

# Voyeurism and Vulnerability

## *Critiquing the Power Relations of Anti-Racist Workshops*

by Sarita Srivastava

*L'éducation antiraciste peut reproduire et accentuer le racisme en se servant insensiblement de l'expérience personnelle des personnes participantes qui ne sont pas blanches. En se basant sur certaines expériences ou les relations de pouvoir ne*

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*sont pas reconnues, les auteures démontrent comment certaines personnes se sentent particulièrement vulnérables et deviennent pour ainsi dire des victimes de voyeurisme. Dans le but même de contrer le racisme, l'éducation antiraciste peut à la fois ignorer, maintenir et reproduire les relations d'inégalité qu'elle tente d'enrayer.*

Anti-racist workshops are becoming an increasingly common, acceptable, and even fashionable way of "dealing" with racism. But my own experiences as both a workshop participant and facilitator have left me feeling vulnerable, drained, and demoralized, rather than more inspired or capable to act against racism. These experiences have motivated me to question the role and the power relations of anti-racist workshops.

At a panel discussion on "Critiquing Anti-Racist Consultancy," (CRIA-W Conference), I found that many women of colour shared concerns about its effectiveness, its commercialization, and its practitioners. Yet when I look elsewhere for critiques, I find that few of these concerns have been documented.

Although several writers in anti-racist education emphasize an analysis of "inequality and white supremacy in Canadian society" (Walcott 110), they do not sufficiently examine these power dynamics *within* anti-racist workshops (see Dei; Lee; Thomas). Few have looked at the conception, practice, and power relations of anti-racist workshops from the perspective of a "minority," or non-white<sup>1</sup> participant, as I will here.

Among my concerns is that anti-racist education, as I have seen it practiced, can reinforce and replicate personal experiences of racism for non-white participants. This happens, for example, because workshops can make people more vulnerable to racist or insensitive treatment, and

put them and their experiences on display. Here, I first describe and discuss some of my own and others' painful experiences of "vulnerability" and "voyeurism" in anti-racist workshops. I also begin an analysis that can explain these experiences and offer opportunities for change in anti-racist work.

In particular, I feel these experiences are a result of unacknowledged power relations. When examined from the perspective of a non-white participant, it becomes clear that anti-racist education can ignore, maintain, and reproduce these power relations of racism within a workshop. This can occur even as the workshop attempts to challenge these power relations in "society."

By "power relations of racism," I mean the way that domination by white, western institutions and people affect everyone's relationships with others, with ourselves. This includes, for example, the way implicit or formal authority allows white people to dominate interpersonal interactions, and the way non-white people are silenced and silence themselves. As facilitators or educators, our relative power can prevent us from recognizing these dynamics. In order to explore and change these "obscured" power relations, the assumptions, goals, methods, and control of anti-racist education need to be questioned.

Many of my thoughts here are based on experiences at three or four workshops, discussions with others, and university classroom interactions. When I describe the behaviour of individuals, it is to highlight and provide evidence of the types of power dynamics that exist in anti-racist workshops. I have to emphasize that these incidents are not isolated, nor specific to these particular individuals. Rather, they are common occurrences indicative of broader relations.

Explaining and exploring these relations is a difficult and painful process, one that I can only begin. It is difficult not only to expose my personal experiences, but to criticize any anti-racist work, work that is already the target of racist criticisms (see Bejin and Freund). But unless we do, we cannot begin to look for alternative conceptions and practices of anti-racist education that would better serve non-white participants and communities.

### **Vulnerability**

Many anti-racist workshops require non-white and white participants to analyze and discuss racism through their personal experiences. However, like others in these workshops, I have often felt the vulnerability that comes with having to speak about racism to people who I feel are

not oppressed by it. This vulnerability has many forms, but it stems from our positions as non-white people within the power relations of a white-dominated society. Revealing our experiences of racism to people who do not understand them, who have the power to deny them or to retaliate with racist remarks or actions, is not just emotionally difficult. It also drains the energy we need for other struggles.

This kind of vulnerability is not limited to anti-racist workshops or people of colour. However, false, or "enforced," trust and togetherness in workshops require us to share painful, personal experiences—sometimes with relative strangers or people who have been racist towards us.

