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Inverting Racism's Distortions

No one is born racist. Racism is taught. Through both explicit and implicit messages, society teaches ideas, attitudes and assumptions about race that are not true.

While racism is readily identifiable in its more extreme manifestations—hate crimes and other forms of physical violence, explicit discrimination in educational and employment settings, etc., in the absence of these glaring expressions of bigotry and hatred, many people deny the persistence of racism. In Canada today, racism is most insidiously propagated not by overt acts of discrimination, but rather by the ubiquitous, subtle, and usually both unintentional and unconscious exchanges that occur in daily interactions and ordinary experiences. The very blindness to it by so many is symptomatic. No one is born racist but no one born into this society is immune to its distortions, interwoven into all aspects of life. With the goal of interrupting the teaching of racism from one generation to the next, in this article, we wish to turn our attention to the work of helping educators and students unlearn the messages of racism they have absorbed. To that end, this essay will be a resource for teachers and administrators to help them understand the dynamics of interpersonal and internalized racism, to identify its patterns of behaviour, and to invert

both the corrosive messages that white teachers and students have learned about racialized peoples, and the destructive and distorting messages that racialized teachers and students may have internalized about themselves. By contradicting the messages students carry about race, the educators also contradict and expunge their own racist recordings. Our goal is thus not merely to curtail racist behaviour but to supplant the beliefs and assumptions that undergird the behaviour itself. This will strongly and clearly move us toward ending racism.

Race is a social and political construction. It is a constructed paradigm of division among people and a hierarchical evaluation of people rooted in long histories of exploitation and violence, the denial of human rights and resources, and the attribution of characteristics and capabilities, limitations and propensities to entire groups based on the colour of their skin and other physical features. Much has been written on the construction of race, the dynamics of colonialism and the ways in which racist bias shapes all aspects of society. In the context of this article, we can only point in the direction of these theoretical frameworks as we focus on the process by which we learn racism and how these play out as we interact with one another.

Racism is perpetuated in a number of ways: through institutional, interpersonal and internalized forms of oppression.

Institutionalized oppression

Institutionalized oppression denotes the formal, systemic vehicles that communicate and enact the messages of an oppression. In a school context, this includes, to name just a few obvious examples, hiring practices, exclusive curricula, unequal distribution of resources, limited definitions of normative behaviour, and the policies that reward or penalize accordingly. It also includes subtle details such as the scheduling of school events that conflict with the holidays of a minority group within the school.

Interpersonal oppression

Interpersonal oppression encompasses the oppressive messages we have absorbed about groups other than our own. It is powerful to note that while many white people consciously take a clear and strong stance against racism, there are countless ways in which all of us have absorbed racist attitudes and beliefs, and act

on them. As bell hooks states, “in a culture of domination almost everyone engages in behaviours that contradict their beliefs and values” (p.29, *Teaching Community*). She further explains that “no one, no matter how intelligent and skillful at critical thinking, is protected against the subliminal suggestions that imprint themselves on our unconscious brain” (p.11, *Teaching Community*). For white people, the behaviours of interpersonal oppression can include, for example, making a bigoted remark or rejecting a person racialized as a tenant. More subtly, and more relevantly for our discussion here, interpersonal oppression includes such things as only having white friends, only dating (or not dating) white people, being more inclined to trust white people over racialized peoples, or expecting less from racialized peoples. It can entail blindness to the experiences of racialized peoples or the trivialization of their experiences. These messages are expressed in habits of acting, thinking and perceiving, habits that are performed as a default mode of being.

Those who occupy the role of oppressor are not only subject to distorted beliefs about others, but equally learn to view themselves through a distorted lens. The perpetuation of a racist paradigm depends upon the complicity of the oppressor group. As Albert Memmi asserts, “the colonial situation manufactures colonizers as it manufactures colonies” (p.xxv, *The Colonizer and The Colonized*). Members of the oppressor group learn, in the words of Memmi, to “assume the opaque rigidity and imperviousness of stone” (Memmi p.xxviii). Whites have to learn to dehumanize themselves, to cut off the possibility of close relationship with racialized peoples in order to enable the discrimination to be perpetuated. Those in the oppressor group have to fashion the targeted into those they can continue to oppress, and need to fashion themselves as separate and worthy of different treatment (p. xxvi, *The Colonizer and The Colonized*). Yet, this too is largely unconscious. In order for members of the oppressor group to be able to dehumanize the targeted, they must close their hearts to the humanity and lived experience of racialized others. This distance precludes true closeness and thereby also limits the humanity of whites.

