

Knowing the Self and the Reason for Being

Navigating Racism in the Academy

BEVERLY-JEAN DANIEL

Pour survivre dans un collège canadien il faut que ceux et celles qui sont discriminés soient très motivés dans leurs stratégies. L'auteure rapporte une gamme de stratégies qu'elle a utilisées avec les étudiants et autres membres de la faculté pour se garder en sécurité et lucide pendant qu'elle essayait de transformer le climat du collège.

When I first entertained the thought of writing this paper, I was in the midst of yet another fight with the administrators of the institution in which I worked, related to the importance of being intentional in focusing on Black student success. My first reaction was to give voice to the varying forms of racial violation that I was experiencing and witnessing. While I was challenging policies that were clearly discriminatory in their application, particularly towards already marginalized students, I was also forced to bear witness to the varying forms of anti-black racism that were being directed towards students. For example, many students spoke of the openness with which White students vilified Blacks, both in the context of the classrooms and in the hallways of the ivory towers of academia. In

addition, there were the ever-present misrepresentations of Blackness that pervaded the curriculum, the abject refusal on the part of some faculty members to acknowledge the intelligence of the students, and the continued imposition of troubling and racially coded analyses of the behaviours of the students. Along with the aforementioned issues, many Black students were also dealing with visible manifestations of internalized racism, which they neither recognized nor understood. This internalization was evidenced in the ways in which many of them had almost completely embodied societal notions of failure, along with the stereotypical performances of Black femaleness and maleness. And I was stuck somewhere in the middle, trying to support Black students in challenging the racism through varying forms of transformative resistance, and critiquing and troubling their internalized racism, while simultaneously pushing for institutional change. Added to this, I could not dismiss the fact that as a Black woman, I was a consistent target of gendered and racial violence and discrimination in Canadian society at large and that my presence in the

ivory tower was a disruption in the sea of whiteness and masculinity.

Black women's bodies are constructed in very specific ways: as the angry Black woman; as the welfare queen; the video vixen; as the caretaker of White children and always as the strong Black woman. We are seldom regarded as brilliant, beautiful, engaging, caring, warm or vulnerable. These markings are imposed upon us by White and other racialized faulty and as such the assaults on us can come from multiple spaces. It becomes almost impossible at times to determine whether the violence we experience is a result of our race, our gender or the assumption that we are interlopers in the academy. The relentless assaults take a toll on us, at times resulting in an internalization of the pain because we are forced to remain in the strong Black woman stereotype.

There were several interchanges in the years of being in the academy that convinced me that I needed to move beyond the bloodletting that occurs when oppression is tabled for discussion. The discussion needed to be deliberate in its intent to engage in a conversation about self-preservation

in the academy while continuing to engage in disruptions of the embedded fabric of racism in the Canadian academy. The first incident that spurred the change in focus occurred when two young women, who had been in a classroom during the racist tirade of one of their White male classmates, which included him being given high-fives of approval by other White students, came running into my office to find a way to purge the venom of gendered and racist violence out of their systems. This incident occurred on a Friday afternoon, and my focus in that situation was to ensure that these young women were supported in identifying strategies to get the venom out of their systems so that they would not spend the weekend ruminating in another person's hate.

The second situation that presented itself was occasioned a few weeks later when I was asked to sit on a panel with other Black female academics to discuss strategies for surviving in the academy. In this room were over 50 Black holders of masters and doctoral degrees, who came out on a rainy spring evening to attend our talk. I was taken aback by the sheer numbers that came out to the standing room only event. I was most surprised however, by the interest they expressed in figuring out how to navigate the direct and indirect forms of racism that sit firmly planted on the surface, as well as the insidious forms of racism that live within the folds, the private spaces, the ideologies and minds of members of the academy. I remember walking down the hallway to where the event was being held, and the walls were decorated entirely with pictures of White men and women who were former presidents and other officials of the institution. The messages inherent in the faces, the stares, the bodies that occupied the walls were very clear—we belong here! There was no break in the message,

no misunderstanding of the messages to those non-white bodies that were forced to walk through the hallway of Whiteness—you are an interloper and there is no space here for you.

