

Education for Whom?: Exploring Systems of Oppression and Domination

Janelle Brady, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada

Abstract: This research paper explores a plethora of issues in education by linking systemic forms of oppression and domination to historical and contemporary contexts. The main argument is an identification and articulation of the importance of historical localities in the perpetuation of people's oppression and marginalization and the pedagogical implications of systems of oppression and domination within and beyond Canadian contexts. I move beyond highlighting deep-rooted systemic injustices by outlining the significance of deconstructing ideas of difference as a deficit by presenting many decolonial actions that are currently taking place in the Canadian K-12 educational context. Finally, I re/introduce an opportunity for further action grounded in new imaginaries and futurities.

Keywords: Education, Race, Racism, Difference, Oppression

Introduction and Roadmap

Through an exploration of historical and contemporary examples, this research paper exposes elements of systemic oppression in the Canadian education system (Giroux, 2003; Wotherspoon, 2004). I discuss the significance of history and situatedness in structures and systems which exist today that continue to perpetuate the oppression of marginalized groups. This current work is necessary because it highlights historical injustices and the ways they are linked to current phenomena of subjugation of Othered bodies and peoples. It also identifies the transcendence of these issues, their historical underpinnings, and related implications for education. The first section of this paper draws on Alcoff (2007) to disrupt the epistemological ignorance of a colour-blind education system and illuminates the messiness of the trope of objectivity. The second section grounds the first section in its historical foundations in an exploration of the systems of oppression and the implications on education. The third section makes a case for the concept of difference, which calls into question Othering and divide-and-conquer politics, ending with a discussion on difference as an asset in educational contexts. My intention here is to carve out a space linking theory to practice by understanding educational issues in relation to the construction of oppressive systems. In generating discussion, stakeholders in education can develop further understanding into the history of oppressive practices and how they relate to educational injustices apparent today. Creating a space which links theory to practice can help practitioners move away from fragmented, ahistorical conversations, to ones which are rooted in a historical context and focused on meaningful action to keep history from repeating itself.

Ignorance, Objectivity, and the Implications for Education

In the Ontario context, while the education system is fraught with the mantra of “colour-blindness” (James, 2011), at the foundation of a neo-liberal education is anti-Blackness (Giroux, 2003); this constantly reproduces the Other while normalizing whiteness.¹ “Colour-blindness” or “colour-blind” attitudes assume that race is nonexistent, and in the process, creates neutral constructs of sameness negating people’s experiences of race and racism. The idea of racelessness and colour-blindness omits the lived realities Indigenous peoples and people of colour, and presents a false social reality whereby whiteness loses its proximity with race. What does this mean in education? Liberal multicultural education in Ontario recognizes “culture” in very surface-level ways that reproduce Eurocentric norms, while silencing and erasing non-European and Indigenous perspectives (Abawi & Brady, 2017). This reality, which pushes out Black, Brown, and Indigenous students, is built upon long established systems of racism and injustice. For example, Mills (2007a) has us re-imagine the concepts of *contracts* and domination vis-à-vis various contractual types, both *ideal* and *non-ideal*. The traditional Eurocentric philosophical idea of contracts is troubled by the work of scholars such as Mills (2007a) who pointed out that the ideal, masked under the guise of universality, is only

¹ To debunk systems of oppression and white supremacy, in this paper, the first letter in the words Indigenous and Black are capitalized, while the first letter in white is not. By doing so, I hope to prioritize and intentionally create space for oppressed groups, while deconstructing the guise of equality by applying the same style for all names.

applied to white able-bodied, straight Western-European men during the Enlightenment period. I use Mills' analytical framework of contract as he applies it in a subversive means by drawing on a non-ideal while dismantling the idea of an ideal. In its application to education, the non-ideal use of the contract disrupts ideas of universality and meritocracy. Though the education system is said to benefit all students, it marginalizes those who are Othered while supporting the dominant group (Dei, 2015; Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Zine, , 1997; James 2011, 2012). Mills (2007b) outlined what he referred to as mainstream and domination contracts, and posited that "the relation between equality as a value and the contract also needs to be rethought" (p. 97). Equality needs to be reassessed because it erases instances of injustice by assuming everyone will do well given equal opportunity, without taking into consideration varying starting points, histories, and conditions. Mills goes on to state "as attractive [equality] may be as an ideal, it obviously bears no correspondence with real life for the majority" (Mills, 2007b, p. 97).