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This "sharing" means that people of colour are singled out, calling attention to our difference, when survival at school or work has often meant "fitting in." We are vulnerable to retaliation, ostracism, and further marginalization from employers and co-workers, especially if we are vocal during, or after, these anti-racist workshops. For example, Akua Benjamin explains how women of colour, who have found a way of surviving at work, become the target of guilt and hostility from dominant groups not prepared for anti-racist training. In addition, we may have to listen to others misunderstand, misinterpret, invalidate, or make racist comments about our experiences of racism. Even if we are silent, we might become the focus of unwanted attention, or be asked to reveal painful personal experiences, or speak for our "community." And if we are silent in these workshops, it is often precisely because we feel vulnerable, unsafe, and unwilling to expose our pain, our lives and cultures which have in the past always been the target of racism. Elizabeth Ellsworth talks about the "safety of silence," and how our decision to speak depends on our energy and on our assessment of "power relations and the safety of the situation" (313).

For example, when I attended an anti-racist workshop series in which half the participants were white, I found that I could not speak or contribute at all. Although I am used to speaking publicly in many situations, I felt intensely uncomfortable and afraid to say anything about racism, to expose myself to a group of white strangers. Even faced with a "minority" of one white person in a group of four, I froze at first, and had to force myself to speak. In fact, I didn't even feel comfortable enough to *say* how unsafe I felt. It was clear that I was not the only one feeling this way—although some women of colour in the workshop publicly and privately expressed similar feelings of vulnerability, the majority of non-white participants were

generally quiet. It became clear to everyone that white people dominated the discussions.

However, although several of us expressed these feelings of discomfort in our anonymous evaluations, and later more openly, I found that these issues were either not acknowledged or not understood. The facilitator said only, "Safety is an ongoing process, we all have to contribute to making everyone feel safe." These kinds of statements don't acknowledge that people of colour *cannot* be "safe" in such a context. They do not acknowledge that white people in this situation are generally safer, and that these different levels of danger are based on the power relations of racism. These statements also create an impression that the feelings of unsafeness are not systemic problems but rather individual problems that can be overcome.

Later, we were asked to share our experiences of racism in a group of four. When, with difficulty, I raised the issue of "voyeurism," I was merely reassured that sharing stories helped everyone learn. In other words, the workshop exercises are not the problem, the problem is individual people's feelings of danger. These are supposed to be overcome by mutual respect and consideration.

Hearing our concern, our pain, brushed aside, trivialized within an anti-racist workshop is especially difficult. As Uma Narayan has explained, members of an oppressed group are "specially vulnerable to insensitivities from outsiders they trust and work with..." because this is more difficult to deal with emotionally (46). I cried when I got home from this workshop, feeling betrayed, hurt, invaded and invalidated. My friend began crying during the workshop—as she identified with other women's stories of racism, she also began feeling even more vulnerable in a mixed crowd, began feeling like a guinea pig. These are not only personal feelings of vulnerability—they are feelings of "collective vulnerability" that arise from the collective aspects of racism. We feel vulnerable and upset not only for ourselves but for these other women who are exposed. It is impossible to separate these so-called "personal" and "collective" aspects of racism.

These are not "empowering" or motivating experiences. They are emotionally draining. It is exhausting to feel so vulnerable, to be exposed to ignorant or racist comments. It is also an incredibly draining task to educate white people under the guise of "workshopping." The result is that we have even less strength for anti-racist struggles. Pat Rosezelle says, "This work is not about us educating and explaining. It's not our job. That's what causes the burn-out." For example, Akua Benjamin says that many women of colour "drop out" of the anti-racist struggle "because it is too painful, too tiring, to keep teaching people about their white-skinned privilege."

### **Voyeurism**

Troyna claims that, "Those endorsing anti-racist education do not...endorse the voyeuristic imperatives of multiculturalism—the focusing, that is, on the expressive

features of ethnic minority cultures" (70). That may be true. Anti-racist education avoids seeing other people's culture as a dance performance. However, voyeurism can express itself in other ways. In particular, the uncritical use of personal experiences of racism to educate others not only makes us vulnerable, it puts us on display. It is as if we need to give evidence and testimony to prove the existence of racism. Revealing our emotions is seen to be the most effective way to do that. In this way, anti-racist education feels like the "song and dance" approach to multicultural education—we display our emotions rather than our costumes, in order to teach white people.

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For example, in a workshop I attended, we were asked to discuss experiences of racism in groups of four. We then presented a story to the larger group, and had it posted on the wall.

This approach is also advocated by school boards. In one board's handbook for "race relations" workshops, facilitators are told to treat the students' personal experiences of racism as "raw material." They are asked to obtain details from the students, and "get them to describe their experiences and feelings in the most vivid way possible." The facilitators are asked to record these experiences on a sheet "for all to see." They are then instructed to use this as raw material to organize the experiences under general categories.

