

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

PART I: RESEARCHING RACE

Jennifer Kelly: *What do Black people have in common with one another?*

Toni: *Experiences with the White man.*

Lorraine: *We've all been there.*

Toni and Lorraine's¹ responses to my question provide a context for the discussion of Black identity undertaken in this book. Although African Canadians come from disparate geographic locations and cultures and hold many different worldviews, they all share the experience of being Black in a White-dominated society. This book illustrates how a specific group of young African Canadians living in Edmonton, Alberta, socially construct themselves as "Blacks." This process of construction is often relational with the youths defining themselves in reference to other social groups. Although their schools provide the common reference point for their experiences recorded in this book, the youths' narratives reveal the complexity of their lives and the role of other social and community influences, including popular culture.

This book demonstrates how *racialization* (giving raced meanings to social situations) takes place in the lives of young Black students. It demonstrates the intricacies of forming a Black *identity*—"an individual's sense of uniqueness, knowing who one is, and who one is not" (Harris 1995: 1)—within a White-dominated society. I do not set out to answer one question or begin with a simple thesis statement. My purpose here is to investigate:

- how Black students view and perceive themselves;
- how they relate to their peers;
- the significance they attach to being "Black" in a White-dominated environment;
- how they receive and perceive predominantly Western popular cultural forms; and

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- how they relate to teachers and school.

The first four issues are the major focus of this text. These dynamics are set in a cultural and—in Chapter Two—a historical discussion of the impact of racialization in Canadian society on education, immigration, employment and the armed forces. How the students' identification intersects with their schooling is the focus of the final chapter.

The students' narratives reveal a process of *cultural reproduction*—a process in which a social formation is reproduced into the future via meanings and sense-making. The narratives show how raced meanings get passed on from generation to generation. Cultural reproduction is linked to the identity formation of the students as individuals and as a group as they make sense of, adopt and adapt the different raced meanings that they encounter in society. Identity formation and the adoption of popular forms is revealed in the instances in which the students differentiate themselves from, and associate with, those who are perceived as Black.

The narratives of the students are of course based on their own interactions within society. Their personal experiences are presented here against a background of social, political and historical factors. Contextualizing the personal in this way illustrates the socially constructed nature and meaning of growing up Black in a society dominated historically and intellectually by White Eurocentric culture, that is, in a society where Europe is used as the universal in terms of values, culture and knowledge creation.

For these African Canadian youths, the process of growing up in a White-dominated society can be seen as a process of being *othered*—of being put outside of the dominant group. As part of this othering process African Canadian youths testify that even when they are Canadian-born, they are represented by the dominant culture as not “belonging,” as not “really” Canadian. Marlene Nourbese Philip, an African Canadian essayist, sums up this process succinctly:

Being born elsewhere, having been fashioned in a different culture, some of us may always feel “othered,” but then there are those—our children, nephews, nieces, grandchildren—born here, who are as Canadian as snow and ice, and yet, merely because of their darker skins, are made to feel “othered.” (Philip 1992: 16)

Incidents of othering are illustrated by the narratives of these youths who are growing up in a city on the Prairies where African Canadians are estimated to make up less than 2 percent of the local population. This book reveals how othering affects the way that these youths socialize and interact with their peers, and how they discuss at school the popular culture they perceive and experience.

When discussing “Blackness,” identity and culture, it is useful to engage a multidisciplinary approach that is grounded in cultural theory. Much work on identity has tended to focus on the interaction between immigrant and host communities, a focus that is fraught with Eurocentric assumptions about “contact,” “assimilation” and “fusion” of the immigrant experience. Thus, discussion of issues of identity benefit from a radical critique of the taken-for-granted meanings of concepts such as culture, race, nation and Black, linked to an analysis of issues relating to power and dominance. The approaches of theorists such as Stuart Hall, Himani Bannerji, bell hooks and Paul Gilroy² open up for discussion the process of racialization and how it affects the formation of a Black identity. This book offers a critique of the positioning of the individual and society as separate from each other. It attempts to move away from psychological accounts that place the rational, all-knowing individual at the centre of human action. Building on the work of the cultural theorists above, the book offers a sense of identity that is complex and layered. In some ways, the book replaces “human nature with the concepts of history, society and culture as determining factors in the construction of identity” and further “destabilizes that identity by making it an effect rather than simply an origin of linguistic practice” (Easthope and McGowan 1992: 67).

