

ACADEMIC WELL-BEING OF RACIALIZED STUDENTS

EDITED BY
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A Note from Marginalized Students to Most Faculty

Beverlee MacLellan

Prof, your privileged presence in front of classrooms is a reminder to us of the history that looms. You're absent-mindedly teaching epistemology; got us wishing for some realistic psychology. You anticipate the students' rate for works without acknowledging how some got perks and some have obstacles of health, loyalty, and poverty only to be called upon for small shows of novelty. For some of us, the classrooms are battlefields and community presence serves as protection, shields. Experience: often our sole reliable resource, given by life and not some school course, gets hidden away until some prof gets bored. We calculate how much free labour we can afford as someone builds their career on our drainage. We try to word it right because of how they may judge. They strip the knowledge away until it all seems basic then preach how we live in a cultural mosaic. But no, please teach us our respective community's history then act like our attitudes and fatigue are somehow a mystery while we watch you take the mic at the next social event and preach how you give your all, 100 percent.

Chapter 1

Centring the Academic Well-Being of Racialized Students

Benita Bunjun

It is with great excitement and eagerness that I offer the release of this edited collection that centres the voices of Indigenous, Black, and students of colour within the academy in Canada on Turtle Island. It draws from papers presented at racialized students' conferences or panels for and by racialized students under my mentorship, as well as intellectual collaborations with peers that centre critical race feminist intersectional frameworks.¹ This collection includes art, photographs, poems, spoken word, thesis chapters, and academic papers from those that dare to create hybridized transformative spaces of good relations, knowledge creation, and community building. Such gatherings are critical and rare academic spaces that ensure students further develop their theoretical vision based on intersecting identities, histories, and struggles while promoting their overall well-being individually and collectively. This collection is the first of its kind to be envisioned in relation to the positionalities and leadership of the diverse writers across geographies on Turtle Island within a transnational context. Their creations and contributions are grounded on unceded territories of the Coast Salish, Okanagan, and Mi'kmaq.

This book discusses the experiences of pain and trauma through visceral colonial violence within the academy and larger society. Stories of trauma, exclusion, displacement, and pain across generations and migrations clearly connect to imperialism. Many of the contributors' journeys in and out of academic spaces include feeling out of place, being an imposter, and not belonging. But this book also emphasizes the ways we survive and strive to build communities of care, while carefully creating strategies of well-being and resistance. Networks, mentorship programs, and conferences become pivotal sites of learning and engagement but

also of retrieval and remembering, such as where we came from and the path we will choose to move forward. The journey is very painful, but along the way we have come to this brave space of alternative teaching and cathartic healing.

While the academic journey of racialized students often begins with pain, this book centres their academic well-being created from forging transformative spaces and relations in and beyond the university. Academic well-being is the capacity of academic institutions to carefully conceptualize and implement with relevance the policies, pedagogies, curricula, and services that promote the mental, physical, and intellectual wellness of students. Further, it is when academic institutions fail to build and deliver on this capacity that students search for spaces of comfort, mentorship, resistance, networking, and survival to then promote their individual and/or collective academic well-being. In this book, I focus on the academic well-being of racialized students over three intersecting themes: barriers to academic well-being; acts of resilience and resistance to white supremacy within academia; and the nurturance of reciprocity, care, and kinship. It is crucial to note that though the book follows this order, the contributors in this book always engage in all three themes by exposing struggles, resilience, and acts of care for each other and their communities particularly through their scholarly work, poetry, and art; they do so in multiple sites such as conferences, networks, and research. I first met each of the contributors as students living their complex lives, which are always informed by historical, geopolitical, ancestral, collective, and individual landscapes. I affirm that their act of writing for this book is itself a multifaceted moment of hybridized individual and collective academic well-being that is full of *cou/rage* and situated in transnational kinship relations. Transnational kinship relations, the focus of Chapter 12, refers to the encountering of individuals from across the globe and the making of non-blood kin relations due to struggles and experiences of Otherness and outsider-ness, as well as through collective resistance and survival.

