

# Challenging White Hegemony in University Classrooms: Whose Canada Is It?

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## INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, Aboriginal women and women of colour have pointed out that Canadian academia is an important site for the construction of race and gender relations. Aboriginal activists and academics have for a number of years been engaging in a struggle to challenge the colonial framework of Canadian academia. From efforts to centre Indigenous history, philosophy and culture, to critiques of the racism and colonialism at the heart of Canadian society, Aboriginal writers have worked to transform Eurocentric knowledge to reflect Indigenous values and perspectives (Monture-Angus 1995; LaRocque 1997; Graveline 1998). At the same time, coming from another space, anti-racist feminist writers have illustrated that the pedagogical paradigms and canons of most disciplines, including Women's Studies, work to maintain the ideological frameworks through which racism is constructed and maintained (Das Gupta 1987; Carty 1991; Mukherjee 1992; Bannerji et al 1995; Jhappan 1996).

One of the underlying strategies behind anti-racist pedagogy has been to transform universities by promoting the hiring of Aboriginal peoples and people of colour to faculty positions. In part, this strategy is located in an attempt to challenge the ways in which systemic forms of discrimination have created barriers to hiring Aboriginal peoples and people of colour within Canadian academia. However, importantly, several writers have suggested that such inclusion would also provide the basis for transforming academic knowledge and structures. In particular, these writers have argued that such hirings would facilitate the transformation of university

curriculum. As a result, anti-racist pedagogy has stressed the importance of equity policies (Carty 1991; LaRocque 1997; Monture-Angus 1995; Mukherjee 1992).

Despite the virtual exclusion of Aboriginal women and a continuing pattern of under-representation of women of colour, in the past decade small numbers of women of colour and a handful of Aboriginal women have been hired by Canadian universities. And, indeed, as this article suggests, it has been these women who have taken on the challenge of transforming academic structures. These women are often at the forefront of challenging the racist canons of their disciplines. However, we need to critically address the effectiveness of such an anti-racist strategy. We need to ask to what extent has such inclusion been effective in challenging the structures of academia? We also need to assess what consequences this has had for these women.

In order to address these questions, we organised a "roundtable" discussion. Because of the spatial distance between the participants, and the lack of funding available to bring the women together in one city, this discussion took place through an email list. In mid-December, a group of seven Aboriginal women and seven women of colour came together to participate in a discussion on teaching anti-racism, and Indigenous thought<sup>1</sup> in universities. We chose these women in a number of ways. We advertised on email listservs organized by Aboriginal women, or those which addressed "progressive" issues. We also approached Aboriginal women and women of colour who we had come in contact with in the past. These women work in campuses across Canada. They work in different departments, including English, Law,

Native Studies, Philosophy, Sociology, and Women's Studies. They include those who work in contractually limited positions, those who are untenured and those who are tenured. The Aboriginal women include those who have Indian status, and those who are non-status, or Metis. The women of colour include Canadian-born women of East Asian, South Asian, and African descents, and those who have migrated from the Caribbean, North Africa, and South Asia.

In the roundtable, we asked these women to consider the following questions: to what extent have we been able to challenge the canons of our disciplines? How have students, faculty and administration responded to those of us who have been able to incorporate anti-racist and/or Indigenous perspectives? What consequences has employing Indigenous and/or anti-racist perspective had for the careers of these women? What consequence has this strategy had for anti-racist practice? How do we evaluate the meaning of our inclusion?

As these women shared their experiences with teaching Indigenous perspectives and anti-racism, what emerged was, at times, an overwhelming picture of forms of systemic discrimination that takes place within academia. What was remarkable was that all of the women had similar experiences - each women reported that she experienced hostility from students, a lack of support from administrations when they face racism, procedures employed by the university that perpetuate racism, and a range of reactions from colleagues, including polite indifference, hostility, and condescension. Some spoke of the pressure they felt to be silent about the racism they were facing, rather than risk ostracism within their departments. As importantly, all of the women reported that these forms of systemic discrimination are having a significant impact on their careers - from negative evaluations of teaching, to difficulties in the tenure and promotion process, to being marginalised in their departments and institutions. Many of the women reported that their experiences with systemic discrimination had a profound personal impact - including long intervals of generalized ill-health, depression, strong feelings

of self-doubt and at times a severe alienation within academic environments. The discussion also raised the issue of retention, as all of the women reported that their experiences with systemic discrimination made them question their future in academia.

At the same time, it was clear that conditions of work varied for different women, depending on how "white"<sup>2</sup> the university environment that they worked in was. Generally speaking, the women who worked in universities where there were other faculty of colour, or where there were large numbers of students of colour, or Aboriginal students, found that the teaching conditions they faced were somewhat different than those who faced virtually all-white classrooms. Meanwhile, it was also clear that while some of the women worked at institutions where anti-racism had been at least nominally addressed, and where environments were less "white," the overall working conditions that each women faced still resonated with experiences of racism.

Another difference that emerged was between the experiences of the Aboriginal women and the women of colour in the group, in that the racism that Aboriginal women are facing is compounded by their negotiating conditions of colonialism, both within academia and in the society outside. While this subject is not the direct focus of this paper, the oppressiveness of the colonial relationship between Canada and Indigenous peoples, and how it is manifested within academia, clearly weighed on the Aboriginal participants in ways that constantly emerged in the discussion.

In writing this article, we believe that it is important to record this dialogue, a process which has highlighted, with sometimes stunning clarity, the absolute commonness of experiences of racism in academia. Our purpose is to draw attention to the extent to which teaching anti-racism and Indigenous perspectives are tied to systemic forms of discrimination within the university, and the profound impact that this has on the lives of women.