TERMINOLOGY AND CATEGORIES

The terminology used when discussing and researching race is problematic, contentious and ambiguous. Often this is because the use of certain terms becomes part of a power struggle between groups in society. For example, what is meant by the term Black and who should be included within a group defined as Black? The data collection undertaken by Statistics Canada is an illustration of the way in which concrete problems result from theoretical ambiguity and confusion in categorization. Use of categories such as “Black origins” and “Caribbean origins” in census questionnaires lead to multiple and inconsistent responses, which makes differentiation and analysis of different population groups difficult.

Recent findings by the McGill Consortium for Ethnicity and Strategic Social Planning (Torczyner 1997) also illustrate the complexities surrounding the gathering and consequent use of census data and the categorization of Black Canadians. Using a more inclusive grouping than the restrictive Statistics Canada identification, which is based on a single component of identity, the McGill Consortium has come up with “more than twice the ‘pure’ count of reported Black origins” (Torczyner 1997: 11).³ Thus, by revising the categorization used in the 1991 census, the consortium estimates that the Black population in Edmonton is about 1.4 percent of the total city population, an upwards revision from 7,000 to 11,745. The 1996 census was designed to eliminate some of this ambiguity

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through the addition of a direct question on race, but there was much controversy as to whether there was such a thing as race and if people should still see themselves in such terms. The latter controversy highlights not only the importance of self-categorization, but also the reality that our self-categorization might not coincide with how others categorize us. This disjuncture is an issue of discussion among those of us of African descent, as some of us re-categorize ourselves as African Canadians rather than Black in recognition of our roots in Africa. How does the variance in categorization impact the political rationale for “programmes that promote equal opportunity for everyone to share in the social, cultural and economic life of Canada” (Statistics Canada 1996: 366).

Some education administrators see highlighting Blackness as negative, as going against the consensual and dominant “colour blind” perspective of Canadian society. This perspective results in a lack of enthusiasm for research in the area of race and difference. The fact that the African Canadian population is numerically small (particularly in Edmonton) reinforces the view of the dominant research community and funding bodies that it is not statistically significant. Often, African Canadians as a social group are only considered worthy of research when they are perceived as a problem for the dominant White society. This view fails to recognize that, regardless of the number of African Canadians living in a community, our stories will provide insights into the formation of racial codes and meanings in the wider society. Further, the experiences of Blacks who are isolated in a predominantly White community will be different from, yet similar to, the experiences of African Canadians who have grown up in areas with a significant African Canadian presence. The meaning and consequences of being an African Canadian will differ according to variables of geography, history, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, and the social norms of the period.

That multiple factors are associated with being an African Canadian adolescent corresponds with the valid critique of theorists who question whether the construct of “Black” is built upon the notion of there being a restrictive Black “essence” (Bhabha 1990; hooks 1992). How can research focus on one specific human dimension related to physiology when the group under investigation has a variety of lifestyles and perspectives? In adopting the term Black, I recognize that it is a social construct, as is White. By social construct, I mean that the label White is not based on biology, but is created and given meaning by social interactions and interpretations within society. While there are structural forms of oppression that Black people experience in common, across gender, class and geographic location, there has to be recognition that differences also exist in relation to gender, class, sexual orientation and geographic region. As Miles and Phizacklea argue, “[I]t is the unique experience of Blacks of racial exclu-

