

Sexism and Racism in the University

Analyzing a Personal Experience

by Roxana Ng

L'auteure est féministe et fait partie d'une minorité raciale. Sa persistance à enseigner les relations raciales et ethniques d'un point de vue féministe qui défie les modèles européens lui cause

*Sexism and racism
disempower
feminist and
minority teachers.*

constamment des problèmes dans sa carrière universitaire. En mettant en relief un incident survenu lors d'un cours qu'elle enseignait, l'auteure démontre comment le sexisme et le racisme qui existent dans la vie de tous les jours peuvent miner les professeures féministes et celles qui font partie de minorités raciales.

Introduction

At the conclusion of a course I taught on minority groups and race relations, a male student brought a complaint against me: he charged that I used the class as a platform for feminism. As a "white male," he claimed that he felt completely marginalized. This incident is not unique. In the first year of my teaching, a male student circulated a petition against me and complained to the administration that half the materials in my course on "cross-cultural education" contained references to women and gender relations. I was pleased that unwittingly I achieved a balanced curriculum, but the student and the administrator disagreed and I was asked to change the contents for the remainder of the course. Complaints about the contents of my courses and my pedagogical methods have been a recurring feature in the ten years of my teaching in the university.

The advice given to me by administrators and colleagues concerning these incidents generally revolves around contents and styles: perhaps I

can tone down my lectures somewhat; I can change to less controversial materials; I need to acquire more teaching techniques; I need to prepare better. (With reference to the course on "cross-cultural education," it was suggested that I should use videos and let the students draw their own conclusions.) As I continued to analyze how gender, race, and class relations operate dynamically in interactional settings, however, I realized what I experienced has less to do with my competence as a teacher than with who I am.

I am a feminist and a racial minority. My scholarly work has been concerned with integrating analyses of gender with race, and vice versa. My insistence on teaching ethnic and race relations with a feminist perspective, and challenging Eurocentric assumptions in feminist theorization, has consistently gotten me into trouble in my university teaching career.

Using a critical incident that occurred to me in one of the courses I taught, I want to draw attention to how sexism and racism as *power dynamics* operate in everyday life to disempower feminist and other minority¹ teachers. These dynamics affect how our formal authority is perceived and received by students, and by extension the degree to which we can be effective as teachers, especially if our teaching challenges existing norms and forms of thinking and behaviour in the classroom, in the university, and in the society.

While my discussion focuses on the teacher's experience, I suggest that other minority staff and students encounter similar situations. In fact, their experiences are frequently exacerbated because of their relative powerlessness in the university hierarchy. My discussion therefore raises issues about existing equity measures and how to make the university more inclusive when people enter and participate in it as *unequal* subjects.

The incident

This incident concerns a complaint brought against me by a student (who identified himself as a white, immigrant male) regarding a course I taught on "minority groups and race relations," which has been one of my primary teaching subjects in various universities since 1982.² In this kind of course, I always include discussions on women as a minority group, and of race and gender dynamics. As I develop and refine these courses, I incorporate meditative and physical exercises, in addition to small group discussions, as a way of rupturing standard modes of scholarly inquiry which create an artificial separation between body/soul and mind. Although most students seem to enjoy them, I receive complaints every time I teach them. What I report here, then, is not unusual. It signals and pinpoints how approaches that deviate from the perceived norm of teaching can be threatening to and resisted by students.

This incident is interesting because the student involved attended classes for the first four or five weeks; he was absent until the third last class. Dur-

*He told the
administrator
I was "a woman
out of control."*

ing the class, he became very agitated that in our discussion on anti-racist education, women's experiences of discrimination were also discussed. At one point he became extremely angry, interrupted the discussion, and insisted on talking about something else. I interceded and brought the discussion back on track. I also pointed out that this kind of interruption,

and the ways in which male and female students reacted to the interruption, were illustrative of the gender dynamics we had been discussing for the past couple of weeks.³

This male student did not come to the last two classes, and complained to the administration about my teaching. I was present at the meeting in which he launched his complaint. He charged that the meditative and physical exercises I conducted (the reasons

for which I explained clearly) were inappropriate in a university setting, and that my course outline did not specify my feminist perspective. He further complained that the reading materials, which

he had to pay for, were exclusively on feminism and not on race relations (although this is not true). I refused to enter into a debate about this, and suggested that whether the materials were exclusively feminist was a matter open to examination. He then charged that I was using the course to advance a particular political agenda. He felt that in intercepting his disruption at the last class he attended, I was marginalizing him as a white male.

