

Counter-storytelling: The Experiences of Women of Colour in Higher Education

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Abstract

This article is based on a research study that explored the experiences of women of colour at the University of British Columbia (UBC), using critical race feminism as epistemology. Critical race feminism sets out to understand how society organizes itself along the intersections of race, gender, class, and all forms of social hierarchies. Critical race feminist theory utilizes counter-storytelling to legitimize the voices and experiences of women of colour, and draws on these knowledges in efforts to eradicate all forms of social oppression. In this research study, women of colour students, non-academic staff, faculty, and non-university community members shared their experiences of systemic exclusion at and in relation to UBC. These stories, based on intersectional and multiple sites of oppression, unveiled hegemonic structures and practices which prevented these groups from participating as legitimate, equal, and contributing members of the institution.

Résumé

Cet article se base sur une étude de recherche dans laquelle l'on a exploré les expériences de femmes de couleur à l'Université de la Colombie-Britannique (UBC), en employant la méthode critique féministe raciale comme épistémologie. La critique féministe raciale entreprend de comprendre

comment la société s'organise selon les intersections de race, genre, classe sociale, et toutes les formes de hiérarchies sociales. La théorie féministe raciale utilise la méthode de riposte au conte afin de légitimer les voix et les expériences des femmes de couleur, et s'inspire de ces connaissances, dans le cadre de leurs efforts pour éliminer toutes les formes d'oppressions sociales. Dans cette recherche, des étudiantes de couleur, des employées non universitaires, des membres du corps professoral et des personnes qui ne sont pas membres de la communauté universitaire partagent leurs expériences d'exclusion systémique au sein de, et en relation avec UBC. Ces histoires, basées sur de multiples sites d'oppressions inter-sectionnelles, ont révélé des structures hégémoniques et des pratiques qui empêchent à ces groupes de participer en tant que membres légaux, égaux, et contributeurs de l'institution.

Background

The original purpose of this research project was to explore the experiences of women of colour at, and with, the University of British Columbia (UBC) in a service-learning context from a critical race feminist perspective (Verjee 2010). The author was interested in exploring the development of service learning from this perspective based on the knowledge that the academy remains a site of systemic injustices. It is well established that the dominant culture of universities is premised on ideologies of whiteness, patriarchy, and classism, which function to colonize, marginalize, and silence racialized students, non-academic staff, and faculty (Bannerji 2000; hooks 2003; Razack 1998). As the research study commenced, the centrality of service learning shifted to the periphery, and the perceptions and experiences of the research participants—their counter-stories—moved to the centre.

Research Methodology

Stories or narratives told by dominant groups are generally legitimized in the academy and society. Such narratives provide members of these groups with a shared sense of identity within society and its institutions. Their identities and life experiences are also reflected in dominant discourses and practices, and are viewed as mainstream, natural, and widely accepted as the “truth.” Such reflections of “truth” can determine and limit who gets to speak, be heard, and be valued. Counter-stories are, therefore, narratives of marginalized persons who speak of social injustice. Their stories, often not legitimized in society, speak against such “truths.” Critical race theory (CRT) is a methodology that utilizes counter-storytelling to look at transforming the relationship between race, racism, and power (Delgado and Stefancic 2000).

Critical race feminist theory (CRFT), as a category of critical race theory, puts power relations at the centre of the discourse on gender, race, class, and all forms of social oppression. It involves the examination of the intersections of social oppression and how their combinations play out in various settings (Delgado and Stefancic 2000). Utilizing CRFT, fourteen women (students, non-academic staff, faculty, and non-university community members) were interviewed as part of this research study. They were representative of a diverse range of educational faculties and university departments at UBC, and also included women in non-university community settings who had been involved with UBC in some partnership capacity. They were recruited via posters, electronic postings, and word of mouth through snowball sampling, and ranged in age from twenty-five to fifty-nine years. They identified as women of colour and spoke of their identities as being fluid and multiple: Canadian, non-white, non-Aboriginal, immigrant settlers on First Nations land, straight, queer, and lesbian. They described their cultural backgrounds as Chinese, Filipina, Korean, Caribbean, Haitian, Jamaican, Jamaican-Costa Rican, Black, African, Kenyan, South Asian, Indo-Canadian, Indo-Ugandan-Canadian, East Indian, and mixed race (part European ancestry).