sion that is the essence of Black ethnicity” (1977: 495). Failure to recognize the heterogeneity of Black identity and to choose instead to treat social groups as homogeneous and stable entities may be described as *essentialist* (Carby 1982; hooks 1984; Wallace 1990). Anti-essentialists call for a recognition that differences in the political and cultural behaviour of minority women and men are determined by social and historical contingencies and not by some essential checklist of innate biological or cultural characteristics (Wallace 1990). The advantage of being sensitive to and challenging essentialism in Black communities is that such a position provides the opportunity to undermine racism based on the notion of an “authentic Black” identity. Perhaps a useful way out of the anti-essentialist versus essentialist debate is to recognize that at times it is “strategic” for us to essentialize ourselves as a group in order to gain social changes (Spivak 1993: 3). This strategy is illustrated in Chapter Two where I discuss the ways in which the African Canadian community responds and adapts to the varying provincial expressions of racism.

Stuart Hall illustrates a way around essentializing when, in discussing Black Caribbean identity, he recommends that “we might think of Black Caribbean identity as formed by two axes or vectors, simultaneously operative: the vector of similarity and continuity; and the vector of difference and rupture” (1990: 226). Recognizing Black identity as not static or fixed allows me to avoid charges of undertaking an essentialist discussion of race and take a position that acknowledges “multiple black identities, varied black experiences” (hooks 1992).

If identity is recognized as a learned rather than a biological part of one’s being, it is analytically more useful to think of a process of “identification” rather than identity. This approach enables one to recognize identification as an ongoing process (Hall 1992: 287). Black identity is not a single all-encompassing sense of self. Identification with a Black identity is influenced by how easy or difficult it is to be recognized as Canadian, for example, by the wider non-Black community. As Dei points out, we have to

recognize and understand that identity is defined by who the individual is, how the individual self is understood in relation to others, and how such constructions of social identities match or do not match what people actually do in their lives. (1996: 59)

Focusing on forms of social interaction and the perceptions of a specific group of Black students enables me to partly answer the question of how the students’ race and ethnicity relates to their schooling. Racialization of the lives of Black students emerges in their interpretations of and the meanings they give to their everyday life and school experiences. If we take

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seriously the remark that “if men [sic] define social situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas and Thomas 1928: 572), then we need to be able to gain access to those virgin interpretations. Linking the Thomases statement to race we can postulate that each actor’s and, more importantly, each group’s definition of a social situation and each group’s racialized frame of reference—which shapes that definition—informs their social action and thereby their social reality (Figueroa 1991: 35). Although schools exist as institutions with overt aims and objectives, not every group within that school experiences these objectives in the same way (Anyon 1981; Ogbu 1992; Solomon 1992). This is the case for students as well as for teachers, as indicated by research on the hidden curriculum (Jackson 1968; LeCompte 1978).⁴ Often investigations of this aspect of school life reveal the subtle ways that schools as institutions bring about certain outcomes as a result of the roles and identities that pupils adopt (Willis 1977). The meanings, attitudes, outlooks and predisposition that people bring to bear on the situations they encounter, as well as the situations themselves, have a history; that is, situations are the outcome of a “historical run of experience” (Blumer and Duster 1980; Mead 1934). Therefore, since racialization is present in mainstream society, most students have a historical run of racial experiences, even if that history does not include interaction with other racial and ethnic groups (Frankenberg 1993).

PLACING MYSELF IN THE RESEARCH

It can be argued that most Canadians subscribe to a liberal philosophy, one that leads many educators (and other members of society) to believe that ignoring the race/ethnicity of students results in their being treated equally. Some educators come to believe that by adopting this colour-blind attitude they are ensuring that “race” does not affect the way in which students receive and perceive their schooling—a position akin to seeing “sameness in different color” (Chalmers 1997: 72). This approach is illustrated in an extract from my research journal of February 25, 1994.

Met with Mr. Admin and Ms. Strator who are in the Student Services Department. Mr. Admin suggested that I explain myself. Seemed slightly antagonistic towards me. He said that the nature of my research was sensitive, especially in light of the beating that had taken place in one of the high schools that I wanted to visit. He stated that they did not keep records of students’ ethnic origins.