During the meeting, he told the administrator I was "a woman out of control" three times. When I pointed out that my perspective was very clearly disclosed during the first two classes (indeed I encouraged students who did not like my approach to withdraw from the course), he turned to the administrator and said, "But I thought it was a phase she was going through. I didn't think that she would keep on like this when I returned after a long absence." He finally threatened to take me and the university to court for "false advertising." He told us that his girlfriend, a lawyer, was waiting outside.

Throughout the entire meeting, the administrator maintained a neutral stance. At the end of his complaint, the student was asked what would have constituted an acceptable

approach, given that we obviously had different perceptions about the course and how he was handled. The student replied that minimally he would expect that I stated my perspective very explicitly in the course outline. I interjected at this point and said that if I was to make my perspective explicit, then I would expect all my colleagues to do the same. The student replied, "But I don't have problems with other courses! I only have problem with yours." He added that he would ask "a gay [instructor]" to make his perspective explicit also.⁴

After the student left, the administrator expressed sympathy, but suggested that I consider the student's request seriously. Apparently the issue of legality (that students are getting more militant about the products we claim to deliver and the products we actually deliver) had been raised in the senior level of the university administration. I declined considering the student's request in relation to my course, and suggested that the matter be discussed in a faculty meeting.

Sexism and racism as systemic

In deconstructing this incident, I want to go beyond treating sexism and racism as if they reside only in certain individuals by examining their *systemic* properties. I begin with the premise that sexism and racism are two systems of oppression and inequality based on the ideology of the superiority of one race and/or gender over others. In Canada, white European men, especially those from British and French descent, perceive themselves to be superior to women and people from other ethnic and racial origins. Systems of ideas and practices have been developed over time to justify and support this notion of superiority. These ideas and practices have their origin in the colonization of Canada by the British and the French. Over time, ideas of superiority and inferiority of different groups become normalized as the accepted ways of thinking and being. Certain behaviours and modes of

operation become taken for granted. They become modes of excluding those who do not belong to the dominant group(s).

Although these ideas may have been developed originally by the dominant group, they have become ways cohorts of individuals are "normally" thought of; they are popularly held beliefs. Sexism and racism are systemic in the sense that they have become ways of thinking about and treating groups of people unequally as if these ideas and treatments are "normal;" they are "common sense"⁵ and thus not open to interrogation. Since these ideas are routinized in institutions, they become the "normal" ways of doing things. It is precisely these ways of doing things that keep certain individuals and groups in dominant and subordinate positions, producing the structural inequality we see in the educational system and the work place.

Sexism and racism are *power relations* which permeate interpersonal and institutional interactions. As participants in organizations, we are all affected by sexism and racism as members of dominant and subordinate groups. Being cognizant of how these dynamics work is a first step in eradicating sexism and racism.

In analyzing the incident, I want to draw attention to the interactional dimension of power relations which operate as forms of exclusion and marginalization by recognizing that in addition to our structural positions as students, faculty, and staff in the academy, we are at the same time gendered and racialized subjects. Our race, gender, as well as other socially and ideologically constructed⁶ characteristics, are embodied and therefore shape how we see ourselves and are seen. They affect, enable, and disable how we negotiate our ways through the university system.

Deconstructing the incident

I want to address four issues using this incident. First, I take up the issue of neutrality, objectivity, and fairness in adjudicating complaints about

To be neutral is to pretend that people are equal or the same.

teaching that challenge societal norms. It is interesting and revealing that, in spite of (or because of?) our unequal structural positions, the administrator gave the student's complaint the same consideration he gave my course design and teaching methods. He did not see anything out of the ordinary with a student calling a faculty member "a woman out of control" (if he did think this was peculiar, he chose to ignore it since

*As a racial minority
and a woman,
the knowledge I
transmit is suspect.*

he never mentioned it during or after the meeting). When dealing with these and other complaints, university administrators and staff frequently take a "neutral" and "objective" stance in the

interest of "fairness."

