

“A Woman out of Control”: Deconstructing Sexism and Racism in the University¹

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Equity measures and attempts at inclusivity in the university, such as harassment policies and prejudice reduction workshops, tend to treat sexism, racism, and other forms of marginalization and exclusion as attitudinal and individualistic properties. Through discussion of a critical incident in which I was involved, I argue that sexism and racism are systemic; they are power relations that have become normalized courses of action within the university. To make the university more inclusive in fact, and not merely in policy, therefore, I propose an anti-sexist/racist approach explicitly taking into account the inequalities members of the university embody in their gender, racial, and other historically and ideologically constructed differences.

Les mesures d'équité et les autres initiatives d'inclusion telles les politiques contre le harcèlement sexuel et les ateliers visant à réduire les préjugés ont tendance à considérer le sexisme, le racisme et les autres formes de marginalisation et d'exclusion comme des questions d'attitudes personnelles. À travers l'analyse d'un incident décisif dans laquelle elle a été impliquée, l'auteure soutient que le sexisme et le racisme sont systémiques; il s'agit de relations de pouvoir qui sont devenues la norme au sein de l'université. Pour favoriser l'inclusion à l'université et ce, dans la pratique plutôt que dans les seules politiques, l'auteure propose une approche anti-sexiste et anti-raciste qui tient compte explicitement des inégalités entre les membres de la communauté universitaire dans leurs différences de sexe, de race ou de toute autre différence qui est le fruit de l'histoire ou d'une idéologie.

At the conclusion of a course I taught on minority groups and race relations, a male student brought a complaint against me, charging that I used the class as a platform for feminism. He claimed that as a “white male” he felt completely marginalized. This incident is not unique. In the first year I taught, a male student circulated a petition complaining 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 I had unwittingly achieved a balanced curriculum, but the student and the administration disagreed that this was desirable, and I was asked to change the contents for the remainder of the course (Ng, 1991). On at least two other occasions, complaining (male) students have physically threatened me. Indeed, complaints of this kind about my courses' contents and my pedagogical methods have recurred during my ten years' teaching in the university.

The advice administrators and colleagues have given me concerning these incidents generally revolves around contents and styles: perhaps I can tone down my lectures somewhat; change to less controversial materials; acquire more teaching techniques; prepare better. (With reference to the course on “cross-cultural education,” the administration suggested I 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 that what I experienced has less to do with my competence as a teacher than with who I am.

I am a feminist and a member of a racial minority. My scholarly work focuses on integrating analyses of gender with those of race, and vice versa. My insistence on teaching ethnic and race relations with a feminist perspective, and on challenging Eurocentric assumptions in feminist theorizing, has consistently got me into trouble throughout my university teaching career.

Using a critical incident that occurred in one of the courses I taught, I want to draw attention, in this article, to how sexism and racism as *power dynamics* operate in everyday life to disempower feminist and other minority teachers. These dynamics, as we are discovering, affect how our formal authority is perceived and received by students, and, by extension, the degree to which we can be effective teachers, especially if our teaching challenges existing norms and forms of thinking and behaviour in the classroom, in the university, and in society. (See, for example, in chronological order: Nielsen, 1979; Heald, 1989; Ng, 1991, Hoodfar, 1992.)

In their introduction to a special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Education* on feminist pedagogy, Briskin and Coulter (1992) identified three power axes in the classroom: between teacher and students; between students and teacher, especially women and teachers who are women of colour; and among students (p. 257). Here I examine an additional power axis: between the minority teacher and her/his colleague(s) in relation to the handling of student complaints. I show how gender and race relations interact to undermine the authority and credibility of minority² faculty members, and I deconstruct the complexity of sexism and racism as interlocking relations operating in a specific situation to maintain the subordination and marginalization of minority teachers. The complex and multi-faceted character of the critical incident on which I base my analysis illustrates the pervasiveness of sexism and racism, and raises questions about the assumption of neutrality and fairness when university administrators and other staff members are asked to adjudicate complaints.

Although my discussion focuses on the teacher’s experience, I suggest that other minority staff and students encounter similar situations, in which their experiences are frequently exacerbated because of their relative powerlessness in the university hierarchy. My discussion therefore raises issues about existing equity measures and about how to make the university more inclusive when

people enter and participate in it as *unequal* subjects. In the conclusion, I propose an antisexist/antiracist approach to educational matters.

