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Intellectualizing whiteness as a response to campus racism: some concerns

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ABSTRACT
This paper is rooted in the reactions of our university community to a racist poster that appeared on our campus. It presents a critique of tendencies to intellectualize whiteness in depoliticized forms as a response to acts of racism, tendencies that work to centre “good whiteness” in unconscious ways, obstructing opportunities for a more robust and determined politics of anti-racism. We structure the paper around three concerns: the first, a conceptual concern, contests the notion that an ethically admirable or desirable response to racism can ever be sought through an appeal to intellectualization aimed at passively healing the intellectualizer; the second, a speculative concern, considers how particular modes of intellectualizing whiteness can seduce people into thinking they have taken a stand against racism where no such stand exists; the third, a practical concern, considers what a more worthwhile response to acts of racism might entail given the criticisms we identify.

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What is needed now is resistance intolerant of self-exoneration, set against blinding itself to evil – even in the service of warring against other evils. One must be able to name the bad bargain that whiteness strikes with its disciples – and still be able to say that it is this bargain, not a mass hypnosis, that has held through boom and bust. (Coates 2017, 381)

A racist poster. It appears one Winter day on a university campus in a small Canadian city. Its message is violent, its claims outrageous: residential schools were a force for good; Canadians of European descent are victims of widespread slander in media and academia; a secret enemy, Jews, is orchestrating dissent that need not exist (McPhee 2018). A campus community reacts. Anger, hurt, and disbelief predominate. Concern spills over to discussion in classrooms, to social media, and to endless hallway chatter. Many of the university’s teachers organize responses. One of us, Casey, a Faculty of Education professor, leads her teacher-education students in
writing a letter to the campus newspaper. The letter rejects the claims of the poster, and points its readers to research and resources that debunk its assertions. The other, Roger, another Faculty of Education professor, plans a lesson for his students that aims to accomplish some of the same.

As the controversy dies down and the poster fades to memory, there is reason for pride. A university has successfully defended its values. Perhaps we feel the same, for a short time. But suspicion sets in. It intensifies not long afterward when a colleague – a white, female, professor – citing the posters within a larger context of inquiry on whiteness, gives a well-intentioned, well-informed, well-attended talk. She points toward some important questions already in circulation in analogous scholarship (Ahmed 2015; Sullivan 2014): What does it mean to feel satisfied in feeling angry about the public display of racially violent discourses? How does prideful resistance to these posters among whites do the delusory work of repositioning “good whiteness” at the centre of discourse? She urges her mostly white audience, on our mostly white campus, to question their need to feel good about themselves for resisting these posters. She urges them to question their complicity in perpetuating the systems, discourses, and practices that underlie the posters’ emergences, just as she questions her own. Her talk gestures toward the notion that an ethical vision lies in this incitement to self-interrogation and inquiry, by exemplifying a response to racism that puts this incitement at its centre.

It seems that many in the audience feel satisfied with this formulation. Still, a problem begins to emerge in our thinking. Is adopting such a position really an adequate way forward, let alone an ethical one? Wouldn’t someone who performed the abstraction in question – who came to recognize the problematic of feeling good about themselves for their opposition to racism, but then felt satisfied in doing so – re-inscribe the same positioning they were aiming to contest? Wouldn’t they also be doing the work of repositioning “good whiteness” at the centre of their deliberations, only doing it more subversively, through an extra layer of abstraction? And couldn’t we keep saying that as a methodological exercise carried out by white bodies, all attempts to intellectualize whiteness in response to acts of racism are really just repressed instances of searching for “good whiteness”? We position these abstractions as practices akin to Chinua Achebe’s (1977) long since made intervention about the “Eurocentric tendency to reduce Africans to ‘the role of props’ for the self-involved drama of the Western mind” (Deb 2018). We reason that maybe these questions about whiteness, as a response to racially violent discourses, are not particularly useful, and instead call to mind Robin DiAngelo’s notion of white fragility in view of “racial stress” – a series of defensive moves including “outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence and leaving the stress-inducing situation” (2011, 57).
In what follows, we – one of whom identifies as a white, Jewish male and father of a mixed-race son of African and European ancestry (Roger), the other as white, settler, cisgender, female (Casey) – present a critique of the intermittent tendency to intellectualize whiteness in depoliticized ways as a response to acts of racism. We believe this tendency is not exclusive to the circumstance at our own university, but applicable to a preponderance of public (Clark 2017), popular (Theriault 2018), and scholarly contexts (Lentin 2016). We contend that endemic to these responses is an interconnected set of misconceptions and practices that obscure the opportunity for a more robust and determined politics of anti-racism, a politics based on action through community partnerships, antiracist teaching practices, and forging spaces within university structures for those most affected by racism to take on agential roles within them should they choose to.