To be neutral is to adopt a disinterested position, to pretend that people are equal or the same, and to overlook the inequalities that people embody as a result of their unique biographies. This stance is the cornerstone of western intellectual tradition established by men to engender and safeguard their privilege. It was institutionalized in the academy as a routine practice at a time when the university was the exclusive domain of certain classes of men. In this instance, the pretense of fairness was immensely disempowering to me as a minority teacher, especially since the student deliberately adopted a tone that denigrated me. As Patricia Williams points out, "If faculty do not treat women [and racial minorities] as colleagues, then students will not treat women [and racial minorities] as members of the faculty" (59). This example shows precisely how sexism and racism are normalized in people's collective consciousness. It reveals that the attempt at fairness is how men collude with each other, intentionally or unwittingly, to restore the status quo of male dominance.⁷

Second, I want to raise the issue of student resistance. This is a complex issue because students resist for dif-

ferent and contradictory reasons: they resist curriculum that challenges the status quo, especially if they identify with the status quo; they resist because certain materials make them realize and reflect on their own oppression; they resist because both the contents and the teacher represent authority in power structures which marginalize them; they resist for other social and psychological reasons too numerous to list here (see Lewis).

I draw attention to the challenges we encounter in the classroom because of *who we are* as gendered and racialized subjects. Challenges to male teachers, as one of my colleagues observed when I discussed the above incident in a faculty meeting, frequently come in discussing course materials; disagreements are played out in intellectual debates. In the case of a minority faculty, in addition to course materials, the person herself becomes a target. As a racial minority and a woman, I have no authority despite my formal position. But it is not only my authority that is at stake. The knowledge I embody and transmit is also suspect—I am a woman out of control. The sexism and racism in this case is not only based on the student's attitude toward minorities in general; it is about minorities in positions of authority whose knowledge and expertise is often questioned. In reflecting on her own teaching about women in the third world, Hoodfar also reports on similar experiences. In one course, she felt that her knowledge was finally accepted by the students when it was corroborated by her white female colleague who gave a guest lecture on the position of women in Uganda.

Third, I want to draw attention to the language used by the student in class and in our meeting. In his outbursts on both occasions, he asserted that I was marginalizing him as a white male. His language use is instructive. With the inclusion and incorporation of marginalized groups into the academy is the subversion and appropriation of feminist and other liberatory discourses, by the mainstream, against the very groups

who developed these discourses in the first place. Statements such as "I don't feel safe (or comfortable)" and "I feel silenced (or marginalized)" are used by everyone to describe their experiences. This kind of language appropriation is an example of the individualization and trivialization of collective experiences (see Mohanty). It erases the inequality, developed historically, among people on the basis of race, gender, class, sexual preference, ability, etc., and reduces systemic inequality to personal feelings. This is one way liberatory language is normalized, so that this white male student, who became threatened because his presupposed way of thinking and acting was challenged, could assert that he was silenced or marginalized.

Finally, as universities are more and more geared toward a consumer and corporate model (see Newson and Buchbinder), they have become market places, rather than places for people to interrogate existing knowledges and create new ones. I firmly believe that teachers must be accountable to students, and realize that students can be and have been short-changed in learning situations. Here, I focus on how this student attempted to use a legal threat as a tactic to restore his power when his beliefs and position as a white male were threatened. His threat lay bare

*We need to speak
up against courses
of action which
maintain inequality.*

his class position and his recognition that what was at issue here was about power, which he knew he had as a "white male" and intended to use. Raising the possible legal consequences of my teaching captured the administrator's attention; it called forth his sense of responsibility as an administrator. The fact that the student threat-

ened legal action and that he received a neutral, if not sympathetic, hearing had depended on his subject position as a white, articulate male who could evoke the law to be on his side.