### **TEACHING ANTI-RACIST AND INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVES: STUDENT HOSTILITY**

All of the women who participated in the discussion were at the forefront of teaching from anti-racist and/or Indigenous perspectives. Notably, they began teaching this material as soon as they were hired. Some were hired specifically to teach such material. Most often they were the only ones in their departments who taught such material. Many of the women took the responsibility of creating new courses and programmes, or of reshaping others to address racism and colonization issues. One woman spoke of helping to build a cultural studies program, revamping the entire curriculum to develop and teach courses about "race," class, feminism, and disability. Another simply described how the feminist courses she taught had maintained "non-white" women as marginal until she reshaped them to establish the centrality of race, class and sexuality in how gender is lived.

All of the women reported that teaching Indigenous perspectives or anti-racism poses tremendous challenges and difficulties. In particular, this kind of teaching requires that instructors challenge the processes through which white hegemony is maintained. It challenges students, requiring that they question their own ways of being - the ways in which they are connected to structures of power, and their positioning within Canadian society. This form of teaching is the ultimate site where the personal becomes political.

It is not surprising then that all of the women reported that when teaching anti-racist or Indigenous perspectives, they experienced considerable resistance and hostility from students. This ranged from an insistence on maintaining Eurocentric "readings" of course material, to expressions of overt anger at having to explore racism or colonialist relations in their courses. One Aboriginal woman, who has had to constantly negotiate the colonialist perspectives on Native people which Canadian literature is replete with, describes the difficulty she faced in teaching

Indigenous literatures from Indigenous perspectives in the following:

I made it clear that the purpose of this course would be to study the texts with an interdisciplinary focus in a manner that would challenge the Western, Eurocentric approach to the texts that students have generally been versed in. Culturally specific readings would replace Eurocentric and/or Postcolonial generalizing reading of the literatures. Some of the students were absolutely baffled that they would have to adapt their learning methodologies to adapt different cultural frameworks and worldviews. I found this both amusing and frustrating, as the challenge that I was offering the students was one that I have been forced to engage with in every course that I have taken at the postsecondary level as an Aboriginal woman.

Another woman described how students resisted her attempt to teaching anti-racism:

When I teach about racism, the tension in the room is clear. Unlike in other classes, the students are deathly quiet and still, glaring, hostile, their pens on their desk. They are clearly telling me that they are not willing to learn. While I am supposed to have the responsibility to define what is being taught in the classroom, students are clearly asserting their power to say that this is their classroom - and I need to teach only what they want to learn.

Finally, several instructors mentioned that if they were successful in imparting the realities of racism, they faced enormous pressures to take responsibility for the students' sense of guilt.

Many of the instructors reported that student discomfort in dealing with issues of white hegemony in society often resulted in the more hostile students challenging their legitimacy as teachers. One form this takes is displaying

patronizing attitudes in class. Instructors described how in the middle of their classes, they have encountered students who offered them advice about how to lecture, and even "corrected" their lecture content:

I was giving a lecture to a class of first year students, which linked violence against women in international contexts to histories of colonization, when one young white woman raised her hand as if to ask for clarification on a point I had made. I stopped for her question; however, at that point she proceeded to begin her own lecture, presenting what she clearly felt to be a superior (and racist) interpretation of the topic. I had to spend several minutes deconstructing her perspective, which undermined a number of points I was making in the lecture, before I could go on.

Faculty who spoke English with a non-Canadian accent were particularly vulnerable to such condescending attitudes.

Another form of de-legitimization involves accusations of bias. On one level, many of the women reported that when they devote any class time or course readings to non-Eurocentric perspectives - or indeed, simply use too many readings written by people of colour or Aboriginal people - they face constant insinuations that they are presenting a biased curriculum. In this framework, the Aboriginal women who present Indigenous frameworks of thought risk being accused of "forcing their culture down the students' throats" - with profound implications, as one woman described her experience of this:

I experienced recurring harassment, including receiving anonymous student complaints that I was forcing them to practice my cultural beliefs, which was used to chastise me. I was forced to "prove" my teaching effectiveness, although I have been teaching for fifteen years in universities across this country.

The most extreme examples of accusations of bias involve students making official complaints about women of colour or Aboriginal faculty members. White students continuously lodge complaints that women of colour or Aboriginal women are not teaching their courses properly, that they have made their classroom environments "unsafe" for white students, or that they grade white students unfairly.

A more banal, but equally de-legitimizing student tactic was to reduce any focus on racism to personal pathology. One woman described how her lectures about racism and colonialism were simply dismissed by students as being "too negative." Another way in which the legitimacy of such teaching is challenged involves "Othering" faculty members and reinterpreting their words within a pluralist framework. One woman described her experiences as follows:

I was asked to give a guest lecture in a Women's Studies course on racism in the women's movement. After the lecture, a white student approached me, and thanked me for the lecture. As she stated, she appreciated hearing the voice of the "other." I had not used the word "other" in my lecture - but repeatedly used the word "racism." This incident made clear to me what teaching anti-racism would be about - and how it would become co-opted. From the perspective of students - I was not talking about racism in society - challenging the fundamental privilege of whiteness and colonialism, and asking that we re-look at how Canada has been constituted, but rather giving the voice of the other. What was distressing was that this seemingly progressive pluralist position succeeded in reconstructing what I had said such that I was positioned not only in the margins, but that the voice of the margins was one voice out of many. Pointing to racism in Canada then was simply another perspective. This is only one of many incidents - but a telling one. It tells of how easily my words are

reconstructed.

The participants also reported that students not only were uncomfortable with the material that was taught, but also with who was doing such teaching. As a result, many of the instructors had also experienced overt forms of racism. One instructor described being labelled with a racist gaze, through which she was constructed as aggressive and unsympathetic. Another woman described how students racialized her as incompetent and aggressive because she spoke English with a non-Canadian accent. These woman and others pointed out that in order to deal with racism, they were forced to be kinder and gentler with students, until they finally realized that they would be called racist names behind their backs, no matter what they did.