To note, our agitation is not concerned with the legitimacy of white scholars engaged in critical studies of whiteness, or with the ever-burgeoning momentum and movement of whiteness studies as offering a crucial set of conceptual tools for addressing race and racism, from which we consider ourselves to have benefitted. We also acknowledge that a robust exploration into whiteness necessarily recognizes the complexities of white supremacy negotiated at individual, familial, structural, and cultural levels (McManimon, Casey, and Berchini 2018). Scholars of Critical Whiteness Studies focus on the need to make visible the normality and hegemonic qualities of structures of whiteness where “whites deflect, ignore, or dismiss their role, racialization and privilege in race dynamics” (Matias et al. 2014, 291; see also Dumas and Ross 2016).

Our object of critique is a particular approach to thinking about whiteness that works to recenter “good whiteness” within discourses and practices of racism in increasingly sophisticated and unconscious ways. In other words, performances of “good whiteness” – including the ones we witnessed at the aforementioned talk in response to the circulation of racist posters – remain as dangerous as any other formulation of whiteness, and should not be positioned as benign, but rather seen as a rhetorical move that continues to uphold the interests of whiteness (DiAngelo 2011, 2018; Mills 2007).

We have structured what follows around three broad concerns. The first, a conceptual concern, contests the notion that an ethically admirable or desirable response to racism can ever be sought through an appeal to intellectualization aimed at passively healing the intellectualizer, particularly when this work centres white bodies intellectualizing about white violence in depoliticized ways (see Lensmire 2010). The second, a speculative concern, considers a consequence of this mode of intellectualizing, which we suggest gives rise to an impoverished politics of anti-racism – seducing people into thinking they have taken a stand against racism. The third, a practical concern, considers what a more worthwhile response to acts of racism might entail, and what a more worthwhile engagement with anti-racism on university
campuses and the communities in which they are located might look like, given the criticisms we have identified.

**Intellectualizing whiteness in Canada**

Before moving forward, we want to briefly situate our critique in relation to the particularities of the Canadian context from within which our university is located, as well as make clear what we mean by *intellectualizing* in this context since a specific iteration of its practice is an object of our critique throughout.

A confluence of intersecting discourses can be said to drive policy, practice, and perception regarding issues of race and racism in Canadian universities. We wish to identify four. The first concerns the persistence of many Canadians’ beliefs in their own exceptionalism as racially benevolent and welcoming to non-white others. Many Canadians, and by extension many Canadian institutions are vested in notions of Canadian tolerance and acceptance of racial diversity (Gulliver 2018). These notions appeal to positive constructions of Canada’s historical and contemporary distinctiveness vis-à-vis the United States, and to the predominance of popular cultural narratives about Canada’s global reputation for friendliness and righteousness (O’Neil 2015; Theriault 2018). In the view of many critical race theorists, such a stance domesticates the views of Canadians and ignores historical and contemporary realities, in which case racism is embedded in the country’s institutions and sociocultural fabric, including in its schools and universities, as seen through issues such as student completion and dropout rates, school funding and resource allocation, and university enrolment demographics (Henry et al. 2016). In these areas and otherwise, poor and racialized students – as well as racialized educators and instructors – struggle disproportionately. Canadian exceptionalism similarly ignores a well-documented historical legacy of discrimination, displacement, and violence against many of its subjects: its Indigenous populations (Vowel 2016), its populations of African ancestry (Maynard 2017), and its successive waves of newly arriving immigrant populations (Gulliver 2018), among others.

