

## Perspectives

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### The Meaning of Being White in Canada: A Personal Narrative

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ESL students in Canada are typically members of visible or invisible minorities, and as such issues of racism, discrimination, and cultural identity are common in their experience (compare Kouritzin, 1999). Fleming (2003) has recently drawn attention to the important relationship between ESL teaching and construction of cultural identity in both students and teachers. Because of the close relationship between language and culture, TESL teachers are not only teaching English. They are primary agents of cultural transmission as well, and through both the formal and the "lived" curriculum (Aoki, 1993) profoundly shape how their students construct their personal and national cultural identities. Fleming encouraged teachers to adopt a critical perspective on cultural identity and to address the issue of cultural identity construction in the classroom explicitly.

#### *White Privilege and White Identity Development*

When Canadian-born TESL teachers who are not members of a visible minority begin to address the question of cultural identity, they will eventually find themselves running into the issue of white privilege. Although it may be easy for a white person to see how minority members are disadvantaged, it is much more difficult to discern one's own advantaging. McIntosh (1995) has called white privilege "an invisible package of unearned assets" (p. 72). To illustrate white privilege, McIntosh identified examples ranging from the widespread and positive representation of her own white race in the media to being able to choose flesh-colored Band-Aids and have them match her skin. Such subtle and pervasive privileges are the natural corollary of racism.

Acknowledging that one's own white privilege stems from invisible systems of racial dominance, and further that an ethical TESL teacher needs to develop solidarity with visible minorities and a commitment to work for systemic change, is not an easy process. This is clear in the work of authors such as Helms (1990, 1995) on white racial identity development. Helms' widely accepted model describes the difficulties of moving beyond an intellectual and conceptual understanding of racial issues to an experiential and affective change.

Although Helms' (1990, 1995) work is derived from the context of race relations in the United States, the difficulty of accepting accountability for white privilege was also clear in my own experience of teaching psychological and political theory to adult Inuit students in the Canadian Arctic. Although these students were fluent English-speakers, they were ESL learners. As they grappled to understand new technical vocabulary in English, it became apparent how much the theory I was trying to teach rested on a vast undercarriage of cultural assumptions that privilege Euro-Canadian values, beliefs, and behavior.

Inuit students educated me about white privilege. When I returned to southern Canada, I became aware of its operation with respect to visible minorities (i.e., people of Aboriginal, African, Asian, or Middle Eastern origin). I also became aware of how resistant many white people are to acknowledging their own privilege. Because of what I learned in Nunavut, much-respected Aboriginal colleagues have suggested that I am the kind of person who should be teaching other whites about the meaning of being white in Canada. In that spirit, I offer this personal narrative.

### *What It Means to be White*

If I start from the definition of the word *meaning* as "to have in the mind" (Merriam-Webster, 2003), my sense is that for the vast majority of white Canadians, through much of their day-to-day lives, *whiteness* is without meaning. Much of the time, to be a white person in a white-dominated culture allows a comfortable obliviousness, a dull indifference to the question of race, unawareness. Obviously there are exceptions to this: the white supremacists in southern Alberta, for example, or human rights activists. But I think for most white Canadians, race is just not a reality they pay much attention to. Race is meaningless.

This is not to say most white Canadians hold actively racist attitudes. *Au contraire*, Section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees equality for all Canadians regardless of race. This country has administrative structures at the federal and provincial levels and in other organizations such as most universities to protect human rights and to defend people whose rights have been violated. Many, many good-hearted white Canadians deplore the notion of racism. But to be non-racist in attitude is one thing and non-racist in behavior another; the link between attitudes and behavior is not strong, as social psychologists have shown us. So do white Canadians behave like racists? If we look at the Canadian demographic picture, we clearly do.

The largest visible minority in Canada is Aboriginal people. If we take any social indicator for this demographic group, we see the effects of discrimination: lower education, lower income, lower life expectancy, higher infant mortality, higher unemployment, higher incarceration, higher suicide rates. Such stark figures mean that as a white person I have a much greater

likelihood of sharing in Canadian freedom and prosperity than if I were Aboriginal, and most probably a member of any other visible minority. But how could these systematic inequalities be happening in a country where equality is guaranteed? We didn't "mean" it to be this way. But somehow, an insidious blindness to the effects of race is pervasive in white Canadian society.