Anti-sexism/racism versus non-sexism/racism

Much of the work of combating sexism and racism in the educational system has focused on attitudinal and curricular changes (e.g., prejudice awareness/reduction workshops; sexual and racial harassment measures; introducing other cultures into the curriculum, especially under the rubric of multicultural education). These steps, important and necessary though they are, are based on a liberal concept of diversity. They reduce historical and institutional inequality to an individualist and psychological level. They constitute what I call a non-sexist/racist approach to addressing inequality which does not fundamentally challenge the existing power constellation within the university.

I want to put forward an anti-sexist/racist approach here. This approach would acknowledge explicitly that we are all gendered, racialized, and differently constructed subjects who do not participate in interactional relations as equals. This goes beyond formulating sexism and racism in individualist terms and treating them simply as personal attitudes. Terry Wolverton discovered the difference between non-racism and anti-racism in her consciousness-raising attempt:

I had confused the act of trying to *appear* not to be racist with actively working to eliminate racism. Trying to appear not racist had made me deny my racism, and therefore exclude the possibility of change (191).

Being anti-sexist/racist means seeing sexism and racism as systemic and

inter-personal (rather than individual), and combating sexism and racism as a collectivities responsibility, and not just as a personal attribute (so that somehow a person can cleanse her/himself of sexism and racism).

The first thing we must do, regardless of whether we belong to minority groups, is to break the conspiracy of silence that has been central in ensuring the perpetuation of sexism, racism, and other forms of marginalization and exclusion in the university. Thus, we cannot be complacent as individual teachers and as members in the different collectives to which we belong (e.g., in committees and in faculty associations). We need to speak up against normalized courses of action which serve to maintain existing inequality; this may alienate us from those in power as well as those close to us. We need to actively support our minority colleagues in their teaching, administrative, and other responsibilities. We need to consciously open up spaces for previously silenced or marginalized voices to be heard. We need to create spaces for students to interrogate existing paradigms and explore alternate ones, and to support them in other endeavours. We also need to constantly interrogate our own presupposed ways of acting, thinking, and being in the world.

To explore what these principles may mean in concrete action, I return to the critical incident. In handling and adjudicating disputes, I am not suggesting that administrators and staff should take the side of "the minority teacher/student" categorically. I am suggesting that the assessment of any situation needs to take account of people's varying subject positions within and outside of the university. In this case, although the student's complaint was legitimate in that he felt uncomfortable with the materials and my instructions, his behaviour in class and in the meeting was not. It was both sexist and racist because it was aimed at undermining my authority and expertise as a minority faculty.

Administratively, in resolving this dispute, the student could be advised to withdraw from courses he has problems with, rather than waiting until the end of the term. An appropriate administrative response would be to arrange for the student to withdraw from the course, even though the official deadline was passed (which was actually what this student wanted and proceeded to do).

Pedagogically, the student's complaint, with its sexist, racist, and homophobic subtext, presents an excellent opportunity for challenging the assumptions in his thinking, and for educating him about academic freedom. Indeed, this kind of situation presents itself as a valuable pedagogical moment which can be used to engage the minds of students outside of the formal classroom setting. To take up anti-sexism/racism as a pedagogical practice is to close the perceived gap between the formal and "hidden" curriculum, and to use whatever opportunity we can seize to challenge the normalized forms of behaviour and thinking wherever and whenever we can.⁸

Educating the student about the notion of academic freedom could, in this instance, help him see the nature of his consumer-oriented mentality toward university education. Universities should expose students to a range of perspectives and experiences, not simply confirm or reinforce the students' limited views of the world. As educators, we need to see ourselves, not as neutral transmitters of knowledge, but as social critics who are trained to challenge dogma, to express critical views, and to expose the political and contested nature of education.⁹

Finally, I want to briefly take-up the issues of "safety" and "comfort," because these words have become leverage in debates around discourses and practices which challenge existing modes of thinking and working. Incorporating anti-sexism/racism into our daily practice is by definition unsafe and uncomfortable, because they involve a serious (and frequently threatening) effort to interrogate our

We need to open up spaces for marginalized voices to be heard.

privilege as well as our powerlessness. To speak of safety and comfort is to speak from a position of privilege, relative though it may be. For those existing for too long on the margins, life has never been safe or comfortable. To understand and eliminate oppression and inequality, we must examine our relative privilege, to move out of our internalized positions as victims, to take control over our lives, and to take responsibility

for change. Such an undertaking is risky, and therefore requires a commitment to a different vision of society other than what we now take for granted.

