

A 'Culture of Whiteness' (Is Change Possible?)

Sarita Srivastava

Many of us confront on a daily basis the decision about how, when and where to act in order to challenge racism. Whether within large institutions, community organizations or intimate relationships, the decision to act is always one with emotional, political and strategic consequences. For those of us who work within universities, the peculiar mix of conservative tradition, academic freedom, hierarchical organization and progressive politics provides a complex backdrop to anti-racist activism. Here I reflect briefly on my own experience at Queen's University, and share my own ambivalence about anti-racist activism within the university.

Few phrases have prompted more controversial and ongoing debate at Queen's University than the assertion in the recent Henry Report on *Systemic Racism Against Faculty of Colour and Aboriginal Faculty at Queen's University* that there exists a "culture of whiteness", a university culture in which values, everyday discourses, knowledge and institutional practices are shaped by white privilege. The Henry Report, (submitted in 2004 and released in 2006) suggests that "there are some strong indicators that a significant number of faculty of colour and Aboriginal faculty are concerned with the ways in which their presence and contributions are marginalized from the mainstream culture and structures of the University" (147). Surely these are not radical conclusions, particularly as the Henry Report is only the most recent of a series of initiatives aimed at equity issues at Queen's. The 1991 report "Towards Diversity and Equity at Queen's: A Strategy for Change", was followed up by the 1992 "Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Race Relations and Curriculum in the Faculty of Arts and Science". Both reports noted the under-representation of racialized persons at all levels at the university and called for increased communication, consultation, and the elimination of racism.

Yet after it was released in the spring of 2006, the Henry Report inspired a backlash that extended even to the *Globe and Mail*, where Margaret Wenté's column, in its now-familiar style, mockingly dismissed concerns about racism at Queen's — after all, how could a university with a racially diverse student body and faculty be racist, she wrote. Within Queen's, and within my own department, many of us also heard the dismissive claim that the

The Ardent Review (April 2008) 1, 23-25.

Henry Report was methodologically flawed. It was a key criticism, used to dismiss outright not only the conclusions of the Henry report, but also the initiatives that sprang from it.

Despite this backlash, there was clearly enough administrative lip-service to the Henry Report, and concerns about the publicity it garnered, that the report's release also inspired some hope that there may be opportunities for change or, at the very least, an increased awareness of the need for change. Yet overall, there has been disappointment at the limited change since the Henry Report was submitted in 2004. Most recently, a female faculty member was verbally and racially attacked and forced off the sidewalk by four male students while walking to class one afternoon last November. This incident, and the administrative and security response to it, highlighted for many of us the lack of administrative initiative on questions of equity.

Not that anti-racist efforts by students and faculty have been insignificant. One group in particular, QCRED, or Queen's Coalition for Racial and Ethnic Diversity, has been a vibrant source of activism, primarily by students. More recently, the November assault on a faculty member inspired the formation of QCARF, or Queen's Coalition of Anti-Racist Faculty. This was the first time that anti-racist faculty have had a communication and support network, a means for gathering, taking action and supporting each other. QCARF organized a phenomenally well-attended anti-racist rally as a direct response to the November assault. My own efforts over the last two years have been aimed at the need for curriculum development in the sociology department. A couple of years ago, a faculty member from another department asked me to supervise a reading course for one of her graduate students. She had done a review of graduate curriculum at Queen's, and could not find a course that dealt with critical race theory. Against some resistance, I subsequently proposed and succeeded in starting a graduate course, *Transnational Theories of Race, Gender and Sexuality*, which I taught for the first time this fall. Facing considerable opposition, resistance and some overt hostility, I also succeeded in starting a departmental Equity Committee to review departmental practices and curriculum. While I have had two strong allies in my department, because of the difficulties of these struggles I began to feel that it might make more sense to focus on interdisciplinary efforts. Consequently, I am currently working on a proposal for a research centre focusing on critical race studies and transnationality.

At the moment, I sit on a committee that is overseeing an Employment Systems Review of Queen's, a huge, comprehensive quantitative and qualitative review of equity practices. However, I also have a great deal of ambivalence towards these efforts. What is the potential for profound change if our work is limited by the administrative framework of the university? Why focus so much of our energies and efforts on reforming cumbersome and slow-moving institutions? Is profound change even possible within chilly environments, and with indifferent colleagues? How do we measure "success" — by the implementation of yet another policy? Often within institutions or organizations we are seduced into investing huge amounts of time in policy development or detailed reports, only to realize that there are insufficient resources and insufficient will to actually implement an equity policy or a report's recommendations.

As an academic, I am supportive of the need for more detailed and thorough analysis of the nature of inequity. As an activist, I am simultaneously hopeful and pessimistic about what kinds of concrete, institutional changes, if any, this knowledge will be able to produce. My own research has challenged anti-racist workshops for the assumption that more and better knowledge will undo racist thinking and practices. Yet small discursive shifts can be significant and minor shifts in the people's thinking can sometimes allow us to open up fissures in the way things have always been done, in the way we have always spoken about the way the world is. Is this enough to profoundly change inequitable relations of power and knowledge? Is this enough to keep us from losing heart? Often not. While I feel strongly that we should act where we are, work to change the places we inhabit, sometimes the struggle is so heart-breaking that all we can do is retreat, and move on. Perhaps the inaugural issue of this review will provide a way of linking these struggles in ways that give us strength — whether it is the strength to continue, or the strength to regroup.

*Sarita Srivastava is a professor of sociology at Queen's University.
Email: sarita@queensu.ca.*