In general, then, a significant problem which the women reported was that students have a power that is not acknowledged, either in the literature about teaching, or, more importantly, by the institution, to disenfranchise them as instructors because they are uncomfortable with the course content.

### **TOWARDS THEORISING THE RACIALIZED CLASSROOM**

As the women who participated in the discussion were engaged in all aspects of anti-racist work, including teaching, research and activism, they were asked to comment on why teaching anti-racist and Indigenous perspectives in university settings solicits such hostility. The discussion identified two interrelated factors that led to forms of systemic discrimination. The first is the marginalization of anti-racism and Indigenous thought on campuses. The second is the way in which classrooms, departments and universities reflect broader relations of power and forms of racism.

In the discussion, the women pointed out that one of the reasons they face such hostility from students is that such teaching has a marginal position within academia. This means that a very small number of courses are being offered at each

university which address these issues, and at most only one or two in each department. The result is that the women are typically being asked, in twelve or thirteen weeks, to address a subject that needs to be addressed in depth. Histories of colonialism and racism span at least five centuries of global history, are deeply rooted in Western thought, have powerful economic and political ramifications, and profoundly challenge power relations within contemporary society. The women expressed frustration at being asked to "boil down" so huge and important a subject material to one course, often to be handled in conjunction with class and gender. They also mentioned the pressures they faced from administrators who saw it as "repetitive" to have more than one course in this area in any department.

Such marginalization means that this teaching is not integrated into the curriculum in any meaningful way. One Aboriginal woman commented:

I am struck by the impression that the more political people in my department are glad that they have managed to "scoop" one of the handful of Aboriginal people at this university. Unfortunately, this does not seem to have been accompanied by any genuine interest in actually seeing Aboriginal perspectives reflected in the general curriculum for the discipline I teach.

One of the issues raised in the discussion was whether or not it was easier to integrate anti-colonial or anti-racist thought into what are generally seen as more "progressive" disciplines such as Women's Studies or Native Studies. Those who taught in these departments pointed out that such programmes are not necessarily any more successful in accepting anti-racist or Indigenous perspectives than the more mainstream departments, and that they also came with their own peculiar dynamics. As the instructors who taught in these disciplines pointed out, "studies" programmes are, inherently, marginalised spaces. Women of colour and Aboriginal women within these

disciplines are further marginalized through being racialized and having their cultural distinctiveness rendered invisible. In these disciplines, the women were fighting for space within departments that were themselves fighting for space within academia.

These instructors also pointed out that these programmes are controlled by either white men or white women, and therefore reflect the power structures of academia. One woman wrote:

Take Native Studies for example. For most of my time here I have been the only "Indian" on faculty with three white men. So I have experienced Native Studies as "white space," absolutely. Imagine a Woman's Studies program or department where the majority of scholars were white men, or just men. Could that happen? Then why is there a white majority in more than one Native Studies department in this country? Over the last decade, why have people been so quiet about this and not out-raged?

Another woman commented: "The overriding impression I've gotten is that Native Studies departments in Canadian universities represent the last bulwark of an openly colonialist relationship (cloaked in the discourse of anti-colonialism), in that the freedom to control what is known about Native people is the last thing that white faculty members want to give up."

Similarly, the women who taught Women's Studies programmes noted that a major problem was that these programmes failed to critique whiteness:

My frustration stems from my (naive, I now recognise) expectations that these programmes would be different, would be capable of setting new standards, would be open to reconsidering power and the ways in which it works through difference. Whether these programmes are inherently marginalised spaces depends on whose perspective one is considering.

From a white woman's point of view, it might be. From where I stand, as a woman of colour, I am marginalized by the inability of white women to address the reality that power is racialized.

Moreover, these instructors pointed out that it is often more difficult to teach anti-racist and Indigenous material in Women Studies departments as students and colleagues fear that such teaching will detract from the study of "women." These instructors reported that they were often forced to ignore the oppressiveness and hostility of white students in order to empower these students "as women." One woman described the contradictions which arise in Woman's Studies departments where a strong emphasis on changing society and empowering female students is not accompanied by any critique of whiteness - either in the students, the curriculum, or in the department in general. For women of colour or Aboriginal instructors, the hegemony of such whiteness leads to the silencing on issues of racism. For example, several women reported that all too often their colleagues responded to their experiences of racism by equating it with other forms of discrimination. The difficulty that this posed was that by equating racism with sexism or homophobia, it ignored how few women of colour and Aboriginal women there are within academia, particularly in positions of authority, and therefore how extremely difficult it still is, even in Women's Studies, to talk about racism. Such responses, essentially, equate the conditions that Aboriginal women and women of colour face with those of white women.

As all of the women pointed out, the marginalization of anti-racism and Indigenous thought was inherently tied to the ways in which academia reproduces and reinforces the mechanisms by which colonialism and racism are constructed in society. Because of this, the challenge in teaching anti-racism and Indigenous perspectives is that it requires challenging white hegemony, both in the classroom and in the university. As one woman wrote:

I believe that the dominant issue is not

about "racism" in its old malevolent definition, but about whiteness, the new benevolent racism. The dominant ethos at my university is that of whiteness, and it extends from the way people dress, to the ways in which they carry on everyday conversation, to the food they eat, and the way they use subtle body language to exclude "others." It is such a subtle process in most of its manifestations that it is difficult to specify, and many of its practitioners are not in the least aware of what they are doing. Challenging them can be very difficult, because a challenge raises defences, and usually results in the challenger being told that she is "too sensitive." I believe, however, that there are very effective ways of dealing with whiteness, through small group education, and I have been working with some anti-racist educators to explore these methods.