In sum, anti-sexism/racism, like other forms of anti-oppression work, is not easy, comfortable, or safe. It is protracted, difficult, uncomfortable, painful, and risky. It involves struggles with our colleagues, our students, as well as struggles within ourselves. It is, in short, a challenge.

This article is condensed from a longer paper entitled, "A Woman Out of Control: Deconstructing Sexism and Racism in the University," published in the Canadian Journal of Education, Vol. 18, no. 3, Summer 1993.

Roxana Ng obtained her Ph. D. in 1984 and taught in five universities before attaining tenure at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education. Her research includes immigrant women, women's organizing, and anti-racist/feminist pedagogy. She is the president-elect of the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (1993-94).

¹I am using the term "minority" to refer to those people who are relatively powerless in our society. Thus, even though women are numerically the majority, they are minority in terms of the power and influence they have. Similarly, ethnic and racial minorities, especially non-white

groups, constitute a minority in our society. To avoid repetition, I use the term "minority" to refer to *both* women and ethnic/racial minorities.

²I am deliberately omitting the specifics of the course to protect the identities of the individuals involved. The intent here is not to personalize the story, but to highlight the embeddedness of gender and racial dynamics in our experiences.

³It was clear that this student had upset everyone in the class. Some students became angry. Some, especially the younger female students, immediately took on a nurturing role. That is, they attempted to protect him from the anger of the other students and to painstakingly explain to him the parallels between women's subordination and the subordination of ethnic and racial minorities, to no avail. Finally, the only other male student in the class spoke up and confronted him about his sexism. He at last took notice, and in my view took the male student on as an equal (as opposed to a bunch of hysterical women trying to overwhelm him). By this time the discussion became a tennis match between the two men. So, using materials we read in the course, I pointed out the gender dynamics occurring in our midst.

⁴This comment, made spontaneously, indicates the normalization of certain sexual practices and the overlapping character of forms of domination/subordination.

⁵This term is used by Gramsci to refer to the uncritical, episodic, and disjointed thinking held by the mass population. I prefer this term to "ideology" because it indicates that hegemonic ideas are taken for granted and unquestioned even when they contradict people's lived experiences (321-343).

⁶By socially and ideologically constructed, I am referring to the process of identification of biological, sexual, and other characteristics as absolute differences. The term "races," for example, is used to denote the supposed differences, based on skin colour, brain size, and physical features, etc., of groups of people. These differ-

ences, treated as "natural" and therefore immutable, are then used to justify the domination of one group over another. In fact, the ways in which different groups are constructed as "races" vary historically and from society to society (see Miles).

⁷Of course, women and racial minorities participate in this process as well by internalizing existing dominant-subordinate relations as "common sense." For example, I heard on the CBC noon-hour news on March 8, 1994 that a man had launched a complaint against a female professor for expelling him from a women's studies class because he continuously disrupted the class. To prove that he was unjustly expelled, he had solicited support letters from some female students corroborating how he was "marginalized." Interestingly, he said in an interview that this professor was completely "out of control." The fact that some female students supported him shows the extent to which women internalize male authority and take on a male perspective.

⁸Realistically, of course we cannot, and do not seize *every* moment presented to us—we would be exhausted in no time! I do want to suggest, however, that pedagogical moments arise more often than we "normally" think of in our work, and they can be deployed as consciousness-raising opportunities for ourselves and others.

⁹The meaning of academic freedom, like the role of education itself, is a topic of heated debates (see Ferando, *et al.*).

