

An Autobiography of Race

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SOCI 2010, 01: Race and Ethnicity

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October 1, 2021

As a white woman living in Canada, who grew up in a white neighbourhood and attended a mainly white elementary and high school, I have never experienced racism firsthand. As a child, I was not aware of the idea of 'race' or that I belonged to a particular 'race' and others belonged to a different 'race'. My parents were and are very open-minded and they raised my brother and I in a way that respected and honoured human diversity. We had dolls of many colours and multicultural crayons. Growing up I never had the impression that I was better than anyone else because of the colour of my skin. And although I went to a predominately white school from kindergarten to grade 12, I had classmates of different 'races' and we all got along in such a way that I was not even aware that racism existed.

Despite being raised in a very culturally aware and inclusive family there were still gaps in my education of 'race' and racism. One memory specifically comes to mind. In my grade two Social Studies class we had to do a project on a Canadian Prime Minister of our choice. I did mine on John A. MacDonald. I know now that John A. Macdonald was terribly racist and was the author of one of Canada's darkest chapters- the residential school system, but I grew up believing that he was a great Canadian hero, the father of confederation.

I am unsure of when I first understood 'race' as a concept or when I first became aware of the idea that different 'races' existed. As a child, I understood that people had many different colours of skin, but I was unaware of the meaning those differences carried. The first time I remember talking about racism was when I was 9 or 10 years old when my grade five class did a novel study of "Underground to Canada" by Barbara Smucker. While this experience informed me on the topic of racism, it also led me to believe that racism and slavery was only an issue in the United States. Until recently, I believed the myth that racism was an issue of the past and it certainly did not exist in present day Canada.

The murder of George Floyd at the hands of white police officers and the re-ignition of the Black Lives Matter movement was a great awakening for me. It opened my eyes to the systemic racism that is present in both the United States and Canada. It forced me to confront my own privilege, biases, and ignorance and challenged me to further educate myself on the issues that racialized groups face. It also made me realize that I am not perfect, that I have implicit biases, and there are some things that I will never be able to fully understand because of my white privilege.

In “Speaking Race: Silence, Salience, and the Politics of Anti-Racist Scholarship” Dei (2009) argues that avoiding talking about ‘race’ or avoiding the use of the term ‘race’ simply because it makes us uncomfortable is unproductive in the fight for racial equality. I agree with this argument and believe that we need to push past our discomfort and stop pretending that ‘race’ does not exist. It is important for us to acknowledge the existence of ‘race’ as a culturally constructed concept which was created to categorize people based on perceived physical differences for the purpose of justifying cultural domination. By failing to acknowledge the existence of ‘race’ we also fail to validate the lived experiences of racism that racialized individuals regularly face. Dei states, “The power of naming race and privilege is an important act in decolonization projects... Silence and avoidance is unproductive.” (p. 233).

I found Brah and Phoenix’s (2004) discussion of intersectionality in “Ain’t I a Woman? Revisiting Intersectionality” particularly interesting. As a white, middle-class woman I had not previously considered the ways in which race and gender intersect to produce inequality in the lives of racialized women. I had also not previously thought about how feminism historically has been concerned exclusively with the issues of white middle-class women. I think their article, exposes the myth of the “global sisterhood” and highlights the importance of recognizing that the

experience of womanhood is not universal. Women will never have true equality until all experiences of womanhood are acknowledged and all women's voices are heard. Brah and Phoenix suggest that "careful attention to working within, through and across cultural differences... can be used as a resource for working with the question of cultural difference in the present moment" (p. 79).

References

- Brah, A., & Phoenix, A. (2004). Ain't I a woman? Revisiting intersectionality. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 5(3), 75-86. <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol5/iss3/8>
- Dei, G. J. (2009). Speaking race: Silence, salience, and the politics of anti-racist scholarship. In M. Wallis & A. Fleras (Eds.), *The politics of race in Canada: Readings in historical Perspectives, contemporary realities, and future possibilities* (pp. 230-238). Oxford University Press.