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Critical Studies in Gender, Culture, and Social Justice

Embracing Diverse Realities

What I see is different from what you see!

Accepter la diversité des réalités

Ce que je vois est différent de ce que vous voyez !

Karine Coen-Sanchez

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Dialogues and Reflections: The Scarborough Charter

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Embracing Diverse Realities: What I see is different from what you see!

by **Karine Coen-Sanchez**

Keywords: anti-Black racism; Canadian higher education; critical consciousness; educational transformation; intersectional identities; polite racism; racialized experiences; systemic barriers

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“What I see is different from what you see”

Author: Kaeyla Lenisa Sanchez, 9 years old

What I see is different from what you see
I see kings and queens you see animals
I see an Empire you see a village
I see culture you see dress-up
I see beautiful long braids, but you just see dirty hair...
that's the difference between you and me
we don't see the same thing!

But one thing we both can see is the disrespect.
But if you just open your eyes and open them wide enough
you will see the beauty in what you didn't see before!

In a world shaped by diverse perspectives and experiences, the poet's poignant words—“What I see is different from what you see”—resonate deeply with the profound complexities surrounding the perception of race. Authored by my daughter, Kaeyla Lenisa Sanchez, a wise nine-year-old Black girl, these lines encapsulate a universal truth: our individual lenses of reality often di-

verge, modified by social, cultural, and economic influences. The power of young voices to shed light on the intricacies of racialized experiences cannot be overstated. In this reflective paper, I seek to amplify this youthful wisdom and delve into the complexities of racial perception that persist in the educational systems. Through the captivating words of Kaeyla, I embark on a journey of

self-exploration, aiming to disentangle the intricate web of racial biases that affect our understanding of one another. In doing so, I will discuss my lived experiences as a Black woman pursuing a doctoral degree in Canada.

I believe it is important to make a connection between the Scarborough Charter (2021) on anti-Black racism and Black inclusion, which has been endorsed by more than fifty postsecondary institutions throughout Canada, and this discussion of education and societal transformation. The prominence of combatting anti-Black racism and ensuring Black participation in Canadian higher education is demonstrated by this momentous event. The Charter is essential for directing anti-racism tactics and frameworks for action inside these institutions since it offers innovative strategies and recommendations. The goal is to consider how the Scarborough Charter may address some of the concerns brought up and aid in the deconstruction of exclusive academic institutions.

I matter because I exist:

I wish I knew that I did not need to continuously seek validation by discursively echoing the phrase “I matter because I exist” to a system that is programmed to exclude certain communities. The sense of belonging can be created, by developing new ways of learning and communicating. As a Black woman and scholar in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Ottawa, I bring a multidimensional perspective to this discourse, by creating space founded on linear exchanges of international experiences and knowledge. Focus is placed on exploring how the term “racialization” draws attention to how racial identities are constructed and contested within relations of power, thus, critically dismantling colonized knowledge. However, this reflection is not a standard educational practice. As I reflect on the invisibility, I faced in the Canadian school system and how this manifested in my collective consciousness, I reflect on what *I wish I knew!*

I wish I knew that although we inhabit one living space called Earth we are traversing vastly distinct paths encoded by social, racial, and economic influences, as well as positionalities, which cannot be dismissed. Within this disparity of perception, we find the seeds of misunderstanding and the perpetuation of unequal power dynamics. The awareness of this reality demands introspection, empathy, and, most importantly, a commitment to fostering a truly inclusive and equitable society (Coen-Sanchez 2023b).

I wish I knew that Western cultures use an imposed system of superiority to maintain a specific order within a social ideology that benefits the dominant group, and that Black students are NOT beginning their academic journey from a point of deficiency but rather, within a faulty system. And that this is linked to the socio-economic power of the West, which is maintained by rigid structures that filter through the Western consciousness (Holt 2002). *I wish I knew* that the idea of inferiority and of inferior peoples has become modernized by various political and social systems. Understanding the weaponization of misinformation in school curricula and beyond early on in one’s academic journey prevents mental segregation and exclusion.

The Scarborough Charter on anti-Black racism does highlight the need to collectively work towards the removal of systemic barriers, to foster an environment that is welcoming to students and to achieve equitable solutions that allow *all* to thrive. There is a commitment to ensure that the knowledge of African/Black people's past, present, and future are honoured, by emphasizing four guiding principles related to governance, teaching, and learning activities, such as *Black Flourishing, Inclusive Excellence, Mutuality and Accountability*. Together, these tenets of action embrace a transformational change that supports the continuous promotion and protection of the human rights of people of African descent.

