

RACISM AND THE UNIVERSITY: How Bureaucracy and the “Equity Industry” Perpetuate Racism (2008)

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Preface: In August 2008, student representatives voted at a meeting of the Canadian Federation of Students–Ontario to launch a Task Force on Campus Racism. The task force is now traveling the province to hold hearings on the issue (www.noracism.ca). This article was written following the August 2008 meeting for an equity studies course that focused on many related issues. The article draws on course material to lay the groundwork, then turns to current issues of racism at the university and places them within a historical context in which bureaucracy has been used to stifle anti-racist organizing on campus.

Substantive Equity vs. the “Equity Industry”

The reality of equity programs in Canada is that they conceal racist and discriminatory practice – they promise equality of opportunity yet deliver grudging accommodation; they deal with systemic inequity while leaving the systems and structures responsible for those inequities intact.

– Rodney Bobiwash

Bobiwash’s remarks were delivered to an Equity Studies panel on employment equity at the University of Toronto in 1998. In his remarks, Bobiwash criticized the bureaucratized “equity industry” for failing to advance substantive equity. Much of his text draws on the university with its failure to hire indigenous staff people or even to prioritize making First Nations House physically accessible.

Bobiwash's analysis resonates deeply with me. The university seems more committed to equity as a public relations tool and defensive mechanism for responding to criticisms than for addressing the root of problems within the university community. For example, while UofT allows tuition fees to skyrocket and has publicly lobbied for their deregulation – despite negative impacts on accessibility for poor and racialized communities – the university responds by touting its so-called “access guarantee” and access programs.

Upon closer investigation, the “access guarantee” does not apply to international, undocumented or part-time students, and the major grants program UTAPS only applies to full-time students who have qualified for and taken on the maximum amount of student loans possible from OSAP. Similarly, access programs such as the Transitional Year Programme (TYP) are very successful yet have very small enrollments and are under constant threats of cuts. The university expects us to believe that because it has an access policy, access program or anti-racism office, it is automatically a “non-exclusionary”, “non-discriminatory” and “non-racist” space.

The University as a Producer and Site of Racism

My thinking on this issue continued to develop as our equity studies class explored different topics each week. Course material helped situate the university as an active force in the history and perpetuation of racism and inequity. Dikkoter speaks to how science has been used in the service of advancing racism with the scientific theory of eugenics, while Tuhiwai Smith's article on research and indigenous peoples speaks to the linkages between research and European imperialism and colonialism, much as Grosfoguel writes about Eurocentrism in knowledge production and the need for critiques from silenced perspectives.

Material from later classes helped me identify how racism is enacted at the university itself. Sorenson discusses the imperialist history of white supremacy and how white privilege is normalized to the point where white people have the luxury of not having to think about their own privilege or the corresponding exclusion of racialized bodies and knowledges. Razack's analysis of how "place becomes race" through the law can be applied to how "place becomes race" through the establishment of a university on land stolen from indigenous peoples as part of a wider process of colonial dispossession, the propagation of Eurocentric knowledges, and the imposition of a fee structure that disproportionately affects poor racialized students. However, materials such as Friere's "Education as the Practice of Freedom" brought the topic of resistance into focus and raised the question of the possibilities for liberatory change at the university.

In the following section, I demonstrate UofT's lack of commitment to substantive equity and anti-racism by considering current and historical issues of racism and the university.

Perpetuating and Confronting Racism

Denying Anti-Racism: Towards 2030 Plan (2007)

In October 2007, UofT President David Naylor held a public meeting at Innis College on his Towards 2030 long-term planning process. The university community was invited to comment on a 50-page discussion document that endorsed deregulation of tuition fees and further commercialization of research. Many students attended this meeting and voiced their dissatisfaction with the direction of the plan. In one exchange students from the African Studies Initiative challenged the President for failing to address the issue of Eurocentric curriculum and in particular the under-resourced state of the African Studies program.

Naylor stated that the issue was not within his jurisdiction, however he was rebuked for attempting to “pass the buck” and reminded of the 1992 Presidential Advisory Committee on Race Relations and Anti-Racism Initiatives (PACRRAI) and its recommendations on curriculum. “Duly noted” is all Naylor had to say in response.

Deflecting Anti-Racism: PACRRAI Report (1992)

Despite President Naylor’s virtual dismissal of PACRRAI, there is much more to be said about this document and the state of anti-racism at UofT. The 1992 PACRRAI report, long buried by the university administration, was found by an executive from the University of Toronto Students’ Union (UTSU) in their office archives. Doing research in the office of the Arts and Science Students’ Union (ASSU), I was able to find a brochure copy of the 1990 Report of the Presidential Advisors on Ethno-cultural Groups and Visible Minorities, as well as additional sections from the 1992 PACRRAI report and a critical response to the report written by an anti-racist action group of OPIRG-Toronto called Students Committee Opposing Racism Through Education (SCORE). Through this archive as well as web searches, I also found a large amount of information about racism at the university and how students have responded.

Remembering Anti-Racism: UCAR (1989)

Notably, while doing research, I was able to learn about the political context out of which these reports emerged. In a 2003 article that appeared in THIS Magazine entitled “Remembering Anti-Racism”, author Raghu Krishnan writes:

In 1989, I helped found the United Coalition Against Racism (UCAR) at the University of Toronto. We launched a “Campaign for an Anti-Racist U of T” with demands around curriculum, hiring, admissions, office and meeting space, and a racial-harassment grievance procedure. UCAR

lasted more than two years, and stood out because of the intensity of its activities, its emphasis on non-white leadership, and the range of forces involved. The coalition included feminists from the Women's Centre, pan-Africanists from the African and Caribbean Students Association, and mostly white representatives from the NDP, Communist Party, and small far-left groups.