As a result, any explanation of the hostility that such teaching invokes needs to address the ways in which such teaching challenges the ways in which the canons of academic knowledge construct colonialism and racism, and the ways in which structures of dominance work to marginalise such teaching. As some of the participants pointed out, in this context, teaching anti-racism or Indigenous thought is at risk of being tokenised, at best, and performative of the very process it was meant to challenge, at worst. One woman described this particularly clearly:

I couldn't get rid of a disturbing feeling that this was more about performativity than about inclusiveness, about what Fanon calls "relations of looking." We still have such a long way to go before the "designated groups" not only have equal representation, but share equally in defining the cultural terms of workplace relations not dominated by whiteness. And with respect to the university, those few of us who still remain under-represented, feel

not only the isolation of numbers, but the marginalization of not feeling equally (or equitably) able to define academic culture. We are still embroiled in relations of looking. Well, I have the same questions about what goes on in the classroom. I worry that our students expect to establish relations of looking rather than to transform relations. For Women's Studies students in particular, it is much easier to become personally invested in the project of changing gender relations than it is in the project of changing relations of racialization. Maybe that partly explains why all of us have at some point experienced hostility from students who don't want to be pushed in that direction. On the other hand, I have encountered more and more students who do (at least within the somewhat safer space of courses that deal specifically with racism), and they are a joy and an inspiration. So, I maintain hope.

A number of Aboriginal women pointed out that white hegemony works very differently in their case. One woman asserted that "race" alone does not fully cover her experiences within academia as an Aboriginal woman. Other women concurred, noting that it is the erasure of Aboriginal *cultures* which is at the heart of colonization agendas. As the women noted, challenging the erasure of Aboriginal cultures within academia goes beyond critiquing racism, to addressing the colonialism at the heart of Canadian education institutions. In particular, they pointed out that white hegemony was constructed through the ongoing imposition of colonial relations:

It is, in my opinion, important to document the way, as Aboriginal people, we are constantly being pushed to the "outsider" space. As my people were confined to a territory (and granted I live in what is now Cree territory - both the Blackfoot and the Metis would squabble with that statement), I will always try to

assert the centrality of my position as a citizen of a nation enclaved in what is now called Canada (and that is not to diminish the overt acts of oppression and force against my people).

As a result, the marginalization of anti-racist and Indigenous thought reflects the forces through which Canada as a nation is unproblematized, as a settler state imposed on Indigenous territories, organized along lines of white dominance.

The common thread noted by all the women was the manner in which both anti-racist and Indigenous thought are marginalized within the university. As one woman expressed it, anti-racism is commonly reinterpreted as being about acknowledging "difference" rather than acknowledging power relations. Speaking of racism or colonization is then turned into "a perspective," a mere opinion, rather than a fact, which diminishes the issues which women of colour and Aboriginal women face, and pushes their realities into "outsider" space.

### **RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGE OF A RACIALIZED CLASSROOM**

Despite the significant challenges the women face in teaching anti-racism and Indigenous perspectives, all of the instructors had developed a number of innovative pedagogical techniques. They employed three interrelated types of strategies to teach such material. The first is to create safe spaces, the second is to employ alternative teaching methods, and the third is reestablish their legitimacy as instructors. These techniques offer valuable methods for deconstructing student hostility and resistance. These strategies are contingent on the student body and the course taught. Is the student body mainly white? Are there many Aboriginal students or students of colour present? Is it a first year class, or an upper level seminar? Is it a course that focuses on racism and Aboriginal issues, or do faculty have to "force" these issues into a general course framework?

The most important technique for teaching anti-racism involves creating safe spaces in the

classroom. In order to do this teaching, an environment has to be created that simultaneously protects students of colour from racist comments while at the same time creating a space where students can safely deconstruct their own racism, including coming to understand their own positionality, and finally, where different positions can be respectfully challenged. The participants discussed various means through which they struggled to achieve this. One woman pointed to the importance of adopting a position of careful tolerance for those who were genuinely struggling with issues of oppression, emphasizing that the process of learning anti-oppressiveness would of necessity be fraught with mistakes, and that most of us are struggling with one form of oppressive behaviour or another. Another instructor emphasized that it was important to restrict discussions until students developed a sensitivity towards the ways in which discussions of racism can make other students unsafe:

I do not allow a free flowing discussion. In my experience, the discussion period is when students can voice racist ideas. This makes students of colour and Aboriginal students vulnerable. So I pack the lecture with material, so that there is little opportunity for discussion. If there is a discussion period, I focus the discussion on questions that have do with resolving theoretical debates. Only when I am confident that students have learned about racism do I allow a discussion. Even then, I am surprised at what gets said.

A crucial aspect of creating safe spaces is dealing with white guilt. As students come to an understanding of their own positionality, a common reaction is guilt. This is problematic in a number of ways. On the one hand, it prevents the individual student from understanding the complexities of racism; on the other, it reinforces the centrality of white experience. An instructor described her ways of dealing with this:

When I experience white guilt from



students, I explain quite clearly to them that I have great difficulty processing this with them, as I can never experience this place. I explain that I am often processing the opposite, anger and pain. And I point out that in the university there are many white spaces and many places (and people) they can go and process this with guilt with. However, my classes are one of the few brown spaces that Aboriginal students (or students of colour) can experience at the university and I am unprepared to participate in the dismantling of this space. I ask them to consider how the Aboriginal students feel in on a daily basis experiencing the university as not "safe space," in almost every other class they have taken? Sometimes I will label this as privilege, sometimes not. It depends on how I am reading the class and how much I think they can take before they combust.

