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Towards White, Anti-Racist Mothering Practices

Confronting Essentialist Discourses of Race and Culture

This paper emerges from the author's personal location as the white (genetic) mother of a son who is registered in his father's Indian band. The objectives are two-fold: 1) to propose that essentialist discourses of race and culture discipline mothering practices in ways that reproduce racial hierarchies and 2) to propose anti-racist mothering practices aimed at disrupting normative patterns of white racial superiority. Essentialist discourses of race and the disciplining of mothering practices are traced through to their colonial antecedents which constructed white bourgeois women as paragons of moral virtue, and re/producers of nation and empire. This construction was dependent on the construction of indigenous and black women as racially degenerate and inferior mothers, and the production of "mixed-blood children" as dangerous to the social body. Discourses of culture have also been approached in essentialist ways both historically and currently in the context of multiculturalism and Aboriginal cultural revitalization as they currently manifest in Canada. Essentialist discourses of race and culture continue to discipline this white mother in ambiguous and problematic ways with regards to how she raises her son who is deemed to be racially and/or culturally different than she is: either raise him into white, male dominance, or raise him as Other—neither of which are viable options. Assuming that racism is maintained at least in part through the reproduction of white dominance, anti-racist mothering is presented as important work for mothers of white-inscribed children as well as for mothers whose children are racially and/or culturally marginalized.

I am a white, middle-class woman. My (genetic) son is registered in his father's Indian band. He passes for white, and I've been raising him alone for six of his eight and a half years. I've been told many times that I'm doing a great job with him, and that he's so lucky he has me. I appreciate these comments and I know they are meant to be supportive and encouraging when the challenges

of single mothering, completing a Ph.D., and trying to land the security of a tenure-track job feel overwhelming. Yet, because of my own knowledge of race, racism, colonialism, and whiteness, I can't help but also hear veiled, and likely unintentional, racist undertones in these comments. They confirm me as a "good" (white) mother against the unspoken backdrop of a distant (Aboriginal) father. It has also been observed on several occasions that I'm "raising him white." Again, my knowledge of racism and colonialism in this settler society in which I live, ensures that in this comment, I hear a considerably less validating judgment of my mothering practices. As Héléna Ragoné and France Winddance Twine suggest, motherhood "cannot be consigned to naturalized domains or idioms" (2000: 1), as much as I sometimes wish this were possible; motherhood is an inherently political site. I've struggled to make sense of my own position as a white mother amidst the politics of race and culture as they manifest in the Canadian prairies where we live. What I've come to understand is that the alternative to "raising him white" *isn't* necessarily to raise him "in his culture" as the "culturalist turn" (Goldberg, 2002: 1) of recent decades would have it. That this phrase is always a reference to his Aboriginal heritage rather than his European heritage or his contemporary, Western, middle class way of living, is evidence of precisely the racist binary of white/not-white that has been used to justify colonial and imperial projects for centuries. I've come to see that my mothering practices are disciplined by essentialist discourses of race *and* culture, both of which serve to reproduce a racist social order, and both of which, in my opinion, must be challenged.

My objectives in this paper are two-fold. I begin the first and largest section of the paper by tracing essentialist discourses of race and the disciplining of mothering practices through to their colonial antecedents which constructed white bourgeois women as paragons of moral virtue, and re/producers of nation and empire. This construction was dependent in large part on the construction of indigenous and black women as racially degenerate and inferior mothers, and on the production of "mixed-blood children" as dangerous to the social body. Discourses of culture have also been approached in essentialist ways both historically and currently in the context of multiculturalism and Aboriginal cultural revitalization as they manifest in Canada. Essentialist discourses of race and culture continue to position white mothers in ambiguous ways with regards to how they raise their children who are deemed to be racially and/or culturally different than they are. My point here is to expose the problem that essentialist discourses of race and culture discipline me into either raising my son into dominance, or raising him as Other—neither of which are viable options. Assuming that racism is maintained at least in part through the reproduction of white dominance, I argue that anti-racist mothering is important work for mothers of white-inscribed children as well as for mothers whose children are racially and/or culturally marginalized. I conclude by proposing anti-racist mothering practices aimed at disrupting normative patterns of white racial superiority.