A second factor informing discourses of race and racism on Canadian campuses concerns its policy of official multiculturalism. Canada’s Multicultural Policy of 1971 and subsequent Multicultural Act of 1988 rendered it the first nation-state to enact a legislated attempt at officially validating cultural differences among its citizens (Tanovich 2008). The corresponding ethos has since been one of cultural pluralism, largely enacted through sociocultural and institutional commitments that variously aim to encourage Canadians – newcomer Canadians in particular – to adopt hyphenated Canadian identities (e.g. Korean-Canadian, Jamaican-Canadian). Although much celebrated as a validating force in the Canadian popular imaginary and in
educational contexts in particular, this policy has also been met with criticism: as a legislated policy and set of practices, many critical race scholars suggest that such a stance constructs all non-white Canadian bodies as being from an imagined elsewhere, marks all non-white Canadians as “visible” in comparison to whites who enjoy neutral or normalized status and can thus refer to themselves as simply “Canadian”, and encourages notions of difference to be encountered superficially and at the expense of confronting real forms of structural racism that go unmentioned within Canadian multiculturalism discourses (Maynard 2017; Tanovich 2008).

A third factor informing discourses of race and racism on Canadian campuses has to do with an attempted reckoning – occurring with increasing intensity over the past few years in institutions and universities across Canada, albeit unevenly – with Canada’s historical and continued legacy of racism and discrimination against Indigenous peoples who inhabit the land that white settler colonialists have for centuries illegally occupied and come to call Canada. A Truth and Reconciliation Commission met between 2008 and 2015 in order to document the history and legacy of the Indian Residential School System on Indigenous students and their communities (see endnote 1), and one of its culmings was the drafting of 94 Calls to Action to “advance the process of Canadian reconciliation” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015). Several of these Calls concern educational reform. As a result, many Canadian universities have launched policy initiatives to undertake the “decolonization” and/or “indigenization” (contested terms, both) of their campuses. The extent to which this is occurring successfully continues to be a source of debate on Canadian university campuses – attempts at new university programmes, policies, initiatives, and faculty hiring initiatives are arguably evident, but much evidence also points to the fact that settler colonial systems and logics remain entrenched (Vowel 2016).

A final factor informing discourses of race and racism on Canadian campuses has much in common with what is variously occurring on university campuses and in political geographies elsewhere around the globe: namely, a return of hostilities toward anti-racism and an attempted re-centering of the presumed supremacies of western knowledge in defiance of Indigenous and non-western perspectives (Vowel 2016). Although in Canada it can become increasingly fraught and uncomfortable to challenge systems and structures of power on issues of racial and social injustice, we know well that in many national and local contexts countless scholars cannot presume to do so without serious repercussions (Ahmed 2012).

Having briefly contextualized the scene in Canada, we wish to emphasize that some of the forms of “intellectualizing” we critique in what follows are not meant to encapsulate a critique of intellectual work on racism writ-large in Canada or elsewhere. More so, we wish to emphasize that our opposition
to intellectualization, as we will come to define it, is not to be taken as advocating for a turn toward anti-intellectualism, or as a turn to what Freire ([1970] 2018, 65) refers to as “mere activism” (i.e. activism without thought).

We define “intellectualizing” as comprising a deep, sustained, and considered inquiry into an area or object of interest, an inquiry whose mechanism for achievement occurs more resolutely within the realm of thought than action. Intellectualizing about race, and about whiteness, is in this sense worthwhile and important, particularly so as a practice carried out by white scholars negotiating their own implications in white supremacy (Lensmire et al. 2013). On the contrary, we view the saleability of our critique of “intellectualizing whiteness” as tied to the particular circumstance we bind it to: to the notion that when a racially violent action such as occurred on our campus is perpetrated, intellectualizing about whiteness – without action, without politicization, without social accountability, and without historicity – for reasons we will describe, is inadequate (Lensmire et al. 2013). And so it is to a critique of such practices of “intellectualization”, and to an inquiry of what an alternative to these practices might constitute, that we now turn.

Ethical delusions

It is worth reiterating how effortlessly good whiteness binds itself to negotiations of racism that value inward contemplation (Matias et al. 2014), particularly when carried out and shared by white bodies in search of ethical grounding (DiAngelo 2018). It is hard to imagine anything emerging from this kind of contemplation that does not involve some variant of a paradox in which the circumstance of racism becomes a staging ground for one’s own moral elevation (Guillem 2016; Lensmire et al. 2013).

In reactions to the display of racist posters on our campus, this attempt at elevation seemed to proceed in increasingly abstract forms. We came to call a first stage of abstraction feeling good about feeling bad – the pride many seemed to take in their anger toward the posters. We note the similarity between this abstraction and the “synodoche” for action described by Lensmire et al. (2013) in examining the uptake of white confessional-centred anti-racism in US-based teacher education programmes. Conscientious awareness of this pride often prompted a stage we now came to call feeling bad for having felt good about feeling bad. Once attained, however, this inevitably became a form of feeling satisfied all over again, a sort of feeling good, for having felt bad, about having felt good. And so on.