As it relates to education, the system only provides equality for some through the domination of many. Students of colour are pushed out of the education system to a higher degree, and this has to do with the mainstream contract, which does not "deal" with difference well. Some of the ways in which students of colour are pushed out by the mainstream contract include streaming students into specific learning groups (Sleeter, 1986), the dedication to an "official" knowledge designating what is legitimate or what one ought to know in schooling, and silencing devalued voices through the selection of books and curriculum topics (Wotherspoon, 2004). The pushing out of Black and Indigenous bodies from the education system is an all-familiar conversation (see Dei et al., 1997), and recently school boards have tried to locate ways of addressing such systemic barriers to education. For example, the Peel District School Board (PDSB) initiated *We Rise Together: The Peel District School Board Action Plan to Support Black Male Students* (PDSB, 2016), a report that addressed anti-Black racism and systemic injustices faced by Black students. The report led to the development of curriculum about Black Canadians, the delivery of anti-racism training for educators, engagement with the Black community, and fostering Black student leadership and engagement (Research and Accountability Office, 2016). The critical and impactful work of the PDSB demonstrates an effort to move away from upholding a system that continuously pushes out people of colour. The idea of colour-blindness comes under the guise of equality and universality but works to uphold the current systems of white supremacy, while subjugating Black, Brown, and Indigenous experiences in schooling and education. A continuity of Enlightenment thinkers suggests that the mainstream contract has, and continues to, serve a select few on the backs of many.

Building on understandings of colour-blindness, I highlight the work of Alcoff (2007) who discussed the *epistemologies of ignorance*, and I relate these to implications for education. Alcoff (2007) addressed three types of epistemologies of ignorance in relation to contemporary and historical examples: the epistemology of willful ignorance, the epistemology of ignorance of objectivity, and epistemic advantages and disadvantages to ways of knowing. First, Alcoff (2007) described the "alarming ignorance about world geography and history as well as current events" among dominant groups in the United States (p. 39). She noted that this ignorance does not have to do with a lack of access to resources or information, but "appears to be, a willful ignorance" (p. 39). The concept of ignorance and Mills' (2007b) account of the mainstream contract go hand in hand, because through a mainstream contract, which supports the ideal, willful ignorance is produced and reproduced. For example, Mills (2007c) accounted for intersecting contracts that addressed the fluidity and intersectionality (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991) of raced and gendered experiences of women of colour. Mills (2007c) stated that a "mainstream social contract mystifies these realities by presenting a white male fairyland, a Walt Disneyfied picture...complete with magic rides and...wands" (p. 199). Mills also centered the voices of women's work on intersectionality and ignorance. First Mills highlighted Gloria Anzaldúa's idea that "ignorance is not a passive state," and that it "create[s] the conditions which ensure its continuance" (p. 199). Second, Mills created space for Toni Morrison's questions: "What are the strategies of escape from knowledge? Or willful oblivion?" (as cited in Alcoff, 2007, p. 199). Such ignorance plays into the educational context and has a significant role in perpetuating the normalization of whiteness and the compartmentalization of Othered cultures. This terrain of ignorance is not so innocent, as it has built systems of patriarchy and white supremacy.

On the matter of objectivity, Code (as cited in Alcoff, 2007) stated, "objectivity requires taking subjectivity into account" (p. 41), and within a guise of objectivity, ignorance prevails and is produced and reproduced. An implication of objectivity within education is that it is presented as the ideal-truth and

something one ought to strive for, thus subjectively located realities are assumed to be weak in nature and not scientific in assumptions and arguments. For example, the reproduction of objectivity is presented in educational curricula as students strive to follow a scientific model in order to seek a supposed truth, but this misses the significant situatedness of knowers, group identities, and an analysis of systemic foundations of oppression (Alcoff, 2007, p. 40). As such, students who are the knowers of their own realities become silenced and disenfranchised from the dominant perspectives presented in Canadian curricula. Students' experiences and knowledge should be centered in the classroom to create *multicentric* ways of knowing (Dei, 1996), which involves multiple epistemologies and debunks universality, as opposed to unicentric ways of knowing.