Essentialist discourses of race

In his book, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (1993), David Goldberg locates the development of the race category in liberal philosophies and Enlightenment notions of modernity. He shows "race" to be a fundamentally empty therefore fluid category—one that has been able to adapt to specific politics in localized times and places. Goldberg (1993) argues that both rationality and race emerged in modernity "as definitive constituents of human self-hood and subjectivity" and he articulates the liberal paradox that "race is irrelevant, but all is race" (6). Amidst the liberal commitment to the equality of all individuals by virtue of their capacity for reason, there was a requirement for some way of justifying the often brutal and very clearly *unequal* treatment of various groups of people in the name of imperial projects. Emerging scientific disciplines such as anthropology and biology "defined a classificatory order of racial groupings—subspecies of Homosapiens—along correlated physical and cultural matrices" (Goldberg, 1993: 29). These racial hierarchies provided precisely the justification required. According to this "naturalist" conception of race (Goldberg, 2002: 74-79), dark-skinned people, by virtue of their blackness, were said to be biologically degenerate—sub-human even—inherently inferior to white men who were constructed as normative, ideal human being. As less than fully human, such people were not believed to be deserving of equality, hence the conquest and domination of indigenous people around the globe, and the policing of racialized Others in the metropole was justified, and even produced as moral obligation. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said (1993) shows how religion and various cultural texts, together with new scientific disciplines and modernist thinking, also supported the construction of race as a category, and the construction of racial hierarchies. Whiteness was produced as the (in)visible marker of the inherent rationality claimed to be the essential feature of the modern liberal subject and the universally defining feature of humanity. White became the unmarked ideal—the rule against which all difference was measured and found lacking. Producing whiteness in this way, modernist liberal philosophies functioned then—and now—to veil "the hidden political and ideological *interests* [original italics] embedded in whiteness" (Yancy, 2004: 118).

Mothering nation and empire

As racial hierarchies were constructed in the context of imperial and colonial projects, mothering came to be located in the nexus between biological reproduction, and the production of nation and empire. A major concern spanning the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century was the racial purity of nations and empires. This required the disciplining of sexual practices including unmarried sex which resulted in "illegitimate" children, and miscegenation. Controlling the sexual practices of white European women provided the only assurance that white men's children would also be white. As Ann Laura Stoler writes in her work on the colonial Dutch East Indies, racial mixing came to

be "conceived as a dangerous source of subversion, a threat to white prestige, the result of European degeneration and moral decay. Children—abandoned, illegitimate and of mixed-blood—had become the sign and embodiment of what needed fixing in this colonial society" (46). In her work on moral reform and the Social Purity Movement in English Canada during this same period, Mariana Valverde (1991) shows that in addition to the biological reproduction of racial purity, the production of a particular kind of "self," constituted by white, Anglo, Protestant characteristics and desires, was believed to be central to the production of a healthy, vibrant nation. In Quebec, the "pur laine" were white, Catholic, Francophone women (Gosselin, 2006: 202). In spite of the ongoing contests between English and French in Canada, what is clear is that maintenance of white racial purity was equated with moral superiority. Thus, in this context of nation and empire building, "bourgeois women … were cast as the custodians of morality, of their vulnerable men, and of national character. Parenting, and motherhood specifically, was a class obligation and a duty of empire" (Stoler, 1995: 135). That white bourgeois women charged with the important task of raising children of good character nevertheless required a mothering curriculum which emerged in the form of mothering manuals, mothering classes and the like (Valverde, 1991: 59), is evidence of the effort required to actively construct them as "naturally good" mothers.

Whether "natural" or learned, white bourgeois women were constructed as paragons of moral virtue—the moral centre of nation and empire—as ideals to be emulated. Mary Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack (1998) theorize white, middle class respectability as a structure of "dominance through difference" (341). Respectability was tenuous because it required the continual effort of constructing colonized people of colour, mixed blood children, and poor Europeans as inherently threatening Others. The white bourgeois woman occupied a highly ambiguous position because it depended so completely on the physical presence and labour of Other women in the domestic sphere to do the dirty work, and often to take care of the children. Because the boundaries containing distinct racial groups are socially constructed and highly permeable, Fellows and Razack theorize that the boundaries "have to be made and remade until the difference between the self and the subordinate Other appears natural and thus fixed" (1998: 343).