Of the fourteen women interviewed, six were UBC students. Four of these students were undergraduates, and two were graduate students. Three of the women interviewed were non-academic staff at UBC, and two of the women were part-time faculty members. Two of the fourteen women were non-university community members. Finally, one of the women interviewed was a part-time faculty member at another institution of higher education in Vancouver who had been a graduate student at UBC.

Two face-to-face interviews (1.5 hours each) were conducted with each woman at a time and at a confidential location convenient to them. Each interview was transcribed and a second interview was scheduled to review the themes and transcripts from the first interview. A semi-structured interview technique was utilized, with standardized questions and the use of an interview protocol, which sought to elicit the participants' perceptions and experiences at and with UBC. However, discussions often became conversational, allowing participants to reflect on their experiences.

The women interviewed spoke of the importance of not essentializing their identities and experiences, yet also noted a political affiliation with other women of colour experiencing subordination through sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, and other intersecting forms of oppression. They came from diverse and unequally situated locations within and outside the structures of the academy as students, non-academic staff, faculty, and non-university community members. Each of their differently located experiences is delineated under the themes that emerged from the interviews.

Perceptions and Experiences

James (2010) states that the impact of racism, and the values, attitudes, and ideas expressed are not merely a product of encounters with other individuals, but are structured by the ideologies, ethics, and practices of institutions and society. These very real experiences of discrimination are experienced as trauma on one's physical and mental health, and Delgado (2000) suggests that

race-based stigmatization is “one of the more fruitful causes of human misery” (131).

Racialized students, non-academic staff, and faculty have acknowledged that institutions of higher education are toxic and hostile (Henry and Tator 2010). Much research has shown that the day-to-day reality for women of colour in the academy involves overcoming hurdles, constantly having to negotiate the institutional landscape, mediating confrontations, and fighting to survive a relentless onslaught of racialized micro-aggressions (Bannerji 2000; hooks 2003; Razack 1998; Carter 2003). The women interviewed spoke of daily micro-aggressions and the trauma of being unseen, unheard, devalued, silenced, delegitimized, disempowered, scrutinized, disciplined, and perceived as inferior. The following are some of the themes that emerged from the interviews: racialization as trauma; lack of commitment to curricular and pedagogical transformation; low representation of racialized faculty; low representation of racialized non-academic staff in management and senior management; and lack of commitment to institutionalizing diversity in the academy.

Racialization as “Other”

According to James (2010), colonialism operates in Canadian society today as part of an ideology of social differentiation sustained by the political, economic, and social domination of one racial group by another. Higher education is seen as a political and educational site where power relations and social inequality are reproduced (Wagner 2008). Such sites operate in ways that usually negate the experiences of racialized peoples, and in doing so reinscribe them as “outsiders,” thereby making it difficult to establish themselves as legitimate, equal, and contributing participants within these institutions (James 2003; Razack 1998). Physical appearance, in particular skin colour, is part of the process of racialization, whereby the racialized are constructed as “other,” inferior, and subordinate. Stamped with a badge of inferiority, racialized peoples are denied opportunities and equal treatment, and excluded from participation in any meaningful way (Delgado 2000; Henry and Tator 2010).

