international markers, whether apartheid, slavery, or holocaust; therefore racism is not a Canadian problem. Against these assumptions, racism as an everyday practice in Canada is more difficult to bring to the level of discourse. Roman and Stanley (1997) found that Canadian grade-7 students had ready access to discourses of Canada as a safe haven (Canada the Redeemer) in contrast to the racism of historic times and other (national) places. Racism was either a thing of the past or something that happened primarily in the United States.

Relegating what is racist to historical and faraway practices whitewashes Canada and portrays it as a raceless nation. Backhouse (1999) says that Canadian legal history is characterized by an “ideology of racelessness” (p. 14). She argues that this ideology of racelessness is a “hallmark of Canadian historical tradition” (p.14) that is in keeping with a “national mythology that Canada is not a racist country” (p.14). Razack (2000b) similarly uncovers this national mythology in her examination of court proceedings of the brutal murder of a Canadian Aboriginal woman by two white men in 1995. Throughout the trial in Regina, in 1996, the court insisted that race was not a factor in the murder and that references to race should be ignored. This ruling came in spite of the evidence that the victim was chosen because she was an Aboriginal woman. Razack points out the court’s insistence on a raceless reading of this murder and the considerable effort required to ignore the consequences of racialization that so infused the crime, investigation, proceedings, and for many observers, the sentence. The refusal to acknowledge the racialized facts of the murder and the discourses around the trial is an example of the context described by Morrison (1993) in which claiming racelessness is itself a racist act.

The perception that Canada is not implicated in racist practices is well rehearsed and embedded in many curricular activities that are used to illustrate that Canadians can be moved by the plight of others. A front-page story in a local newspaper reports that white students fasted for the weekend in solidarity with the land rights of disenfranchised Brazilian Natives (Fowler, 2001). One wonders whether local Aboriginal people could expect to see these same students and their teachers also fasting for the many unresolved land claims of Aboriginal people in Canada. Instead, turning the student gaze in another direction silences the awareness of and interest in local and everyday racism.

In the United States, Sleeter (1993) found that white teachers in her study explain racial inequality in a similarly raceless fashion — by not acknowledging their students of colour or not questioning their own racial privilege. They accomplish the disappearance of race either by denying outright that race matters or by using code words and phrases, like “immigrant” or “inner city,” when referring to students of colour. In Canada, especially on the prairies, a common code for racial difference is

“cultural difference” — a quality that racial minority children, especially Aboriginal children, are said to have and which is given as the reason for any lack of school success. The phrase “cultural difference” connects education failure to the “other” by shifting the emphasis away from how dominant identities are implicated in the production of “difference.” Instead, the task for racially dominant teachers becomes simplified to one of understanding and even compensating for the perceived lack brought on by “cultural difference.” When racism is recast as a problem of “cultural difference” instead of an everyday experience, the solutions take on particular forms that serve to obscure the systemic and structural relations of racial domination (Razack, 1998; St. Denis, 2002).

Aboriginal people are also enlisted in the shift of emphasis. They are encouraged to reframe the challenges they face as problems that stem from their “cultural difference” and not from “commonsense racism” (Bannerji, 1987). Even Aboriginal people may have internalized racism to the extent that they may, at times, deny that racism shapes their lives on a daily basis. They are discouraged by dominant discourses from understanding their situation as an effect of racism, and may even be disciplined from within to accept that racism is what happens under special, isolated circumstances. For example, an Aboriginal columnist suggests that we “use care in playing [the] ‘racism’ card” (Cuthand, 1998). He suggests we use the word racism “only when one really means it. Otherwise, it will lose its serious meaning and have weakened effect when really needed” (p. A5). In the same column two years later, the headline declares: “‘Racism’ overused by both sides of debate” (Cuthand, 2000, p. A5).

