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Abstract

Trinity College has gained a reputation as a predominantly white elite institution over its years at the University of Toronto. Using both personal accounts from a member of the college, as well as participant observation based on three months of research, this essay attempts to understand how the college maintains its legacy as a white institution despite its existence in a supposedly multicultural university environment. Drawing upon Judith Butler's theory of performativity, the essay describes how "whiteness" is constructed through a reiteration of acts rather than on race or colour in the context of Trinity College.

Keywords

Performativity, Race, Whiteness

White Skin and White Masquerades: The Performativity of “Whiteness” at Trinity College

Alican A. Koc

It is a bright and crisp autumn afternoon and I am standing in the Trinity College quadrangle, talking to Lucy, a fourth year student actively involved in Trinity’s student life. Leaves fall from the trees and young students in academic gowns and suits walk by us on their way to High Table Dinner as Lucy mentions that she had heard that Trinity College has one of the most ethnically diverse student bodies at the University of Toronto, almost none of which is reflected in the college’s central student life. I laugh, recalling fellow first year students from other colleges asking me if Trinity was the place where all the rich white kids walked around in robes when I mentioned which college I was from. I tell Lucy that her suggestion is probably true, and ask her if she thinks Trinity is a predominantly white space as I gaze around the college’s quad, eyeing the bust of the college’s founder John Strachan. “Yeah,” she replies.

Trinity College, which is the University of Toronto’s second oldest college, has gained a reputation both on and off of campus as a predominantly white elite institution. The primary purpose of this essay is an attempt to understand Trinity’s culture of “whiteness”. More specifically, I will attempt to uncover how a culture of “whiteness” has managed to perpetuate itself year after year in the supposedly multicultural environment of the University of Toronto campus. Rather than drawing upon a fixed notion of “whiteness” that relies upon essentialist assumptions of race, I will examine how notions of “whiteness” are constructed in the context of Trinity College. I will therefore use quotes around

the term throughout the duration of this essay to emphasize the multiplicity of meanings that might be associated with the term.

In addition to the anthropological significance of understanding the construction of “whiteness” in a site as unique as Trinity College, many of my motivations for this research were also personal. While the customs and culture of Trinity were incredibly familiar to me during my first and second years of university during which I lived in residence, I quickly lost touch with Trinity when I moved away in my third year. Anthropology is often discussed as an attempt to make the unfamiliar familiar and the familiar unfamiliar. In conducting three months of ethnographic work in and around the college, I attempted to distance myself with what was once familiar to me, and tried to understand the customs of the college that were new to me. During these months, I attended a number of college events, participated in everyday activities of student life such as eating in the dining hall and spending time in the quadrangle, and spoke to students on their experiences at Trinity. Many of the observations I made through this work on Trinity’s culture of “whiteness” have been put into dialogue with my own personal experiences from previous years as a Trinity student. This research can thus be seen both as an attempt to re-familiarize myself with a once significant site in my undergraduate life, as well as an attempt to understand my own motivations for passing as white as a non-visible ethnic minority at Trinity.

Drawing upon the theory of performativity discussed by Judith Butler in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (1993), I will discuss how “whiteness” is constructed through a reiteration of “acts” in the context of Trinity

College, rather than being based purely on race and skin colour. It is important to note that Butler's book specifically discusses the performativity of gender; however I will be extending her insights into the terrain of "whiteness" in the context of Trinity College. This essay will argue that it is through the transformation of "whiteness" into a form of performance rather than a race or skin colour that allows the hegemony of "whiteness" to survive at Trinity College. In the paper, I shall discuss a number of ways through which "whiteness" is performed by various groups of students at the college. As I will argue, humour has been the most prevalent and enduring "act" through which individuals at Trinity performed "whiteness" in the four years that I have spent at the college. However, this essay will demonstrate how many of the "acts" through which Trinity students have performed "whiteness" in the past are no longer relevant to understanding "whiteness" at the college. This essay shall thus examine how the students at Trinity College are constantly recreating and reimagining definitions of "whiteness" through the citational practice of its performance. The example of how "whiteness" is constantly being redefined by its performers at Trinity College is an example of how race, like sex in Butler's classic example, is also discursively produced.