A non-university community member shared her experience of silencing because of her racialized status, present but invisible in white-dominated spaces in both educational institutions and community organizations. She spoke of how insignificant she felt in not being seen or acknowledged:

“When I’ve worked within institutions or organizations which have been predominantly white, I’ve encountered situations where I haven’t been acknowledged...i.e., no eye contact, no greeting. At these times I’ve felt excluded and invisible.” (Verjee 2010)

A faculty member who taught English spoke of her experience of being suspect because of her racialized status and being questioned regularly by students in ways that “othered” and discredited her:

“I’ve constantly been asked where I learned English. That’s why I have to remind people that I have a [graduate degree] in English...I’ve had a student say to me in a class, ‘I know my housekeeper is from the Caribbean, and she sounds like you and she looks like you, and do you know her?’” (Verjee 2010)

Her accent and skin colour delegitimize her from being recognized as a person who fully comprehends English, let alone has authority teach the English language. In addition, her social identity is compared to that of a student’s housekeeper, which constructs her as a person who does not belong in the academy. Such “out of place” delegitimization is a form of racialized micro-aggression. She commented: “You can be the colour or face of the person to whom English is marketed, but not the face of the person who teaches it.” Experiences of a “chilly” climate are common on university campuses where women of colour continue to experience barriers that decrease their visibility, power, and voice as they encounter sexism, racism, and classism (Mayuzumi and Shahjahan 2008).

Students also spoke of experiences of racism. One of the undergraduate students worked as an assistant director for a student-based organization. She stated that she was constantly being surveyed and undermined

by her director, a white student. While working with student clients, the student director would often interrupt and take over, suggesting that the student was incapable of doing her job. She felt undermined and humiliated by this behaviour:

“Somebody [a student] would be asking me a question and I would be helping them just fine, and she [the director] would come in with this solid, resonating voice and just interrupt, without any regard for what I’ve said.” (Verjee 2010)

In response, the student worked harder and longer hours with more student clients to challenge any preconceptions about her personal and professional deficiencies. Working beyond the call of duty actually backfired as she was eventually denied a promotion. She explained:

“And in the end that actually backfired. Because when I applied for the directorship, she [the director] said that I was unable to say ‘no’ to people. I was unable to set limits.” (Verjee 2010)

No matter what she did, then, she was perceived as not having what it took to be in a leadership position. Such experiences of marginalization carry heavy emotional and psychological consequences.

A culture that reinforces hierarchies of power and control also causes students to fear instructors. hooks (2003) suggests that when racialized students realize that teachers and peers in predominantly white settings view them as less capable, they begin to feel and perform in ways that makes for “confirmation bias,” where the student performs badly, which in turn confirms the teachers’ expectations. A graduate student described going out of her way to please her white instructor by agreeing to take on a research project on a topic of interest to her instructor. She encountered criticism throughout this project and felt she never measured up to her instructor’s expectations, thereby damaging her own self-esteem. She claimed:

“I just got the impression right off that she [the instructor] didn’t expect much of me. That you had to prove yourself...So, I was constantly trying to

please her and what she really thought I ought to be doing, rather than what I wanted to do, and that was a really negative experience altogether. (Verjee 2010)

Another graduate student experienced confusion in some of her graduate seminars. Questions she asked about histories of oppression and systemic injustices were blatantly ignored or dismissed. She began to see a pattern of dismissal and realized that many instructors were incapable of working with conflicting worldviews in their classrooms, and that the academic system was structured to oppress. She claimed:

“As I went through the education system, a lot of the time the questions I had and what I wanted to learn weren’t being addressed. So I thought maybe there’s something I’m not getting. ‘I’m not intelligent enough.’...It’s a real blow to your self-esteem, not just in that your stories aren’t being heard, but you’re always constantly second guessing yourself ...and you’re like, ‘I know there’s something wrong with what he [instructor] just said.’” (Verjee 2010)