In the pages that follow, I explore and discuss some potential strategies of self-sustaining resistance that can be adapted within the academy. Let me be clear! Canadian society and its institutions need to be overhauled to address the insidiousness of anti-Black racism and gendered violence. However, we need to be able to survive the daily onslaught if we are going to continue the fight. Over the years I have had all too many students, particularly young racialized women, in my office in tears in fight or flight mode whose physical, mental and emotional well-being were being assaulted once again. What follows is a synopsis of the conversations that we have had, and varying iterations thereof, all intended to support them in maintaining their sanity in spaces of higher learning that, at times, appear to produce more mental instability than intelligent thought.

Understand the Context, Changing the Narrative, Change Your Perspective

I have come to believe that in order to survive the racism that is endemic in academia, it is important to use alternative frames to understand the context within which the raced body is located. Racism and its purveyors are central figures in each academic institution. They are embedded within the leadership, the faculty, the board members, and at the administrative staff level. There are very few spaces of safety and escape from its tentacles. "Racism is so embedded in the very essence, sinew, and fiber of the academy that what is normal to a racist is abnormal to everyone else, but who is listening?" (Randolph and Weems 311). As the above quote indicates,

racism is central to the functioning of the institution not because there is no other way of doing business, but simply that those who are otherwise privileged by its very existence, refuse to entertain the possibility of an alternative option. However, alternative understandings can dictate new options for self-sustenance and resistance.

If one were to use the analogy of an organism to describe the academy, the main biological imperative of that organism is survival. If therefore, the organism has successfully replicated itself and maintained its viability across the lifespan of many generations, changing the way it functions, its environment, or any aspect of its behavior can be seen as a possible root to its demise. Post-secondary institutions, like all aspects of schooling, have been historically designed and are contemporarily replicated to ensure the survival of its species, i.e., the dominant or those in power. Its concomitant purpose is to control those who have had subordinate status imposed upon them. In other words, the organism must ensure that all potential threats are contained, subsumed, or destroyed. In the context of the academy, anyone who is not White, is regarded as a potential threat to the organization.

Racism is an unfortunate reality that has been around in varying manifestations, across the globe. When Black people experience racism in the academy, there can be an internalization of the trauma, which can have a range of impacts. Researchers have linked the experience of racism to higher levels of stress, depression, and anxiety disorders (Carter; Dua and Lawrence). Recognize that the deployment of racism is not based on you or anything that is deficient in you, but is instead based on a system of oppression that is attempting to sustain itself.

During one of the most toxic

encounters with racism that I experienced in the academy, I began to have a range of symptoms, including incessant colds, muscular aches, headaches, unexplained dizziness, etc. The extent of the symptoms resulted in me having to take an extended leave of absence, because work was literally killing me. Added to this, was an ongoing battery of tests and

no history of interacting with you, that person is dealing with their own internalized hatred that has nothing to do with you. In much the same way that when people are disrespectful or nasty, you may attribute that behavior to a lack of proper upbringing and personal development, racism functions in much the same way. People who

themselves palatable to White company. Blacks who immerse themselves in Whiteness seldom enter into forms of engagement that may rustle or unsettle the master's domain, thereby ensuring that they continue to be looked upon with grace and afforded the privilege of White acceptance, irrespective of how superficial and tenuous that acceptance may be.

Although I was aware that racism was pervasive in the environment and there were repeated and ongoing attempts to silence any discussion of the existence of racism, I had forgotten to take on a different perspective. I needed to recognize that all of the actors were simply doing what they had been taught to do.

doctor's visits. I even began to see a psychologist. I was convinced that there was something wrong with me. And in essence there was. I was consuming the toxicity of the environment and internalizing it. I was eating the devil's bread.