For Judith Butler in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, "'Sex' is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. It is not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize "sex" and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms" (1993:1-2). Applying Butler's approach to the social construction of race at Trinity College, I will show how "whiteness" as an ideal construct is created through the gradual materialization of the

reiteration of particular racialized norms. I argue that at Trinity College, the hegemony of the culture of "whiteness" exists not through the dominance of individuals whose skin colour is "white", but rather through the transformation of "whiteness" into a form of performance. Thus, the college maintains its reputation as a "white" institution in a multicultural campus by allowing any of its students to perform "whiteness" regardless of their race and skin colour.

It is important here for me to specify exactly what is meant by "whiteness" in the context of Trinity College in order to avoid an essentialist or otherwise limited assumption of the meaning of the term. Indeed, the notion of "whiteness" can be interpreted in a multitude of ways. While the most seemingly intuitive definition of "whiteness" refers to skin colour, this notion too can be complicated. For example, in *Ethnic Humor in Multiethnic America*, David Gillota refers to how affluent, educated and liberal "whites" are seen as the "right" types of "white" people, while blue-collar "whites" with less education and more conservative values are not imagined as the idealized "whites" (2013:86). This paper will be dealing with "whiteness" at Trinity College as a particular culture, defined by Lucy as the "Oxbridge patrician ideal". Lucy mentioned how the connections between Trinity College at the University of Toronto and the Trinity Colleges at the University of Oxford and Cambridge created an aspiration amongst its students to behave according to the idealized image of the Oxbridge student. Rasputin, a fourth year student at Trinity described this Oxbridge image at Trinity as "old white men studying old white men". "More specifically, it is a wealthy "white" culture that is performed at Trinity. Vijay, a Middle-Eastern student at the college mentioned to me that the college's culture is, "Not just white. Rich white, an old money kind of feel." While a great deal of the

Trinity's traditions are heavily based around the Anglican and British origins of the college, this paper shall be focusing on the performativity of "whiteness", as many of the "acts" of performance do not necessarily pertain to Anglicanism or Britishness.

The first mention of performativity in the student life of Trinity College that I encountered was in a conversation with Rasputin, in which he cited it as one of the main ways in which the culture of "whiteness" was kept alive at Trinity. I immediately thought back to Trinity's college chants that I had been taught in my first year at the college, virtually all of which reflect the college's British and Anglican origins. For example, Trinity's most popular chant, *The Salterae* opens with one student asking the rest of the college, "Who are we?" to which the college replies, "We are the salt of the earth, so give ear to us! No new ideas shall ever come near to us! Orthodox, what! Catholic, what! Crammed with divinity, damn the dissenters, hurrah for old Trinity!" Another chant emphasizes the college's British origins, in which students chant in an exaggerated British accent, "Crumpets and tea, crumpets and tea, we are Trinity." What struck me about these chants in retrospect was that they were chanted by not only the Anglican and British students in the college, but all of the students. Thus, in order to become a proper member of the college, the speakers of these chants were given no choice but to identify with a British and Anglican subjectivity that did not necessarily exist in these peoples' past histories. It is certainly not possible for students of non-White Anglo-Saxon Protestants backgrounds to simply "become" Anglican and British, and the multicultural environment of the university does not allow the college to exclude those whose background does not correspond to Trinity's WASP-y history. However, students of Trinity come to

perform and identify with the college's idealized WASP subjectivity through their mannerisms, their taste, their dispositions, their activities and even their chants.

The performativity of "whiteness" at Trinity College is arguably most prevalent through the college's use of humour. In order to better understand how humour functions in the performance of "whiteness" at Trinity, I began attending the meetings of the college's Literary Institute on a weekly basis. The Literary Institute of Trinity College or the "Lit" as it is known by students, began as the oldest debate university debating society in Canada, and is one of the most important sites of college life. At the weekly meetings, which take place every Wednesday night, students drink beer and engage in a humorous mock debate based on the British parliamentary system, which is generally absurdist in content. Due to the stand-up comedy-like atmosphere of the Lit meetings, it is the primary site in which the college's humour is most visible. Lucy, a Lit executive, mentioned to me however that the Lit is also one of the main college institutions that deter non-white students from participation. According to Lucy, a lot of the humour at the Lit has often been criticized as racist by some students, and the Lit has been a site of disagreement between students who want to push the boundaries of the institution's humour, and those who want to censor particularly offensive content out of Lit speeches.