Racism is not beneficial for whites. It grants white people access to many things, but such access comes at a great cost. In addition to the distancing, and the isolation that accompanies the

distance, racism also deprives whites of the real and vital contributions of racialized peoples. Thought, art, engagement, citizenry and the collaboration of racialized peoples are excluded from the norm, thus depriving whites of such bounty. The lives of whites would go better if racism didn't exist. Racism hurts all of us. It is in the interest of the oppressor group and the targeted that racism end. Our full intelligence, capacities and human connection are at stake.

Internalized oppression

James Baldwin states, "We are trapped in our history and our history is trapped in us." Racial meaning is inherited, interpreted and passed on across generations (p. 105, *Courageous Conversations*). Groups that are targeted through systems of oppression are subject to discrimination, denigration and demonization. Internalized oppression denotes the various ways in which members of a targeted group come to believe the messages of oppression about themselves—their capacities, their limitations and their self image as a whole. The messages that racism teaches are plentiful and toxic. They include messages about limited intelligence, about laziness, about being over-sexed or asexual, about being violent or submissive, about being ugly and disgusting, about being dirty, about being simple. The messages of racism teach that the lives of racialized peoples are dispensable and disposable, that the work of racialized peoples is less valuable, that the thinking of racialized peoples is less useful, that the concerns of racialized peoples are trivial. Racism teaches that racialized peoples are more likely to be addicts, more likely to be abusive, more likely to be criminals, more likely to be unethical. Racism teaches that racialized peoples are primitive and un-intellectual. Racism teaches that racialized peoples love their children less. Not a single one of these messages are true. And yet, similar to interpersonal oppression, internalized oppression exists even though a person may intellectually reject these messages. When a student of African descent, for example, continually receives the message that s/he is less intelligent, less motivated and less capable than whites, even though s/he intellectually rejects these messages as false, s/he might nonetheless second-guess the worth of her/his contribution in a mixed-race classroom, readily give up on pursuing a creative or educational

goal or interact with others in a way that assumes s/he is unwanted or unworthy.

Patterns of withdrawal, giving up, feeling isolated and feeling not smart/good/capable enough are all symptoms of internalized racism. Other common manifestations of internalized racism include: failing to meet expectations, feeling defensive, unwanted and unwelcome; a heightened concern about the gaze and perception of others; propensities toward violence and aggression; feelings of despair and hopelessness. These behaviours are often punished in an attempt to have students behave differently. However, punishing these behaviours both blames the victim and reinforces the messages. Rather, we must work to contradict the messages of racism that students have learned so that both the manifestations and the messages they are rooted in disappear.

Because racist messages have been internalized by members of the targeted group, its beliefs and behaviours are taught not only by whites, but also by racialized peoples to one another. We learn a tremendous amount from the adults we grow up near, including their discouragement, their anger, their drive for safety and their surrender to systems larger than themselves. In addition, as Paulo Friere describes in his groundbreaking work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the dynamics of attack, rejection, blame or hatred between members of an oppressed group exhibits both the internalization of the oppressors gaze and judgment, and, still as members of the denigrated group, a “safer” means of striking out against the frustration and pain of the oppression, rather than directly attacking the oppressor. Thus, without meaning to, our own families and communities, exactly those people and contexts that are supposed to fight for and affirm our full humanity, strength and beauty, are also teachers of racism. For every targeted group, internalized oppression is venomous. As bell hooks explains,

(e)very black person and person of colour colludes with the existing system in small ways every day, even those among us who see ourselves as anti-racist radicals. This collusion happens simply because we are all products of the culture we live within and have all been subjected to the forms of socialization and acculturation that are deemed normal in our society. Through the cultivation of awareness, through the decolonization of our minds, we have the tools to break with the dominator model of human social engage-

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ment and the will to imagine new and different ways that people might come together (p.35, Teaching Community).

With this acknowledgement, hooks is decidedly *not* blaming those targeted by racist bias for the damaging messages internalized. She is, however, recognizing the shift of awareness and the healing of self and community that have to occur in order for racism to be uprooted from the mind and heart.