It became clear that the pursuit of a personal resolution toward acts of racism was the problem. It does not follow that rationalizing well about acts of racism shows the rationalizer to be ethical, particularly when no politics of anti-racist action is achieved in undertaking this exercise. The practice is ethically disingenuous – nothing outside of one’s own moral elevation
seems achievable here (see also Ahmed 2004; Teel 2014). This held true even for a strand of thinking we witnessed that positioned thinking subjects as finally self-aware about the entire exercise of intellectualizing in this way—something akin to holding up one’s hands and saying, “There is no resolution, but I acknowledge that I am unsatisfied, and I will continue to ask questions”. Even here there seemed an attempt at moral elevation, that of the benevolent questioner, unsatisfied in their pursuit of feeling good, who has gained mastery of the problem through the wisdom of acknowledging its intractability. All the way down, the exercise of intellectualizing racist acts for one’s own sanctification is rife with delusions.

A primary delusion seems rooted in a notion we have come to refer to as narrative purity, a stance inherent in attempts at self-inquiry made in relation to acts of racism. Such a stance inevitably positions a narrator’s own perceptions as central to any engagement with racism. This positioning is unavoidable, a dictum of narrative theory: a narrator can never escape the centrality of their location within the narrative they recount (Andrews, Squire, and Tamboukou 2013). An issue arises in relation to the act of narrating racism. For in doing so, racism is unavoidably rendered as an antagonist in relation to the interests of a protagonist human subject who seeks to narrate it. Racism becomes a set of circumstances mediated through one’s own experiences, a backdrop subservient to the work of a prior narrating subject—who can imagine an innocent self—distinct from its workings.

There is a lot to learn from experiences and negotiations of racism. Racism, a social construct, is of course always mediated through some variant of human experience. A more acute question that lingers for us concerns what it means for a white body who benefits from the structures of whiteness to conduct this narration, under the assumed auspice of ethical engagement. This is a common anti-racist practice on our campus and elsewhere (Smith et al. 2017). If anti-racist inquiry renders the story of racism as its narrator’s story, then it bears asking if publicly claiming anti-racism as one’s own story—even as a conscientious narrator of its perpetuation toward others—meets a public ethical stance toward racism, particularly in the context of who it is that often claims space to perform these stances. In our university, this remains a space predominately colonized by white bodies, a space therefore rife with all of the attendant complications of reflexive appeals to “good whiteness”.

Anti-racism’s narration problem does not end here. For there is also the lingering issue of what narratives ask of those centrally staged within their narration (Teel 2014). We refer here to the predominant narrative tendency to position first conflict and then resolution in the path of protagonists, and to what this portends when transposed to the narrative context of white bodies negotiating racism aimed at non-white bodies. The narrative tendency imbues onto peoples’ negotiations of anti-racism an individuated structure of
determination and resolution that much scholarship on anti-racist practice has by now categorized as superficial, this despite the fact that it remains a dominant discourse of anti-racism (Crenshaw 1989; Saul 2010). This structure most often finds form in imperatives among subjects to locate racism as a personal problem created and resolvable through an appeal to individual proclivities – a problem of ignorance, perception, education, or otherwise – and anti-racism as in-turn amenable to individualized initiatives of personal healing through pseudo-therapeutic discourses appealing to self-help and personal responsibility (Saul 2010).

The popular prevalence of this view reflects its seductiveness. The notion that anti-racism work can be addressed by submitting the self to a project of personal healing allows people to assume they have control over systems and structures that may seem too vast or complicated to address (Saul 2017). Pseudo-therapeutic discourses of anti-racism put into practice additional functions in occupying the public sphere: they lay claim to discursive spaces for speaking about racism that might be more informatively spoken about through other means and by other voices. At the same time, they obscure alternate forms of anti-racist mobilization in their presumption of enacting anti-racism, since they locate narrators at the centre of a personal story, and presume that anti-racism discourses need their edification.

What is missing in such a context is an enactment that engages anti-racism in relation to notions of the social, the structural, the systemic, the institutional, the historical, and the actionable. These engagements do not seem possible through intellectual moves that aim at reconciliation through the means of narration by white bodies, even when those narrations embed within them appeals to these very factors. An iteration of Coates’ earlier, epigraphic “bad bargain” here persists, that of a bad bargain struck by whiteness and in need of “resistance intolerant of self-exoneration” (366).