Although I was aware that racism was pervasive in the environment and there were repeated and ongoing attempts to silence any discussion of the existence of racism, I had forgotten to take on a different perspective. What I mean is that I continued to deal with the racism from a perspective of disbelief, questioning, and consumption. Instead I needed to recognize that all of the actors were simply doing what they had been taught to do. They were protecting themselves and the world that had been created for them.

There is a saying, don't try and change the problem, change your perspective on the problem. Clearly this does not apply to all situations, but I believe that it is central to figuring how to navigate racism in the academy. First, it is important to recognize that when somebody interacts with you in a racist manner, particularly when that person has

choose to engage in racist behavior are doing so because they have been raised badly by society. They have not taken the time to critically think about and analyze issues of race and have no reality-based historical or contemporary understandings of the manifestations of power and oppression. Therefore to accord that person the privilege of impacting upon your functioning would be paramount to asking a person who has never climbed a mountain to describe their personal journey of mountain climbing.

In actuality, Whites do not have to think about the impact of racism because it does not affect them in a tangible way on a daily basis. The average White person does not know, in any intimate way, someone who is Black, nor have they ever had to deal with the daily aggressions of anti-Blackness (Bell, Washington, Weinstein, and Love). And the all too familiar trope of "I have a friend/husband/partner who is Black" is typically void of any real grounding, given that most of their Black friends engage in a performativity of Blackness designed to soothe the White appetite and gaze, thus rendering

Secondly, it has to be recognized that people often attack that which they are afraid of or intimidated by. As Blacks we have been told that we are inferior to Whites, when in fact they control each site of power in society, political, economic, and ideological. In addition, they have purposely implemented laws and policies that are designed to disempower us. Given the power they have amassed throughout the colonial period and beyond, why should they be afraid of a group of people who they have deemed to be inferior? Each time a Black man, woman or child is killed by the police, the trope of fear, which appears to take on an almost mythical proportion, is proffered as a justification for murder. A Black child playing in the park, a man sitting in a car with his family, or a woman in her home with her young son, are all scenarios that elicit such extreme fear in White men with guns that they have no recourse but to kill!

The irrelevancy of that argument is so patently disingenuous that it would be laughable if the outcomes were not so devastating! There is, I believe, this intergeneration, almost cellular, transfer of fear and guilt amongst Whites that is based on the

abject violence that they have levied against Black bodies since our first contact with colonizers. Drawing from the biblical narrative of an eye for an eye, i.e. the assumption that if Blacks were empowered they would exact retribution against Whites (Frederickson), this presumed fear of Blackness exists in the realm of deities and devils. We may never have seen Gods or had any direct experience of them, not even actual proof that they exist, but we structure our lives based on the belief that they do. When people have “faith,” or when they believe in the existence of something, the possibility of unsettling that belief is slim. Therefore, instead of focusing on trying to challenge or change their belief system, you need to understand it differently and focus on how you protect yourself. Institutional responses to anti-Black racism has been extremely slow but in Blacks have to continue to survive the violence and self-care is absolutely central. Black women, by necessity have to adopt strategies for self-care rather than putting those energies into placating White fear or guilt.

The unfortunate reality is that personal experiences continue to be the penultimate factor that coalesces people into action. Therefore expecting the average White person to change their attitudes towards race and racism, when everything around them bathes and cocoons them in the narrative of power, superiority, privilege, and access, albeit based on the historical production of fabrications, is unrealistic. No amount of appeals to the inherent goodness of the oppressor will result in the type of change we need to see in a perceptible time period. Instead you have to change the way you deal with those who oppress you. But that can only happen when your figure out who you are and how you have arrived at the particular juncture in your life. Understanding those factors requires

that you engage in an analysis of the larger structural issues, the history and modern day forms of racism and the ways in which power is implicated in all of these dialogues. There is also a need to critically examine the ways in which gender, race and identity intersect.