The epistemological ignorance of objectivity is rarely raised in education, thus reproducing systems of oppression which become ontological reality. Dei (2016) posited that “objectivity is the dominant’s subjectivity” (G. J. S. Dei, personal communication). Without this epistemological bias being called into question, objectivity is presented as the ultimate truth. King (2015) highlighted the need for liberation from “ideological myths, masquerading as objective scientific or academic knowledge, that rationalize and obscure dominating power relations” (p. 180). In Kindergarten to grade 12, students are rarely encouraged to question the philosophical canons and all-knowing mathematicians and scientists (Abawi, 2016-2017)—the keepers of knowledge—who are white men. Thus, non-white students are unlikely to find people who represent their lived experiences or look like them as part of their normal encounters with subject material (Smith, 2010). Furthermore, according to Smith, educators have a difficult time in providing multiple sites of teaching and learning within the classroom, because identities, which do not fall under a white, patriarchal supremacist ordering, are deemed as Others and are only provided in juxtaposition to or as additives on the normative base. In an effort to achieve objectivity in education, the focus on essentializing difference through liberal democratic discursive practices of tolerance, respect, and fairness depicts racialized minorities and Indigenous peoples through a deficit perspective (Abawi & Brady, 2017; Dei, 1996). Therefore, Alcoff’s (2007) epistemology of ignorance of objectivity demonstrated how the subjugated are questioned: their values, experiences, and lived realities are labelled as subjective and henceforth weak, non-encompassing ways of knowing. This leads to Alcoff’s discussion of the third epistemology of ignorance, which highlights the epistemic advantages and disadvantages to knowledge and ways of knowing.

Knowledge systems and ways of knowing are rooted in people’s social locatedness and help them to understand certain phenomena. Alcoff (2007), again drawing on Code’s work, asserted that there are epistemic advantages and disadvantages to ways of knowing and knowledge systems. In relation to the epistemology of ignorance of objectivity, those whose knowledges are validated and legitimized are part of the dominant group, whereas those whose knowledges are disenfranchised are part of the oppressed group. According to Dei (2014), knowledge is based on its historical, as well as ancestral and spiritual underpinnings, and cannot be pinpointed to one contextual moment. Epistemological advantages or disadvantages may play out in education when educators or students become ascribed knowers in particular contexts. One might be the “South Asian Food expert” or the “Indigenous history expert,” and they may experience some level of epistemological advantage in knowing; however, their knowledge is still Othered and compartmentalized into particular moments in time and removed from history. In an educational context, Othering people’s knowledges, histories, and identities to become stagnant points in history or single stories takes the onus away from school administrators and curriculum developers whose responsibility is to delve into South Asian history beyond samosas and Indigenous history beyond Pow wows. This is because the epistemologically advantaged become responsible for sharing their knowledge in educational contexts. However, their knowledge is not solely contextualized to that particular moment in time, but deeply entrenched in history and implicated by the history of others. Questions in the educational context can be asked about why South Asians were denied entry into Canada through racist immigration policies (Ralston, 1999; Thobani, 2007) or why and how Indigenous residential schooling, forced assimilation, the building of pipelines and the like continue to affect Indigenous communities to this very day (Coulthard, 2014). The contextual experts carry the burden for the ignorant who dominate, thus reinforcing the idea of “sharing their subjective experiences.” As Lorde (1984) stated,

People [of colour] are expected to educate white people as to our humanity. Women are expected to educate men. Lesbians and gay men are expected to educate the heterosexual world. The oppressors maintain their position and evade responsibility for their own actions. (p. 115)

Thus, it becomes the work of the oppressed to become educators to share their stories and their subjective histories and realities for the dominant group, when the dominant group deems it appropriate to do so. The oppressed become the bearers of the oppressor's ignorance while also living through their own oppression. It is important to be critical of such dynamics so that people of colour do not bear all of the responsibility for the privileged to learn and unlearn about their privilege.

The idea of knowing and the relentless pursuit of knowledge is another issue that comes into play when addressing the ignorance of objective epistemologies and ontologies. Objectivity, falling under a modern-colonial logic, is presented as all-knowing and truth-seeking. However, this is counter to Indigenous knowledges—which anticolonial scholars (e.g., Dei, 2008; Simpson, 2004) believe should be centered in curricula—with one of the major tenets of Indigenous knowledges being the *humility of knowing* (Shields, 2005). The humility of knowing—where the learner does not seek mastery of knowledge, but instead knowledge is gained through sharing, learning, and unlearning—is in contrast to what becomes sought after in colonial education, which is rooted in individualism and the ultimate quest for knowledge, meritocracy, and excellence. Students who are from non-dominant groups are forced to attempt scholarly excellence in institutions based on individualism while their very ancestral, family, and community settings are contradictorily based in holistic and community-based ways of knowing and organizing. Therefore, the consumption of knowledge does not become a sharing process, but a process based on individual ownership of knowledge, and those with access to such value systems succeed while those who come with humility are pushed out of schools (Dei et al., 1997).