In my conversations with Lucy, she alluded to distinct ways in which white and non-white students at Trinity performed humour. More specifically, Lucy mentioned how non-white students in the college were more prone to self-othering in their humour, while white students tended to make jokes about their own privileges. Lucy's observations were incredibly accurate. Upon my first visit to the Lit, the debate opened

with a first-time debater who opened his speech with a joke about his heterosexual white male privilege. Around two months later, I came across a video on a Facebook event page of a college event in which several South Asian students from the college made a parody of themselves by playing upon traditional stereotypes. In the video, the students made jokes about a variety of stereotypes surrounding South Asians in universities such as their parents' aspirations to have them achieve successful jobs in business and medicine, their supposedly inclination towards mathematics and algebra, and their accents.

In her book, *The Melancholy of Race*, Anne Anlin Cheng writes that, "the social lesson of racial minoritization reinforces itself through the imaginative loss of a never-possible perfection" (2001:17). Cheng's notion of this imaginative loss pertains to the moment of realization of racial difference, when the raced subject notices that they are not part of the dominant group. As I argue, it is at this precise moment that "non-white" students at Trinity come to feel their difference from the idealized image of "old money whiteness" that they come to start enacting "whiteness" through performance. David Gillota discusses how the standard reading of the origins of an ethnic humour begins with oppressed or underrepresented minorities internalizing the stereotypes given to them by the dominant ethnic group (2013:77). According to Gillota (2013:77), "Over time, ethnic humorists reclaim the negative stereotypes, turn them into positives, and create a humor that (at least for a moment) liberates the marginalized subject from being defined by the dominant group". However, rather than using this ethnic humour to liberate themselves from marginalization, I argue that in the context of Trinity College, mocking one's own racial difference is the first crucial step for

non-white students to begin functioning as white. By attempting to extinguish themselves of their racial difference through mockery, these students have completed the first "act" in performing "whiteness", as they too can now figuratively "step outside of their bodies" in order to identify with the college's idealized "whiteness" and see their racial difference as "other". Butler refers to "sex" as, "the power to produce—demarcate, circulate, differentiate—the bodies it controls" (1993:1). Similarly, the example of the self-othering of non-white students at Trinity shows how "whiteness" is capable of differentiating, demarcating, and subsequently reproducing the bodies of non-white students that it controls in the process of performance.

I witnessed how students were encouraged to label themselves racially during the meeting of the *James Bond Society*, in which students dressed up in typical Bond attire and drank martinis together. Aside from drinking martinis, the purpose of the club was to give humorous double entendre or pun names to various students at the college. For example, a Latin American student at the college was dubbed "Latino Royale" in reference to the recent Bond film, *Casino Royale*. When a Chinese girl was asked where she was from, she mentioned that she attended Trinity. One of the executives of the club then asked her, "Where are you from, like geographically?" Upon realizing her Chinese background, the girl was named after the Bond girl Wai Lin. I myself suggested the nickname, "Big Turk" as a Bond name during the event as a playful reference to my Turkish background. While these examples of racial humour are decidedly more tongue in cheek and playful, some jokes I witnessed were not. During one of the Lit debates I attended toward the end of the year, one student mentioned the absence of English speaking students at Sidney Smith Hall, the University of

Toronto's Arts and Science building, which drew an awkward silence and some uncomfortable giggling from the students.