The second pedagogical strategy that the women utilized was to develop alternative teaching methods. Deconstructing teacher-student relations is an essential part of this:

In seminar classes, I trash the hierarchical style. First we sit in a circle (this means I often have to do a lot of wandering around the university scouting rooms. It's a strategy that requires preparation of a different kind than what we are used to). It's amazing what happens when you remove the teacher's front desk or the large table we sit around in seminars (it's an obstacle in the middle of us that I think forces us to communicate as individuals from our own defined space). I explain that I do not think of myself as the expert (as teacher) but rather the one in the room that has the most responsibility for the fact that "learning" must take place here. I tell them my first name, and do not seek to be addressed as "Professor." In the first class I ask students to introduce themselves

(actually Indian style but I don't tell them that although the Aboriginal students recognize it). Who are you, where are you from, why are you here, what's important about you. I think this not only makes a circle (in a sacred sense and that circle has power I don't fully understand but that I trust) but it forces people past the "me student, you professor" dichotomy. I share personal bits of my life about my Aboriginal nation, where I live, my children, and so on. This is an effective strategy to validate the personal as a learning process without labelling it as such. It also allows me to "identify" students who may be single moms, etc., whose experiences are as "outsider" for different reasons and may need some consideration/support. I allow students to bring kids to class. This definitely changes the space (and sometimes I bring my own to establish the principle it is all right to do so AND besides, my kids need to see what their mom does when she is away all the time). While this may seem risky to some, it works for me - perhaps because I teach Aboriginal issues in upper year seminars, with classes that are at least 50 percent Aboriginal students (and often a majority of those are women).

An important technique for teaching Indigenous perspectives involves utilizing traditional cultural practices in the classroom, including the use of teaching circles, bringing in Elders, and using sacred medicines. There was some discussion of the issues involved in introducing Aboriginal cultural practices in the context of a white space. While some women asserted the importance of practicing traditional spirituality in every aspect of their lives, including challenging the secular and despiritualized space of academia, others wondered if it was possible to do this without acknowledging the marginalization of Indigenous thought and privileging of Western thought within Canadian universities.

I don't believe in bringing smudges or Elders to the university. It is a mainstream white institution. Perhaps if I taught in an Indian institution I might feel very differently. Perhaps if I did not have access to these things I might feel differently. However, my analysis suggests to me that when I as professor facilitate Elders in the university, I am not doing anyone any favours. Part of the culture is about learning the way to ask, the self-respect to ask. There are places for ceremonies and I think to truly respect the Elders we need to be going to them.

Finally, several of the instructors found that an effective alternative technique for teaching anti-colonialism and anti-racism was to encourage students to link what they learned in the classroom to broader political struggles against racism. Instructors described the different strategies they employed to do this. One strategy was to integrate issues that are taking place on campus into their teaching: "I make sure that I find the women of colour/Aboriginal women (and men) and find out what the issues or sites of struggle are and then I work these into my presentation/talk/class whatever." Another instructor encouraged students to become politically active: "I teach activism and have them actually attempt to take up some form of activism to challenge racism/eurocentrism in their lives/families/communities."

Given that students almost routinely de-legitimize those who teach anti-racism and Indigenous perspectives, the third strategy that the women engaged with was to establish (and re-establish) academic legitimacy in the classroom. This involved developing techniques to deconstruct how their authority was racialized in the classroom. A few of the women discussed their awareness that white students saw white writers as "more legitimate" than writers of colour. As a result, they continuously wrestled with inordinate pressure to reestablish their legitimacy by using white writers when exploring the issue of racism.

Another women, who taught to mainly white students in lower level courses, pointed out

that it was important to demonstrate "objective proof" of racism. She made sure that her lectures on racism contained statistical data and recent studies, omitting the personal voice as much as possible. However, others noted the limitations of employing such a strategies, especially as the use of "objective" data and voices of authority reinforces relations of power.

Other instructors suggested that the use of films and guest speakers allowed instructors to avoid having to prove the existence of racism, while at the same time decreasing the hostile response from students - who projected their anger onto the guest speaker (after they were gone), or onto the filmmaker - rather than the faculty member. A number of films which explore strategies of resisting racism, in particular, have been useful for some of the women. Finally, the women pointed out that employing alternative teaching methods, in addition to being an effective way of teaching anti-racism and Indigenous perspectives, was also important in deconstructing student hostility.

However, all of these strategies require the support of institutions. The women pointed out that while engaging in many of the above strategies made their teaching more effective, it also rendered them more vulnerable to criticism from administrators who did not see the value of adopting "non-mainstream" teaching techniques.

### **LACK OF ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT**

While these instructors employed a variety of pedagogical techniques in order to respond to the hostility they faced, what became clear in the discussion was that a more serious problem for these instructors was the lack of support from other colleagues, chairs of departments and deans. As many of the participants pointed out, success in employing such techniques required the support of administrations. Rather than receiving such support, most of the women reported that they faced administrators who were, at best, indifferent to their situation, and at worst, blamed them when they experienced racism in the classroom. The lack of support for such teaching took different forms. It

ranged from the lack of official recognition of the difficulties such teaching posed, to facing a more rigorous evaluation of their overall work than those who did not teach anti-racist or Indigenous perspectives typically received, to receiving negative course evaluations, to the lack of strong procedures to protect instructors from incidents of student racism.

In the most benign form of indifference, administrators fail to acknowledge that teaching anti-racism and Indigenous perspectives has placed burdens on these instructors which other faculty members do not face. These instructors are often responsible for creating new courses and programmes. In addition, teaching these courses means that instructors are more sought after as advisors and supervisors by students of colour and Aboriginal students. The result is an extremely heightened supervisory load (as well as other demands) for faculty of colour and Aboriginal faculty, which is rarely acknowledged by most departments. For example, one woman reports, "For five years, I engaged in projects that I thought made the environment a bit more Native and people of colour friendly. I worked from seven a.m. until sometimes ten p.m. at night in my office."

This is particularly problematic as such onerous responsibility often falls on new faculty. Given that such courses are taught by mainly by women of colour or Aboriginal women, and given the pattern of hiring, new faculty are in the position of doing what amounts to the most difficult teaching in the university. This can have grave consequences for new faculty members, as one woman summarized succinctly: "Now there should be some discussion about the stress and pressure that this places on aspiring academics...especially, as some of you have noted, we get swept into the system to teach the 'unspeakable' - race relations. As newly appointed, non-tenured academics this is very dangerous ground."

