Why is My Curriculum White?

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EDITORIAL

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> You have to be careful, very careful, introducing the truth to the Black man who has never previously heard the truth about himself, his own kind, and the white man … The Black brother is so brainwashed that he may even be repelled when he first hears the truth.
> –Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 1965

In a recent story by Minna Salami in *The Guardian* entitled 'Philosophy has to be about more than white men', the following claim is made 'The campaign to counter the narrow-mindedness of university courses is gathering pace because philosophy should investigate all human existence.'[1]

Salami makes reference to a 20-minute video with the title *Why is My Curriculum White?* made by UCL (University College London) students who propose responses to this question pointing out the lack of awareness that the curriculum is white comprised of 'white ideas' by 'white authors' and is a result of colonialism that has normalized whiteness and made blackness invisible. This is a fundamental educational challenge that has not been addressed by the educational establishment, nor by the majority of philosophers including philosophers of education. Racism rarely figures on philosophy of education conference agendas and papers discussing the ethics of education that tend to talk in general and abstract terms neglecting issues of race or gender.

Salami is writing a blog rather than a philosophy paper yet she makes the argument that 'we should not dismiss white, western, or male thinking simply on the premises that it is white, western, or male' while at the same time acknowledging, by reference to Michael McEachrane's statement, 'Modern philosophical concepts of personhood, human rights, justice and modernity are deeply shaped by race.'[2]

My purpose was not to take issue with Salami but to take seriously the issues that she and UCL students are making. In view of the events in Ferguson, USA, where social unrest and a series on ongoing protests began the day after the shooting of Michael Brown (9, August 2014), it is necessary to raise the question again of the roots of US racism and racism in general. This is exactly the topic of *The Stone* interviews conducted by George Yancy of prominent American philosophers.[3] Yancy's latest interview features 'Noam Chomsky on the Roots of American Racism.'[4]

Chomsky provides a brief history in terms of slave labor camps, a major factor in American's success and current wealth, the harsh criminalization that followed after

the end of slavery and the new Jim Crow that neoliberalism under Reagan initiated in the 1970s as part of the 'drug war.' Chomsky says:

> The national poet, Walt Whitman, captured the general understanding when he wrote that "The nigger, like the Injun, will be eliminated; it is the law of the races, history … A superior grade of rats come and then all the minor rats are cleared out." It wasn't until the 1960s that the scale of the atrocities and their character began to enter even scholarship, and to some extent popular consciousness, though there is a long way to go.

Yet Ferguson demonstrates that Obama's 'post-racial America' is a kind of mythology despite the critical scholarship of Yancy and Chomsky and others.[5] Part of the problem is what scholars call internal colonization that Cesaire, Fanon, and Malcolm X knew too well mean that the dominant ideology had become internalized and thus part of the psychological make-up of the oppressed.

Afro-American studies departments emerged in the 1960s after student activism although the reconstruction of African-American history began much earlier with W.E.B. Du Bois in the late nineteenth century. The origins cannot be separated from the Civil Rights context. Students for a Democratic Society at Berkeley held a conference called 'Black Power and its Challenges' inviting Black civil rights leaders. Then came the demand for Black Studies:

> The black freedom movement, in both the civil rights phase (1955–1965) and Black Power component (1966–1975), fostered the racial desegregation and the empowerment of black people within previously all-white institutions. The racial composition of U.S. colleges changed dramatically. In 1950 approximately 75,000 blacks were enrolled in colleges and universities. In the 1960s three quarters of all black students attended HBCUs. By 1970, approximately 700,000 blacks were enrolled in college, three quarters of whom were in predominantly white institutions.[6]