THE INCIDENT

Although I use one incident instead of a variety of examples, I am not treating it as typical or generalizable of similar types of situations. Following Dorothy Smith's (1987) method of problematizing the everyday world, my purpose here is to explicate the social organization that produced and reinforced my position as a gendered and racialized subject in the university. Here is how Smith puts it:

If you've located an individual experience in the social relations which determine it, then although that individual experience might be idiosyncratic, the social relations are not idiosyncratic. [All experiences] are generated out of, and are aspects of the social relations of our time, of corporate capitalism. These social relations are discernible, although not fully present or explicable in the experiences of people whose lives, by reason of their membership in a capitalist society, are organized by capitalism. (quoted in Campbell, n.d.)

The dynamics that partly shaped the interactions described in the incident involve relations of gender, race, and class. These relations, which I call "sexism" and "racism," are not peculiar to this incident but are rather relations that have developed over time in Canada and elsewhere as groups of people have interacted. They have become systemic; that is, they are taken for granted and not ordinarily open to interrogation. In examining the incident, my intention is not to attribute blame or to identify victims, but to explicate the systemic character of sexism and racism as they are manifested in interactional settings. I maintain that in so doing, we move away from treating these incidents as idiosyncratic, isolated "wrong doing" perpetrated by a few individuals with attitudinal problems. Instead, we aim at a fundamental re-examination of the structures and relations of universities, which have marginalized and excluded certain groups of people historically, and continue to do so despite equity measures implemented in the last ten years or so.

In this particular incident, a student (who identified himself as a "white,"³ immigrant male) brought a complaint against me regarding a course I taught on "minority groups and race relations," one of my primary teaching subjects in various universities since 1982.⁴ In this kind of course, I always include discussions of 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 to rupture standard modes of scholarly inquiry, which artificially separate body/soul and mind (Currie, 1992). These courses are stimulating and contentious, and 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 are resisted by students.

Interestingly, the student complainant attended classes for the first four or five weeks, then was absent until the third-last class. During that class, he became very agitated when, in our discussion on antiracist education, we included women's experiences of discrimination. 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 male and female students reacted to it, illustrated the gender dynamics we had been discussing for the past couple of weeks.⁵

The student did not come to the last two classes, but complained to the administration about my teaching⁶—at a meeting I attended. During the meeting, he charged that the meditative and physical exercises I conducted (the reasons for which I had explained clearly) were completely inappropriate in a graduate class, 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 (this was untrue). I refused to enter into a debate about the reading materials, and suggested that whether they 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 of the last class he attended, I had marginalized him as a “white male.”

Three times in the meeting he told the administrator I was “a woman out of control.” 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 five-week absence.” He finally threatened to take me and the department to court for “false advertising.” He told us that his girlfriend, a lawyer, was waiting outside.

During the entire meeting, the administrator maintained a neutral stance. At the end of the student's complaint, he asked the student 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 at a minimum he would have expected me to state my perspective explicitly in the course outline. I interjected at this point that if I was to make my perspective explicit, 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 problems with yours.” He added that he would ask “a gay” to make his perspective explicit also.⁷

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

SEXISM AND RACISM AS SYSTEMIC

Much work combatting sexism and racism in the education system has emphasized attitudinal and curricular changes (for instance, prejudice awareness/reduction workshops; measures against sexual and racial harassment; introducing other cultures into the curriculum, especially under the rubric of multicultural education). These changes, important and necessary though they are, are based on what Mohanty (1990) has identified as a liberal pluralist conception of diversity. In her critique of what she calls “the race industry” and prejudice-reduction workshops in universities, Mohanty points out that they reduce historical and institutional inequality to an individualist and psychological level.