One of the dangers is that as Aboriginal women and women of colour, these instructors are subjected to more rigorous evaluation than their colleagues. As individuals who are in extreme minority positions within their departments, any mistakes that they make are generally judged far

more harshly than is common for those who are the majority. In addition, several of the instructors reported that they were more likely to receive negative or lower course evaluations than white colleagues. These women reported that rather than exploring how these negative evaluations were tied to the kind of teaching they did, their colleagues and administrations interpreted this as evidence of poor teaching ability. Furthermore, incidents of racism in the classroom were often interpreted as the inability of instructors to "control" their students.

Moreover, instructors reported frustration that their institutions failed to have procedures to protect them from their students' racism. When instructors brought racism to the attention of administrators, they often found the administration taking the strategy of waiting for racist incidents to "blow over." As one instructor pointed out, this response not only silenced and victimized her, but also made her vulnerable to further attacks:

Silence from the administration leaves us vulnerable to further attacks, as students do not carry any consequences for their racist behaviour. In this gap, where the university does not clearly and loudly respond that racism, colonialism, homophobia and sexism are all wrong from the beginning, we are left in the victim place. I think that it is very important to note that university strategies of inaction (which include things like not hiring to critical mass, not allowing us to develop courses that reflect what we want to teach because it'll never make it through the approval process, leaving "new" professors to do the course revisions regarding race in introductory courses when this should have been a department/program wide initiative) are as silencing and marginalizing as some of the active things they do.

Ironically, many of the instructors noted that university procedures made them accountable when students made accusations that were founded

in racism. Several instructors reported that they had been subjected to having students make official complaints with regard to the content of their teaching. In these situations, instructors reported that the procedures employed by the university protected the student rather than them. For example, one woman who challenged a student's use of racist language reported that rather than having procedures which protected her (and the students of colour and Aboriginal students in her class) from racism, she was charged with racism instead.

I was called into three different offices on the charge of my own "racism" based on the allegations of this student. I was called to defend my position on two occasions after my contract was up, and I was later told that the time and energy that I put into responding to her charges was "voluntary." Students are not made responsible for their own racism. Basically, they would have to physically assault you before the university would be willing to consider any action against them. I did come out on top of all of the charges, after considerable effort on my part.

To summarize, a number of the women reported that their institutions failed to acknowledge the specific challenges that came with teaching anti-racism and Indigenous perspectives. Their experiences suggest that racism is rarely conceptualized as a problem within the university. As a result, the faculty member is left with the "choice" of continuing to pedagogically challenge students and risking their anger, which could result in receiving negative results for their annual course evaluations, and official complaints; or in "toning down" their teaching in response to the racism, and therefore not taking the kind of risks which are often at the heart of good pedagogy.

#### **DEALING WITH THE CHILLY CLIMATE**

All of the women reported that teaching in

such an environment has had a serious impact on their careers and lives. Facing the particular demands that such teaching entails, in the context of the lack of support from administrations, has led to the women receiving lower course evaluations, merit assessments, and facing difficulties with tenure and promotion. In addition, the lack of support from colleagues and administrators perpetuates the hegemony of whiteness, making the workplace a site of extreme alienation. Again, what was notable in the discussion was how such teaching impacted on each participant in remarkably similar ways.

One of the consequences of teaching anti-racism and Indigenous perspectives is burnout. The increased demands that such teaching entails often leads to longer contact hours with students. In addition, such demands make it more difficult for these faculty members to undertake research and administrative duties within the working day making for longer intervals spent on campus after hours. As one woman reported:

The lines at my door are long (and my maximum enrollment in courses of 60 are often 110, while seminars of 15 or 20 students more often have 35). I get phone calls from students in crisis at all hours of the night. It seems very much that I fix one problem and it causes another stress. I can't work or write on campus (and often it will take me a half hour to go from my office to the library when I am in a big hurry to just grab a book or check a footnote).

While dealing with the seriousness of burnout, what all of the women found exceptionally problematic was the degree of racism in the workplace. As one woman wrote:

The stereotypes that one must confront every day from both students and faculty are debilitating on the body and the spirit. My first week on the job, I was given a lecture by a colleague on preparing for winter and snow, despite the fact that this

person in all likelihood had seen my file, and knew I had lived in Canada for some time. Additionally, as everyone knows, the restrictive employment legislation virtually guarantees that the person occupying my position would have to be a citizen or resident alien, who would therefore have some inkling of what snow was!

Another common way in which white hegemony in the workplace operates is the manner in which women of colour and Aboriginal women are excluded from informal networks. As one woman wrote: "For example, gossip is primarily about women of colour and their mishaps, dilemmas etc. Privacy and secrecy exists for white colleagues. If you refuse to be recruited into this, you are simply left out. Precious few are shamed into taking responsibility for their shit. It is impossible to stand outside, to build a cocoon to protect oneself from the hegemonic normative whiteness."

The grind of dealing on a daily basis with covert and overt forms of racism often leads to feeling of anger and depression. One woman reflected what many felt when she stated: "I find the overwhelming whiteness at my university to be so oppressive that I'm not sure it's bearable any more. On my worst days, I say to myself, 'but why can't you just accept it and adjust?' On my better days, the thing that gets me through the severe depression that I was plunged into is that however much my experiences may be individually specific, they are also shared, and expressed in similar ways by other academics of colour." Another woman wrote:

Even though I have developed this bag of tricks to make my teaching experience basically a good one (and I think for my students too), it does not mean that I am not angry, or conscious that my every moment at the university must be a considered and calculated one. I am angry that being a good teacher (or making my classrooms safe) has certain profound

consequences.