Oppositional Subjectivity and the Recreation of Self

I use the term oppositional subjectivity to introduce the idea that Whiteness only comes into being in opposition to Blackness. In order for Whiteness to come into existence, the racial binary of Blackness was created in the White imaginary through the centuries of colonial exploitation. Blackness was constructed with a range of negative permutations and symbolisms that range from seemingly biblical references to the banality of everyday language. Common examples include the construction of the imagery of God and angels as White and the devil as Black, and the idea that black lies are mammoth falsehoods when compared to the innocence of a little white lie. Therefore the very construction of and the demonization of Blackness allowed for the emergence of a White identity and subjecthood of innocence and purity (Morrison; Ross), practices that are “inherently contradictory” (Frederickson).

I define oppositional subjectivity as the emergence or understanding of one’s identity based on the diametric negative characterizations of another person or group. In its initial manifestation, the group in power controls the specificities of the terms that are deployed. When the subjugated group is defined as inferior, the dominant group is automatically imbued with the insignia of superiority. If the subjugated group is regarded as savage, then the oppressor is afforded the privilege of being cul-

tured and sophisticated, irrespective of the extremes of barbarism they may deploy. These markings remain constant across time and ensure that the dominant group controls the social narratives that is fundamental to their relations of power, dominance and control. Ultimately these ideas become embedded, normative, and unquestioned to the point where those who are dominated seldom question the origins or validity of the ideas. In his seminal 1998 text, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, Carter G. Woodson argues that when you control a man’s thinking, he willingly accepts his status of presumed inferiority.

If one were to apprehend the manner in which their identities are co-created (Elenes), molded easily like clay in the hands of a potter, those who are oppressed and subjugated to the aphorisms of the dominant would recognize the possibility of challenging and unsettling the negative identity markers. The acceptance of an imposed identity is acquiescence to a presumed state of inferiority (Daniel Tatum). Those in positions of power will not design, develop, or deploy identity markers that are intended to enhance the quality of humanity of those they oppress. It is not in the best economic, political, or personal interests of the oppressor. The continuation of the rules of oppression, exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence (Young) replicates and protects the boundaries of power. Supporting the empowerment of the oppressed is simply not a comprehensive business model for the dominant and would undermine the reality of capitalism that foregrounds societal interactions.

Effectively navigating the chilly climate of academia requires that you move beyond racial binaries implemented by the dominant, and

instead identify and implement markers of identity that are based on your personal narrative, rather than the imposed narratives of the oppressor (Haymes). Developing alternative markers of identity requires a critical engagement with historical narratives of Blackness that existed before the colonial period. Bell hooks employs the term “radical black subjectivity” to

Rodolfo Torres state, it is not simply about playing identity politics, but also recognizing that the creation of race and the deployment of racism are central to the maintenance of the power structures. Understanding that no one invests hundreds of years trying to destroy that which is truly “inferior” can be an essential starting point towards self-care and healing.

sions that are specifically targeted at these students, all seemingly designed to deny them their full potential as human beings. Continuing to blame those who are in power for desperately trying to hang on to power is like cursing the earth for being round. Those in power will employ every strategy at their disposal to hang on to power and they will consciously

Bell hooks employs the term “radical black subjectivity” to describe the necessary process of moving beyond narratives of opposition, towards adopting those that facilitate transformation. The un-reading, re-reading, and re-learning of history beyond the purview of the colonizers, is central to shifting conceptions of identity.

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There is an African proverb that states that “Until the story of the hunt is told by the lion, the tale will always glorify the hunter” (unknown author, n.d.). The story that the dominant has told about Blackness have always been stories of failure and racial bankruptcy. What version of the story of Blackness will you choose to tell? What story will you choose to embrace? How will you recognize and understand the impact of internalized racism? Surviving in academia does not require subservience or simple acquiescence to the narratives of the dominant. Rather, dealing with the trials of academia, and other spaces of work, requires the reframing and reconceptualization of your identity (Bell et al.), your sense of being and the ways in which you understand the particularities that are central to the deployment of racialized discourses. As Antonia Darder and