Academic institutions within Canada — a white settler society — remain troubling sites of racial exclusion and racial disempowerment, lacking critical Indigenous and race scholarship and scholars. Undergraduate and graduate students who are Indigenous, Black, and of colour, across multiple intersections of gender, sexuality, citizenship, language, student status,² place of origin, accent, migration, displacement, and discipline, experience a diversity of embodied and material isolation, silencing, erasure,

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and exclusion. Drawing on the work of Sara Ahmed (2000, 2009), this edited collection explicates how and why racialized politicized students are produced as specific “bodies out of place” in western, Eurocentric academia, as they are constructed to be unsettling the “happiness” that constitutes white supremacy within universities. By foregrounding their scholarship on Indigeneity, Blackness, settler colonialism, queerness/trans, belonging, language, migration, and nation, this book demonstrates that it is imperative for alternative and subversive educational models to emerge within and outside academia. The voices and writings invoke theories, methodologies, and praxes of resilience, reciprocity, and community care.

Academia in Canada can be understood as a site of colonial encounters of differently positioned subjects within simultaneous contact zones (classrooms, instructors’ offices, libraries, group/lab work, student/campus services, departments) in a white settler society. Mawani (2009: 5) refers to a colonial contact zone as “a space of racial intermixture — a place where Europeans, Aboriginal Peoples, [descendants of enslaved Africans,] and racial migrants came into frequent contact, a conceptual and material geography where racial categories and racisms were both produced and productive of locally configured and globally inflected modalities of colonial power.” University spaces, such as classrooms, are powerful sites of socio-geo-political local and global intermixing of international students, domestic students, and instructors across the intersections of racialization, class, gender, trans/non-binary, and ability. Feminist critical race and anti-racist scholars have consistently demonstrated the pervasiveness of coloniality with the academy, resulting in the erasure and marginality of critical race and Indigenous scholarship and knowledge (Ahmed 2012; Bunjun 2014; Carty 1991; Henry 2015; Henry, et al. 2017; Monture-Angus 1995; Smith 2010). Hence, understanding the making and reproduction of Canada as a white settler society becomes imperative to examining academic spaces of intermixing.

Canada, a White Settler Society

My community and scholarly pedagogical entry point begins with recognizing Canada as a white settler society. According to Sherene Razack (2002: 1):

A white settler society is one established by Europeans on non-European soil. Its origins lie in the dispossession and the extermination of Indigenous population by the conquering

European. As it evolves, a white settler society continues to be structured by a racial hierarchy. In the national mythologies of such societies, it is believed that white people came first and that it is they who principally developed the land; Aboriginal peoples are presumed to be mostly dead or assimilated. European settlers thus become the original inhabitants and the group most entitled to the fruits of citizenship.

Attached to these white settler mythologies, there exists white amnesia, white settler innocence, and the ongoing denial of conquest, genocide, chattel slavery, and the exploitation of racialized bodies for labour. The “White Fantasy” as described by Hage (2000) is enveloped in reproducing the myth that Canada was peacefully settled and not colonized while being recognized as *terra nullius* (empty uninhabited lands). Even though such lands were already inhabited by Nations, according to Culhane they “were simply legally *deemed to be uninhabited* if the people were not Christian, not agricultural, not commercial, not ‘sufficiently evolved’ or simply in the way” (Culhane 1998: 48; original emphasis).

As a nation, Canada is contradictory and contested. Its colonial construction can only exist with the continuing dispossession of Indigenous Peoples. The nation is able to imagine its community of those who truly belong by the constant displacement of those who do not belong to the nation. Bannerji (2000: 64) explains that discourses of national belonging involve “certain ideas regarding skin colour, history, language (English/French), and other cultural signifiers—all of which may be subsumed under the ideological category ‘white.’” Europeanness is represented as whiteness, which translates into Canadianness. Furthermore, embedded in this construction of Canada is a particular notion of nation and state formation. Ahmed (2000: 98) also refines this concept:

The production of the nation involves not only image and myth-making—the telling of ‘official’ stories of origin—but also the everyday negotiations of what it means “to be” that nation(ality). The production of the nation involves processes of self-identification in which the nation comes to be realised as belonging to the individual.

Ahmed (2000) analyzes how the stranger is recognized as a stranger, prior to its appearance, as a body identified as not belonging and out of place.

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She examines how the dominant subject of the nation ensures that the boundaries are maintained and enforced to keep the stranger out. If the stranger appears to cross the line or come too close, fear accumulates, demanding that the stranger be expelled to secure imagined purity and spatial formation. By already recognizing the stranger as not belonging, the demarcation and enforcement of boundaries crystallize the place “we” inhabit as home (Bunjun 2011). This book demonstrates how racialized students, across their intersectional complexities, are such “bodies out of place.” They are constructed as strangers who must learn to know their place to keep their place. Yet, they interrupt such national boundary-making through community/collective resistance and care. Therefore, bodies who are often seen as out of place and who experience the effects of being out of place learn that they must strive to maintain autonomy, relevance, and creativity to pursue the creation of non-hegemonic spaces of collective care and determination.