Racism as Polite Inequality

I wish I knew that in the twenty-first century the face of racism has evolved, adopting more covert and insidious forms that cloak themselves in politeness and subtlety (Coen-Sanchez 2020). Despite societal progress towards overtly challenging racism, polite inequality remains deeply ingrained within institutions and social systems. Polite racism operates through microaggressions, unconscious biases, and subtle discriminations, often masked as jokes, backhanded compliments, or seemingly well-intentioned remarks.

However, I question what it means to be institutionally and socially visible. What does it mean to have equitable access to resources and opportunities? From the lens of an observer, I would say it refers to being accredited for the intellectual and characterized content of the person and not the external features that have been categorically stigmatized by society. Therefore, understanding bigotry is a mainstay in the educational system, as most funded

institutions are a microcosm of the larger macrocosm that have their own agenda to maintain order.

I wish I knew that the politeness of such acts camouflages the harm they cause, making it challenging for those who experience them to articulate their grievances. Consequently, it goes unnoticed or dismissed as trivial, perpetuating its cycle of insidiousness. For example, at the University of Ottawa, there is an apparent gulf between the instructors and the student body, and when I looked up the organizational ladder, I could see the demise of Black representation in leadership positions. The departments as well as professors are not equipped to deal with the diverse knowledge and the increasingly diverse student body. Once more this contributes to a sense of isolation—in my thoughts, academic pursuits, and research ideas. In theory, the equitable and full academic development of human potential is largely made possible by universities and colleges. How is this possible to attain when there is a lack of diverse professorship and knowledge? Again, the Charter does directly address the benefits of eliminating structural obstacles that will promote equity, inclusion, and social justice, and fully acknowledge intersectional identities. This reference provides the space for senior administrators, policymakers, and stakeholders at universities to begin a process of critical thinking/reflection, leading to creative research, and to disseminate knowledge that upholds substantive equality, human dignity, and sustainability.

The Role of Education in Fostering “Inclusivity”

I wish I knew that I have the power and the voice to challenge the influence of eurocentric ideologies by directly undertaking the process of decolonizing space and knowledge. It was not until later in my academic journey that I began to socially advocate. For example, I developed workshops¹ that focused on subjects that have been omitted by departments, such as What is Race, Black feminism, environmental racism, intersecting identities, disparities in the healthcare systems, and so on. Discussions ignite students to reflect on their own social positionalities and provide the space to recognize the diversity of lived realities in the classroom—a mindfulness space. By including different perspectives and experiences outside of European culture, students’ voices and experiences become part of the learning process. It is no longer a structure of imposing knowledge; rather, it becomes a dialogue of sharing and learning.

I wish I knew that although Western society is culturally diverse in terms of composition, it does not necessarily include the integration of various perspectives. The eurocentric homogeneity of viewpoints does not come naturally and points to systematic incompetence, namely in the inability to engage with individuals from diverse backgrounds and respect cultural differences. It is the notion of what is ‘natural’ versus what is imposed as ‘truth’ through teaching materials. Nevertheless, the Charter does outline in their report the importance of supporting Black students through scholarships and access programs that re-evaluate curricula, to ensure Black expertise and knowledge are represented. In addition to acknowledging the existence of anti-Black racism, the Charter also offers specific action plans to guarantee institutional and cross-sector accountability (Scarborough 2021). This offers the possibility to incorporate new knowledge.

I wish I knew that education stands as a powerful catalyst for societal change, and it plays a pivotal role in shaping perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours. And it is within the realms of educational institutions that young minds are shaped, and notions of race, identity, and diversity are formed. Subsequently, education emerges as a primary agent of transformation, holding the potential to deconstruct existing norms and reconstruct new realities that embrace diverse ways of thinking (Tatum 2017). For example, Kymlicka (1995) a political advocate, argues that we must integrate the opinions of minority rights into liberal theory. He argues that multiculturalism in Canada typically refers to the rights of immigrants to express their ethnic identity without fear of prejudice or discrimination. It is through this collective lens that authentic inclusiveness can occur.