My own awareness of this color-blindness began to awaken when I moved to Nunavut. In that fragment of Canadian society, the meaning of being white completely changed. There I was a member of a visible minority, a representative of a colonial power. The question of race was constantly in mind as I struggled to understand the Inuit world view in our daily interactions.

Perhaps because I was drawn to Nunavut on a spiritual journey, I was fortunate to begin my life there with a trip on the land under the guidance of skilled and confident Inuit. Their ease and comfort in that vast, beautiful, and terrifying environment engendered in me a tremendous respect for Inuit culture and intelligence. This respect grew as I had the good fortune to work as a colleague with an Inuit woman who is fluently bilingual and bicultural.

Although Lizzie (a pseudonym) was naturally wary of me at first—not another *qablunaaq* (Inuktitut word for non-Inuit) to train!—she gradually became a friend and gave me glimpses of what being white means through Inuit eyes. White people are those who descended from the sky when she was seven, grabbed her crying and screaming from her parents, and took her to live in the bleak sterility of a hospital in Montreal. White nurses in white uniforms are those who kept her confined to the TB ward, there to spend her childhood apart from her family, not knowing if they were alive or dead. White people are those who decided when it was time for her to return to the Arctic, after so many years away that she no longer felt at home in her own culture. White people are those who created the residential school at Chesterfield Inlet where she and many others were sexually abused. White people are those who recognized Lizzie's usefulness as an educated, bilingual Inuk and applied persistent pressure for her to take on more and more responsibility as a bureaucrat in the public administration set up to manage the Inuit. And white people are those—the taxi drivers and shopkeepers—who spurn and reject her when she travels outside her home territory.

Lizzie's story began to open my eyes to the meaning of being white, but my awareness was further deepened when I began to teach Inuit students in social work and public administration. My philosophy of adult education is expressed in the saying from the Hwa Yen Sutra of Zen Buddhism: "The teacher in the student is teaching the student in the teacher." My experience in Nunavut classrooms proved it true.

Although Lizzie's story, horrific as it was, was just one story, the students taught me that it is in fact the story of all Inuit and their encounters with whites. White people, because they are richer and more powerful, appropri-

ate the right to make all kinds of decisions about the lives of Inuit, often with little or no understanding of the people and communities they are affecting. Sometimes these decisions are well meant, even compassionate; sometimes they are for bureaucratic convenience, sometimes for national security reasons. But regardless of the motivation, the power relationship remains. To be white means to be dominant.

Another aspect of life in Nunavut contributed to my increased awareness of whiteness. Many of my colleagues and friends were immigrants and members of visible minorities. Black, East Asian, Korean, Mayan, Ojibwa—up there we were all non-Inuit. As government employees, educated English-speakers, and outsiders in isolated communities, we were drawn together socially in a way rarely found in southern Canada. Because my experience with Inuit had sensitized me on the question of race, my non-white friends were willing to share with me their own experiences. They told me about what it is like to deal with institutions such as colleges and universities that consistently assume a Eurocentric viewpoint. They told me how they could never be sure when or where they would encounter overt or veiled racism. For them, whiteness always has meaning; it is always in mind. And what it means is: If you're not white, your culture and history don't exist. It also means: watch out; be careful; you might get hurt.

Since I have returned to southern Canada, I have been spending more time with southern Aboriginal people and heard some of their take on what whiteness means. To Aboriginal marketing students, white people are rapacious, greedy capitalists who are destroying the environment. They are the people who are slow to serve them in restaurants, follow them around the stores to make sure they're not shoplifting, stop them on the highway to check for alcohol. To Aboriginal colleagues, white people are those who won't rent them an apartment despite an impeccable credit rating and who will not consider them for academic positions despite impeccable qualifications because "the Aboriginal quota is filled."

When I first started to become aware of the meaning of whiteness, to have whiteness in mind, I was shocked. Then I was angry, and then I was sad. Now I seem to feel a diamond-like determination to do what I can to help other white people wake up to the fact that race does have meaning in Canada; and that Indigenous cultures have great gifts to offer the rest of the world, gifts that are being threatened with extinction by the continuing push to cultural homogenization associated with increasing globalization.