This accounts for the construction of colonized women as racially degenerate and dangerous influences for their own children. Writing about women missionaries and other workers in British Columbia, Mary-Ellen Kelm (1998) notes that "many Anglo-Saxon feminists of the early-twentieth-century moral reform movements were unable to see women of colour as true 'mothers' and therefore saw their world-wide task as setting the maternal standard for all people" (62). Moreover, "women field workers among the First Nations … condemned the child-rearing practices of Aboriginal women and argued that Native children were best raised away from their biological mothers" (Kelm, 1998: 62). Recommendations were also made in the Dutch East Indies for

the removal of indigenous children from their communities, especially their mothers' influence because it was deemed to be threatening to them (Hilgers and Douma cited in Stoler, 1995: 160). Of course, this recommendation was put into practice here in Canada in the form of Residential Schooling. Rosalyn Ing (2006) is among the many writers who explore the horrendous and widespread abuses that wounded several generations of Aboriginal children in residential schools. The violations endured there are argued to be the source of many intergenerational dysfunctions including the emotional distance that often marks survivors of the schools and their relationships with their own children (Ing, 2006: 157-172). In a move that blamed and further wounded the victim, many Aboriginal children of residential school survivors were subsequently removed from their parents by social workers during the "'60s scoop" (Cull, 2006: 144-146) because their parents were said to be unfit. Hence, there is a long and varied history of Aboriginal children being removed from their parents' and communities' influence, supposedly for their own good.

While it was especially necessary that white children should be raised and educated to be proper—i.e., white—imperial subjects, the permeability of the boundaries also opened the possibility for racialized Others to assimilate to the dominant culture—at least to whatever extent was permitted by racist discourses and legislation of the day. Education was one means of accomplishing this. Indeed, a major grievance of Aboriginal people in their residential school legal claims is the imposed cultural assimilation of Aboriginal children. Moreover, Aboriginal cultural revitalization may be understood as a reclamation of the cultures that were targeted for "cultural genocide" by the assimilative processes of residential schooling. Parenting was also a means of assimilation and was intended to ensure children's ability to survive in a white supremacist world. Aboriginal scholar Verna St. Denis (2004), interviewed many Aboriginal people, both parents and children, who acknowledged that Aboriginal parents often chose *not* to teach their language and culture to their children in the attempt to "participate in the promise of assimilation…[that their children] would be able to avoid oppression and racism and be accepted into the dominant white society" (40). Today, in the context of cultural and multicultural discourses, these parents are said to be liable for the "loss" of their culture, which is pointed to as a sign, once again, of their failure as parents (St. Denis, 2004: 41).

Essentialist discourses of culture

The terms "race" and "culture" have been interconnected for a very long time. Just as race was long considered a biologically essential category, culture has also been approached in essentialist ways. For instance, Said (1978) wrote many years ago in *Orientalism* that Oriental culture (and, by extension, *the* Oriental), as an object of knowledge, "is a 'fact' which, if it develops, changes, or otherwise transforms itself in the way that civilizations frequently do, nevertheless is fundamentally, even ontologically stable" (32). Today, amidst Canada's legally mandated celebration of cultural diversity under the *Multiculturalism Act*

of 1988, there is a tendency "to construct the members of a minority collective as basically homogeneous … and as distinct as possible … from the majority culture in order to be able to be 'different'" (Yuval-Davis, 1997: 57). Under multiculturalism, previously marginalized racial groups become the containers of a commodified, imaginary, historical culture while, as Evelyn Légaré (1995) asserts, a "largely unchallenged Canadian culture is [still] normatively defined as a middle class, Euro-Canadian (i.e., British) society" (352). Hence, as Sherene Razack (1998) argues, "cultural differences perform the same function as a more biological notion of race…once did: they mark inferiority. A message of racial inferiority is now more likely to be coded in the language of culture rather than biology" (79).