The daily onslaught of these kinds of micro-aggressions manifests as self-doubt and low self-worth because these experiences inform people of colour that they are not respected or granted the same kind of courtesy accorded to dominant groups. They are reminded over and over that they are “less than,” inferior, or unintelligent, and some begin to believe and internalize these constructions of “otherness.” In addition, being a body “out of place” in white institutions has emotional and psychological costs to the bearer of that “difference” (Mirza 2006). Delgado (2000) suggests that in coping, racialized people are left with few choices—they either hate themselves or have no sense of self at all. For example, a non-academic staff member spoke of her continued hypervigilance and self-monitoring around maintaining a confident sense of self even though she struggled with challenging internal conceptions of “otherness.” She disclosed:

“I cannot allow myself to be seen with less authority than I want to convey. I can’t permit myself to be seen as if I don’t have it together because the

forces of marginality and inferiority are such that it is a constant struggle to maintain some dignity and some equanimity.” (Verjee 2010)

Lack of Commitment to Curricular and Pedagogical Transformation

Dei, Karumanchery and Karumanchery-Luik (2004), and Calliste (2000) state that universities, being state sanctioned and funded, support and reproduce inequities. The ideology of the white settler nation-state is reflected and supported by the academy, where classrooms and interactions mirror the everyday world (Razack 1998). Many instructors of colour teaching in the academy have argued that neither their presence nor their histories are recognized in the academy (Henry and Tator 2010).

UBC was certainly viewed as an institution that continues to support the ongoing task of nation-building through the centring of Eurocentric and male-dominated knowledges. Though the women interviewed agreed that there are programs and courses that provide alternate spaces and critical studies, in general, education was seen as reinforcing the status quo. One faculty member stated:

“I don’t think our education, as it stands, really does very good justice to non-white groups in this university. I think we really get a very Europeanized history of the world...That’s not to say we don’t have courses or programs that relate to other cultures and histories, but in terms of what we really celebrate and what is really promoted, I think it is European.” (Verjee 2010)

Campbell (2003) suggests that most institutions of higher education in Canada lack a concrete commitment to diversity and inclusion. Diversity is usually responded to by teaching a bit of this and a bit of that as add-on approaches, but there is little rigorous reorganization of the curriculum. Most of the curriculum is still grounded in a dominant framework that disappears or erases “othered” worldviews. When students challenge mainstream curriculum and teaching practices, instructors often reprimand them. A student experienced such offence when she offered a different perspective in a term paper for one of her courses:

“So, I got the paper back, got a bad mark, and the professor wrote that I was too angry, too bitter [and] that I shouldn’t be bringing in my personal experiences—that they had nothing to do with the paper. I think I was writing about the institution of slavery, so I went to see the professor and I said, ‘Well, actually it is related. This is a legacy that I live, and it may have happened 400 years ago, but it’s still a collective [memory with real consequences of social exclusion]’...He said something like I was always playing the race card in class.” (Verjee 2010)

In the paper, the student was personalizing the theoretical by not remaining in the position of passive learner, but by being reflexive about her history and her position within a system of oppression and domination. Suggesting a student is “playing the race card” is not only a form of racist micro-aggression, it is also a strategy that disciplines, silences, and disempowers students, and maintains white privilege (hooks 2003). Wagner (2008) states that for women learners, the task of theorizing the personal is not easy and often leads to conflict in the classroom. The above quote is an example of how some instructors treat students when they challenge mainstream curriculum, and an example of how the academy fails racialized students. Mirza (2006) suggests that racialized students are more likely to leave university before completing their programs because of unmet expectations about higher education. Though anecdotal, the students interviewed also felt that there were higher attrition rates for students of colour than their white counterparts.