Because they do not have to come to terms with their racial difference, white students at Trinity perform "whiteness" through humour in a decidedly different way. David Gillota mentions in his book that although it does not achieve this because of historical circumstances, contemporary white humour attempts transgression in ways that minority humour traditionally had in the United States (2013:78). Gillota discusses how, like minority comedians had done in the past, white comedians today are often making jokes about traditional stereotypes of white people such as their blandness, uptightness, nervousness, and sexual repression (2013:77). This is very far from the reality at Trinity College, where jokes about "whiteness" are constantly being made, albeit in a very different context. Rather than making jokes about stereotypes of white people, the jokes made on "whiteness" by white people at Trinity often seem to glorify "whiteness". Like the first time Lit debater mentioned earlier in this paper who mentioned his heterosexual white male privilege, jokes about "whiteness" at Trinity often adopt the discourse of privilege that is taken up in anti-oppression politics, but done so in a dismissive mockery of these politics. Thus, rather than making self-critical jokes about the problematic implications of how whites are afforded more privileges in our society, these jokes celebrate this fact and mock the supposedly "political correctness" of those who speak against it. This dismissal of "political correctness" and anti-oppression politics can be read as an exaggeration of the privileges of the white students at the college. The privileges experienced by the students of the college are thus exaggerated in the performance of the idealized "wealthy white

elite" who are untouched by structural oppression.

Although humour constitutes a particularly prevalent "act" through which students at Trinity perform "whiteness", the performance of "whiteness" at the college is by no means limited to humour. Indeed, the most visible displays of the performance of "whiteness" at the college have nothing at all to do with humour, and more to do with image. Students at Trinity perform the "old money whiteness" mentioned by Vijay primarily through what they wear, how they carry themselves, and what they consume. A reception for students that had received scholarships at the college that I attended was an excellent example of this. Upon entering the room, I noticed that almost all of the students were dressed up. A long table of hors d'oeuvres were presented in the middle of the room, and despite the fact that most of the students were hungry and tired from being in the midst of final tests and essays, they tried to avoid embarrassing themselves by eating too much and not socializing with one another. Several students remarked to me that they detested such events and had only come for the free food, but still tried to exercise some degree of restraint toward their eating and attempted to make small talk with other students. It is in events like these that students demonstrate their performances of "whiteness". Through wearing formal outfits, making polite conversation with one another, and discussing topics that demonstrate their cultural capital, these students are demonstrating and refining their performances of "upper class whiteness", and often make a point of showing it off. At a meeting for the *James Bond Society* of Trinity College, a younger student who I wasn't familiar with spontaneously made a point of entering a conversation with a friend and me when he realized that we were talking about bourbon whiskies to offer his

perspective on the best bourbons available on the market. Butler notes that, “‘Sex’ not only functions as a norm, but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs”, and it is through the repetition of self-regulatory practices such as discussing whisky, wearing suits, eating hors d’oeuvres, and having polite small talk that students come to perform “whiteness” at Trinity (1993:1).

During my first year at Trinity, consumption also played a large part in the performativity of “whiteness”. This was primarily established through what was described to me as the four B’s of the college in my first year: Belmonts, Brooks Brothers, boat shoes, and Blackberries. Upon talking to Petra, a student in the same year as myself, I discovered that bowties were a fifth B that I had not formally been aware of, yet had still associated with the college. Belmonts are a premium brand of cigarettes that were popular amongst upper year students when I was in my first year. The combination of the luxury clothing often associated with “preppy” Ivy League fashion from Brooks Brothers, Sperry boat shoes, often associated with sailing, and bowties served to create the image of old money collegiate dapperness amongst the students of Trinity. Finally, almost all of the upper years who socialized the students in my year to the college’s “culture of whiteness” seemed to have a Blackberry cell phone, considered to be prestigious at the time. Although the five B’s were particularly important, other luxury items evoking upper class white culture also had high levels of prestige such as Scotch whisky and pipes. I myself began dressing in a more “preppy” fashion and flaunting my appreciation for whiskeys within my first months at Trinity in order to conform to the ideal “whiteness” of the college.