**False action**

If the practice of narrativizing racism in ways we have described represents a suspect ethical stance, it is also worth considering the ways in which it can function as an empty political stance (Ahmed 2004; Saul 2017). What political interests are served when predominately white university communities such as ours come together to take on anti-racism in ways that begin and end with imperatives to intellectualize? While critically progressive interests may be served and supported by the aims of such gatherings – learning, conversation, consciousness raising, and community making – an ancillary interest is also arguably served, that of preserving the political status quo. An issue here is that form and function do not equate. Irrespective of its intellectual content – which may well support the values of anti-racism – it seems to us that what can happen during such displays is a parallel cultivation of the
values of political disengagement. For all of their social, political, and commu-
nitariant benefits – from which many of those discoursing are far removed
from racism’s most pernicious impacts and consequences, yet assume
agency in speaking about these – such gatherings can also serve to legitimize
structural relations of racism already in existence.

This seems true even of those anti-racism discourses that come across as
thoughtful and structurally critical, whether of the university or of other insti-
tutions, which was the case in the talk we attended at our own university.
Even in these instances, the exercise of anti-racism is carried out within a
structure that serves to legitimate itself even as it portends to legitimate
anti-racist politics. This legitimation locates its own existence as a place
where racism can be seriously addressed without any action, or addressed
under the guise that its very address has constituted requisite action
(Ahmed 2004, 2015; Shih 2016; Sullivan 2014). This process – in which see-
mingly subversive discourses instead reproduce their objects of critique –
sees anti-racism discourse participants sharing anti-racist messages as an
ends and a means of mutual validation. Yet what political risks were taken?
How have the targets of racism been benefitted? How did the exercise
support a substantive politics of anti-racism?

One implication is that in those still relatively fleeting moments on univer-
sity campuses in which people’s attention turns en masse toward seeking to
engage in public anti-racist conversations, space that could have been used
differently, or by others, particularly non-white persons differently located
in relation to racism, is precluded. The preceding is not at all a call to set par-
ameters around talk of racism or to force the labour of anti-racism work in the
academy onto non-white bodies (Wagner 2005). It is rather a reminder to con-
sider how this work is done, a consideration from which we, white scholars
implicated in these same ethical and political processes of “good whiteness”
even as we commit to anti-racism, cannot exempt ourselves (again, on this
point we devote more deliberation in the following section).

That said, we have been apprehensive about how these considerations
have been taken up on our campus where, after the display of posters, we
observed an increased interest and focus on anti-racism, in ways that
seemed to reinforce the kinds oversights we have identified (Ahmed 2004).
Both physically and metaphorically, we have seen white persons on and
around our university community take up more anti-racist and anti-discrimi-
natory spaces than previously, although these at times feel like spaces
where not much, or at least not enough, seems at stake. Through the competi-
tive attention economy of Twitter, for example, we have witnessed the inten-
sification of presumed social media activism in support of anti-discrimination
from within our community, but we remain suspicious of practices where
white bodies lay claim to this space and centre themselves anew among
these discourses (Engles 2016). We have seen this too through new campus
nods, enthusiasms, and meetings in service of building better equity initiatives across the university, a worthy goal that would seem even worthier if those given real leadership responsibility in building these initiatives were the persons who had both the deepest experiential knowledge about them and the biggest stake in their success. We do not yet see enough evidence of this on our own campus or elsewhere (Cabrera, Franklin, and Watson 2016).

At issue here is that these ways of claiming space can feel incredibly safe and sanitized. For many in university communities – and here we consider white bodies in particular, our own included – these can become ways of conversing about racism without implicating oneself in the kinds of talk that can engage what is most uncomfortable about its workings. Talk, for example, about how from within said bodies we might perpetuate discrimination in spite of our best intentions, or be implicated in relationships, processes, and systems that see us benefit from its workings. It seems to us that these are issues best learned by ceding public space to those most impacted by racialization processes in circumstances where they wish to claim it, including those not necessarily associated with the university, but who assuredly have something to say on these matters. These kinds of inclusions might open perspectives on anti-racism that belie what is possible in gatherings that do not seek their input; they might force into discourse the notion that racism cannot best be confronted by neat narratives that presume to edify.