In focusing on “the healing of past wounds” this approach also equates the positions of dominant and subordinate groups, erasing all power inequities and hierarchies. . . . [T]he location of the source of “oppression” and “change” in individuals suggests an elision between ideological and structural understandings of power and domination and individual, psychological understandings of power. (Mohanty, 1990, p. 198)

Whereas the institution of women’s studies has brought about a radical rethinking of gender relations in society, especially in western societies, this cannot be said of curricular reform on race. Frequently, attempts in this area take an additive approach, adding an article (or two) to existing materials. There has been insufficient re-conceptualization of how race matters in the structuring of social experiences inside and outside the academy. More insidious and stifling, when racism is treated as an individualistic and attitudinal property, as Mohanty has pointed out, is that members of minority groups (both faculty and students) are tokenized. That is,

specific “differences” (of personality, posture, behavior, etc.) of one woman of color stand in for the difference of the whole collective, and a collective voice is assumed in place of an individual voice. . . . [T]his results in the reduction or averaging of Third World peoples [for example] in terms of individual personality characteristics. . . . (Mohanty, 1990, p. 194)

This approach overlooks the fact that power dynamics, based on one’s race, gender, ability, and other characteristics, operate in mundane, taken-for-granted, and “common sense” ways. Thus, although attitudinal changes and multicultural education (for example) are necessary points of departure for creating an inclusive university, they do not address the embeddedness of sexism and racism as routine operation in the university.

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. Thus, “white” European men, especially those of British and sometimes French descent, will typically see themselves as superior to women and to people with other ethnic and racial origins. Systems of ideas and practices have been developed to justify and support this notion of superiority. In Canada these ideas and practices originate in colonization by the Anglo-Saxons and the French.⁸ Over time, ideas about the superiority and inferiority of different groups become accepted ways of thinking and being. Certain behaviours and modes of operation are eventually taken for granted; they become ways of excluding those who do not belong to the dominant group(s).

This understanding is derived from Gramsci’s analysis of ideology and of how certain ideas become hegemonic and “common sense” over time. Common-sense thinking is uncritical, episodic, and disjointed, but it is also powerful because it is taken for granted (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 321–343). Once an idea becomes common sense, it is no longer questioned. In applying Gramsci’s historical discussion to racism in contemporary British society, Stuart Hall observes:

[Ideologies] work most effectively when we are not aware that how we formulate and construct a statement about the world is underpinned by ideological premises; when our formulations seem to be simply descriptive statements about how things are (i.e. must be), or of what we can “take-for-granted.” (Hall, quoted in Lawrence, 1982, p. 46)

Collin Leys⁹ suggests that when an ideology becomes completely normalized, it is embedded in language. Some examples of common-sense statements are: “Blacks are good at sports but not at academic subjects”; “Women are nurturing”; “Unemployed people are lazy.” Although these ideas may originally have been developed by the dominant group, they have become ways cohorts of individuals are “normally” thought of; they are popularly held beliefs.

These normalized ways of thinking (frequently referred to as “stereotyping”) have real and profound consequences for people’s lives. In her ethnographic research on how high school students are streamed into vocational programs, Jackson found that Chinese boys were advised to go into vocational-stream accounting courses which effectively curtailed their entrance into university. This advice was based on guidance counsellors’ perception that these boys were good at maths, but not so good with language. Similarly, Chinese girls were routinely streamed into secretarial programs (Jackson, 1987).

Let me give another example from my own research as illustration. My analysis (Ng, 1992) of immigration policy reveals that when a household applies to Canada for landed immigrant status, usually only one member of the household is granted “independent” status; the other members are granted “family class” status. This classification system usually accords the man/husband, seen to be the household head, independent status, and designates the woman/wife and children “family class” immigrants. This system is based on the western notion of the

“nuclear family” with the man/husband being the head of the household; it ignores the facts that other societies have different family structures, and that the wife and adult children make essential contributions to the household economy. Furthermore, since “family class” immigrants are seen as dependents, they are not eligible for state assistance (such as training subsidies) available to the household head. In an immigrant household, then, often the husband can receive such assistance, while the wife is ineligible by virtue of her classification, rendering her dependent on and subordinate to her husband. This is an instance of how sexism operates objectively and routinely in Canadian institutions, and illustrates what I mean by “systemic” sexism.

Sexism and racism are systemic in that, routinized in institutions, 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” and thus not open to interrogation. These ways of doing things keep certain individuals and groups in dominant and subordinate positions, producing the structural inequality we see both in the education system and in the workplace.