Stop Taking the Poison of Oppression or Eating the Bread that the Devil Made

Racism constrains the options that are open to us. Racism results in others treating us in ways that have been designed to degrade our souls and destroy our spirits. Those who have been oppressed have been taught to breathe with the same ease with which they are taught to consume the poisonous bread that the devil made. The bread of racist-based identity markers. Every discourse that is fed to those who have been oppressed is toxic and the poison exists in all environments. The storybooks that are read to children, children’s movies, especially Disney movies, have been, and continue to be, replete with direct and coded messages about race and gender positioning. The school system, starting in Early Childhood Education environments, is rife with racism and the denials of the existence of racism (Berman, Butler, Daniel, McNevin, and Royer). Carl James and Tana Turner, in their latest report on the experiences of Black students in school, highlight the multitude of racial aggressions and micro-aggress-

and unconsciously engage every strategy at their disposal. The most effective strategy in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed and the dominant ensures that you are constantly fed with the poisoned bread that they have created—the recipe for Black disenfranchisement, and corrupted identities of Blackness. Unfortunately for those who are oppressed, the consumption of the devil’s bread has been the very sustenance upon which their identities are built and groomed for failure. Challenging institutional structures requires a change in understanding of the ways in which racialized groups have been and continued to be mis-educated into accepting life on the margins. Black women have to place the burden of racial and gendered violence on the society rather than internalizing the trauma and recognize the ways in which all of these interchanges are related to dynamics of power.

In much the same way that when we are afflicted with physical illnesses, medical specialists often recommend particular dietary changes, the undoing of the mental turmoil and toxic racial messaging requires

a change to one's mental diet. As was discussed above, the main biological imperative of any organism is survival. Therefore, in much the same way that the dominant insists on their survival, so must those who are oppressed insist on their own. However this must be built on the recognition that while the dominant have been ensuring that they receive the diet that maintains their position of power—i.e. the mental messages that ensure the continuation of their presumption of superiority—those who are oppressed have to ensure that they change their diet to challenge the notions of inferiority. Those who experience oppression must also focus on developing biologically, socially, and mentally well-rounded imperatives that ensure their survival. This however cannot be accomplished by consuming the meal that is prepared by the oppressor.

Consuming an unhealthy diet of identity malfeasance, when you have become aware of it, can be analogous to a form of intentional gluttony. It is therefore important to recognize the impact of identity-based racism that is intended to poison minds; this is a recognition that requires the implementation of disruptive practices (Shor and Freire). These can include offering a broader range of curriculum options for students; identifying in-class research-based opportunities for students that challenge their thinking and presumed knowledges; and also engaging in teaching practices that are disruptive, aimed at challenging the academic norms. All of these practices, while having the potential to support student growth and development, also allow you as the educator to develop a healthy sense of racial identity that is central to undoing the poison of racism. However, recognize that these practices only work when you have a clear and deliberate goal in mind.

What is Your Big Plan?

In order to address the challenges that will inevitably be experienced in academia, it is central that you are aware of your reason for being in that space. According to Ira Shor and Paulo Freire, "To the extent that I become more and more clear concerning my choices, my dreams, which are substantively political and adjunctively pedagogical...I recognize that as an educator I am a politician... If I am clear about my political dream, then one of the conditions ... is not to immobilize myself..." (480-481). Did you enter the space in search of friendships? Did you enter the space in search of support, encouragement, and collegiality, expecting to find mentors who would help you to figure out your research trajectory and support you with publishing? The unfortunate reality is that you will probably not find those mentors (Maharaj) in a space that is built on competition, that is staffed by people whose very capacity for self-absorption has been a skill that has fostered their trajectory in academia.

The possible options for developing within group racial alliances are also tenuous at best given that many academics of colour are so afraid of unsettling the illusory and fleeting moments of inclusion, that they dare not challenge the situation. Tenure is in the hands of those in power (Bell et al.), the deans and department heads; as such there is the reality based fear (Shor and Freire) that your very survival in the academy lies in the hands of the gatekeepers of the oppressors. Many faculty of colour are ever so grateful for the opportunity to traverse the borders into the lands of the oppressors, that they dare not challenge the racism, sexism, homophobia, and all the other isms that are at play (Maharaj). In some cases they, in their performances of mimicry, will be the ones who would

most likely walk you to the guillotine.