At times, universities do centre the work and expertise of people embedded in the life of their surrounding communities (for example, through public talks, seminars, performances, and ceremonies). The issue is more a question of degree, where in universities a whole structure of benefit and incentive is in place that is antithetical to encountering anti-racism in ways that background the will to assume leadership in engaging it. The university system – the very system from within which the professoriate might address anti-racism – incentivizes visible public engagement, the more visible the better, whether or not particular social issues are best benefitted by it. This perpetuates a self-referencing system that does not necessarily need to accomplish much outside of its boundaries for sustenance. The concern then becomes how well-equipped such a system is for addressing issues of critical social relevance like anti-racism, especially in ways that move beyond navel gazing and inaction.

There is of course much meaningful address of such issues on university campuses and in scholarship (Shih 2016). Yet it is not at all clear that these are benefitted by the structures and functions of university life even when successful. We are well aware that people’s commitments to anti-racism are not solely reliant on professional credit for pursuing them. Still it seems hard to argue against the notion that the structures and functions of universities necessarily locate anti-racism work according to systems of professional reward. This leaves open the larger and perhaps more pressing issue of how
scholarship and public conversations of the kinds we have critiqued – often by white bodies, for white bodies – benefit racially marginalized peoples to the degrees that these conversations presume (Ahmed 2015; Smith et al. 2017). There is a good case to make that an inclusive ethics and politics of anti-racism has to lie elsewhere, through action, an idea we now take on more resolutely.

Missed opportunities

What might a more worthwhile response to acts of racism, and engagement with anti-racism more broadly, look like given the criticisms we have identified? In this concluding section we wish to think forward with a series of responses, both partial (for we wish to avoid claiming expertise lest we re-inscribe the practices we critique), and necessarily aimed at ourselves as much as at the discourse practices we have called into question (for we understand ourselves to be implicated in these practices).

A first response has to do with attempting to locate a personal and professional stake in matters of anti-racism that carves out a somewhat different discursive space than we have inveighed against throughout. In this regard, readers may recognize an obvious irony – in suggesting a way forward, are we, two white scholars, not also positioning ourselves favourably in relation to “good whiteness”, part of an endless loop, in the ways we have critiqued?

We are. We see this admission as inextricably bound to the subject positions we occupy (McManimon, Casey, and Berchini 2018). Foundational to inhabiting the discursive space we aim to work toward is an understanding that there is no way out of attaching to uncomfortable desires for moral edification in our anti-racism commitments. Any such work must proceed with an admission of the uncertainty of its own motives. But here the operative question perhaps becomes: absent the compulsion to rescue ourselves from inhabiting this subject position, can we also accomplish something else in positioning ourselves as such? We believe it is this “something else” – a something else not concerned with using anti-racism as a foil for working out one’s own narrative determinations, not concerned with occupying public space toward performing the same, and not concerned with responses to racism that begin and end with imperatives to intellectualize absent of other measures – that can perhaps form the basis of a more worthwhile ethics and politics of anti-racism.

We see this “something else” as encompassing a move away from inactive intellectualization about anti-racism in service of sanctification toward intellectualization in service of action. Intellectualizing in service of action, where action itself becomes an object of anti-racist scholarship, and in which the full intellectual force of scholarly predilections for research, analysis,
theorizing, and conceptualizing is brought to bear on actionable approaches to anti-racism in universities, therefore forms the basis of a second response we wish to put forward.

Intellectualizing toward action surely exists at the level of institutional planning in universities (Pedersen, Walker, and Wise 2005), not to mention in institutional and public life outside of universities (Abramovitz and Blitz 2015; Crenshaw 1989). Likewise, it exists at the level of the work of countless individual scholars committed to anti-racism (see for example, Lensmire 2010; McIntosh 1988; Sullivan 2014; Tate and Bagguley 2017; Teel 2014; Wagner 2005). Yet it seems to us that a public, scholarly culture devoted to such planning in universities—a culture that takes planning toward action seriously as intellectual work worthy of exchange, theory building, and implementation—does not at all exist to the same extent as do university cultures that take up anti-racism according to predictable cycles of scholarly recognition. We believe that the work of the professoriate can be put to good use in making an important scholarly intervention along these parameters, and in ways that can extend beyond the bounds of self-referential intellectualizing.