Sexism and racism are enacted in interactions. In the example of immigration policy above, when an immigration officer classifies people according to the law, s/he is implicated in the reinforcement of sexism in relation to the immigrant woman regardless of her/his attitude toward the person so classified. The way counsellors stream Chinese boys and girls into different programs is another case in point. Thus, acts of sexism and racism go beyond personal intentions and attitudes precisely because they are embedded in institutions and because individuals have different (and at times multiple and contradictory) locations within institutions. Sexism and racism are *power relations* that have crystallized in organizational actions in which we are implicated by virtue of our membership in institutions. We are not and cannot be exempted from them. To see sexism and racism as systemic, then, is to understand that power dynamics (including forms of inclusion and exclusion) permeate the settings in which we live and work. Knowing 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 operating 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 and gender, as well as other socially and ideologically constructed characteristics, shape how we see ourselves and how we are seen. They affect, enable, and disable how we negotiate our ways through the university system.

I use “socially and ideologically constructed” to refer to the 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, and so on, of groups of people. These

differences, treated as “natural” and therefore immutable, are then used to justify the domination of one group over another. In fact, the construction of different groups as “races” varies historically and across societies (see Miles, 1989; Ng 1989, 1993).

To see members of the university community as gendered and racialized subjects is to understand and acknowledge that we are not made equal. The social structure of inequality on the basis of class, gender, race, ability, and so on, which leaks into and becomes integral to the academy, means that we do not participate in the academy as equals. To make the university more inclusive, therefore, we must make special efforts to redress the unequal balance of power at every level.

DECONSTRUCTING THE INCIDENT

The incident cited above raises four central issues. First, it raises the issue of neutrality, objectivity, and fairness in adjudicating complaints about teaching that challenges societal norms. 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 presume 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 the western intellectual tradition, established by men to engender and safeguard their privilege and institutionalized in the academy when the university was the exclusive domain of certain classes of men.

Feminist scholarship has challenged the notion of objectivity and demonstrated that so-called objective universal knowledge is constructed by men for men (see Smith, 1974; Spender, 1980). Adrienne Rich (1976) argues that the “detachment” and “disinterest” that constitutes objectivity in scientific inquiry are the terms men apply to their own subjectivity.¹⁰ Mary O’Brien (1981) calls this “malestream” thought. Susan Bordo (1987) argues that the exclusive preoccupation with Reason in scholarly pursuit is a product of Cartesian thinking, which creates an artificial dualism, separating the mind/intellect and the body/emotion. The idea that “truth” exists independent of the social and physical location of the knower is carried over to the adjudication of disputes in the university. As Martin and Mohanty (1986) point out,

the claim to a lack of identity or positionality is itself based on privilege, on a refusal to accept responsibility for one’s implication in actual historical or social relations, on a denial that positionalities exist or that they matter, the denial of one’s own personal history and the claim to a total separation from it. (p. 208)

It is interesting and revealing that, in spite of (or because of?) our unequal structural positions, the administrator attempted to treat the student’s complaint

on equal footing as my course design and pedagogical methods, that he did not see anything out of the ordinary about a student calling a faculty member “a woman out of control.” (If he did think this was peculiar, he chose to ignore it, since he did not mention it either during or after the meeting.) This pretence 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 (1991) says, “If faculty do not treat women as colleagues, then students will not treat women as members of the faculty” (p. 63). This example shows precisely how sexism is normalized in men’s, and frequently women’s, collective consciousness. The attempt at fairness in this instance reveals how men collude with each other, intentionally or unwittingly, to restore the status quo of male dominance (see also Burstyn, 1985).¹¹

The second issue the incident raises is that of student resistance. This is a complex issue because students resist for different 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 that marginalize them (consider, for instance, the youths in Willis’ [1977] and McClaren’s [1989] studies); they resist for other social and psychological reasons (see Lewis, 1990) too numerous to list here. Here 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 a colleague observed when I discussed the above incident in a faculty meeting, are frequently directed at course materials, and disagreements are played out in intellectual debates. In the case of a minority faculty member, both course materials and the person her/himself become targets. As a member of 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 here. The knowledge I embody and transmit is also suspect—I am a woman out of control. The sexism and racism in this case is based not only on the student’s attitude toward minorities in general; it is also about minorities in positions of authority whose knowledge and expertise is dubious. In reflecting on her own teaching about women in the Third World, Hoodfar (1992) reports on similar experiences. In one course, she felt that her knowledge was finally accepted by the students only when it was corroborated by her white female colleague, who gave a guest lecture on the position of women in Uganda (p. 313).