Black Studies was also strengthened through the growth of Black Legal Studies and Critical Legal Studies in the 1970s that drew heavily of changes to the political culture occurring during the counter culture of the 1960s. Critical Legal Studies explored how the practices of legal institutions, legal doctrine, and legal education worked to buttress dominant white culture and rule of law devoid of hidden class and race interests. Critical race studies applied critical theory to the intersections of race, law, and power providing a critique of liberalism and revisionist accounts of American civil rights law. Critical race theory and critical pedagogy also pursued these issues theorizing the notion of whiteness as property. As Delgado and Stefancic (2006) comment:

> Although CRT began as a movement in the law, it has rapidly spread beyond that discipline. Today, many in the field of education consider themselves critical race theorists who use CRT's ideas to understand issues of school discipline and hierarchy, tracking, controversies over curriculum and history, and IQ and achievement testing.[7]

Even with these movements for justice and social change, recent surveys would suggest that little progress has been made in eliminating systematic or institutional racism in the US.[8]

Anti-racist education differed strongly from multicultural education, designed to eliminate the practice of classifying people according to their skin color or racial identity. Anti-racist education in Britain and the US criticized the liberal assumptions of multiculturalism by uncovering and dismantling the hidden power structures that were responsible for inequality and racism in institutions. Educational institutions, in particular, it is claimed play a fundamental role in reproducing white privilege and schools are seen as places where racism and stereotypes against ethnic and minority groups take place through a variety of means. The curriculum and pedagogy have been analyzed as sites for this kind of reproduction that takes place through misinterpretations of history and the 'othering' of minorities, shaping both white and non-white subjectivities and identities.

Gillborn (2006) focusing on the UK argues 'conventional forms of anti-racism have proven unable to keep pace with the development of increasingly racist and exclusionary education policies that operate beneath a veneer of professed tolerance and diversity', especially in the context of 'conservative modernization' and the resurgence of racist nationalism which if anything has increased under austerity programs since Gillborn wrote his essay. He concludes by suggesting 'Racism is complex, contradictory, and fast-changing: it follows that anti-racism must be equally dynamic' (p. 26).

Gillborn's analysis is entirely salutary. After 50 years of struggle in the form of multiple movements, it is heartbreaking and extremely frustrating for Blacks, for indigenous peoples, for minority groups and for society as a whole that there has been so little progress or that social change has been resisted, destabilized, and undermined. At the same time, it is encouraging that a new generation of students and scholars is actively pursuing 'whiteness as ideology'. The UCL collective remarks:

> Although often treated as something biological, fixed or even benevolent, 'race' is an ideologically constructed social phenomenon. Therefore, when we talk about whiteness, we are not talking about white people, but about an ideology that empowers people racialised as white.

To the question 'why is the curriculum white?' they provide eight answers (summarized here):

1. To many, whiteness is invisible.
2. A curriculum racialised as white was fundamental to the development of capitalism.
3. Because its power is intersectional.
4. The white curriculum thinks for us; so we don't have to.
5. The physical environment of the academy is built on white domination.
6. The white curriculum need not only include white people.
7. The white curriculum is based on a (very) popular myth.
8. Because if it isn't white, it isn't right (apparently).[9]

Even if one disagrees with the statement of these reasons it is clear that there is a general philosophical problem concerning the curriculum and that efforts to resolve it so far have been only partially effective.

One of the difficulties has been that western philosophy itself has been part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Of all disciplines, it has seemed most resistant to taking race seriously and only recently have Black philosophers begun to deconstruct and dismantle the ideology of 'whiteness' as it affects our institutions in education, in government, and in the law.

I have used the term 'white philosophy' to designate the notion of color-blind philosophy which it my view

> has special application to American philosophy for its extraordinary capacity to ignore questions of race and for its incapacity to recognize the centrality of the empirical fact of blackness and whiteness in American society and as part of the American deep unconscious structuring politics, economics and education.[10]

I traced the development of American pragmatism especially in the work of Cavell and Rorty (and also Dewey) to show how race is all but peripheral and charted the beginning of Cornel West's challenge to white philosophy crystallizing in the late 1980s beginning with his book *The Evasion of American Philosophy* (West, 1989). Interestingly, as I remark in the paper, 'West himself names Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Dewey as those philosophers who set us free from the confines of a spurious universalism based on a European projection of its own self-image'.