It is worth defining and nuancing a conception of action in ways that might be relevant to university life, if only to render tangible the culture of intellectualizing toward action that we imagine. Action in service of anti-racism, and action in reaction to egregious acts of overt public racism such as occurred on our campus, can mean taking to the streets in protest, but it does not have to. We are well aware that people operate according to various levels of security and capacity when it comes to their dispositions toward taking on activist stances, just as we are aware that there are consequences to taking such action—unwanted exposure, vulnerability, sanction—that can re-inscribe individual and social conditions of privilege.

Apart from such stances, however, there remains much room for myriad alternative and impactful formulations of action. In our lives as professors, we seek to ask ourselves: Are we taking opportunities to include ourselves on programming committees in order to advocate for anti-racism and anti-discrimination in ways that might otherwise be absent on planning agendas? Are we taking initiatives to sit on hiring, admissions, and scholarship committees that support the nominations of candidates who will advance intersectional anti-racist teaching, learning, scholarship, and service? Are we applying administrative and collegial pressure toward anti-racism goals? Are we making attendant pedagogical and curricular decisions in the courses we teach, and supporting others in doing the same? Are we supporting and advocating for students in myriad, unglamorous ways once they are admitted to our university? Are we working with students and colleagues to engage in ethical, reciprocal, participatory research processes? In sum, in the accumulation of our decision making, are we taking the kinds of actions that will support the kinds of conditions that work to decentre whiteness in the academy?
We observe these commitments in many of our colleagues past and present, from whom we take our own cues in aspiring toward the same. Still, our earlier point of intervention remains: Where does an intellectual culture devoted to strategizing about these commitments inhabit the public intellectual sphere in universities? It seems to us that such commitments are often relegated to the discursive space of planning committees of the sort imagined as “university service” existing apart from serious intellectual work, and therefore afforded lesser professional status as a result. It is perhaps not surprising that these commitments are in-turn so much more easily envisaged as personal commitments taken-up by conscientious individual educators acting alone or in small groups, rather than understood as normative institutional commitments of the sort that would render anti-racist theory and practice most impactful.

This presages a final response that we imagine might represent a more worthwhile engagement with anti-racism than is currently the norm, this one centred on the institutional values and practices that customarily underlie the teaching mission of universities. Recalling our earlier discussion on the hindrance to anti-racist work of systemic proclivities for claiming and expressing “expertise” in universities, we believe a related critique can also be brought to bear on discussions of teaching – both in the micro context of classrooms, and in the macro context of what universities tend to see as their civic, social, and communitarian mission. A logical counterbalance to paradigms of teaching expertise would therefore embrace a more concerted learner disposition even in the act of positioning oneself as “teacher”.

A teaching vision that centred learning with and from others – whether in classrooms, or in how the university positions itself in forging civic and community-based agreements and partnerships – seems more often suggested than accomplished (Lensmire et al. 2013). From the macro perspective of universities looking outward, it would mean giving up something of value. It would mean moving away from dichotomous modes of positioning, endemic to service-learning and other prevalent models of university-community engagement, in which the university and those who represent it often understand themselves as knowledge experts within these partnerships. It would likewise mean moving toward a more resolute ethic of reciprocity in which the university casts itself in the position of learner. In transposing a learner disposition to anti-racism, it would mean elevating various forms of alternative expertise – land expertise, lived expertise, organizational expertise, experiential expertise, activist expertise – in having something to teach many in the university community. We have seen versions of these arrangements in our university contexts (see Saul and Nichols 2014). Yet to the extent that these evolve successfully, it seems no easy task for universities to let go of their deeply engrained orientations to expertise in prolonged and sustainable ways, even in spite of the social benefits of doing so (Henry et al. 2016).
By the same token, the possibilities and challenges of relinquishing over-determined orientations to expertise also extend to possibilities for anti-racism action through teaching and learning in university classrooms. About this issue, much has been written (see for example, Lensmire et al. 2013; Matias and Mackey 2016; McIntosh 1988). In our own experience, the issues and conflicts that arise in classrooms are instructive in making sense of the possibilities and challenges of undertaking anti-racist action at various institutional levels. For in classrooms, many educators know well that good practice involves not simply exercising over-determined and thoughtless control over curricula in agenda driven ways, even and especially under the presumed justification of presuming to do anti-racism work. For example, as Timothy Lensmire and his colleagues argue, engagement by white teacher candidates in Peggy McIntosh’s popular “Invisible Knapsack” activity works to re-centre white privilege, in that the ritual “teaches participants that the crucial action they need to take as white people is to confess their privilege rather than, for example, take antiracist action” (2013, 411). Antiracism work within teaching, to us, instead involves inviting and engaging the expertise of students where it exists on such matters, and having these encounters enter the collective curricular and pedagogical sphere. Even still, this practice often operates in tension with intensified attempts by universities to infuse into classroom life, from far above, anti-racist and anti-discriminatory initiatives and protocols (Smith et al. 2016; Vowel 2016). As many scholars suggest (see for example, Crenshaw 1989; Lensmire et al. 2013), these can be initiatives that show little commitment beyond abstract proclamations. Taking on such stances can therefore do more harm than good – they often re-inscribe the very same expert positioning, ever duplicitous, that forms the object of our critique throughout.