Aboriginal cultural revitalization has been underway in Canada since the National Indian Brotherhood released *Indian Control of Indian Education* in 1972. In response to more than a century of racist federal legislation that impoverished and debilitated generations of Aboriginal people, this document called for a culturally relevant education for Aboriginal students, one that would recognize "Indian culture, values, customs, languages and the Indian contribution to Canadian development…promote pride in the Indian child, and respect in the non-Indian student" (NIB, 1972: 9). As enthusiastically and widely as cultural revitalization is taken up by First Nations, Métis and Inuit scholars, politicians, educators, and others, as well as by non-Aboriginal people who work with Aboriginal people in various capacities, there are also Aboriginal scholars who are concerned that cultural revitalization may have achieved fundamentalist status (Green, 2004; St. Denis, 2004) and result in contradictory and paradoxical effects for Aboriginal people. For instance, Verna St. Denis (2004) argues that cultural revitalization may well serve to maintain a racist social order by misdiagnosing the problem of systemic racism as a problem of "loss" of culture, thereby letting those in positions of dominance "off the hook" (45). Echoing Said, St. Denis maintains that cultural revitalization "depends on a construction of Aboriginality as a timeless, unchanging essence … [and encourages] a hierarchy of Indianness" (41). Moreover, cultural revitalization "encourages incompatibility with socio-cultural change as the native must remain Other, distinctly different and identifiable" (St. Denis, 2004: 42). As Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) writes, "what counts as 'authentic,' is used by the West as one criteria to determine who really is indigenous, who is worth saving, who is still innocent and free from Western contamination" (74). Similarly, St. Denis (2004) notes that markers of "authentic" Aboriginal culture in Canada, including the ability to speak an Aboriginal language, participation in traditional spiritual practices, and knowledge of traditional stories, have become "gate-keepers" of sorts—markers of who is a "real Indian" and who isn't (35-37).

At the same time, as Légaré (1995) asserted above, white middle class is still produced as normative. Under multiculturalism, cultural minorities, most often relatively recent immigrants who haven't yet been assimilated, are encour-

aged to celebrate their culture within the limits permitted by multiculturalism. Most typically this includes dress, food, and music. As long as they perform what Jo-Anne Lee (2005: 164) refers to as "cultural whiteness," for instance through such practices as operating in one of the two official Canadian languages, working and paying taxes, integrating with members of the dominant culture, and not doing anything that might offend Canadian sensibilities, they are welcomed as "new Canadians" and may be accorded what I consider "honourary" white Canadian status, even though they are not necessarily regarded as "Canadian Canadians" (Mackey, 1999: 3). Within multiculturalism, immigrants are encouraged to celebrate their "heritage" culture and simultaneously permitted to be (hyphenated) Canadians. But in Canada's prairie provinces, where the Other is overwhelmingly Aboriginal rather than immigrant, where essentialist discourses of Aboriginal culture are pervasive, and racist notions of Aboriginal inferiority are still deeply ingrained in the popular imagination, this possibility of being both culturally authentic and Canadian is not as easily available to Aboriginal people. Well-educated, well-employed, well-paid Aboriginal people who live in "good" neighbourhoods in urban centers—i.e., who perform cultural whiteness—are often no longer regarded as "real" Indians at all because they're neither authentic enough, nor deficient enough. Cultural whiteness is performed *at the expense of* Aboriginal authenticity.

Implications of essentialist discourses of race and culture on mothering practices

This history and these politics inform my contemporary position as the single, white, middle class mother of a son who is registered as an Indian and is physically inscribed as white. In *Mother Outlaws*, Andrea O'Reilly (2004) argues that intensive mothering, as the current ideal of mothering practice, is a patriarchal construction that is oppressive to women, and often, is actually unattainable by most women. As a single mother, it often eludes me even as I am disciplined to aspire to this ideal. Yet, as a racially coded construct, "good" mothering is still fairly available to me as a white woman, if only because my mothering practices are less likely to be monitored and policed than, for instance, those of Aboriginal mothers (Gosselin, 2006: 196). What I have learned in this exploration, is that I am disciplined by essentialist discourses of race to raise my son into white dominance. This would be easy to do given that he is a white-looking, middle-class boy. Moreover, given that Aboriginal boys and men in Canada are criminalized, policed, and in disproportionately high numbers meet untimely ends through violence and suicide, I empathize with those Aboriginal parents who hoped to protect their children from oppression and racism even if through assimilation. However, to actively raise my son into white male dominance would be to willingly perpetuate the reproduction of racist and patriarchal hierarchies that have oppressed so many people for centuries. I have also learned that essentialist discourses of culture discipline me to raise my son "in his culture," which refers only to authentic

Aboriginality. As a white middle-class woman, this is not something I am able to do primarily because I myself have not been raised in an Aboriginal culture. But I also take very seriously the critique that cultural essentialism defines and limits people, and that notions of authenticity may marginalize them as Other. This is not something I want to impose on my child. Hence, neither of these seems to be a viable alternative.