This focus on individualism is further exacerbated through neo-liberalist education. In this context, while education promotes group work, academic success advantages individuals (Giroux, 2003). The danger here is that students begin to believe their academic success is based on their own merit rather than the systems which afford them privilege. This results in mantras of equality falling under the veil of liberalism, sameness, and meritocracy. This individualism also creates chants like “All lives matter,” which is critical of the Black Lives Matter movement and supports the belief, built on an epistemology of ignorance, that all lives are subjected to the same trials. This perpetuates ignorance and objective knowledge systems, while negating and furthering the expendable nature of Blackness, Indigenousness, and Black and Brown bodies. Hence, scholars have explored the dangerous nature of claiming that “All lives matter” (Adjei, 2016; Carney, 2016; Orbe, 2015; Yancy & Butler, 2015), believing it upholds white supremacy and denies the police brutality of Black people, the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, and Islamophobic attacks. Such a claim to innocence becomes key to upholding systems of oppression, which are often silenced and denied by the dominant group. Therefore, educators, students, community members, and parents/families need to trouble the ideal of equality and claims to fairness for all in reimagining new possibilities for hope and change.

Systems of Oppression: Historical Foundations

Capitalism

The previous section discussed colour-blindness and objectivity and the epistemology of ignorance, but to fully engage with this concept it is important to also examine its historical foundations. Willful ignorance is not ahistorical, but is deeply entrenched into larger global systems. Mills (1997, 2007b) affirmed that “European expansionism takes place in the modern period [accounting for] how global white supremacy was established” (2007b, p. 96). Such global systems effect everyday institutions, namely the education system, and reinforce the centrality of dominant history and its implications for students and the broader society. The normalization of whiteness, as indicated in the previous section, is not a phenomenon of its own, but is part of global white supremacy, which came with colonialism and continues with neocolonialism.

From a historical materialist perspective capitalism, as a global system, continues to be central to oppression. Mills (2007b) highlighted the classic claim by Karl Marx in which society is seen as a system of group domination, rather than collective individuals. A Marxist analysis of capitalism presents itself as

essential to understanding the racial, patriarchal, and global ordering of people to the benefit of group domination. The typified universal person is a capitalist or a beneficiary of capitalism, one who is competitive and operates under universal liberal ideologies of individualism and rights, and one who is able to gain access to resources and privileges based on exploitation, alienation, and oppression (Bakan, 2014). The capitalist man's antithesis though is the Indigene, seeking self-determination, who constitutes

'the heart and soul of [I]ndigenous nations: a set of values that challenge the homogenizing force of Western liberalism and free-market capitalism; that honour the autonomy of individual conscience, non-coercive authority, and the deep interconnection between human beings and other elements of creation.' (Taiaiake Alfred, 1999, p. 60 as cited in Coulthard, 2014, p. 35)

Thus, this relationship between the coercive nature of the competitive spirit placed in context with that of non-coercive authority and interconnection leads to the reproduction of exploitation. These systems certainly clash and have done so for centuries, creating the colonial and neocolonial systems which continue today. Such capitalist systems and global white supremacist systems are significant in understanding the oppressive nature of our education system today and the foundations upon which it was built.

The interplay between racism and capitalism cannot go unnoticed. Bakan (2014) asserted that the universalism of whiteness in juxtaposition to Blackness is interlinked with the idea of bodies as property and was essential to Euro-expansionism as seen in the transatlantic slave trade (p. 107). This becomes integral in an understanding of the connectedness between capitalism and racism, and raises two important questions: a) Whose bodies were deemed sub or non-human and commodified for capitalist exploitation and Euro-expansion? and b) how did epistemologies of ignorance play into such ideas and result in the dehumanization of Black bodies? Pateman (2007) noted that Africa was "at the heart of the construction of the modern concept of race" (p. 156) through the slave trade, thus the linkages between capitalism and racism are made very clear. This is also true in the North American colonialist systemic removal of Indigenous peoples from their land.

Fanon's (1963) work also drew linkages between colonialism and capitalism. Fanon presented the idea of colonial-capitalist exploitation and highlighted that it was rooted in the misrecognition of the colonized by the colonizer and that alienation was a pillar of colonial injustice. Fanon's understanding of misrecognition demonstrated the ways in which Blackness was linked to colonial and capital expansions. Systems of colonial and capital expansion still continue today as we see in the on-going murder and incarceration of Black people (Black Lives Matter, 2017). The education system also reproduces these norms through the school-to-prison pipeline (African Canadian Legal Clinic, 2012).

Racialization

Mills' (2007a) critique of a raceless universal ideal and contract as posited by the philosophical canon (such as Hobbes, Locke, Rawls, and Kant, among others) helps in providing a historical account for systems of race. The artificiality of race has been proven, but the material conditions based on this social construct still persist today (Frankenberg, 1993). Mills (2007a) elucidated that racelessness is part of a universality, which centers whiteness as normative. He argued that we must move towards a racial contract, that acknowledges the shakiness of equality for all. The concept of equality for all was established to benefit—and continues to benefit—only a minority. Early Enlightenment philosophers advocated for polity around an ideal contract—society should be ideally organized politically, morally, and socially. However, Pateman and Mills (2007) succinctly demonstrated how this contract is only for a select few deemed to be full persons, and it is essential in the creation of global white supremacy and patriarchy, which is unnoticed and unquestioned as presented above. Importantly, such an ideal contract provided the foundation of racist Othering as we know it.