To make this even more complicated, alongside the racist messages that are internalized, human resilience and intelligence lead people to discover coping mechanisms to survive the circumstances of their lives. While these coping mechanisms are effective in some situations, over time they become rigid, automatic and often counter-productive. This manifests, for example, in ways that a group isolates itself and becomes insular, distrusting members of another group because it has historically experienced violence or betrayal from members of that group. Or, for example, many women are quick to apologize for things that are not their fault, a learned response to a history of sexism in which women are blamed indiscriminately. These coping mechanisms have effectively enabled members of a group to protect themselves and avert harm in particular situations. However, as default responses are applied universally, they do not challenge or contradict the oppression, and often act to reinforce it.

Looking at, for example, the level of disengagement racialized students show in schools, it is clear that in many ways this is a coping mechanism that protects the student from racism in the classroom. At the same time, it inhibits the students' ability to succeed and to learn. For bell hooks, progressive education as the practice of freedom "enables us to confront feelings of loss and restore our sense of connection" (p. xv, Teaching Community). In order to engage, invite and embrace our students, supporting them to rid themselves of the internalized oppression they carry, we must offer students alternatives to the coping mechanisms that hurt as much as they, at one point, helped.

Clearly, internalized oppression limits our students and reinforces racist recordings. Yet, it is also these unseen effects of racism that are hardest for teachers to navigate. When teachers are unaware of how internalized oppression operates and/or are not prepared to interrupt and contradict the messages students

have internalized, the racist messages are further reinforced—for both teacher and student. For this reason, we make the case that in order for educators to develop the clear insight and flexible thinking necessary for this work, we need to: a) engage in a process of understanding the dynamics of internalization, b) invert those messages and c) help students build tools to identify and eradicate these messages.

A) The first step is for teachers to identify the internalized recordings that create behaviour patterns in their students. When students exhibit behaviours that are frustrating for teachers or seem to re-enforce racist messages, the teacher must remember that it is racism that generated the behaviour, not the student. For example, when a student “gives up” on understanding a math concept, it may not be because the student is lazy; it may, however, be the workings of internalized oppression. Any behaviour that limits a student’s success, that blocks a student’s ability to build close relationships with others, that separates a student from the school community, is likely to be connected to internalized oppression. Rather than blaming the student for the behaviour, teachers must name the messages of racism that lead to students responding with these behaviours.

Undermining racist socialization requires constant attention because it is constantly, simultaneously, reasserted in society. It requires a complex and nuanced approach. The racism that targets the African descent community has differences from racism that targets the Arab communities; Latino/Latinas are targeted in ways that are different from the oppression of South Asians. Each constituency group has a particular set of recordings against it, and each message needs to be unlearned in its specificity. We must help teachers understand the particularities of racist messages and the histories they grew out of so that teachers can begin to contradict each one of those recordings, both in themselves and in their students.

B) Once a teacher develops these tools of perception, identification and understanding, the teacher can then learn to invert and contradict the messages and beliefs upon which the behaviours sit. This is the work of recovery and restoration. Teachers have the opportunity to educate toward liberating students’ minds, supplanting false messages and replacing them with human truth, not only as abstract ideas but helping racialized

students experience their own full humanity and that of their peers. As bell hooks writes, “(s)peaking aloud daily affirmations to change long-imprinted, toxic messages is a useful strategy for cleansing the mind. It promotes vigilant awareness of the ways white-supremacist thinking (daily encoded in the world of advertisement, commercials, magazine images, etc.) enters our system and also empowers us to break its hold on our consciousness” (p.38, *Teaching Community*). When a racialized student, for example, doesn’t feel intelligent, the teacher can find various ways to invert the message, to constantly convey to each of her/his racialized students that they are infinitely smart and capable. While this may sound pat, continuous and varied contradictions of internalized recordings are highly effective at expunging the recording students carry. This also includes helping students develop skills of agency, self awareness and communication. In doing so, teachers will be making room for the sadness and anger that may arise, and at the same time, they will be germinating love of self, of group and of human beings, all working toward vibrant, powerful human living. Simultaneously, such a strategy acts to contradict the messages the teacher carries—white teachers and racialized teachers. To illustrate the point, when Sarah was teaching in New York City, she had a practice of waiting after she asked the class a question. She would wait for the initial grouping of hands to go up, usually all boys. The wait time brought other hands to rise and Sarah was mindful to often ask a female student to speak first. Over time, the female students began raising their hands more often and the contribution of students’ thinking to the class became notably different. When Sarah purposefully brought the marginalized voices to the centre, her students responded and the classroom dynamics shifted.