Third, this incident raises the issue of language. In his outbursts both in the class and in the meeting with the administrator, the student asserted that I was marginalizing him as a “white male.” His language use is instructive: as marginalized groups are included and incorporated into the academy, the mainstream is appropriating and subverting feminist and other liberatory discourses for use against the very groups who developed these discourses in the first place. State-

ments such as “I don’t feel safe [or comfortable]” and “I feel silenced [or marginalized]” are now widely used to describe individuals’ experiences. This is another instance of the individualization and trivialization of collective experiences;¹² it erases the inequality among people due to race, gender, class, sexual preference, ability, and so on, and reduces systemic inequality to personal feelings. Liberatory language is thus normalized, so that the “white” male student, feeling threatened because his taken-for-granted way of thinking and acting is challenged, can assert that he is silenced or marginalized.

Finally, as universities are increasingly geared toward a consumer and corporate model (Newson & Buchbinder, 1988), they have become marketplaces rather than places for people to interrogate existing knowledges and to create new ones. Although I believe that there must be accountability in teaching, and recognize that students can be and have been short-changed, I also know, having taught in universities for the last ten years, that student complaints are launched and threats of legal action are evoked in very specific situations: usually when a student is threatened by knowledges that rupture his/her common-sense understanding of the world. Threats of legality are intended to restore the status quo.¹³ In the specific incident above, the legal threat was a tactically clever move on the part of the student, and it bared his class position and his recognition that what was at issue here was power, which he knew he had as a “white male” and which he intended to use. Raising the possible legal consequences of my pedagogy captured the administrator’s attention, and summoned¹⁴ him in his role as an administrator rather than as my colleague. That the student threatened legal action and that he received a neutral, if not sympathetic, hearing resulted from his subject position as a “white,” articulate male who could invoke the law on his side.

AGAINST THE GRAIN: COMBATTING SEXISM AND RACISM IN THE UNIVERSITY

To conclude, I want to explore how we may begin to combat sexism and racism in the university in light of my preceding conceptualization and analysis. I recommend that we try to think and act “against the grain”¹⁵ in handling various kinds of pedagogical situations. To act against the grain requires one first to recognize that routinized courses of action and interactions within the university are imbued with unequal power distributions which produce and reinforce various forms of marginalization and exclusion. Thus, a commitment to redress these power relations involves interventions and actions that may appear “counter-intuitive.”¹⁶ We need to rupture ways university business and interactions are “normally” conducted.

In introducing the notion of working “against the grain,” obviously I am speaking not to those interested in preserving the status quo, but to the increasing numbers of groups and individuals who wish to make the university more inclu-

sive of previously marginalized and disadvantaged groups (recognizing that they by no means represent a monolithic interest or position).

To work against the grain is to recognize that education is not neutral; it is contested. Mohanty (1990) puts it thus:

[E]ducation represents both a struggle for meaning and a struggle over power relations. [It is] a central terrain where power and politics operate out of the lived culture of individuals and groups situated in asymmetrical social and political positions. (p. 184)

We must develop a critical awareness of the power dynamics operating in institutional relations, and of the fact that people participate in institutions as unequal subjects. We must take an antisexist/antiracist approach to understanding and acting upon institutional relations, rather than overlooking the embeddedness of gender, race, class, and other forms of inequality that shape our interactions.

In her exploration of feminist pedagogy, Linda Briskin makes a clear distinction between non-sexist and antisexist education critical to our understanding here. She asserts that non-sexism is an approach which attempts to neutralize sexual inequality by pretending that gender can be made irrelevant in the classroom (Briskin, 1990a, 1990b). Thus, for instance, neither asserting that male and female students should have equal time to speak nor giving them equal time adequately rectifies the endemic problem of sexism in the classroom. One of Briskin's students reported that in her political science tutorials, when a male student spoke, everyone paid attention, but when a female student spoke, the class acted as if no one was speaking (Briskin, 1990a, p. 13). Neutrality conceals the unequal distribution of power.