Aboriginal people risk being portrayed as unreasonable, outrageous, unfriendly, and demanding if they advance a race analysis or even hint at pursuing racism as a problem and as an explanation of their challenges. Larocque (1991), a Métis scholar, notes that merely talking about or attempting to address racism in Canada can bring about strong rebuke that one is being prejudiced. She asks, “Since when is a person prejudiced for exposing racism and injustices?” (p. 76). She notes that “when peoples around the world speak out against racism in a manner stronger than I or other Native persons have done, they have been accorded heroic stature; we, on the other hand, are often maligned and

censured!" (p. 75). If Canada is not a racist country, then it is difficult to reframe the discourse to take up the issue of racism including the ways racism shapes the lives of Aboriginal peoples. A discourse of "cultural difference" denies the power relations on which racial privilege and inequality depend, and without an analysis of race construction, "difference" and inequality are explained as naturally occurring phenomena. When racism is being denied, the talk about it is easily replaced by a celebration of diversity, heroes, and role models.

In the next section we problematize why this multicultural spectacle is still so common and why celebration of the other takes place in trivializing ways. As Bhabha (1992) reminds us, "multiculturalism must be seen to be done, as noisily and publicly as possible" (pp. 232–233). Alcoff (1996) similarly describes how difference is publicly maintained: "difference must be either trivialized or contained in the other across a firm and visible border" (p. 5). In discourses of multiculturalism, the other is both trivialized and contained as a cultural artifact — instantly ancient and museum-ready (Legare, 1995). The celebration of heritage and heroism not only maintains difference but also allows a multicultural Canada to congratulate itself on achieving tolerance.<sup>3</sup> Describing inequality as an effect of racism is seen as bad manners in the midst of well intended tolerance. Majority/minority status is neither changed nor challenged by the multicultural spectacle that resists engagement with the underlying question of what is accomplished by such a performance.

#### UNSETTLING DOMINANCE AND THE WILL TO IGNORE

An emphasis on multicultural display obscures the fact that differential access to power is produced through racial formations and not through the lack of familiarity with the cultural practices of other peoples. This "forgetting" about the salience of race — suggesting that bygones be bygones and that we are all part of the "human race" — is not merely a passive "letting go." The multicultural approach to education sanctions ignorance of racializing systems including the production of white identities and the taken-for-grantedness of racial dominance. Because whiteness in public schools is not usually talked about, it is consequently

recentred as an invisible standard of success against which others are marked. For white teachers and their students, examining one's racial positioning is a challenge to one's sense of self within a multi-racial Canada. For those in positions of institutional advantage, involvement in redressing inequality typically happens by helping others; in turn, helping others is proof of one's privileged positioning (one is the helper – not the helped). The way whiteness operates as an unspoken norm obscures the way it is considered not only normative but also superior. This is what we mean by the production of an innocent self as described by Fellows and Razack (1998): "To be unmarked or unnamed is also simply to embody the norm and not to have actively produced and sustained it. To be the norm, yet to have the norm unnamed, is to be innocent of the domination of others" (p. 341).

Backhouse cites Dionne Brand, who describes the unique Canadian formation of simultaneously ignoring whiteness as a racial marker while depending on whiteness to construct an image of innocence and goodness. "Unlike the United States, where there is at least an admission of the fact that racism exists and has a history, in this country one is faced with a stupefying innocence" (Brand cited in Backhouse, 1999, p.14). Backhouse (1999) concludes: "A 'mythology of racelessness' and 'stupefying innocence' – these would appear to be twin pillars of the Canadian history of race" (p. 14). One point of pride about how Canada is different from the United States depends on the construction of an egalitarian, not racist, national self-image. There is a great deal at stake in keeping this mythology in tact.

Goodness and innocence are talismans of one's superiority. The claim of innocence acts as both cause and effect: one is produced through innocence as superior; superiority is claimed as a sign of one's innocence. Only conscious and deliberate actions that everyone would denounce as discriminatory can be recognized and owned as that for which one can be held responsible. The equating of good with white permits education students to think that they are going to learn of the other, to learn how they can be helpers, to discover how to incorporate practices of the dominant society. This is the assumption of superiority that whiteness permits: what we have and who we are is what the world needs, whether it wants it or not. This sense of normative superiority is

connected to what it means to be a respectable citizen and teacher (Fellows & Razack, 1998). The following statement about white, unemployed men could be equally applied to the production of white education students. Much of their identity production swirls around the creation and maintenance of the dark “other” against which their own whiteness and goodness is necessarily understood (Weis, Proweller, & Centrie, 1997, p. 212).