On a handful of significant occasions, I've been blessed with the opportunity to spend time in nature with Indigenous people. Pulling spruce roots in the forest with Dene women, sailing over a coral reef in an outrigger canoe with a Micronesian navigator, dancing at Ayers rock with Australian Aboriginal women, building an igloo with an Inuit elder, watching a puma in the Guyanese rainforest with an Amerindian leader: these experiences came to me, I'm sure, because of my spiritual search. They have shown me

that to be white means to be out of touch with nature, not to know how to be in nature, simply, without trying to conquer it or exploit it. Disconnection from nature is what is destroying our blue planet. My heart aches with grief when I see such beauty being despoiled. That Indigenous cultures still know how to be in harmony with nature is one reason I want to support Indigenous efforts to keep their languages and traditions alive.

Being with Inuit has also taught me about resilience and emotion. As a student of the Dalai Lama, I agree with his opinion that white culture spends too much energy on developing the mind and not enough developing the heart. From Inuit I learned how to laugh in the midst of difficulty, how to grieve and move on, how simply to be with someone who is unhappy or troubled, how to pay attention to every subtle ripple of emotion that plays across a face or body. An Inuit colleague told me that the Elders used to sit on a rock in the middle of the camp, quietly watchful. If any trouble was brewing, they could simply and unobtrusively move to shift a dynamic before it erupted into conflict. This is another aspect of Indigenous culture that the white people really need to learn if our planet is to survive.

### *Taking Action on White Privilege*

As for what I was to do about white privilege and pervasive Euro-centrism, I initially tried to use my position at Nunavut Arctic College to incorporate Inuit knowledge and tradition into the Management Studies curriculum. I hired Inuit instructors whenever possible or invited Inuit Elders, politicians, administrators, and business people to be guest speakers. I initiated research to ask Inuit Elders about appropriate management practices. But I still felt uncomfortable with the power differential. Guided by a series of dreams, I took a sabbatical to work with Ghost River Rediscovery, an Aboriginal organization in Calgary. There I felt that I could be a member of a family based on mutual respect. Race has meaning, but the meaning of being white is created by my own actions rather than just by the actions of other members of the white race. Working there gave me a sense that the situation of racial inequality can be changed without the necessity of marginalization, isolation, or assimilation. We can rejoice in diversity, drawing on the strength and wisdom of all peoples (Henley, 1996).

I left my job at Nunavut Arctic College after my sabbatical, and feel less tension about whiteness when I volunteer with Aboriginal organizations or work as an employee of an Aboriginal manager or Board than I did as a member of a colonial bureaucracy. I'm also having to relearn what it means to be white in a place where whites are so much the majority, so much in charge, that whiteness could again lose its meaning. I'm still learning too more about whiteness from the perspective of non-whites. I was recently introduced to the notion of *apples, bananas, Oreos, and coconuts* and the pain those labels bring to minority people who have become "too white." Just last weekend, my Japanese neighbor told me about her experiences of being

treated as a “rice queen” on the streets of Vancouver. At a meeting with some of the economic developers from CANDO (Council for the Advancement of Native Development Officers), I got a different look at the meaning of white. The whites are those who have the goodies and know-how to get the goodies, so they are to be emulated. Aboriginal traditions set aside—it’s all business, business, business now.

I feel honored that some Aboriginal people and people from other visible minorities are willing to look beyond my whiteness and accept me as a colleague and friend. The only reason I can for their doing this is that they recognize that I have some sense of the meaning of whiteness. We can find common ground where we meet as individuals while respecting the real differences in our lives that come from color.

And we can join together to work against the insidious nature of white privilege. This may mean being active in human rights organizations or volunteering to support the efforts of Indigenous educational institutions. Or at the level of the classroom it may mean acknowledging the achievements and contributions of other cultures and races as a way of helping ESL students to define a positive minority identity that is not warped and distorted by the invisible weight of whiteness. To do this effectively, I always have to keep whiteness in mind.

### *The Author*

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