The Fostering of a (New) Critical Consciousness

I wish I knew that education must also nurture a new critical consciousness, by encouraging students to question societal norms, power structures, and inequalities. *I wish I knew* that by critically examining and observing the historical and contemporary manifestations of race, I had to grieve the ‘old’ Karine to embark on a journey of mindfulness. This is a self-empowering process which cultivates a critical consciousness that should be shared. And it should be at the core of our educational system, as a basic cognizance that invites students and teachers to consider various points of view while perusing and in-

vestigating texts. This process of self-exploration provides the space to become an observer of the system, thus critically interpreting teaching materials.

In response to the rising pressure that Black and racialized students felt throughout their academic journey (Koen-Sanchez, 2023a)², I *knew* I needed to create a space that would be dedicated to highlighting and publicizing the efforts of students of Black identity and the African diaspora. In 2020, I established at the University of Ottawa an anti-racist committee which worked to create a safe environment for open dialogue through workshops and panels. Annually, I also organize a Black Talent Showcase that promotes Black excellence through spoken word, poetry, and other arts. Such talent shows create space for Black scholars to embark on the quest to change the narrative. One of the main objectives was to educate others during Black History Month, in recognizing that the Black people who were enslaved were composed of doctors, lawyers, teachers, musicians, inventors, and poets, thus shifting the traditional narrative and highlighting the artistry in various Black communities. These types of events validated Blackness as a strong contributor to any given society.

Final Thoughts: *Empowering Silent Voices*

I know now that addressing racism as polite inequality requires a multifaceted approach that tackles systemic issues at their roots. Awareness and acknowledgment of subtle discrimination are essential, as is fostering a culture of openness where discussions about race and privilege can occur without defensiveness or dismissal. We, as social beings, have an ethical and moral responsibility to actively promote inclusivity and diversity by amplifying silenced voices and providing platforms for their authentic representation. A case in point is the signatories of the Scarborough Charter (2021) who commit to reparative justice measures for the future” and “agree to move beyond mere representation and take responsibility for supporting fulsome, transformative inclusion across university and college structures, policies and procedures.”

I know now that by addressing social inequalities head-on and cultivating genuine inclusivity and empathy, society can work towards dismantling polite racism and creating a future where all individuals are recognized, respected, and valued for their unique identities and contributions.

I know now by fostering integration, we create spaces where individuals can embrace their identities proudly, challenge dominant narratives, and contribute to a diverse and inclusive society. The celebration of cultural pluralism enriches the social fabric, contributing to a more vibrant and empathetic world.

I know now that there is a need for political recognition of the merging of racial identities and their institutional validation. As the author Bonilla-Silva (2014) notes, failure to recognize this is at the core of the issue, as once racial categories have become naturalized, it will become more difficult to view the world from different angles. Additionally, authors Desmond and Emirbayer defined race as being “a symbolic category, based on phenotype or ancestry and constructed according to specific social and historical contexts, that is misrecognized as a natural category” (2009). *I know now* that addressing racism as polite inequality requires a multifaceted approach that tackles systemic issues at their roots. Awareness and acknowledgment of subtle discrimination are essential, as is fostering a culture of openness where discussions about race and privilege can occur without defensiveness or dismissal. *I know now that* addressing social inequalities head-on and cultivating genuine inclusivity and empathy, society can work towards dismantling polite racism and creating a future where all individuals are recognized, respected, and valued for their unique identities and contributions.

I know now that through education, we can deconstruct to reconstruct new realities that embrace different ways of thinking, a new collective consciousness that can eventually be translated into policies and procedures. This is my aha moment during my journey of reflectivity, to understand that the programming that was once prescribed to be ‘true’ and ‘right’ can be rewired. It’s the process of introspective reflectivity that requires space and time to fully embrace a new consciousness. By becoming an observer of the system, by embracing authentic inclusiveness, we create a world where everyone’s humanity is recognized and celebrated, where the rich tapestry of human experiences is woven into a collective narrative of understanding and compassion.

As we move forward, let us remember the words of Kaeyla: “We don’t see the same things.” Let us embrace this difference as a source of strength, innovation, and beauty.

Endnotes

1. See: <https://opirg-gripo.ca/creating-a-space-for-bipoc-to-strengthen-their-social-positionality/>
2. Mitacs-funded research I conducted to explore the lived realities among undergraduate and graduate racialized (international and domestic) students during their higher education studies: <https://www.mitacs.ca/en/projects/inclusivity-canadian-educational-system>

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