So the non-white student's experience of racism is treated as a resource to be used, something to be probed and displayed in "vivid" detail, and intellectually manipulated. While the aim of these kinds of exercises is partly to validate experience, and to create a collective social analysis, non-white students and their very personal experiences are also *used* to educate white students about racism: "Students will begin to hear about what discrimination is like for other people, some for the first time." One (white) facilitator of such a workshop answered my criticisms with, "But it's good because some white students have never heard that before." In other words, it is an effective education tool aimed at white students.

But nowhere in the instructions about this kind of exercise are the non-white students' experiences dealt with: the pain of exposing personal experiences of racism to a mixed group, the crushing invalidation by white students and teachers who may have been the source of these experiences, the feeling of invasion and vulnerability in having their experiences probed by the facilitator,

and then displayed "for all to see." However, one section of such a handbook does deal with feelings of white students. It advises the facilitator to "let them off the hook a little." Here, it is acknowledged that "guilt and defensiveness" can be destructive—but only "to the process," not to the non-white students in the group.

The actual experiences of non-white students are absent in the manual. I was told, for example, about a student who related painful experiences of racist abuse, only to have a white teacher invalidate them by equating them with name-calling against white people. According to this kind of handbook, this is a common example of "guilt and defensiveness." Another non-white student who talked about discrimination she felt as an immigrant had to listen to a white American teacher equate this with his own experience. It is difficult and painful for a young student to share these stories, let alone to have them misunderstood and invalidated by people who have authority over her.

I do not mean that white people should not learn more about racism, but we need to explore alternative ways to do that. I also do not mean that people of colour should never share experiences of racism. I am doing that now. But we should be able to share our experiences in situations under our own control, or when *we* have chosen to—and when it is in our interests.

Gurnah, for example, clearly feels that anti-racist education can be contrary to the interests of people of colour, because "it provides white officials with the acceptable language of anti-racism, with which to disarm black criticisms" (16). In a workshop I attended, for example, one government employee and one consultant were there because they were working with government policy and programs. Though perhaps "well-intentioned" individuals, these officials and consultants may learn not only "acceptable" language but also information about anti-racist practice that can be used in social analysis, policy or public relations which either misrepresents, defuses or counters people of colour and anti-racism. So the danger of voyeuristic practices is not only that our pain will be displayed and invalidated, but that our pain will be used against us.

### **"Hidden" Power Relations**

If anti-racist education is "about rupturing the dominant power structures that continually exclude people and marginalize them in society" (Walcott 110), then we must also examine these power relations in our own workshops. As Elizabeth Ellsworth says, "Acting as if our classroom were a safe space did not make it so." Instead, she says we need "classroom practices that confronted the power dynamics inside and outside the classroom" (315). My own and others' experiences show that the ways anti-racist workshops are structured and facilitated is a result not only of racist power relations, but of a failure to acknowledge them. People of colour in anti-racist work-

shops are required to expose their painful experiences of racism to people who have power within racist relations. Not only are white participants implicated in these power relations, they can also use their power to deny our experiences, or to openly express their racism.

Few women would ever suggest that other women should have to share their stories of abuse in groups with male strangers. So why does a parallel situation become acceptable in anti-racist education?

First of all, workshops in which women talk about and act on their experiences of sexism have been organized *by and for* women. In contrast, much of anti-racist education

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is run *by and for* institutions that are still white-dominated—the governmental, educational, and corporate sectors, as well as much of the non-governmental sector. Even if the facilitators or planners are not white, these mixed workshops still focus on white participants. And, perhaps feeling that they and their friends are not racist, many white facilitators and participants either forget or cannot imagine that in a white-dominated society, all white people participate in the racism that is a constant, daily lived experience of non-white people. Because that reality is forgotten or not understood, it seems acceptable for non-white people to have to publicly expose their personal experiences of racism to white strangers.

Secondly, people's general understanding of sexism and racism differs, partly because these two forms of oppression are often seen as totally separate phenomena. Sexism is understood by many as an issue of male power, as systemic. Racism is still seen by many as isolated events perpetrated by uninformed and malicious people. More importantly, this view of racism is even held by those who theoretically understand and can explain "systemic racism." They may think about racist relations abstractly without looking deeply at their own, their friends', participation in them. Although I am acutely aware of the daily impact of racism, I have also internalized the notion of the "ugly racist." I can still feel surprised when an anti-racist consultant, friend, co-worker, classmate, professor makes a racist comment.