A non-university community member stated that she often encountered UBC students with little or no understanding of the history of colonialism or oppression in Canadian society. For example, many students in service-learning placements at her community-based centre were unaware of the residential school system, others wondered whether sexism or racism still existed, and some did not know what heterosexism was. She spoke of the enormous responsibility placed on her shoulders to decolonize the minds of students sent through university-community placements. Another non-univer-

sity community member spoke of a need to broaden the curriculum by integrating alternate worldviews that speak back and challenge dominant ideologies of Eurocentrism. She suggested that in preparing for community-university partnerships, curricula must address political, economic, and social injustices:

“In preparation to partner with communities of colour, the academic environment should provide a forum that would enable faculty and students to examine, analyze, and address their own issues around oppression. The curriculum content would be diverse enough to include non-Eurocentric, feminist, and anti-oppression pedagogy, and analyses.” (Verjee 2010)

Low Representation of Racialized Faculty

Dei, Karumanchery and Karumanchery-Luik (2004) state that instructors in post-secondary institutions remain primarily white, and that racialized faculty sometimes make up less than 5% of educators; furthermore, there is generally a lack of commitment to hiring faculty of colour at these institutions (Campbell 2003). On the other hand, racialized students often comprise 50% or more of the student population in many post-secondary institutions (Campbell 2003). In addition, as a group, women make up almost 60% of undergraduate students, 45% of Ph.D. students, but only 18.8% of full professors (Ollivier et al. 2006). However, women of colour represent only 3.4% of full professors in Canadian universities (Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences 2006). Their numbers, as professors, are significantly lower than their male counterparts (Henry and Tator 2010).

Students interviewed expressed a desire for an increase in racialized faculty representation for mentoring, support, and guidance. Luther, Whitmore, and Moreau (2001) state that racialized students are drawn to similar faculty members as role models, as experts in mutual areas of interest, as personal advisors, and as research supervisors. Students desire to be understood without the need to explain what they are experiencing in the academy. They want to feel comfortable

in exploring critical questions in a supportive environment which does not threaten them, but stimulates them intellectually and affirms who they are. In addition, Luther, Whitmore, and Moreau (2001) state that racialized students deserve instructors who will provide insights into how to deal with the problems of systemic discrimination that they are likely to face in the academy. An undergraduate student remembered the first time she met a racialized faculty member, and what a surprise and how inspiring this was for her. She found herself engaged for the first time in her academic program:

“And you know, I was stunned. And I double-checked that she has a ‘doctor’ beside her name... [During the course] I found myself asking questions. I found myself engaged, and I found myself really interested...I would never do that before. You know, no way!” (Verjee 2010)

The few racialized faculty hired at post-secondary institutions in Canada carry an invisible knapsack of many demands and responsibilities, and there is generally a lack of understanding by leadership and senior administrators of these demands. Luther, Whitmore, and Moreau (2001) indicate that much of what the small numbers of racialized faculty do in addition to their regular workload goes unnoticed, such as the ongoing support and encouragement that is provided by them to the many racialized students seeking support. This hidden work is in addition to the community involvement projects, research, and publishing activities they are also engaged in. Henry and Tator (2010) acknowledge that racialized women carry an excessive weight of expectations and demands that goes far beyond that of their white colleagues. A graduate student spoke of the need for increased racialized representation to lessen the burden of having to meet all the demands placed on racialized instructors:

“First of all, it [UBC] would need that the different departments would hire people of colour. If there aren’t people of colour in the faculty, how are you even going to find a mentor? And it should not just be one token person, because I’ve seen that before, and the person just gets burdened with

everything, with teaching race, with mentoring people, and it's just too much." (Verjee 2010)

Demands by colleagues, through requests to be guest speakers in different classes, usually on topics of race, ethnicity, or cultural issues, further exacerbate an already heavy workload for racialized faculty in post-secondary institutions. This additional work consumes energy and time, leaving little time for activities supporting tenure and promotion, and further marginalizes them. In addition, Kerl and Moore (2001) state that there are huge costs associated with such marginalization, costs that range from having one's research and teaching located on the margins, to being punished for speaking out about inequities.

Increasing the numbers of racialized faculty would not only provide mentoring, support, and validation for racialized students in the academy, but would also advance the standards of education by providing richer and broader learning experiences for all students. Excellence in teaching is not only about competence; it is also about representation. According to Luther, Whitmore, and Moreau (2001), having a critical mass of racialized faculty is a means to equity.