C) The final and often most emotional part of this work entails helping students notice their own internalized recordings. When students are guided to become self-reflective, to identify the messages they have absorbed and the ways in which those messages are manifest in their behaviour, this awareness allows the process of contradiction to move beyond the teacher into the power of the student her/himself. This process is very different from the punishment often given to students to “sit there and think about what you’ve done wrong, and write an

essay about it”, a punishment thick with blame and targeting. Our approach relates to self-reflection as a tool applied toward contradicting racist recordings. This step invites students to notice the ways their behaviour patterns are part of a much larger story, connected to systems of racism rather than simply personal fault. With the support and guidance of a teacher who continually inverts the recordings and reaches for the student, this process further enables racism to be eliminated. For example, when Miriam was working as an educator at a Jewish summer camp, she once had a conversation with a male camper who had been dumped again and was heartbroken and frustrated. As she listened to him tell the story of the ways he repeatedly found himself stuck and making the same mistakes in his past relationships, Miriam pointed out that his particular patterns were common among Jewish men, arising from the history of anti-Semitism and its internalization. Through this conversation, and others that followed throughout the summer, he started to understand for the first time that these weren’t simply his own failings but part of a larger system and dynamic. The insight offered him the perspective that his struggles are part of prejudicial messages he has been taught. This shift was liberating and helpful to the student, enabling him to both stop feeling like a failure, incapable of being in a relationship, and to take responsibility for making different choices.

This multi-faceted approach becomes challenging to implement when the recordings teachers carry, both white and racialized teachers, impede their ability to act. Even when teachers have the critical consciousness about race and racism to understand its history and dynamics, even when teachers object to white domination over racialized peoples in all aspects of social, economic and political life, the work of deeply examining the messages one has internalized and honestly probing the specific choices, reactions, behaviours and feelings one holds is required in order to actually expunge the patterns that come from internalized and interpersonal recordings. It takes a dedicated effort to expunge the recordings we carry. Raising awareness and educating teachers about racism is an important and largely cognitive endeavor. Ridding ourselves of the messages we carry and supporting students to do the same is also an emotional endeavor, for it is not merely about behaviour, but about belief. For

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racism to end, white people and racialized peoples must work collaboratively, each bearing responsibility and each supporting the other in ridding ourselves of racist recordings.

In this work, white teachers will necessarily come up against the racist recordings they carry to which they, themselves, are oblivious. Further, there is a tremendous amount of guilt, shame and embarrassment most whites carry in relation to racism. Most often, they disagree with racism so strongly and feel so bad about it, that they have little room to explore and expunge the recordings that exist. There is “a disconnect here between their conscious repudiation of race as a marker of oppression and their unconscious understanding” (p.26, Teaching Community). It is this gap that we have to train teachers to bridge. There is both broad denial of racism and shame about it, a combination that makes eradicating racism even more difficult. For this reason, it is vital to differentiate between blame and responsibility. Here, again, we must remember that racism is taught. While white teachers have a responsibility to end racism, they are not the ones to blame for creating it. White guilt about racism is decidedly unhelpful. It limits a person’s ability and capacity to effect change and it targets the person rather than the system of oppression. It is vital that safe and supportive opportunities are created for white teachers to explore and name the racist recordings they carry. For example, when Sarah worked at a social justice organization, issues of wealth and class often surfaced. Co-workers regularly pulled Sarah aside to unpack incidents that happened in the office. Co-workers regularly expressed their feelings of guilt along with their frustrations at the dynamics at play. Sarah would lovingly, and without blame, offer a space for her colleagues to name the recordings they carried and share their feelings about the fact that they carry those recordings even though they cognitively reject them. This dynamic is part of what enabled her colleagues to pull her aside over and over again; they found it useful, supportive and safe. This practice had a significant impact on the relationships of the office staff. It is crucial to distinguish between the racist recordings and the person who has learned them. When we work with teachers and students on racism, we have to remember that it is the racism we want to eliminate; the people, we want to embrace.