White students are recruited as inevitably entitled to the institutional space of academia, and they often embody natural national belonging as full citizens. Ahmed (2012) notes they reflect the image of the organization back to itself. Hence, white students across queerness, class, and ability inherit, experience, and reproduce the comfort or happiness of academia. On the other hand, “non-white bodies can be uncomfortable”; Indigenous, Black/African, international, and racialized students who encroach on such sites of whiteness “stick out” where whiteness has always been assumed to be what “turns up” (Ahmed 2012: 40–41). Racialized students, faculty, and staff constantly and consistently endure this “discomfort” while ensuring that they work hard to make comfortable those who are seen as naturally belonging. Through multiple genres, this collection responds to the question that Puwar (2004: 141) asks: “what happens when those embodied differently come to occupy spaces rarely occupied by them?” Ahmed (2012: 41) suggests that “you have to pass by passing your way through whiteness, by being seamless or minimizing the signs of difference. If whiteness is what the institution is oriented around, then even bodies that do not appear white still have to inhabit whiteness.” Hence, to decentre whiteness, the envisioning and creation of racialized spaces becomes central to affirming the diversity of racialized histories, knowledges, cultures, and languages as well as recognizing our historical and current relations with each other as racialized peoples.

Racialized undergraduate and graduate students from various

universities and faculties have repeatedly advocated for dedicated and safe spaces for racialized students and access to critical race scholarship and scholars as pivotal to their academic well-being. In reports³ to university administrations, students explain that “such lack of academic spaces, resources and scholars have had a deep impact on our educational journey ... and left us intellectually and emotionally deprived.” They note, “often when we meet ... there are difficult moments of sadness, anger, and disappointment, when discussing our school environment... not only because we are made to feel invisible but also due to the lack of critical engagement with the complexity of who we are as diverse racialized students with multiple identities and histories.” These communications call for institutional change with a focus on transforming the culture of whiteness in academia. A letter from students to a top university administration in Canada continues this thread:

We are fed up with the overrepresentation of white professors in general but particularly so for those teaching racialized histories, ethnic languages, critical race and ethnic studies type of courses. We repeatedly network and support each other around our frustration with the common theme of “all my professors are white” and the lack of courses with curriculum that focus on anti-colonial, critical race, and intersectional frameworks. Shamefully, we can count the handful of tenured and tenure-track Indigenous faculty and faculty of colour ... As Indigenous students and students of colour we deserve an ideal learning environment which strives to create relevant engagements of learning where critical race scholarship and racialized scholars are present to teach us and mentor us in non-precarious ways.⁴

The above summary exposes the significant barriers and frustrations students experience with the presence and culture of whiteness in academic institutions. This is further complicated and intensified for international and exchange students whose physical presence is embodied in the lack of citizenship, an outsider to all that is “Canadian.”

I have worked with racialized international and exchange students across four universities in Canada for the last twenty years, and I have repeatedly witnessed the intersections of language, citizenship, and geography construct them as solely a source of revenue for universities, as dependent on and grateful to the settler “host,” and at times, as “the

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annoying international student” guest. They have more than often shared in meetings, gatherings, conferences, and in my office their experiences of “sticking out.” Ahmed (2012: 41) further explains, “to inhabit whiteness as a nonwhite body can mean trying not to appear at all ... When you stick out, the gaze sticks to you. Sticking out from whiteness can thus reconfirm the whiteness of the space.” Racialized international students retreat to making themselves invisible, unheard, and unseen in this very white racialized space that has been constructed as neutral or natural, but conditional. Yancy (2008: 40) explains the effortless mobility through, around, in, and out of white settler spaces where “white bodies move in and out of these spaces with ease, paying no attention to their numbers or looking for bodies that resemble their own. They are at home.” Yet, as racialized bodies in academia, we are always alert in a sea of whiteness, that we are alone or few, that we “stick out” again.

