

“Daga Waawiinadamawishin” (Explain It to Me): Critical Race Theory, Indigenous Epistemologies, and Institutional Racism in the Canadian University

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Abstract

This paper examines the structures and persistence of institutional racism within Canadian universities through the combined lenses of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Indigenous epistemologies. Grounded in the author’s positionality as Indigenous faculty members in a publicly funded Ontario university, the inquiry investigates how racism is produced, normalized, and sustained across the continuum of compulsory mainstream schooling and post-secondary education. Drawing on a critical review of scholarly and popularized literature, the study identifies four interrelated themes that shape Indigenous and racialized faculty experiences in the Academy: (1) the reproduction of the status quo through mainstream schooling, (2) Whiteness as a mechanism of institutional control, (3) the performative nature of institutional documents and policy inaction, and (4) linguistic racism rooted in colonial nationalism and monolingualism.

CRT is employed as an analytical framework to restory dominant narratives that obscure the racialized foundations of higher education, while Indigenous epistemologies—particularly

relationality and responsibility—inform a reflective praxis oriented toward healing, accountability, and transformation. The paper situates contemporary manifestations of racism within historical and ongoing colonial structures, including residential schooling, curricular erasure, and governance practices that privilege Whiteness under the guise of equity and multiculturalism.

The study concludes by offering praxis-based recommendations for institutional change, including collective bargaining advocacy, curricular reform, Indigenous and Racialized Course Requirements (IRCR), and the meaningful inclusion of Indigenous and racialized voices in strategic planning processes. By foregrounding lived experience, critical reflection, and ethical relationality, this paper contributes to ongoing conversations about reconciliation, decolonization, and anti-racist transformation in Canadian higher education.

Keywords: Critical Race Theory, Indigenous epistemologies, Institutional racism, Whiteness, Canadian universities, Reconciliation, Indigenous faculty, Linguistic racism, Colonialism, Higher education praxis

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction to the Problem

The central question in this inquiry involved identifying the salient themes within the structures of institutional race and racism for my professional practice in the Canadian university landscape, with specific utilization of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and our own Indigenous epistemologies. The investigation of racism towards faculty in universities and the protracted process of university entrance known as mainstream schooling was planned to include the utilization of CRT in the contextual analysis of literature in order to provide the researchers with a deeper understanding for optimizing my own professional practice. A series of conclusions are drawn for our own praxis based on the review of literature. Matters of racism the Academy towards Indigenous and racialized faculty have been previously identified (Bédard, 2018; Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Henry et al., 2017).

The importance of this topic lies in the need for the critical praxis of Reconciliation in the Academy outlined by Azzahrawi (2023) and Howell and Ng-A-Fook (2022). As pathways to maintaining the status-quo in Canada, institutions of higher learning and mainstream compulsory schooling (modelled in the image of Academia) support the dominant culture's imbalance of power in favour of Whiteness as reflected in documents, similarly emphasized by Ahmed (2007) and linguistic racism by May (2023). The significance of the institutional structures of racism identified by Ray (2022) often reflected in what is termed as the 'equity myth' (Henry et al., 2017) in Canadian universities is paramount to our professional practice, as our own research and understanding informs our teaching as Indigenous faculty in a publicly funded Ontario university. To determine potential off-ramps to the current status-quo racist and colonial pathways in mainstream institutions, an examination of positionality, the framework of Critical Race Theory and the popularized literature was analyzed.

1.2 Positionality

Our location and social identity intersect with regards to race and racism in our professional

practice. For example, our positionality and our roles in the milieu as Indigenous university educators are closely linked. We will begin by stating in the traditional language of Anishinabemowin “Daga waawiinadamawishin” which means explain it to me. In our own minds we sometimes struggle to answer E-aawyaan or who I am? As we situate ourselves in the structures of race and racism, in the monolingualism of the colonial enterprise (May, 2023). Many times, when asked to introduce ourselves at university meetings, one might feel like starting with, “*Colonization and racism have impacted my life in the following ways...*” and then proceed to list off a detailed list.

As a product of the colonial compulsory mainstream schooling system, we did not have a true sense of identity and was essentially ‘whitewashed’ and did not know Indigenous history, only that of White history, Holt (1964) states that “*These ideas are absurd and harmful nonsense. We will not begin to have true education or real learning in our schools until we sweep this nonsense out of the way. Schools should be a place where children learn what they most want to know, instead of what we think they ought to know.*” (Holt, 1964, p. 289) In Freirian thought, one might say in my experience, the colonizer and the colonized.