It is a paradox and testament to its commanding status that cultural practices supportive of whiteness as normative are both ubiquitous and often invisible — especially to those who benefit from the practices. Coco Fusco warns that, “To ignore white ethnicity is to redouble its hegemony by naturalizing it. Without specifically addressing white ethnicity there can be no critical evaluation of the construction of the other” (Fusco cited in Goldberg, 1993, p. 59). By not examining whiteness and keeping it invisible, white students and teachers can conclude, “I don’t have a culture. Therefore I can be a helper to Aboriginal people in their efforts to define theirs.” Challenging students to look at the production of their own identifications disabuses them of the notion that they will be the helpers, interested onlookers, or those who can appreciate the “exotic other” (hooks, 1992). “The other” is positioned as an exotic spectacle that the dominant culture may appreciate and consume. As students like to say: “I am fascinated by all the cultures. I love learning about them,” a preoccupation in which students unselfconsciously participate as consumers whose only troubling moment is in the plethora of choice. The onus remains perpetually on Aboriginal teachers and students to explain themselves, to exhibit the markers by which they can be known as the other (St. Denis, 2004).

#### DOING ANTI-SUPREMACIST PEDAGOGY

White preservice students, well versed by their years of schooling and their experience as Canadian citizens, frame problems of racial inequality in the language of multiculturalism. Given the discourses to which students have access, it is not surprising if student resistance to anti-racist curriculum comes from a variety of sources. In one location (Schick, 2000) in which an anti-racist course is a requirement of the

teacher-education program, the course is perceived by students as an infringement on their liberty even before they enter the class. A requirement to learn of the “other” challenges students’ self images as ones who are already knowledgeable and sympathetic to difference. That the course is compulsory is taken by some as an indication of a moral lack on their part, a suggestion that is an affront to their self-perceptions as supportive liberal-minded citizens (Schick, 2000). Alternately, some see it as undemocratic because it privileges the point of view of First Nations people. Furthermore, some students resist because they do not imagine themselves as teachers of Aboriginal students because they do not plan to accept teaching positions where Aboriginal students are enrolled. A final point of resistance to this anti-racist course is that students are concerned they will be made uncomfortable over the extent to which white privilege has enhanced their life chances (McIntosh, 1998).

Given their experiences of schooling and the historical and cultural narratives of Canadian nationalism, student reactions are not unusual. Indeed, it is the normative and tacit production of whiteness that gives license to more overt and deliberate acts of racism. The normative perception of racism that depends on notions of white supremacy is as invisible as it is necessary to students’ everyday lives. For the most part, preservice teachers do not have a language for talking about racial identities — including their own.

We are not surprised if some students offer initial resistance to learning the effects of racial identifications of themselves and others; for most students in our program, an analysis of power relations is unfamiliar in language and concept. Such an analysis illustrates to them that racial identifications are produced through social, political, and historic relations, and, as such, students cannot stand outside and view themselves in a neutral and objective manner. Perhaps more importantly, a moving away from the concept of white teachers as unimplicated helpers in the progress of racial minorities requires that students significantly reassess who they will be and what they will do in their future classrooms. Student resistance is, in some ways, useful to them as a defence against what they would rather not know. We agree with Ellsworth (1997) that “Rationalist approaches to teaching cannot

address this unconscious desire to ignore” (p. 327). As they come to understand the implications of their social positioning for anti-racist pedagogy, students learn that there is no innocent space. This is a traumatic experience for many, but we think it could not be otherwise. As teachers, we have found solace in Felman and Laub (1992) who claim that “[If] teaching does not hit upon some sort of crisis, if it does not encounter either the vulnerability or the explosiveness of (an explicit or implicit) critical and unpredictable dimension, it has perhaps *not truly taught*. . .” (p. 53).

Students process this significant shift in their learning by means of extensive opportunities to talk and write about their experiences. Their desire not to know is part of what we ask students to consider. Most students come to some knowledge of their personal positioning; we also encourage them to find ways of interrupting the social and ideological ramifications in which their learning is situated.