An antisexist/antiracist approach would acknowledge explicitly that we are all gendered, racialized, and differently constructed subjects who do not interact as equals. This goes beyond formulating sexism and racism in individualist terms and treating them as personal attitudes. Terry Wolverton (1983) discovered the difference between non-racism and antiracism 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. (p. 191)

Being antisexist/antiracist means seeing sexism and racism as systemic and interpersonal (rather than individual), and combatting sexism and racism collectively, not just personally (as if somehow a person could 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 ensured the perpetuation of sexism, racism, and other forms of marginalization and exclusion in the univer-

sity. Patricia Williams' closing remark in her article "Blockbusting the Canon" (1991) is worth quoting at length here:

It's great to turn the other cheek in the face of fighting words; it's probably even wise to run. But it's not a great way to maintain authority in the classroom. . . . "[J]ust ignoring" verbal challenges from my law students is a good way to deliver myself into the category of the utterly powerless. If, moreover, my white or male colleagues pursue the same path (student insult, embarrassed pause, the teacher keeps on teaching as though nothing had happened), we have collectively created that peculiar institutional silence that is known as a moral vacuum. (p. 63)

Taking an antisexist/antiracist approach means we cannot be complacent as individual teachers or as members of the different collectivities to which we belong (for instance, on committees and in faculty associations). We must speak out against normalized courses of action that maintain existing inequality, although this may alienate us from those in power as well as those close to us. We must actively support our minority colleagues in their teaching, administrative, and other responsibilities, and consciously open up spaces for previously silenced or marginalized voices to be heard. We must create spaces for students to interrogate existing paradigms and to explore alternative ones, and support them in other endeavours. We must also constantly interrogate our own taken-for-granted 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. I am not suggesting that administrators and staff handling and adjudicating disputes should categorically take the side of "the minority teacher/student." I am suggesting, however, that assessment of any situation should take account of people's varying subject positions within and outside 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 explicitly sexist and implicitly racist; it was aimed at undermining my authority and expertise.

Administratively, to resolve such a dispute, the student could be advised to withdraw from courses with which he has problems rather than waiting until the end of the term. An appropriate administrative response could be to arrange for the student to withdraw from the course, even though the official deadline had 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. This kind of situation is a valuable pedagogical moment that can be used to engage students in what we teach in a formal classroom setting. To work against the grain as an educator is to close the perceived gap between the formal and the "hidden" curriculum, and to use any opportunity we can to challenge normalized and normalizing forms of behaviour and thinking.¹⁷

The concept of academic freedom could be deployed in this instance to educate the student about the nature of university education and about his consumer-oriented mentality toward university education; university education is intended to expose students to a range of perspectives and experiences, not to confirm and/or reinforce their limited views of the world. Taking Fernando's and his colleagues' (Fernando, Hartley, Nowak, & Swinehart, 1990) definition of the role of an intellectual and an academic to be that of a social critic trained to challenge dogma and to express critical views (p. 6), it can be argued that a fundamental aspect of our freedom and responsibility as academics is to expose the political and contested nature of education.¹⁸

Finally, I want briefly to take up the issue of safety and comfort, because these words have become currency in debates around discourses and practices that challenge existing modes of thinking and working. Understanding oppression and doing antiracist work is by definition unsafe and uncomfortable, because both involve a serious (and frequently threatening) effort to interrogate our privilege as well as our powerlessness.¹⁹ To speak of safety and comfort is to speak from a position of privilege, relative though it may be. For those who have existed too long on the margins, life has never been safe or comfortable. Understanding and eliminating oppression and inequality oblige us to 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 by definition risky, and therefore requires commitment to a different vision of society than that which we now take for granted.

Teaching and learning against the grain is not easy, comfortable, or safe. It is protracted, difficult, uncomfortable, painful, and risky. It involves struggles with our colleagues and our students, as well as within ourselves. It is, in short, a challenge.

NOTES

¹ This article is based on my presentation on a panel entitled "Racism, Sexism and Homophobia: Some Threats to Inclusivity and Academic Freedom in the University," at the OCUFA (Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations) Status of Women's Conference on Developing Strategies for the Inclusive University, 5–6 February 1993, in Toronto. The other panel members were Johann St. Lewis and David Rayside. Thanks are due Suzanne de Castell, David Bray, Linda Briskin, Roger Simon, and Rebecca Coulter for comments on earlier drafts of this article. Special thanks to Linda Briskin for the title.

² I use the term "minority" in the standard sociological sense to refer to people who are relatively powerless in a society. Thus, even though women are numerically the majority, they are a "minority" in terms of power and influence. Similarly, ethnic and racial minorities, especially non-whites, constitute a minority in this society. To avoid repetition, I use the term "minority" to refer to *both* women and ethnic/racial minorities.