Anti-racist mothering practices

Much has been written about the role of mothers of colour in teaching their children to survive and thrive amidst the racism they will encounter in their lives. As an example, Adrien Wing and Laura Weselmann (1999) present a critical race feminist praxis for Black mothers that includes survival, nurturing and transcendence. "Mothering to ensure survival involves guaranteeing the provision of food, clothing, shelter, health care, childcare and basic education, and all in conditions of safety" (Wing and Weselmann, 1999: 276). Nurturance means "providing individuals with the emotional and cultural self-esteem to survive in a racist, sexist, homophobic world…. Mothering, in the form of nurturing others, provides individuals with the intellectual backbone to survive the 'isms' that permeate our society" (Wing and Weselmann, 1999: 278). Finally, Wing and Weselmann (1999) describe transcendence as "the ability to rise above limits" (279). Under "transcendence," they advocate the provision of spiritual and/or religious resources, and teaching children about their history and heritage. Without doubt, this is crucial activist work. But I propose that it is not work for Black mothers alone.

Much of what Wing and Weselmann describe as critical race feminist praxis resonates with my own white mothering practices. Because racism is largely a problem perpetuated by white people, even through discourses intended as critical and progressive (Comeau, 2007), I propose that white mothers can and ought to claim mothering as a site where they can challenge and disrupt normative patterns of white racial superiority. In her book *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness*, Jane Lazarre (1996) offers a beautiful memoir and testament that it is possible for white mothers to confront white racism. France Winddance Twine (2000) also provides evidence that white mothers of black children in Britain can and do develop racial literacy, deploy their white skin privilege to challenge systemic racism, and teach their children proactive strategies for mediating racism. However, confronting racism is also important for mothers of *white-inscribed children*, who, regardless of their ancestry, need to learn about race and racism as much as racially and culturally marginalized children do.

In my attempt to disrupt the reproduction of a racist social order through both my teaching and my mothering practices, I have identified the following objectives, many of which resonate with Wing and Weselmann's (1999) ideas: 1) to disrupt essentialist understandings of race and culture; 2) to provide counter-narratives to racist, sexist, homophobic narratives; 3) to teach racial literacy; 4) to identify and challenge unearned white privileges (McIntosh,

1992) (and privileges of other normative positions); and 5) to challenge the myth of meritocracy, that life is a level playing field where individuals succeed or fail based on their own good choices and hard work. When I think about the children who, even in my son's very progressive school, are marginalized because of how they look, or because their first language is neither English nor French, or the girls who wear hijab, I have no doubt that they are painfully aware of their own marginalization. Faced with this reality, mothers of marginalized children cannot avoid discussions about racism and other forms of oppression with their children. However, as my son was able to articulate at only six and a half years of age, "some kids don't like other kids who are brown." Avoiding direct and critical conversations about racism with white, normatively positioned children, whether as mothers or as teachers, does not protect their innocence. As my son taught me, even young children aren't colour blind or innocent about racist exclusions. Avoiding talk of racism is a discourse of denial (Jiwani, 2006) which only protects white racial dominance.

Conclusion

At eight and a half years old, my son knows he has white skin like his mother, and he knows that his father and extended family on his dad's side are First Nations people who often speak Cree to each other. He has seen his own Treaty Card that I keep in my wallet, and he's aware that his First Nations ancestors have always lived in this part of Canada. He also knows that my ancestors came mostly from France a very long time ago, that many of them spoke French, and that his First Nations ancestors suffered many losses when the Europeans settled here. I am teaching him that all of this is his heritage, and I have described "heritage" as a kind of family treasure—the richness we get from our history and all of our ancestors. As he gets older and more capable of dealing with complex ideas, I want him to know that the derogatory comments he will undoubtedly hear about Indians are ways of remaking the boundaries that protect dominance. I also want him to know that it is unjust if his hard work pays off better and faster than somebody else's simply because he appears to be a white male. I want him to understand how he has been positioned by history, and by discourses of race, culture, and gender, in very ambiguous ways. I think it's crucial that he understands that neither his race, nor his culture, run in his blood, or make him any better or any worse than anybody else. I hope he will think I've been a good mother.

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