Gatto reminds us that “*We have become a nation of children, happy to surrender our judgements and our wills to political exhortations and commercial blandishments that would insult actual adults*” (Gatto, 2009, p. xxi). We think that before we were living to survive and now, we must survive for our culture to survive. Our Indigenous worldview and philosophy (*i.e.*, *All My Relations*) impacts the approach utilized as we internalize and interpret the topic of race and racism. Likewise, being conscious of looking inward and outward examining the existing research informs my potential limitations of my positionality (*e.g.*, not “seeing” through a non-Indigenous lens) which is an element of praxis we endeavour to be mindful of as reflective practitioners; to see the world as many of our colleagues do.

2. Frameworks

Using the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) to inform our research topic, we enhance our understanding through the use of this analytical framework. CRT was selected as it aligns with our Spirits and lived experience as an Indigenous people navigating against the colonial backdrop. To apply CRT involves restorying the dominant narrative and ideology with a perspective committed to Social Justice. Restorying is also at the heart of my Indigenous epistemology. At a foundational level, the social and legal construction of race advances the interests of Whiteness (Curry, 2009; Ruparelia, 2016) to the detriment of racialized peoples (Milner, 2013; Crenshaw, 1991). The power division and allocation as observed in the context of the governmental systems (*e.g.*, justice system/laws) draw attention to how race as a social construct results in complex dynamics, such as higher rates of incarceration for racialized and marginalized peoples (*i.e.*, National Inquires: TRC Calls for justice system of 2015; MMIWG Calls for justice system of 2019). These unequal racial outcomes are prejudiced, such assertions of not “seeing” colour (Lawson, 2020), however, it is in this neutrality that the discriminatory predilection for Whiteness flourishes. Picower (2009) raised the point that:

Ideological tools such as ‘now that things are equal’ or ‘I don’t even see color’ are mainstream understandings about race that the participants shared. Other tools, such as

'It's out of my control' and 'I can't relate', are claims that the participants made about their personal inability or unwillingness to work with students of color or to take an active anti-racist stance in their classrooms. (Picower, 2009, p. 206)

CRT illuminates our own lived experiences as Indigenous people in the dominant culture's historical and ongoing stereotyping, marginalization and normalization in the Canadian landscape. In the contemporary context, laws and systemic oppression have embedded invisible essentialist norms into the dominant culture's nationalism (*i.e.*, colonial celebratory history narrative in Canada).

3. Review of the Literature

The main focus of the literature review was to highlight the themes of racism in educational institutions to enhance our professional praxis. The starting point for this understanding lies in compulsory schooling required by law (*i.e.*, Ontario's *Education Act* of 1871-2024) and conformity. The key factor in racism (*i.e.*, anti-Indigenous) in institutions, laws and government connects to maintaining the status-quo of the dominant culture, in the case of Turtle Island (North America) this is Whiteness. According to James (2023), the systemic structures racialized people experience within Canada from entry to laws and policies shape the life experience of racialized and often marginalized people. An examination on racism and institutional oppression has yielded results. The review of literature also contextualized racism and the prime factor in maintaining the power structures of Whiteness (Bédard, 2018; Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Henry et al., 2017).

3.1 Status-quo Through Mainstream Schooling

The first theme was found in mainstream schooling which as a mode of social control which values passive obedience to school rules and processes children from thirty-six months of age to determine life pathways such as university entrance, workplace preparation, etc., on the same note, universities by extension maintain the hidden agenda of the status-quo (Udas and Stagg, 2019). Noguera (2003) pointed out that "*First, schools sort children based on various measures of their academic ability and place them on trajectories that influence the economic roles and occupations they will assume as adults*" (Noguera, 2003, p. 344). There exists an endemic of racism in mainstream schools and post-secondary institutions (Ladson-Billings, 2021). The processing of children through standardized testing in mainstream essentialist schooling although purporting equality, further increases racial inequality (Au, 2016; Eizadirad, 2020). Paulo Freire stated:

...for the more oppressed can be lead to adapt to that situation, the more easily they can be dominated. To achieve this end, the oppressors use the banking concept of education in conjunction with a paternalistic social action apparatus, within which the oppressed receive the euphemistic title of "welfare recipients." (Freire, 1970, in Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009, p. 53).