³ I use the term "white" in quotation marks to emphasize that "white," similar to "coloured," is a socially and ideologically constructed term. Its designation changes historically according to the dominant-subordinate relations in a given society. I use "white" to refer to groups who have taken

part in Canada's colonization and who are perceived to be or who perceive themselves to be part of the dominant groups. In this case, the student referred to himself as a "white male"; his original language, however, was not English. He also told the class he was an immigrant and had been discriminated against due to his legal status; but in the course he did not draw parallels between his own marginality as an immigrant and the experiences of other marginalized groups.

- ⁴ I am deliberately vague about details of the course to protect the identity of individuals involved. I want to emphasize that my intent is not to personalize the story, but to highlight the embeddedness of gender and racial dynamics in our experiences.
- ⁵ It 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 (see Lewis, 1990), attempting to protect him from other students' anger and to painstakingly explain to him the parallels between women's subordination and the subordination of ethnic and racial minorities. When 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 on the male student as an equal (as opposed to as a bunch of hysterical women trying to overwhelm him). By this time the discussion had become 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.
- ⁶ In highlighting the focus of this article, I have to omit details that detract from the main theme(s). What brought this student's complaint to the administration was actually more complicated. Briefly, in addition to resenting what had occurred in the class he attended after being away, the student was upset that I had asked him to make up, by means of written work, the work the class had done in his absence (e.g., small group discussions, debates and writing exercises). He felt I was being unjust because his absence was due to medical reasons (which I accepted), but I insisted on his making up the work because of the length of his absence. He felt I was discriminating against him because I asked him to do "extra" work not mentioned in the course outline (which specifically stated that attendance, though ungraded, was required). This was unacceptable to him, hence his request for mediation. In the meeting, however, he completely bypassed the original issue and instead criticized the course.
- ⁷ This comment, made spontaneously, indicates the normalization of certain sexual practices and the overlapping character of forms of subordination.
- ⁸ This is a cursory and simplistic presentation of the complex history of Canada's colonial past. Space and time prevent a fuller exploration and explication of this topic, except to say that although I recognize the subordination of French-speaking peoples, I want to note the two key colonizers of Canada.
- ⁹ Special lecture by Collin Leys organized by Tuula Lindholm for a Gramsci study group on 21 March 1993. I thank Tuula for inviting me to the lecture.
- ¹⁰ For an excellent discussion of objective versus subjective knowledge and the constitution of objectivity, see Currie (1992).
- ¹¹ The myth of objectivity of school knowledge has also been challenged by those writing about the hidden curriculum. For an excellent summary, see Giroux (1981).
- ¹² See also Mohanty (1990, pp. 193–196). Mohanty raises an important critique of the use of "experience" in liberatory discourses which becomes individualized in the university.
- ¹³ I base this claim on my own experience and on informal conversations with minority faculty over the past ten years of my university teaching career. Given the corporatization and rise of politically correct movements in universities, I think this area is worthy of further investigation.
- ¹⁴ I borrow this term from Susan Heald's (1990) analysis of state formation (p. 149). To summon is to call forth or to command a particular aspect of our multidimensional and contradictory identity.

- ¹⁵ Various writers have used this term — see Cochran-Smith (1991), Ng (1991), and Simon (1992). Although these authors attach slightly different significance and meaning to the term, it generally denotes educational practices aimed at instilling critical perspectives and consciousness in students in the classroom. I suggest it should be extended to our work in other settings.
- ¹⁶ The term “counter-intuitive” is borrowed from Linda Briskin, who used it in a workshop, “Negotiating Power in the Inclusive Classroom,” we co-facilitated for the Toronto Board of Education on 21 January 1993. Similar to being “against the grain,” to be counter-intuitive is to interrogate what we take for granted as the “natural” ways of doing things.
- ¹⁷ Realistically, of course, we cannot and do not seize *every* moment presented to us; however, critical 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.
- ¹⁸ The meaning of academic freedom, like the role of education itself, is a topic of heated debates. I will not elaborate on this subject here except to say that the discussion in Fernando et al. (1990), together with the literature on critical pedagogy, can be used to re-conceptualize the academic freedom debate and related notions of “objectivity” and “fairness.”
- ¹⁹ I thank the students in my advanced seminar “Sexism, Racism, and Colonialism: Pedagogical Implications” (spring 1993) for helping me clarify my own thinking on this subject.

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