Low Representation of Racialized Non-academic Staff in Management and Senior Management

It is well documented that the majority of non-academic support staff and service workers in many academic institutions are non-white (Bannerji 2000; hooks 2003; Razack 1998). In contrast, many universities have conducted employee workforce audits, which indicate a significant level of underrepresentation of women of colour in management and senior-level non-academic positions (Henry and Tator 2010). This disparity suggests that there are some very real discriminatory practices in place that prevent people of colour from being hired and promoted into leadership positions, and that employment equity policies have mainly benefited white women. More specifically, the non-academic staff spoke of UBC's lack of commitment to hiring, retaining, and promoting non-academic staff of colour into manage-

ment and senior levels of management within the academy.

Many of the women interviewed spoke of "gatekeeping" practices within UBC that prevent racialized non-academic staff from being promoted. Homogeneous social groups, primarily white, often meet outside work for social events and dinners, and sometimes celebrate holidays or festivities together. Information about vacancies or opportunities for advancement in departments is exchanged at such gatherings. When job vacancies come up, departments are known to hire personnel that they know, people that are viewed as a "fit." Calliste (2000) states that gaining employment and promotion through the ranks in non-academic positions is often not based on merit. She suggests that one must be a member of a privileged group to be perceived as suitable and supportive of the status quo. In addition, hiring or interviewing committees are also often homogeneous and white in make-up. White people are therefore more likely to be hired and promoted into leadership positions. A non-academic staff member gave an example of this:

"For example, management hire people that they know versus posting positions for short-term positions, one year maternity leaves, etc. with the rationale that it's easier than posting a position, [i.e.] advertising to the broader community for appropriate candidates. The result is that those individuals who are already known get more opportunities than the unknown. White candidates get hired for short contracts, gain valuable on-site job experience, 'fit', and then get hired when the permanent positions come up. This is a typical UBC hiring practice, and is discriminatory." (Verjee 2010)

Another non-academic staff member stated that white women are quick to be promoted or parachuted into leadership positions without these positions going to open competition. In doing so, they are provided with opportunities to develop their management skills, and such opportunities enable them to move into senior management positions. As Razack (2002) reminds us, the more prestigious and higher-paying jobs in post-second-

ary institutions remain white, whereas the lower levels remain racialized.

Economic discrimination occurs through discriminatory practices that limit racialized people's access to and employment in desirable positions, including positions of leadership. Because of these discriminatory practices, racialized candidates who are eminently qualified lose employment opportunities and advances in employment (hooks 2003). Such people, even with educational qualifications that should position them within the "meritocratic" circuit to gain returns from that education, experience disadvantages and discrimination. Another non-academic staff member, even though very well-qualified, experienced barriers to being placed in a leadership position because her white colleagues claimed that she made them feel uncomfortable:

"In the workplace, I'm not seen to 'fit in'. My presence seems to cause discomfort and mistrust. People have said, 'she makes me feel uncomfortable'. I'm not perceived to be suitable for leadership positions where I would be giving orders, or [where] I would have authority over a white person. This is all part of the underground discourse, which translates itself into actuality. You get mysteriously passed over for leadership positions in favour of a white person who is less qualified and less competent. The galling thing is that you are expected to train and prop that person up." (Verjee 2010)

This example illuminates white discourses and spaces that are structured to keep people of colour socially and economically marginalized. A student, critical of the discriminatory hiring and promotion practices at UBC, spoke of the hierarchy of race in keeping the upper echelons of UBC white. She observed that, while there was certainly a critical mass of racialized people working at the institution, such people were overrepresented in service-related spaces:

"I think the institution needs to have much more representation of people of colour in positions of power because we certainly have lots of people of colour in the institution, but they're not in positions where they're influencing students. They're actual-

ly men and women who are bowing down to students, who are picking up students' garbage." (Verjee 2010)