In the major course assignment, students write autobiographies that avoid retelling national and personal narratives that reinscribe dominance. They are asked to engage in reflective social and political self-analysis (see Schick & St. Denis, 2005) and to see themselves in ways that were formerly unfamiliar or unavailable to them. We wonder with Kumashiro (2001): “Can we imagine an assignment where teachers ask students to write in ways that trouble the already-familiar stories?” (p. 9). Students are encouraged to comment on what their socially positioned gender, sexuality, ability, class, and race afford them or cost them, and how these identifications depend on the production of normative social practices and histories. They come to understand that in their own families, identifications can change with education, place of residence, class position, language spoken, and the anglicizing of immigrant names. To varying degrees, they also see how racial dominance, such as whiteness, is an ongoing process and how identifications can shift and change in accordance with dominant discourses.

As anti-racist professors, we learn continually to assess our teaching and the curriculum we offer. In the midst of sometimes strong resistance, we have learned to ask what it is that students like ours and other white people, including the white professor, are afraid to know. Some of what

we are afraid to know is that the national discourses with which white people can identify are unhelpful in anti-racist curricular planning. These national discourses forestall deeper examination of systemic inequality; they also congratulate white students for taking part in the national identification of “helper to the less fortunate,” even while affirming the taken-for-grantedness of white privilege. It is from student resistance and trauma that we see the extent of what is at stake for them in learning about the implications of being a white teacher. In the autobiographical assignment written by each student, we have evidence that, indeed, something has been taught. However, we are more excited when we read evidence of student learning we have not taught — more importantly, learning that students have taught themselves. Students move with and through resistance when they write of things they could know only by having allowed themselves to risk learning about the uncomfortable implications of being a white teacher in an anti-racist classroom.

#### CONCLUSION

Teaching about the production of white identities is always problematic, largely because students do not have the same experiences of whiteness. Class positions, gender, sexual orientation, and many other means of identity formation affect their performances of whiteness. Another problematic issue of talking about whiteness and racial privileging is that whiteness will be recentred in the process. We understand that white people — including one of the authors of this paper — who take up these issues are free to see themselves as unimplicated helpers. There is also the possibility that they will see themselves as a little better at being white if whiteness is defined as liberal, accepting, tolerant, and innocent of historic nation-building that depends on the other for an heroic image of self. An examination of the concept of race and the portrayal of whiteness as integral to racism begin the process of making race privilege visible. Given the investment in whiteness, however, schooling practices have every possibility of reinforcing relations of domination — even in multicultural and anti-racist courses.

In the ubiquitous, well-intended information sessions about

Aboriginal people, the fundamental position of whiteness as dominant remains largely unexamined, as does the standard of what passes for normal. By ignoring the production of racial identities, whiteness is at once invisible and a marker of difference. In Canada, discourses of race are ignored or seen as bad manners, allowing a certain raceless Canadian identity as the norm. Without a critical analysis, an information session designed to teach more about Aboriginal peoples reinforces processes of Othering whereby the customs and people themselves are taken up as exotic, quaint, or problematic, as something that happened in the past, as part of the nation's celebrated history. Multicultural education that emphasizes cultural difference and ignores the salience of race is inadequate as a preparation for preservice teachers and for any other form of cultural awareness education intending to increase understanding between Aboriginal and white Canadians in a post/colonial society.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The phrase "race matters" has been used most notably as the title of the excellent book by Cornell West (1993). As West notes and we contend, the term "race" is a social construction without biological grounding. We do not mean to reinscribe it here as if it were a "real" category, but in this instance to refer to the effects of racialization that separate and mark distinctions between people where none would otherwise exist, but which now operate through social force.

<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, Morrison attributes the notion of America's definitional whiteness entirely to the presence of African blackness. Her analysis completely covers over and minimizes the indigenous presence of the first peoples of the Americas. Morrison repeats a significant error by accepting that the Americas were a "blank page," without history (p. 35), and available for the conquerors to do with as they pleased. By allowing only a single dynamic of the formation of white consciousness, Morrison also repeats the repression of memories that undermines the significance of Aboriginal peoples as the historical and present-day other. This omission seems especially critical if Morrison is intent on moving towards a project that she insists is fascinating and urgent: developing a national literature that is historically and critically accurate (p. 48).

<sup>3</sup> "Tolerance hallmark of being Canadian," *The StarPhoenix*, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, December 22, 1997. A10.

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