As Himani Bannerji points out, those who have a sincere motivation to do anti-racist work, who learn about and practice it, do not escape their own racism. I have seen this evidenced in several ways through the behaviour of anti-racist educators: through racist and ethnocentric comments, through an ignorance of the issues that people of colour deal with daily, and through their assumptions

about the "submissiveness," culture, or physical appearance, of certain non-white peoples. Their own racism may be expressed through their uncritical dominance of workshops and meetings, or when they fail to address the domination of workshops by other whites. These educators may have an intellectual analysis of racist relations, but they may not have fully examined their own positions within them. Their racism, and their failure to deal with it, will also affect the way they decide to structure a workshop, what they decide will be discussed, how it will be discussed, and how they respond to the participants. Ironically, this can result in anti-racist workshops becoming a *denial* of racism. Because the white participants and facilitators implicitly deny their own position in power relations, they end by reinforcing them. And, operating within these power relations, non-white facilitators are also constrained in challenging them—especially in workshops run largely by and for whites. As my own and others' experiences show, this can mean that anti-racist workshops end up producing a reinforcement and replay of personal experiences of racism for non-white participants.

I attended a workshop/play on employment equity which illustrates this point. As part of the workshop, actors dramatized several incidents of racism in the workplace. The (white) facilitator then asked members of the audience to volunteer to take the place of the non-white character in the scene, and respond differently. Several white people in the audience volunteered to take the place of the actor/person of colour, and they effortlessly, powerfully answered the white racist. They made it appear that racism can be easily countered, without repercussions, by a forceful retort. Except for one woman who protested, the rest of the people of colour, including me, remained mostly silent. Of course, white men in the audience felt more confident to speak on this subject. Their denial of the power relations and reality of racism was reflected here as well. Repeatedly, they tried to invalidate the experiences of racism and sexism being presented. One white man couldn't understand why the woman of colour didn't just tell her racist personnel manager to "fuck off." "That's what I'd do," he repeated over and over. Another insisted that personnel managers couldn't really be that racist. At the end of the session, one white man said he couldn't believe it's really this racist in *Canada*.

Mostly silent, the non-white people in the audience had to listen to their experiences being invalidated by people sitting next to them. Although the facilitator/producer was skilled, by not explicitly addressing power relations *within the workshop*, she implicitly reinforced them. Not only did white people dominate audience discussion and participation, they "fought" racism in a way that was clearly ignorant of the real power relations between white and non-white people.

We need to explore other "invisible" ways in which power relations become visible in these workshops. For example, another workshop I attended was arranged in two concentric circles. Afterwards, my friend tells me that

as she counted the proportion of non-white participants (half), she made a discovery: all but two of the people sitting in the inner circle were white. This is not surprising—only surprisingly affirming. When we arrived at the workshop, we both had ignored the empty inner seats and sat on the outside, very conscious that we would feel too exposed in the centre.

### Alternative Visions

Exposing these power relations gives us a starting point to deal with and change them. Anti-racist educators have to acknowledge the separate realities and needs of people of colour, rather than denying them in some desire for racial unity. Elizabeth Ellsworth says sometimes dealing with power inequalities means “constructing alternative ground rules for communication” (317). She discusses the use of written and visual material so that white people can take on some of the burden of educating themselves.

But we also need to envision several forms of anti-racist education that will differently address diverse needs of non-white and white communities. For example, U.S. activist Pat Alake Rosezelle helps people of colour learn “survival skills for a hostile institutional environment.” George Dei also mentions the possibility of empowering non-white students through anti-racist education, especially if leadership skills and resources are provided (43). In addition, we also need anti-racist education which has more substantial links to anti-racist action. Rosezelle points out that without an ongoing foundation for change, anti-racist education is merely “pimping off other people’s misery.” However, many of the current methods and structures of anti-racist workshops are based on using the experiences of people of colour as an educational tool.

Because these issues have not been adequately addressed, anti-racist workshops can become a demoralizing and racist experience for people of colour. We are already exhausted by dealing with and fighting racism in the rest of our lives. This kind of anti-racist workshop can be more exhausting, as well as non-educational, non-motivating, and useless in prompting action. Many other concerns about anti-racist education still need be addressed: its rapid commercialization, its use by government agencies, its separation from everyday life.

But actually challenging racist relations also means conceiving and practicing various forms of anti-racism. That will be an ongoing, difficult and painful process, one that continues outside these workshops and extends to our personal relationships.

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refer to “people who are relatively powerless in the hierarchy of power and authority” (99). Here, I prefer to use “non-white” not because I think of myself that way, but to highlight my position in relation to a white-dominated society.

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<sup>1</sup>Ng uses the term “minority” in a sociological sense to