Krishnan continues with this cautionary note about the university bureaucracy:

The momentum around UCAR was eventually channeled into the university bureaucracy. The U of T administration wanted peace around "equity issues" – the better to pursue a new agenda of tuition hikes, private fundraising and large-scale corporate involvement on the campus.

Bureaucracy: Today's Deflection, Tomorrow's Denial

Channeling the momentum from activism into bureaucracy is a common response by those in power who are attempting to defuse situations that threaten the status quo. Campaigns that apply massive public pressure are often politically impossible to ignore outright. Rather than attempting to achieve meaningful change, vague commitments are made to study the issue and develop a report. A committee is formed, selective consultations and research are conducted, and a report is produced. Drawn-out processes ensure that the institution is able to proceed at its own pace, while the intensity of activism ebbs and flows. Once issued, recommendations remain suggestions that the institution is under no obligation to implement.

Of course, this analysis of bureaucratization ignores institutional flexibility and the impact that continued political pressure can exert on areas such as the composition of a committee, how a committee goes

about its work, and how activists work to see recommendations implemented. Nevertheless, the bureaucratic report process described here, while desirable in that it is recognized by the institution, allows the institution to retain control over the process and how it intends to respond to recommendations. Without autonomy, the possibility of critical inquiry is jeopardized. More importantly, without a binding commitment to implement change, the effort put into critical inquiry is wasted.

The bureaucratic report process is what Audre Lorde would refer to as a master's tool that is incapable of dismantling the master's house. This process does not take power back from the university administration; rather, it uncritically adopts the administration's approved approach for "creating change". Minor concessions that may result from this process can be strategically used to undermine demands for broader systemic changes and defend the current power structure that allows administrators to undemocratically maintain their dominance.

UofT's Equity Industry: No Substantive Equity to be Found

In the case of anti-racism and equity at UofT, institutional responses to activism have continued the trend of bureaucratization, claiming to address systemic inequity "while leaving the systems and structures responsible for those inequities intact." For instance, in a shift away from the direct presidential advisory model, a permanent office of Race Relations and Anti-Racism Initiatives was created in 1993, known since 2005 as the Anti-Racism and Cultural Diversity Office. The Anti-Racism and Cultural Diversity Office is part of a network of 15 equity offices at the university. Much like with bureaucratic report processes, UofT's equity offices exist in a context where they lack autonomy and a binding commitment from the institution to implement change. The equity offices are accountable to the administration, a fundamentally backwards

arrangement to effectively address inequity.

In a news release announcing its new glossy equity posters, UofT carefully framed the announcement with the title “Equity core value at UofT: New equity posters only a hint of activity taking place”. The poster campaign is said to be only one way the administration is “weaving equity into the fabric of the university”, in accordance with UofT’s 2006 Statement on Equity, Diversity, and Excellence. Part of this statement reads:

In striving to become an equitable community, we will also work to eliminate, reduce or mitigate the adverse effects of any barriers to full participation in University life that we find, including physical, environmental, attitudinal, communication or technological.

The statement glaringly omits any mention of financial barriers, one of the principle modes of exclusion from society and universities that disproportionately affect equity-seeking groups such as poor and racialized communities. Therefore, it is not surprising that activists criticized the equity posters for excluding categories such as “working class” or “racialized”, nor is it surprising that the supposedly “core value” of equity is entirely absent from the President’s Towards 2030 long-term planning process to determine the future of the university. When pressed about equity issues such as Eurocentrism in the curriculum, the President states that these matters are outside of his jurisdiction, as if it is the notion of substantive equity itself that is outside of his jurisdiction.

Renewing Anti-Racism

While institutional responses have failed to address the root causes of issues such as racism, the positive side of these incremental changes is that they directly resulted from pressure applied by activism, and that these incremental changes can still have positive impacts on the

university community. The possibility for liberatory change at the university exists if we continue to organize collectively, remain committed to our principles and expose injustices and hypocrisy. For example, the Transitional Year Programme (TYP) is an access program that was founded by members of the African–Canadian community before becoming institutionalized. We must work to ensure that exemplary equity initiatives such as TYP are not framed as tokenistic accessories to be “woven into the university”, but rather ensure that their lessons in terms of access, support mechanisms, student–centred pedagogy and curriculum are applied to the university as a whole.

At UofT there is a rich history of anti–racist organizing that is erased from institutional narratives. This article lacks the space to highlight the many cases of racism which have highlighted systemic discrimination at the university such as the tenure cases of April Burey and Kin–Yip Chun. The counter–hegemonic narrative of anti–racist organizing disrupts the unsullied narrative of the university as a “non–exclusionary”, “non–discriminatory”, “non–racist” and progressive space. In the anti–critical way that the university discusses itself, it is constantly claiming to have improved its achievement of equity, but at the same time will never admit in the present to the existence and extent of inequity.

While it is true that campus activism ebbs and flows, the current climate on campus is promising. Groups such as the Critical Area Studies Collective (CASC) are bringing attention to Eurocentrism in the curriculum, while the Committee for Just Education (CJE) is organizing direct actions opposing fee increases on the basis that they disproportionately affect poor and racialized students and their families. Moreover, the Canadian Federation of Students – Ontario (CFS–O) recently voted to form a task force on racism and to integrate the work of this task force into their province–wide Drop Fees campaign. This activism is

promising not only because it is autonomous from the administration and committed to systemic change, but in light of Krishnan's reflections regarding anti-racist organizing, it also offers a united front on issues of access, anti-privatization, and anti-racism. Such unity amongst activists denies the university the opportunity to divide movements by superficially making peace on "equity issues" while ignoring the intersections between all of these issues.

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