In comparison to the United States, relations between racial groups in Canadian society are portrayed as being harmonious; “race” is seen as having little effect on the experiences of students. But is this true? Is this comparison and perspective supported by the experience of Black students?

UNDER THE GAZE

Formulation of an area of inquiry often reflects one's raced, classed and gendered positions within society. With that in mind, I believe it is useful to indicate how and why I became interested in Black youths and their experiences of schooling. This positioning of myself recognizes that knowledge and meanings are produced from a specific social and political understanding of the world. We all have a standpoint from which we speak even if we do not recognize it as such. I should add that while explaining how I came to this area of research may reveal the filter through which I wrote this book, it does not provide a complete guide to the embedded bias that result from the various ways in which I have been constructed.

Perhaps the most important factor in my recent past has been my immigration to Canada. My emigration from England gave me the opportunity to reconstruct and compare how race operates in another White-dominated society. The conceptual development of my research question has been influenced by my social and cultural identity as a Black woman who has lived in White-dominated societies. For me this inquiry is a continuation of my ongoing interest in the issue of "race" and how its construction affects the social, economic and political lives of those not belonging to the dominant groups. Having been active in political and community groups working towards a social, political and economic transformation of society I have personally experienced as well as observed the interlocking oppressions of race, class and gender.

Although English and Canadian societies differ, and the umbilical cord of dominion status has been cut, philosophies and ideologies in each location continue to influence one another. Therefore, as both a newcomer to Canada and a Black woman—I wondered how a society with similar roots, values and structures to other more tension-ridden democracies could have achieved the harmonious multiculturalism the rhetoric suggests. Further, years of working as an educator in the school system means that I have a heightened awareness of both the nuances of racism and the difficulties of shifting the approach of the school from assimilation to anti-racist.⁵

In England, racism is more explicit and is recognized as a source of potential social and educational conflict open to political manipulation (Gilroy 1991; Hall 1993). In contrast, Canadian society is more reluctant than the U.K. to openly recognize conflict. The country is generally portrayed as a conflict-free multicultural society (Schick 1995). This construction of Canada as "gentle" in terms of its acceptance of those visibly different from the dominant group is, as argued above and in Chapter Two, partly related to Canadians' myopic sense of being better than those south of the border, and to an ignorance of Canada's racial history.

While being an outsider gave me a degree of insight into racialization

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in Canada, I still had to develop an understanding of the world of the students who were to be the focus of my inquiry. Although I am raced and gendered in ways common to the students, my experiences are different. A picture of the students' world was gained from interviewing individuals with different fields of interest, ranging from education to community work, and from attending outside school events in which the students were involved, including a court hearing.

METHODOLOGY, SCHOOL AND STUDENTS

Since race is a social construct that is ascribed to a group of people, I felt it was appropriate to use focus groups to gain insight into the youths' "natural" vocabulary when discussing the issues of racialization and identities. Focus groups provided an opportunity to view the times when youths agreed on issues, when they were willing to challenge each other and how they responded to such challenges (Morgan 1988: 18). All the focus groups developed their own dynamic as the participants recalled similar experiences and, in some cases, corroborated and elaborated on common experiences.

Many of the students welcomed the opportunity to share their experiences in the focus group. After one focus group, I was approached by a group of four girls who wanted to know why I had not invited them to be interviewed and become part of the project. One of them dramatically rolled up her sleeve and said, "Aren't I Black enough?" The incident illustrates the degree of interest shown by the students who volunteered for the research, as well as the contentions around who is seen as "Black enough." They wanted their voices to be heard! My journal extract demonstrates that for another student the focus groups were cathartic—perhaps they are a better way of self-expression than writing, which is often the *modus operandi* in classrooms:

At the end of our session, one of the participants introduces me to another student who he suggests should get involved "'Cause we have some heavy deep discussion man.'" (Personal Journal, River High, April 8, 1994)

I selected the schools for this research on the basis of observation because, in line with the colour-blind attitude, no records of student origins were kept. Recognizing that identity is layered and crossed by gender (hooks 1981), I held three focus groups with a group of boys and another three with a group of girls in each of the two Edmonton schools, as well as individual interviews with students and thirteen teachers.