As such, you need to ensure that you have a goal for being in the academy and a plan for survival that does not require you to depend upon those you work with. You will need to have a support system that is not connected to your work life. It is also important to know what drives you and where your moral compass lies. Inevitably you will experience situations where you see, experience, and hear things that you know are wrong; and in some situations you may be asked to ignore it, pretend you don't see it, or openly asked to be quiet about it. In such situations you need to be aware of the moral underpinnings that brought you into the field, the modalities of behaviors that you can comfortably tolerate, and the choices with which you can live. Let your moral compass guide your decision-making, recognize which fights you NEED to fight and which ones you can allow to slip by. If you attempt to fight each battle you will lose! I was told by a mentor early in my career, "If you have come here to save the world, get out now. If however you can recognize that you can have an impact on one life at a time, then you can survive." I have since expanded that statement and included, *that for every person I support, there is a ripple effect that is created, and they will then touch the lives of people that I will never meet.* And it is the knowledge of the power of the ripple effect that keeps me focused and moving forward.

Developing strategies for self-care is a central aspect of your plan. You need to know what your focus is, and where you will go to for support when you encounter obstacles. This can include having a supportive network of other people who understand the challenges related to life in the academy and who are able to provide guidance (Brown-Glaude). Unfortunately many of our friends and relations see our jobs as "cushy" jobs, where

we get the summer off etc., so they are often unable to understand the internal political wranglings of the academy. The sheer brutality of the space is hidden behind the polished veneer of a presumptive “space of higher learning.” There is the tacit assumption that we are engaged in intellectually challenging dialogues aimed at improving the human condition, rather than a space where doors are shut, camps are formed, and where some academics possess the proverbial God-complex. Therefore build your networks on stable ground rather than the shifting sands of the academy. Recognize, as well, that you will need different types of networks: for the academic challenges; the personal challenges, and the ones you go to when you simply want to have fun and turn your brain down.

Conclusion

Working in the academy can be taxing, difficult, violent, and destructive. Understanding the environment you are choosing to go into is an important first step in taking care of yourself and developing resilience. Ensuring that you enter the space with a solid understanding of your identity and background are imperatives that will enable you to survive. Find systems of support that you can draw upon to sustain you during the challenging times. And also ensure that your goals are clear and grounded. These strategies may sustain you in the moments of crisis and as you continue to work towards transforming the academy.

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MARLENE KADAR

To have a daughter

Those many times when young women think they can bake
a cake
Turned around
And off they have gone which is what they said you wanted
them to do
(and you know what she means)
Does not really capture the context

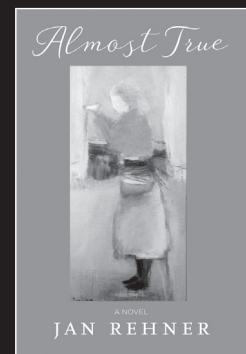
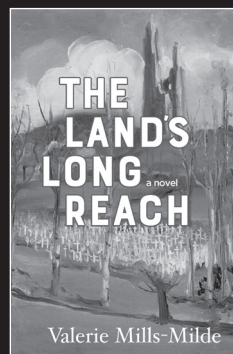
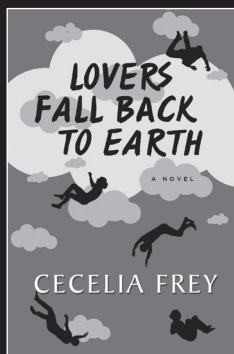
In which things said protect.

Those many times when young women think that mothers
humoured will be quiet,
Keep love contained, free her for other loves.
Turned around
And every message as if Rossetti or Akhmatova
Just like she said it would be, far away,
not seeing the streets she walks along,
The shops she passes or the beer and urine cocktail she smells
when the sun bakes
the sidewalks.
Cannot really capture the context

By the time you hear her voice again
She is 28 years old and living in Brooklyn
Turned around, oh great joy.

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