It is important to note here that upon conducting my fieldwork at Trinity this year, I realized that the five B’s were no longer relevant to the college’s culture and the performativity of “whiteness”. Upon spending some time at the college, I came to realize that few of the students still smoked cigarettes, the ubiquity of Sperry boat shoes that existed in my first and second years seemed to have vanished, Blackberry cell phones had largely been replaced by the more popular Apple iPhone, and there were fewer students that dressed in the traditionally preppy fashion that I thought had once distinguished members of the college. I found Butler’s description of performativity as “citational” incredibly important in understanding the gradual changes in the performance of “whiteness” at Trinity (1993:2). Butler writes that, “The norm of sex takes hold to the extent that it is “cited” as such a norm, but it also derives its power through the citations that it compels” (1993:13). This quotation is important in the context of my research at Trinity College in a decidedly different manner than Butler intended, in introducing a temporal dimension to understanding the gradual changes in how “whiteness” is performed. While Butler’s notion of citationality refers to the citation to all previous forms of gender performance, and thus implies the temporal durability of particular “acts” required to perform sex, the temporality of “acts” constituting the performance of “whiteness” at Trinity is decidedly shorter. Because the college goes through an entirely new body of students every four years or so, students are only able to cite the performances of “whiteness” that they witness within a decidedly limited time frame. Because of Trinity’s small student population and the fact that the student body shifts yearly, the “acts” which constitute the performance of “whiteness” are in constant flux. For example, very few of the students

in my year at Trinity smoked cigarettes and Belmonts subsequently lost their significance as one of the B's of the college. As Butler might note, these "norms" of "whiteness" at the college only derive their power to the extent that they are cited as such, and promptly lose significance if and when they are not cited (2013:13).

The significance of the temporality of Butler's citationality to my research is that it endangers a stable notion of "whiteness" to begin with. The fact that most of the "acts" and cultural symbols that are used to represent "whiteness" in the college are in constant flux means that there is nothing really inherently "white" about these objects and actions. While there is nothing "white" about smoking Belmont cigarettes, or wearing a suit, or considering oneself a connoisseur of whisky, these "acts" are only endowed with racial connotations in the event that they are given a racial meaning through citation. As Butler would put this, these "acts" are only norms insofar as they are cited (2013:13). This is significant because it shows how the performers of "whiteness" ultimately come to redefine what "whiteness" is in the context of Trinity College. Put another way, "whiteness" is only a performance constituted by particular "acts" that are considered "white" in the current moment. Like Butler argues for sex, race can also be seen as a discursive construction that is ultimately arbitrary outside of its performances. There is thus no manner of acting, speaking, dressing, or consuming that is inherently "white", nor is there any "white" culture. There are only particular sets of behavior that come to be associated with "whiteness" at a particular time and place. Although race is often characterized as a biological phenomenon, it is up to the work of scholars in disciplines such as anthropology to demonstrate how race is actually socially produced through discourse

and yet has very real effects. The irony of my findings at Trinity College was that students from a staggeringly large spectrum of backgrounds were all unified, performing an extremely essentialized stereotype of "whiteness". Although on the one hand, this seems to perpetuate the hegemony of "whiteness" that the college had traditionally been known for, it is also impressive in demonstrating how arbitrary "whiteness" really is. Thus, the transformation of "whiteness" into a form of performance could ultimately be read as a demonstration of the flimsiness of the definition of "whiteness", as "whiteness" now comes to constitute something that anybody can perform.

In this essay, I have attempted to demonstrate how "whiteness" can be understood as a form of performance in the context of Trinity College. Drawing on Judith Butler's work in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, I have shown how the students of Trinity College perform "whiteness" through the reiteration of specific "acts", and how they "cite" this behavior from one another. I argue that the performative aspect of "whiteness" at Trinity, contributes to how the college gets away with having a "white culture" in the context of a multicultural university environment. Because "whiteness" is performative, anybody at Trinity can be the college's idealized wealthy whites through performance. However, the fact that anybody can enact this performance, and the fact that the "acts" which constitute the performance of "whiteness" also demonstrate how arbitrary "whiteness" really is, and ultimately gives an example of how race is a social construct that is created through discourse. While Trinity College really is a place where anybody can be somebody so long as they perform the idealized "old money whiteness" that the college favours, this essay has attempted to

demonstrate that this image itself is in constant flux, and is largely based around the collective imagination of the current students.

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