In terms of differences, River High is seen by many within the educational community as a school with a strong academic tradition. Its

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reputation is based mainly on the academic programs it offers and the fact that many of its students go on to university and other higher education institutions. Alternatively, Valley High offers fewer academic programs and is situated in an area that has a higher level of socio-economic problems. Though many of its students go on to university and other post-secondary institutions, its past reputation as a school with a vocational focus remains. A teacher who had worked at both schools compared them:

Ms. Chalk: In River High two-thirds of the students were serious students who had their life together and going forward. One-third were unmotivated and struggling In Valley High two-thirds were struggling, and one-third were as good as any student at River High At River High more Black students had a broader experience . . . [whereas in Valley High] welfare was more of a lifestyle [Basically] a school is academic because of the children who go there.

Another teacher, who had also worked at both schools, reiterated the differences:

Mr. Elastic: River High doesn't have the vocational program that Valley High does We [at Valley High] have a real gamut of high academic achievers and then we have low academic achievers. River High was all the same. You couldn't take "shop" at River High.

Despite the schools having differing intakes in terms of the students' socio-economic status, the students' identifications within these schools are complex and multiple and do not necessarily relate to simple conceptions of "class," "race" or gender.

The twenty-six females and twenty-three males interviewed for the research were in grades 10, 11 and 12. Their ages ranged from fifteen years to twenty years. Most of the students were born in Canada, but a significant majority had parents who were born in the Caribbean. A few of the students had immigrated to Canada during their junior high school years. While the students had a critique of schooling and society, this did not mean that they rejected the benefits of schooling or education, or that some students did not succeed (Codjoe 1997).

Research findings (Goetz and LeCompte 1984; Labov 1973) have indicated that the gender of the interviewer may well affect the social situation and verbal behaviour in a group. To counter this, Malcolm Azania, a then education student with a wide knowledge of popular culture, assisted me as a moderator for the male focus groups. Having Malcolm's assistance

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was useful, not just in terms of developing a rapport in the male focus groups, but also because I was able to discuss the male sessions with him and hear his interpretation of what had taken place.

In presenting the student narratives in this book, I try to create a binocular effect so that their voices stand clear and distinct in Chapters Three, Four and Five next to my interpretations in Chapters One, Two and Six. This “stereo vision involves two images: the image of the left eye (the ethnographer’s) and the image of the right eye (the native’s)” (Werner and Schoepfle 1987: 311). My aim is to apply this approach, or “binocular” metaphor (Kluckhohn 1949), to my consideration of individual experiences and their broader context to develop two differing images (mine and the research participants’) that can be brought together to focus on the issue of learning to be Black in a White-dominated society. Without this binocular vision there is a danger of over-theorizing and thus devaluing the students’ perspectives, a form of massaging the data in order to create a particular hypothesis. The research reflects students in specific schools at a particular historical moment. As adolescents they are experimenting with what it means to be Black. There is no guarantee that their views and perceptions will remain beyond their school years.

Finally, I want to caution that carrying out research is problematic at the best of times but when the issue under discussion is related to race and racialization certain pressures and responsibilities come to mind as I attempt to “get it right.” In one focus group this was crystallized for me when a student indicated:

What you are doing right now is awesome because you are like speaking for all of us with this [research]. (Yvonne)

Although the theme of identity and how it articulates with racialization is highlighted in this book, this is not the one and only perspective that can be gained from reading the students’ narratives. As with most human interaction, what was going on within the schooling experiences of these students was complex and it operated on many levels relating to class and gender as well as race. The lens I used for my interpretation was open to a wide range of possibilities. Many insights can be gained if we listen closely to what the students have to say.