What was particularly difficult was that these feelings of anger and depression were often accompanied by self-doubt. A number of the women reported that dealing daily with the racism in their workplace led them to question their own assessment of their teaching and abilities. As one woman wrote:

Incidents of racism work to divide us from ourselves, so we distrust our own judgment. Often, I have been reduced to telling supportive others about incidents and my responses to them, not just to get support, but also to have someone else reaffirm that what I had experienced was racism and not a figment of my imagination. Somewhere along the way I somehow learned to distrust even myself. This is the most painful part of all. In many ways my self-confidence has dwindled. I have found that I keep doubting myself. I have felt like the woman of colour impostor who everyone is going to someday realize is a fake, is not good enough, will be judged by the one slip that she makes.

As another woman noted, the similarities in how many of the participants experience racism provides an excellent window on how whiteness works. As instructors of racism we know well that racism often induces a cycle of self-castigation/ anger and resentment/ fear. What seemed to particularly reinforce such a cycle was the lack of public and official recognition of racism, which isolated these instructors in profound ways. As one woman wrote, the ability to acknowledge that these experiences are shared assisted her in breaking the cycle of depression:

It is incredibly empowering to hear that many of us share similar reactions to the oppressive experiences that we are forced to encounter as Aboriginal women and women of colour in the mainstream,

Eurocentric university environment. For many years in university I really felt alone in my feelings, thoughts and responses to the multiple oppression that I have met with in academia. At times, I was unable to respond in an empowered manner and fell into deep depressions, or became absorbed in my own anger and frustration.

Given that such teaching is accompanied by negative course evaluations, burnout, isolation, alienation, depression and anger, it is not surprising that many of the women questioned whether they wanted to continue to work in such a context. As one woman wrote:

I often question the retention rate. Many of the scholars from my father's generation said that they have done the whole "mainstream university experience" and they would never return. I originally thought that I could serve as a "bridge," but the agony involved in that position makes me question that belief. It's a scary thing to question your career choice.

It is the lack of support from colleagues and administrators, combined with the hegemony of whiteness, which makes university workplaces sites of extreme alienation.

### **MOVING BEYOND SURVIVAL STRATEGIES**

The discussion concluded with a focus on how to move forward. As all of the women stated, they were tired of simply surviving, they wanted to bring about changes. Different strategies were explored, including the need to create a critical mass in hiring, to bring anti-racist and Indigenous thought more centrally into the curriculum, to have the university develop teaching supports and acknowledge systemic discrimination, and to build communities of support. The first step involves speaking out about the extent of racism which women of colour and Aboriginal women are facing within academia.

Secondly, all of the participants pointed to the need to build supports and communities, both within the university and outside, with progressive white faculty as well as faculty of colour and Aboriginal faculty members.

Many of our colleagues are supportive, as are many of our students, and it has little to do with gender, except that many have recognized the very important links between "race" and gender, as well as other forms of difference. Many of them would be much more supportive if we could more effectively communicate to them how we feel. That's why I think this article is so important, and why I hope it will make a difference. But we need to ask also why so many of our colleagues and students, including our Women's Studies colleagues, are so unsupportive, to the point, in some cases, of undermining our efforts to convey the experiences of Aboriginal people and people of colour. Their attitudes, often as not expressed in the "positive" terms of what I have called "orientalism," are a large part of the fact that we feel so vulnerable, hurt, betrayed, or whatever. And it is so difficult when we feel in such a position of vulnerability, to step back and take a clear analytical look at what is happening. As Sherene Razack has shown us in her writing, "looking white people in the eye" is a difficult, fraught and complicated process.

While building links are crucial, many of the women pointed out from their own experience that the process can be quite difficult.

Another crucial strategy for change involves making anti-racism and Indigenous thought more central within the university. One suggestion was to promote the hiring of a critical mass of faculty who would integrate such material into their courses. Another suggestion was to encourage curriculum committees to put forward more courses. As one woman stated, "The curriculum committee will be the 'heart' of the

university, it is important to be there, and in enough numbers to create change. Here is where real coalition-building needs to occur."

While building communities, and providing supports is a starting point, as many of the women pointed out, a fundamental problem is that faculty who do this teaching get such little support from the administration. As we have seen, all of the women reported that administrative responses to racist incidents in the classroom work to legitimize the processes that maintain racism, and to de-legitimize anti-racist and Indigenous pedagogy. The participants pointed out that procedures need to be put into place that ensure that instructors are not punished by administration for the racism of students. The question was how to encourage administrators to do this. As one woman pointed out, in her experience, administrators were generally unresponsive to such concerns:

I am currently working on strategies from filing chilly climate grievances (and it took me two years to get the union on board to doing such a grievance) to talking to administrators (such as Deans) about the reality of my life and the demands on me at the university. It's not really working yet as there has been no structural change. Maybe they understand a little better, but it has not meant anything in real terms to me (or others) yet.

Another woman suggested that administrations be pushed through the use of lawsuits:

I think we need to push administration to acknowledge the hostility we face. We need to charge them with racism, with creating chilly climates, whatever. The fear of a lawsuit seems to be an effective tool, which white women used to break some barriers. It has been effective in the United States. However, while this is what I think we should be doing, I know in my own life, I run out of steam, get afraid, and burned out. So after a few months in

the term, I do not usually have the energy or courage to keep struggling.

An effective way that administrations could support such teaching is to develop teaching support centres that specifically target racism in the classroom:

I have been thinking about what a "support" structure for women of colour in the academy would look like. I don't mean just a forum for women of colour to come together but something more...that challenges the structures which replicate what so many of us experience across contexts. Given that it is primarily new and untenured faculty who are doing the majority of this work, such a center would both provide support to instructors, as well as provide an official acknowledgement that teaching anti-racism and challenging colonialism in general is the responsibility not of individuals but also of institutions.