Freirian thought aligns with the circumstances in the Canadian context regarding the colonizer and the colonized, as this is what has happened to the Indigenous population of Turtle Island—that of being oppressed. This is also why Residential Schooling was used "To

kill the Indian in the child” (Canadian Federal Government Residential School Apology, 2008). Freire’s view on critical pedagogy and traditional pedagogy (*i.e.*, the oppressive banking model) or human beings as the empty child’s bank waiting to be filled and non co-created knowledge has been at the forefront of experiences in compulsory schooling and Canada’s resource-based economic system. Gonzalez-Sobrinho and Goss (2019) point out that:

Theories of race and racism seek to understand how race operates in the society and how racial inequality is created and maintained. “Racialization” as a concept has been used as a part of critical race theory to understand the process through which racial meaning is attached to something that is to perceived to be “unracial” or devoid of racial meaning. Racialization plays a central role in the creation and reproduction of racial meanings, and its inclusion enriches the study of race and ethnicity. (Gonzalez-Sobrinho & Goss, 2019, p. 505).

As Illich (1971) illustrates “Consumers are faced with the realization that the more they can buy, the more deceptions they must swallow.” (Illich, 1971, p. 112). The same is true for First Nations as well as mainstream society. Freire believed in dialogue and how the oppressed can liberate themselves. For Ray (2022), the institutional structures of racism in American society remain strong; there can’t be racism without racists. Ray (2022) further outlined the historical origins of race theory and central understandings of CRT, *i.e.*, the social construction of race and structural racism.

3.2 Whiteness and Institutional Control

Many universities are historically White institutions and undemocratic models of learning (Bonilla-Silva & Peoples, 2022; Van Milders, 2018). The themes of Critical Race Theory (CRT) identified by Azzahrawi (2023) and the need for the critical praxis of Reconciliation in Canada outlined by Howell and Ng-A-Fook (2022) highlight Senator Beyak’s appalling comments in 2017 defending Residential Schools and her published letters of support on her Senate website. Azzahrawi (2023) emphasized the importance of CRT as confronting the prevailing established thought by basing race and racism as the focus. In schooling, Azzahrawi further underlined how CRT can be transformative by recognizing and examining the frameworks that enable racial minoritization. Howell and Ng-A-Fook (2022) draw attention to the colonial mentality of settlers and how the systemic anti-Indigenous racism can be deschooled and unlearning can transpire on the pathway of ethical relationality and speaking the Truth in Truth and Reconciliation. Azzahrawi indicated, that the majority of non-Indigenous and non-racialized people do not have power in institutions, in most cases, it is White individuals who make up the majority of those making decisions in administration and policy (Azzahrawi, 2023).

3.3 Documents in Institutions: Performance and Inaction

The review of literature also produced themes of document creation and action (or inaction) in institutions outlined by Ahmed (2007) and linguistic racism by May (2023) as demonstrated in both the historical and socio-political manifestations of entities towards monolingualism; drawing attention to how colonialism and nationalistic tendencies maintain the status-quo using subtle and overt methods. The overwhelming issue of Whiteness and

White privilege within universities is always persistent (Pilkington, 2013).

The lack of pathways for Indigenous peoples in the documents of the university is a reminder of document performance as Ahmed (2007) identified. Ahmed (2007) indicated that universities are not merely brick and mortar buildings, but rather as Ahmed highlighted the point of Prior (2003), that institutions are the documents themselves. Ahmed (2007) described how documents both create and operate organizations within the politics of documentation. The pathways to institutional racism become evident when shortcuts to document creation occur (often by design) such as documents being written by individuals rather than working groups, which although being expedient, creates pressure on individuals and allows the organization to decline responsibility (Ahmed, 2007). Similarly, an overt lack of diversity in the Canadian university exists within faculty ranks (Diaz, Cabrera, Moore, & Yakas, 2019; Lawson, 2020) and Indigenous issues are often erased through multiculturalism (St. Denis, 2011) while multiculturalism is a lie that pretends to advocate equality while maintaining Whiteness (Walcott, 2019).