Lack of Commitment to Institutionalizing Diversity

The non-academic staff interviewed for this study facilitate diversity and social justice training across the campus, including through organizing activities that involve internationalizing the campus. They stated that there is much resistance to social justice training and education by senior management at UBC. A non-academic staff member shared an experience regarding a conversation she had with her director on the development of a diversity workshop for students. Her director wanted to focus the content of the workshop on understanding cultural differences and celebrating diversity, and nothing related to social justice. She relayed:

"I was told that this approach [social justice] was a dangerous approach, and that I better be careful, that it was 'immoral'. Which horrified me! I was shocked." (Verjee 2010)

Such attitudes from people with power and privilege shame marginalized individuals, which contributes to continued experiences of oppression. Such shaming also centres dominant values and morals in the workplace. Dominant discourses in academic spaces function in ways that privilege whiteness, where white dominance and morality inform what is worth knowing and worth doing (Schick 2002). hooks (2003) states that systematic shaming operates as a mode of oppression, colonizing the minds and the imaginations of racialized peoples. Those who shame crush the spirit of people who strive for social change, and practise a form of emotional violence and psychological terrorism. Such management practices are hurtful, devaluing, and degrading, and maintain the subordination of "racialized others."

Often programs and events that are life-sustaining for disenfranchised people, such as Black History Month, the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Women's History Month, Pride Week, etc., are tokenized as one-off events, and,

therefore, their intents are not built into other institutional programs, such as student development and leadership programs.. These “othered” histories and knowledges are also not integrated into the everyday teaching and learning environment. Yet, these very events and programs were life-affirming to many students and non-academic staff of colour at UBC, many of whom help coordinate these events on a voluntary basis.

These short, intermittent events bring people together in creating community, but take on a multicultural or celebratory approach to promoting diversity as they do little to shift hegemonic structures and practices. They are seen as stop-gap measures in education as such programs do little to challenge systemic injustices. An undergraduate student talked about how degrading and disrespectful this diversity as celebratory paradigm was to her:

“Let’s enjoy each other’s food, and let’s go to the Chinese New Year Festival, and then to the Caribbean Festival in July, and then go to the Powell Street Festival for Japanese culture’ and things like that where it’s surface, very tokenizing and quite frankly, belittling. I’m more than that. I’m more than my food and great costumes and dances.” (Verjee 2010)

Ahmed and Swan (2006) suggest that, in “showcasing” diversity and holding celebratory events accompanied by happy “colourful” faces, systemic inequities faced by people of colour remain hidden. In addition, by being the caretakers of diversity, people of colour are repositioned as “outsiders within,” and institutions are discharged from doing this work. James (2003) maintains that “diversity” represents nothing more than a public relations enterprise that yields support and financial benefits for publicly funded institutions to justify their continued claim to government funding and to raising tuition fees, particularly for international students. Mirza (2006) adds that an “inclusion” framework is also a desirable feature in higher education as “good for business.” She argues that “diversity” statements act as a mechanism for reproducing institutional hegemony and operate in ways that keep the project of

diversity stuck and unfinished, as if “saying is doing” (104). Diversity statements and policies in higher education have little to do with transforming the academy, and have fundamentally failed to change the culture of whiteness within academia (Henry and Tator 2010).

Summary

Institutions of higher learning in Canada continue to be sites in which racism, sexism, and intersecting forms of oppression are produced, reproduced, and maintained. Despite claims of access, inclusion, and equity, academia remains a landscape of white privilege. The women of colour interviewed for this study shared their experiences and knowledges through counter-stories of systemic oppression and exclusion at and in relation to UBC, hoping to illuminate the structures and practices of white dominance and privilege that continue to remain firmly in place. Such systemic exclusion reinscribed them as “outsiders,” making it difficult for them to establish themselves as legitimate, equal, and fully contributing participants within the academy. It was their hope that these counter-stories would help prepare the path for the next generation of racialized learners, instructors, non-academic staff, and community partners, so that they would travel a road less troubled.

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