Special Issue: Antiracisms Without Guarantees: A Framework for Anti-Racist Literacies

Introduction: Literacies of Anti-Essentialist Antiracism

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In 1983, the French political philosopher Christian Delacampagne observed, “racism is not only a word among others in the universe of discourse, but a reality; a reality that kills, slowly or brutally, everyday, thousands of [people] on the planet [my translation]” (p. 13). Thirty years later racisms continue to kill. Racisms are at work in the re-emergence of ethnic hatreds that have accompanied the realignment of world power following the collapse of the former Soviet Bloc, in the uprooting of populations by globalization, in the actions of nationalist politicians who seek to win the next election by dividing people against their neighbours or even in the I-didn’t-really-mean-it apologies of public figures whose indiscretions end up on the front pages. Meanwhile, the election of Barack Obama, the end of apartheid in South Africa, the emergence of antiracist movements worldwide have done little to the change the structural inequalities that racist systems have created (e.g., Haltinner, 2014). At the same time, many people are confused by the term “racism,” by what is and what is not racist and if something is racist, by what can be done about it. More than ever, teachers, scholars and activists need antiracist literacies. The ability to read racisms, to analyze racist configurations and to identify the factors that allow them to work are key to making racisms in all their forms “uninhabitable” (following Hall, in Hall & Jhally, 2002).

Focusing on Canadian examples, the contributions to this special issue of Critical Literacy: Theories and Practices are intended to help promote antiracist literacies. In the end, all of these contributions share in common three principal commitments. Our first commitment is that racisms are the creations of power and not difference. Racisms signify certain differences to create the power of dominating groups and as that power is challenged by the excluded, the configurations of racisms change. Thus racisms have no fixed essences and are dynamic, their expressions specific to time and place. Despite this, as noted above, they continue to destroy people’s lives everyday. Second, we hold that the official celebrations of multiculturalism and diversity in countries like Canada mask realities of continuing colonization, marginalization and exclusion that daily destroy the lives of millions of people in the world. While the discussions that follow are specific to Canadian contexts, we believe they illustrate larger patterns in the operations of government controlled schools and contemporary nation states. Third, as teachers we know that the young people in our care include those being damaged by racisms. These young people cannot wait for racisms to end once and for all or until a complete analysis of all the configurations of racisms are developed. As teachers we need to act now to mitigate the consequences of exclusion even when that means acting on partially formed and contingent understandings. The challenge is to continually find ways of engaging with those who are excluded to deepen the educational conversation.
Thus, the contributors to this special issue do not pretend to have found the solutions to racisms or to have identified how to end their material exclusions. We do hope that we have identified some places to start what we have come to call antiracism without guarantees.

In the first article, I introduce a framework for analyzing racisms and developing antiracist strategies that can help to promote such literacy. This framework builds on a long-standing anti-essentialist critique of “race” (e.g., Barzun, 1937/1965; American Anthropological Association, 2011), the foundational work of the British sociologist, Robert Miles (1989) and the South African antiracist scholar, David Theo Goldberg (1993), and it analyzes the role of dominance in creating racisms (Foucault, 2003; Hall, 1980). The resulting framework has grown out of thirty years of antiracism education and has been used to analyze historic racisms and to identify antiracist research methodologies (Stanley, 2011, 2012). The article presented here focuses on how teachers can use this framework to think through the racisms and anti-racisms in their own teaching practices.

In the second article, Nichole E. Grant uses this framework to theorize how the methodology of the mobile digital device application can be used for antiracism education. As she shows, in the new world of Web 2.0 operations, there is indeed “an app for that.” Apps can mark racializations, highlight exclusions and mitigate consequences, while through social media and user-generated content they can create conditions for engaging with and understanding people’s experiences of racist exclusion. The resulting antiracist app can also be a vehicle for organizing against specific racisms in specific locations.

In the third article, Pamela Rogers shows how the long history of colonization and exclusion of indigenous peoples in Canada literally gets flagged in a specific classroom. Although at first glance she appears to analyze a personal confrontation with another teacher, in fact the relations of exclusion and marginalization enacted in her classroom both give voice to and articulate larger relations of colonialism through which the indigenous First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada continue to be marginalized. As she shows, the resulting racialized exclusions are central to the knowledge-making processes of contemporary government-controlled schooling, what gets valued and whose knowledge is excluded.

Racisms, however, also lead to resistance—sometimes unknowingly. In the fourth contribution, Doug Tateishi, now a senior official with the Ontario Ministry of Education, reflects on how he came to be a leading antiracist educator. As he suggests, growing up as a third-generation Japanese-Canadian in the Canadian Atlantic province of Nova Scotia, he was unaware of how the racist uprooting of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War shaped the silences of his childhood, his personal engagements, his understandings of racism and indeed the commitments that made him “the inevitable antiracist educator.” He shows that racist exclusions have intergenerational effects that continue long after formal redress has been achieved for those who directly experienced exclusion.

Finally, Bryan A. Smith explores a problem that all teachers face whether in public schools or in post-secondary education: how to bring antiracist commitments into effect while having to teach under the constraints of time, the many other things that need to be done and in the face of privileged students’ lack of preparation for antiracist engagement. His story of a “Social Studies Without Guarantees” shows that opening up even a tiny space to antiracism creates possibilities for future development, but as in all teaching, we can never be certain of what those possibilities are.
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References