3.4 Linguistic Racism

Linguistic racism is a pervasive issue on the post-secondary campus (Clements & Petray, 2021; Dobinson & Mercieca, 2020). May (2023) provided perspective on how linguistic racism is deeply embedded within the historical, societal and political colonial-nationalism. Attitudes of superiority, particularly White-Europeans endorsing a monolingual method of White racial supremacy suppresses the languages of the Original Peoples of Turtle Island as May (2023) indicates “...colonization in relation to the historical and ongoing marginalization and denigration of minoritized language varieties, particularly Indigenous languages.” (May, 2023, p. 656)

Racist sentiments are fueled (Howell & Ng-A-Fook, 2022) by actions of Canadian leaders, as previously noted, Senator Lynn Beyak who in 2017 urged Canadians to recognize the “positive aspects” of Residential Schooling which the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) did not. Howell and Ng-A-Fook pointed out that “...the narratives put forth by Senator Beyak, Conrad Black, and the Ontario school social studies and history curriculum have taught us how to forget the violent intergenerational settler colonial state formation of a “commonwealth” nation called Canada” (Howell and Ng-A-Fook, 2022, p. 6). Many White faculty do not think they have anything more to do towards Reconciliation or as Howell and Ng-A-Fook suggested, perhaps feel they have already apologized for the wrongdoings of colonialism.

This inquiry accomplished the goal of identifying four themes or pillars from the review of literature to enhance our professional practice: status-quo through mainstream schooling, Whiteness and institutional control, documents in institutions: performance and inaction, and linguistic racism. What follows are a series of recommendations for praxis from the popularized literature.

4. Conclusion

Addressing racism in Ontario universities in action and deliverables has yet to adequately

become part of the university administrator and faculty associations' lexicon. We began by stating the Anishinabemowin words "Daga waawinadamawishin" which means explain it to me. Throughout this process, we have tried look inward to explain how we as Indigenous educators came to this point in time; as we situated ourselves in the theme of race and racism in the Academy. We continue to heal and to love as in the Freirian ideal of humanizing the oppressed which we have been through the traditional pedagogy of mainstream compulsory schooling and the paternalistic social governmental constructs of being a "welfare recipient" which the federal government uses to marginalize people. As Bédard (2018) noted, we are the "Indian in the Cupboard" situated in a mainstream Canadian university, to be seen but not heard, taken out for special photo opportunities and then to go back into the cupboard. The Indian in the Cupboard, phrase in reference to the film made in the mid-1990's of the same name, wherein a tiny Indigenous male is kept in a cupboard and only taken out when convenient to the Caucasian boy to share Indigenous culture. This scenario is often reflected in what Indigenous academics face in mainstream institutions (Bédard, 2018). Flowing from the review of literature and with reference to CRT and our Indigenous epistemology, the following recommendations for our professional practice were produced:

- ✓ Contextualized racism is the prime factor in maintaining the power structures of Whiteness in my institution. We will advocate for grassroots improvement changes to our collective agreement (CBA) in our next round of bargaining by our faculty association for racialized and Indigenous faculty (Bédard, 2018; Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Henry et al., 2017; Pilkington, 2013).
- ✓ The inclusion of content in the university courses we teach, such as Indigenous and Black history puts the burden on Indigenous and racialized faculty, further oppressing marginalized peoples. Inclusivity by advocating for Indigenous and racialized content in courses is something we will advocate for in meetings and hiring practices (Freire, 1970; Gonzalez-Sobrinho & Goss, 2019; Illich, 1971; Ray, 2022).
- ✓ At faculty council we will proposing IRCR (Indigenous and Racialized Course Requirements) as a move towards Reconciliation by improving the understanding of CRT as well as Indigenous and racialized peoples' histories in Canada (Azzahrawi, 2023; Howell and Ng-A-Fook, 2022).
- ✓ Strategic planning as a pathway to improving conditions for racialized and Indigenous faculty; at our next townhall meeting; proposing enshrining Indigenous and racialized voices in the strategic planning process at the institutional level in this document ("strat plan") to ensure deliverables for racialized and marginalized peoples in language and action (Ahmed, 2007; Clements & Petray, 2021; Dobinson & Mercieca, 2020; May, 2023).

Likewise, in our day-to-day, we will continue to share our voices and through dialogue, following a healing path to push back against the dominant settler culture's storyline, the colonizer and the colonized.

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