The recognition of the whiteness of philosophy and its effects is a complex matter. In education, it is important to recognize with critical scholars like Michael Apple, Henry Giroux, and Peter McLaren, and sociologists like Gillborn, Barry Troyna, and Fazal Rizvi, to name only a few, that curriculum is an official selection that structures knowledge in ways that privilege a particular construction of knowledge and the history of knowledge. It is no longer surprising that some of the most eminent philosophers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—Nietzsche, Heidegger, Wittgenstein—were strongly racist, at least at some points of their lives.

The lack of recognition of cultural context, of contexualism in general, in curriculum theory was perpetrated in philosophy of education by the Hirst and Peters forms of knowledge thesis that focused on propositional knowledge and admitted no historical understanding of evolving forms of knowledge let alone their cultural variation (White, 2005).

Park (2014) gives an account of the development of philosophy as an academic discipline in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. During this period, European philosophy influenced by Kant formulated the history of philosophy as a March of progress from the Greeks to Kant. It was an account that demolished existing accounts beginning in Egypt or Western Asia thus establishing an exclusionary canon of philosophy. Hegel's account of world history was strongly racist and imbued European philosophy with a prejudicial history we are still trying to escape from. These two philosophers contributed so much to a contemporary understanding of modernity as fundamentally Western (Peters, 2014).

A critical question for me is whether the Western tradition has the intellectual resources within to transform itself and come to terms with the historical effects and

traces of racism that are invested in our institutions and in our knowledge traditions. I think it has—as a teacher I have to believe this—but we are only at the very beginning of this process of transformation and the UCL collective has initiated a student-led movement that has the potential to provoke and demand curriculum change.

Notes

1. See http://www.theguardian.com/education/commentisfree/2015/mar/23/philosophy-white-men-university-courses. Minna Salami is the founder of the MsAfropolitan blog, which covers Africa and the diaspora from a feminist perspective. I would like to thank Tina besley from drawing my attention to this story and for discussing the underlying issues.
2. See McEachrane's (2014) *Afro-Nordic Landscapes: Equality and Race in Northern Europe*. Salami also makes reference to Dirk J. Louw's 'Ubuntu: An African Assessment of the Religious Other' at http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Afri/AfriLouw.htm.
3. The Stone features the writing of contemporary philosophers for the New York Times moderated by Simon Critchley.
4. See http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/03/18/noam-chomsky-on-the-roots-of-american-racism/?_r=1. George Yancy is himself a philosopher who works on 'critical philosophy of race, critical whiteness studies, and philosophy of the Black experience' as he say on his university webpage (http://www.duq.edu/academics/faculty/george-yancy). His latest edited collection is *White Self-Criticality beyond Anti-Racism: How Does It Feel to Be a White Problem?* (2014).
5. In this regard see James Anderson's AERA lecture, 'A Long Shadow: The American Pursuit of Political Justice and Education Equality', that explores the historic and inseparable relationship between the right and freedom to vote and the pursuit of education equality. Video, transcript, and slides at http://www.aera.net/Newsroom/AERAHighlightsE-newsletter/AERAHighlightsOctober2014/JamesDAndersonDeliversEleventhAnnualAERABrownLecturetoRecordAudience/tabid/15698/Default.aspx.
6. http://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/1742/African-American-Studies.html.
7. See http://www.odec.umd.edu/CD/RACE/CRT.PDF. See also Leonardo (2009) *Critical Theory and Race*, *Educational Philosophy & Theory* monograph series.
8. See http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/07/college-student-survey-race_n_6632854.html.
9. See http://wire.novaramedia.com/2015/03/8-reasons-the-curriculum-is-white/.
10. See 'White philosophy in/of America' (Peters, 2011).

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