Yet, if it is the case that our positions imbue onto us notions of expertise, even when at times unearned, it seems that one way forward is to consider and continually reconsider how we are choosing to exercise the authority bestowed by this expertise. Here our influence toward action is considerable, particularly in faculties of education where our students, future teachers themselves, may pass along their experiences with us to countless others. In such contexts, students may particularly thrive if we do not simply elevate our own constructions and prior narrativizing about what anti-racist practice is and means, but make available spaces for them – especially those students variously marginalized by processes of racialization and the workings of racism – to inform this practice in substantive ways with their own thoughts, ideas, and perspectives. To the question of whether teaching in view of these kinds of learner orientations occurs with any broad consistency, university norms continue to point otherwise (Lensmire et al. 2013).

In thus extending this learner orientation inwardly to our judgements of our own practice and outwardly to the work of universities in all of its
guises – whether in teaching, research, committee planning, public outreach, civic engagement, community work, or otherwise – such a perspective thus prompts a concluding set of enquiries. These enquiries summarize the core of our critique on the types and tendencies of intellectualization about racism that too often find currency in universities, enquiries in relation to which we believe answers might best be cast under suspicion if ever conjured as individualized or definite instead of as contested, tenuous, and in continual need of negotiation: Are we making and supporting decisions in our professional practices that de-centre privilege by inviting perspectives and ceding public spaces to peoples, views, experiences, and actions that can best support an ethics and politics of anti-racism? Are we thinking about what it might mean to do this work in unceded and unsurrendered territories, on the stolen lands of Indigenous peoples? Are we creating solidarities with others in strategizing to do the same? Can our scholarship claim to accomplish much beyond elevating internal, self-involved dramas of anti-racism for our own edification? And, can we, finally, engage in anti-racist resistance intolerant of confession and self-exoneration?

Notes

1. For over a century, Indigenous children in Canada were taken from their homes by government agents and raised in over-crowded, underfunded, and often unhealthy residential schools across Canada. They were commonly denied the right to speak their language and told that their cultural beliefs were sinful. Some students did not see their parents for years ... others never made it back home ... to put it simply: the needs of tens of thousands of Aboriginal children were neglected routinely. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015, 1)

2. Endemic to this paper’s argument is that no white people – us included – stand outside of “systemic whiteness”, defined here as an interrelated structure of existence that enacts social, political, economic, and embodied privilege, dominance, and violence over non-white bodies (see Matías et al. 2014; Tanovich 2008). To the extent that white bodies in our Canadian university context and elsewhere benefit implicitly and explicitly from these systems and structures, the notion of an uncomplicated “good whiteness” is an impossibility.

3. In stating this, our purpose is not to disparage the contribution of our aforementioned colleague, whose input and activism we value, and who shares many of the same cautions we outline. Rather, we view her intervention as a necessary prompt in extending our thinking.

4. In identifying himself this way, the author wishes to highlight that his whiteness – rather than his relationship with those of African ancestry – is central to grappling with the issues raised in what follows. He likewise wishes to acknowledge that white people’s relationships with people of colour are sometimes used as an avoidance strategy for their own culpabilities in discriminatory, racializing processes. In acknowledging the preceding, the author nonetheless wishes to locate himself as a means for readers to understand his positionality.
5. Our university is situated on unceded and unsurrendered Wolastoqiyik territory.
6. Just as is the case in universities outside of Canada, the presumed supremacy of western knowledge is often coded in the form of debates about free speech and academic freedom, otherwise important issues that frequently get rendered as caricatured assaults on “western values” within such debates.
7. We recognize that similar claim can be made about the writing of an academic paper for academic audiences. We delve more deeply into our own implication in this issue in our concluding section.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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