References

- Ferando, L., N. Hartley, M. Nowak, & T. Swinehart, *Academic Freedom 1990: A Human Rights Report*. London: Zed Books, 1990.
- Gramsci, A. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. New York: International Publishers, 1971.
- Hoodfar, H. "Feminist Anthropology and Critical Pedagogy: The Anthropology of Classrooms' Excluded Voices." *Canadian Journal of Education*. (17) (1992): 303-320.

To speak of safety and comfort is to speak from a position of privilege.

Lewis, M. "Interrupting Patriarchy: Politics, Resistance, and Transformation in the Feminist Classroom." *Harvard Educational Review*. (60) (1990): 467-488.

Miles, R. *Racism*. London: Routledge, 1989.

Mohanty, C.T. "On Race and Voice: Challenges for Liberal Education in the 1990s." *Cultural Critique*. (14) (1990): 179-208.

Newson, J. and H. Buchbinder. *The University Means Business: Universities, Corporation and Academic Work*. Toronto: Garamond Press, 1988.

Williams, P.J. "Blockbusting the Canon." *Ms.* 2(2) (1991): 59-63.

Wolverton, T. "Unlearning Complicity, Remembering Resistance: White Women's Anti-Racism Education." C. Bunch & S. Pollack, eds., *Learning Our Way: Essays in Feminist Education*. Trumansburg, New York: The Crossing Press, 1983.

FAWZIA AHMAD

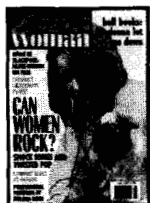
The "R" Word That Kills

I drag my feet out the door
 It was a hard day
 People ask me how I do it
How do you do rape crisis work?
 I sigh
I must be really hard
 I feel heavy
The work must really depress you
 I cringe inside
 If they only knew
 If they all only knew
 It is not the work
 It is not the women that I see
 It is not the women that have survived male violence
 The strong beautiful women that I support
 On the line
 In the office
 It is the RACISM
 From the women I work with
 From the women that are "politically correct"
 From the progressive white Anti-racist women
 The ones that I expect so much from
 Because they are feminists
 Because they are closer to making the difference
 Or are they really?
 I have to stop and consider
 What difference
 Difference for whom?
 Not me
 Not my mother, my sister, my aunts, my cousin
 But difference for whiteness
 What is so different about that!?
 It is white supremacy that it is killing me
 It is this oppression that drags me down
 That makes me cry
 That makes me weep
 That spins my head around
 That kills my spirit
 Why I wonder do I expect more?
 More from the women's movement
 Is it asking too much?
 Is it unreasonable?
You have hurt me
Your are excluding me
You are silencing me
You are racist
 Why do these words scare you so much?
 When it is your words that stifle my inner soul
 That makes me deny my people
 My family
 Me

An article by Fawzia Ahmad appears earlier in this issue.

The new look

woman



Every month...

Melissa Benn talks to a woman in the public eye; Yasmin Alibhai Brown lets rip on issues affecting women; Lucy O'Brien looks at the music scene, from Riot Grrrl to romantic pop; Nell McCafferty takes a hilarious look at life and politics in Ireland.

Britain's only feminist monthly

Rates: Individual subscribers: six issues £12; 12 issues £21; 24 issues £40. Organisations and libraries: 12 issues £34; 24 issues £65. Europe (air mail) and surface mail worldwide: 12 issues £28. Air mail outside Europe: £38. Add £5 or more to become a supporting subscriber. Thank you!

Free *Everywoman Directory of Women's Business and Organisations* worth £7.95 when you subscribe for a year or more

Name _____

Address _____

Postcode _____

Tick here for your FREE *Everywoman Directory* (one or two-year subs only)
 For gift subscriptions: date and message (or send us your card to go with the first issue)

Total payable: £ _____

Return with your cheque payable to *Everywoman* (or official order)

OR fill in your credit card details below

Name and address of card holder if different from above

Access/Visa No: _____

Expiry date: _____

We will start with the next issue unless you specify otherwise.

Return to: *Everywoman*, FREEPOST, London N1 8BR