One consistent barrier of exclusion and of “sticking out” experienced by international students remains with the daunting and, at times, frightening execution of the dominant English accent of the host country. Students who speak English differently from the dominant accent experience forms of marginality resulting in isolation and omission in group work, classroom discussions, and engagement with university services. It saddens me how much international students apologize for who they are, for not being enough, and for inadequacies of their English.⁵ This results in reduced participation and beliefs that they are alone in feeling shame. How English gets taken up as the main language of instruction is deeply embedded in power and access to instructors, services, housing, health care, and employment. This is especially apparent in accent hierarchies; though international students are differently positioned across class and country, those who speak an English that is closest to the host country are at the top. As international students brought forth their experiences and struggles within academic coloniality, a forum was needed for such discussions and responses. The Third Critical Indigenous, Race and Feminist Studies Student (CIRFS) Conference in 2019 focused on international students in the university and centred international student presenters in collaboration with Mi’kmaq students and elders, and Black/African Nova Scotian students (see Figure 1.1). The panels emphasized mental health and wellness, institutional critiques and recommendations; they also focused on housing, student visa/immigration, and graduate student services as experienced by racialized international students.



Figure 1.1. Third CIRFS Conference on International Students in the University. Kjiipuktuk (2019)

Alternative Spaces for Racialized Students' Scholarship, Resistance, and Leadership

It is pivotal to visualize and create alternate spaces of validation and advocacy for peer support, mentorship, and nuanced scholarship to emerge while ensuring that the experiences of racialized students are at the centre. Such spaces of empathy, compassion, friendship, leadership, and transformation must be multidisciplinary across different levels of study. Universities must be understood as powerful sites of intermixing among a diversity of international students, domestic students, administrators, staff, and faculty across racialization, class, gender, trans/non-binary, ability, accents, and place of birth.

Students I mentor often share their experiences of embodied and material isolation, abuse, silencing, and erasure. Specifically, students experience two kinds of academic exclusion: Eurocentric curriculum and pedagogy of displacement. The exposure to Eurocentric curriculum within universities in white settler societies such as Canada is too present, violent, and exhausting for racialized students. In addition, instructors' lack of recognizing the complexities of (at times violent) ancestral and individual journeys to institutions of learning results in a lack of relevant pedagogies of teaching — what I call pedagogy of displacement. The omission of multifaceted histories of war, displacement, genocide, colonialism, and migration deeply impact students' sense of belonging and participation within university sites of engagement (academic and non-academic). Over the years, evaluation feedback from student networks, workshops, conferences, and meetings describe academia as: “lacking mentorship,”

“not a safe environment,” and where “group work is the most difficult and painful.” Students also noted universities’ absence of relevant student services (e.g., counselling), specifically due to the overrepresentation of white counsellors, white faculty, white administration, and white staff who lack appropriate training and care. Universities that engage in such omissions of histories, knowledges, and experiences within the classroom, through graduate supervision, and in student services, produce forms of visceral and epistemic violence. This results in a lack of physical, emotional, and intellectual care for racialized bodies who are seen, or see themselves as, “bodies out of place” within academia. The impact of this omission or lack of expertise on the intersections of racialization, trauma, migration, Indigeneity, anti-Blackness, disability, queerness, and violence, leads racialized students to create alternative sites of scholarship, resistance, and leadership. Next, I discuss networks and conferences as pivotal sites of mentorship, peer support, leadership, and community building for those who dare to envision marginal spaces of existence and survival.

Networks as Sites of Mentorship and Peer Support

In this section, I discuss the creation and delivery of two student initiatives focused on creating spaces of anti-colonial, feminist student organizing that I have been part of in some capacity. These initiatives take the form of networks, conferences, and mentorship, and are in direct response to multiple manifestations of academic violence experienced by Indigenous, Black, and students of colour. This violence has motivated the visioning and creation of spaces of anti-colonial feminist student organizing and, therefore, this edited collection. Such transformative and transgressive spaces are vital not only for intellectual rigour and scholarship but also for resistance, survival, mentorship, love, organizing, friendship, and guidance while holding each other accountable based on individual and collective capacities.

The first initiative that I will discuss is The Centre for Race, Autobiography, Gender and Age (RAGA) Graduate and Undergraduate Student Networks on Coast Salish Territories at The University of British Columbia. RAGA has been an instrumental space of scholarship, mentorship, networking, peer support, and community engagement for racialized students. RAGA fosters interdisciplinary critical race and feminist scholarship with a focus on auto/bio/graphy in its broadest interpretation. RAGA also works collaboratively with community organizations to promote