Finally, the women pointed out that what is crucial in speaking out is that through this process, supportive colleagues and administrators will respond:

The silencing of our voices reproduces hegemony by the mere force of our exclusion and invisibility. The world needs to hear from us. For too long these institutions have gotten off believing that they are doing us "a favour" with "equity" hiring, that we should be "grateful" when they hire us and "let" us teach equity or race relations. Problems of institutional racism for too long have been accounted for in terms of our personal psychological problems. Of course each of us believes that we are the "problem" we are indoctrinated to do so. This serves the needs of the system.

The discussion ended with a call for a conference to further address these issues. Some preliminary discussions have also taken place, concerning the

need for a national association of Aboriginal women and women of colour within academia.

### CONCLUSION

This paper contributes to an extensive body of literature that has documented sexism and racism within the academy. Much of this literature focuses on the ways in which gender biases characterize academic workplaces (Caplan 1993). These writers illustrate the ways in which systemic barriers impact on female faculty - in hiring and promotion decisions, as well as in remuneration (Drackich and Stewart 1998). However much of the work on gender biases fails to explore the ways in which factors such as race, sexuality and disability also shape the ways in which women experience the academy.

In contrast, there is also a body of writing by Aboriginal women and women of colour which has pointed out that factors such as race are important in mitigating the ways in which gender works within the academy (Carty 1991; LaRocque 1997; Monture-Angus 1995; Mukherjee 1992; Razack 1998). While this literature is rich in pointing to the ways in which racism leads to forms of systemic bias, much of this work has documented individual cases with systemic discrimination. Notably, many of these writers have indicated that one of the ways in which systemic discrimination takes place is through the canons and pedagogical paradigms of most disciplines - as these work to marginalise Aboriginal women and women of colour (Bannerji et al 1995; Monture-Angus 1995; Mukerjee 1992; Graveline 1998). As a result, these writers have pointed to the importance of transforming academic knowledge and structures. This article adds to this rich literature by pointing to the ways in which the classroom is a site of systemic discrimination for those who are engaged in teaching anti-racism and Indigenous perspectives. The extent to which all of the women shared these experiences points to the pervasiveness of this form of discrimination.

That the classroom is a site of systemic discrimination raises a number of issues for addressing equity within universities. Most

importantly, it points to the need to develop strong procedures that protect instructors from the consequences of teaching Indigenous perspectives and anti-racism. The circumstances that women of colour and Aboriginal women face in teaching anti-racism and Indigenous perspectives commonly "fall through the cracks" of university human rights procedures and "chilly climate clauses," as equity procedures generally assume that when the classroom is a site of racism, this takes the form of faculty racism towards students. In addition, it raises questions of how we evaluate such teaching. As we have seen, rather than acknowledging that such teaching comes with the risk of evoking strong negative responses from students, the procedures for evaluations hold instructors accountable.

That the classroom is a site of systemic discrimination raises concerns around the limitations of current equity policies. As this paper suggests, it has been the often newly hired Aboriginal women and women of colour who have taken on the challenge of transforming the canons of various disciplines. However, they do this in relative isolation, leading to both their marginalization as well as the marginalization of such teaching within the university. Such isolation and marginalization points to the importance of hiring in critical mass, making links and building communities, and pushing for a broader reform of curriculum. It also points to the importance of linking equity procedures for hiring policies to equity provisions that eliminate systemic forms of discrimination in the workplace.

While the paper begins to document the ways in which those who teach Indigenous perspectives and anti-racism experience the classroom as a site of discrimination, several questions need further exploration. In particular, as the participants included only Aboriginal women and women of colour, the question that emerges is whether white men and women, or Aboriginal men and men of colour, who do such teaching have the same experiences. As importantly, the different ways in which Aboriginal women and women of colour experience the classroom needs much more investigation. While this paper documents that both kinds of teaching are accompanied by similar forms



of discrimination, we have not sufficiently explored the specific forms of discrimination that accompany teaching Indigenous perspectives. Also left relatively unexplored are the pedagogical techniques that are specific to teaching Indigenous Perspectives. Another area for investigation is the issue of difference within groups. For Aboriginal women, the discussion raised the issue of the ways in which Indian status shapes Aboriginal women's experiences within the academy. Those with status, those who do not have status and Metis women had very different relations to other colleagues and administrations. Similarly, another issue that needs further exploration is the differences between women of colour. While the participants included those who were of East Asian, South Asian, Caribbean and African descent, we need to further examine the ways in which differences in racialization impact in the classroom. Also the ways in which immigration status, language, sexuality and disability mitigate the affects of race and gender need further attention.

What emerges from this paper is the chilling reality which accompanies the teaching of Indigenous perspectives and anti-racism in the classroom. The challenge of dealing with student hostility is accompanied by the lack of official recognition of the difficulties that characterize this kind of teaching.

## ENDNOTES

1. In this paper, anti-racist perspectives include a range of approaches, from challenging white hegemony in general, to explicitly focussing on Canada's colonial relationship towards Indigenous people, and on colonialism and neocolonialism globally. At the same time, a number of Indigenous educators are focussing on imparting Indigenous worldviews. While this kind of work is anti-colonial in nature, in this paper it will be referred to as Indigenous thought or Indigenous perspectives.

2. In the discussion, "whiteness" was identified as an important mechanism through which Aboriginal women and women of colour were marginalised within academia. Through the discussion, the participants came to define "whiteness" as a process by which a hegemonic understanding of normality is constructed. Notably, this definition of whiteness does not refer to essentialist assumptions and undifferentiated stereotypes about labelling people through the colour of their skin, but rather to the dominant manner of doing things, a set of cultural patterns that carries with it all the baggage of colonialism, privilege, domination and sense of belonging. It's about whiteness as normativity. People designated as "white" do not need to practice whiteness.

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