Racialized teachers will come up against their own internalized recordings. They will need the support and safety of other racialized teachers to name and expunge the recordings they carry. For many, this process stirs deep rage and extreme sadness for it requires acknowledging out loud how harmful and destructive racism has been to their personal lives. Like any targeted group needing to function in an oppressive society, the actual extent of damage is rarely felt or expressed on a personal level. Creating opportunities for racialized teachers to share and explore is vital to their own liberation from the effects of racism, and to the liberation of students. For example, when Miriam was staffing a summer Israel program for high school students, there was always a small constituency of Ethiopian students among a mostly white student body. Each summer, the program would invite the Ethiopian students to join a staff member in discussing the challenges of being such a small minority group in that setting. These conversations were repeated throughout the summer. Often the first conversation at the beginning of the summer was short and the students voiced how happy they were to be part of the program. As the summer progressed and issues of racism manifested in the group (most often in subtle, unintentional and unaware ways), these conversations became opportunities for students to show their anger and frustration with their peers (which they were not prepared to do in front of their peers) while also being supported. Through these discussion groups, the Ethiopian students were able to see some of their internalizations and act to rid themselves of the recordings, a process that enabled them to take on leadership roles with their peers in addressing issues of race in the group, and in their lives beyond the summer. While this example is of students rather than of the educators, it clearly points to how useful and successful such a group can be.

For white teachers and racialized teachers this process is effective and helpful. It is also deeply personal. By contradicting racism in the classroom, coupled with participating in supportive and safe opportunities to expunge their own racist recordings, teachers will be actively working to end racism. From the personal to the communal, this process will continue to move outward, impacting school policy and school culture, and further out to impact school communities, families and social structures.

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Developing insight in this way, from the specificity of student experiences outward to the institutional level, enables a critique of the oppressive systems and institutions that is deeply rooted in concrete realities rather than abstract assertions. It is our contention that systemic change is most effective when traveled in this way, so that the teacher's self-awareness and examination of the impact of racism on her/his own perceptions is personal and paradigm shifting, making it possible to re-envision policy and institutions with a clear view to their new ends, not merely addressing the effects or symptoms of racism, but rather eradicating racism from the inside, out.

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Sarah Margles began her work with social systems and cross-cultural engagement when she was hired by the Nesiya Institute to staff their summer high school programs in 1999. After completing her Masters Degree in Jewish Education (2004), with a focus on cultural transmission, she moved to New York City and developed social justice curricula for her middle and high school classes. She began working in global justice education with American Jewish World Service, looking particularly at how we understand international issues of race, gender, sexual orientation and ethnicity (2006). She was a Grace Paley Organizing Fellow with Jews for Racial and Economic Justice doing anti-oppression work and community organizing (2008). She completed the Telus Interactive Arts and Entertainment Program at the Canadian Film Centre (2009) and was invited (2009) to join United to End Racism, an international cross-cultural anti-racism initiative. Sarah currently facilitates anti-oppression trainings, develops cultural competency curricula, and does anti-oppression counseling in Toronto (www.CulturalPolitics.ca). She also blogs (www.RadicalDiversity.blogspot.com), works on Israeli/Palestinian dialogue, and runs group sessions on internalized and interpersonal oppression. Sarah has a knack for fixing things that seem broken and can kick it nicely on the dance floor.

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tional organization that fosters understanding through face to face encounters between North American Jewish leaders from across the religious and political spectrum and Palestinians in the West Bank. She facilitates workshops integrating text learning, social justice and creative exploration in movement, song and creative writing particularly addressing issues of oppression and liberation, difference and conflict. She has led workshops with various populations including hospital patients, prison inmates, Israeli agunot (women denied a religious divorce by their husbands) and adults and young people of all ages. Miriam served as the Associate Rabbi at Kehilat Lev Shalem in Woodstock, NY and is an alumnus of the Mandel Leadership Institute in Jerusalem. She earned a Master's degree in Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School, Rabbinic ordination from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and a Bachelor's of Fine Arts in creative writing from York University in Toronto. She is also a dancer, composer and poet.

ENDNOTES

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