Processes of racialization were necessary for Euro-expansionism, and people of colour were not considered human enough to partake in the Enlightened-ideal polity (Pateman & Mills, 2007). Thus, under this system, people of colour's bodies were justifiably subjugated in processes of racism, colonial expansion, and early capitalism. Masked by egalitarianism, the subordination of raced and gendered bodies was part of the domination contract, which subsumed under the guise of equality (Mills, 2007a). This was justified by

Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant who assumed that only the white man could fully grasp universal principles essential to civil society and could, therefore, be the only ones to govern others (Pateman, 2007): Such justifications became and remain essential to the racialization and othering of people of colour and Indigenous peoples (Pateman, 2007).

Mills (1997) pointed out that the ideals and justifications behind considering people to be savages and barbarians, led to the expropriation and genocide of Native Americans, the enslavement of Africans, and later the creation of the Jim-Crow laws against Blacks in the United States. In Canada, residential schooling was in place to “remove the Indian” from Native Canadians, but the reality exposed was one of “killing Indians, not cultures” (Palmer, 2015). This historical milieu of Others is revealed in contemporary realities of belonging with citizens and non-citizens in Euro-colonial states. The hierarchy of race is systemic and must be interrogated from all angles until fully dismantled. Processes of racialization have brutal consequences and remain key for the expansion of white supremacy.

Systems of oppression may be historically placed, but should not be historicized into the past. Instead, a thorough account for and understanding of the implications of oppressive systems are vital to move forward in reconciliation and reflection. Such systems based on white supremacy and patriarchy, rooted in capitalism, colonialism, and Othering, are foundational and thus have a role in everyday lived experiences.

Implications within Education

Histories of oppression has had significant implications on education. The epistemological ignorance of sameness and liberal ideals of equality, rooted in Euro-colonial logic, provided a basis of racelessness, which continues to raise its head in the education system today (Castagno, 2008). The idea of equality comes from Enlightenment ideals and presents itself in the form of meritocracy, and as mentioned, colour-blindness. However, the danger of such an innocent manifestation of epistemological ignorance is the assumption that people are ahistorically-located: The Black student who is failing is a failure, not because of systems of oppression nor the trauma and material conditions of slavery and colonialism, but because of individual choices and not having the drive to “pull up those bootstraps.” The Indigenous student who is failing is failing because of a lack of assimilation into dominant white culture, and not because of the very value-systems of sharing and reciprocity of that student’s lived experiences, which are incompatible with ideals of excellence and individualism; nor because of that student’s disconnect with educational institutions, which has led to the division of their family, history, and roots. However, the mantra of equality and meritocracy often omits further historical underpinnings, which are rooted in systems that provided equality for a select few on the backs of many who were not considered human. Such omission leads to the pathologization/blame of the individual, because one dare not argue that the system itself is flawed. In the education system, managing and dealing with the Other becomes pivotal in the justification of continuing a failed system as is. In thinking of the plight of those who are Othered in educational contexts, ideas about difference are significant in such an analysis. Similar to many nation-states refusing to admit that genocide occurred (Palmer, 2015), educational institutions often deny that racism and anti-Black racism exists or they deny claims that educational institutions engage in silencing racism (Castagno, 2008). Institutions may instead blame the family for poor parenting or pathologize the youth who are the beneficiaries of a broken system. Therefore, identifying historical injustices is about identifying the connectedness to the current realities of people who are oppressed rather than compartmentalizing history into imagined temporal markers in time.

The Production and Reproduction of Difference as a Dominating Tool

This final section explores how difference is produced and reproduced as a dominating tool. Difference is part of the construction of what is normative. Dealing with the Other was and is about difference. Ideas about difference are highlighted by Erevelles (2011) who used the example of the Christocentric idea that the body is weak and sinful and in need of regulation. Erevelles demonstrated the ways that non-traditionalist Enlightenment thinkers did not do much justice to the cause of body management in their constructions of normal/abnormal to uphold the ideal of the universal, liberal man. Dealing with/saving/curing the Other was important in the simplistic false binaries which existed. The white, universal man, then, becomes key in dealing with and saving the Other (see *The White Man’s Burden* by Rudyard Kipling, 1899). Difference management goes hand in hand with the systems of oppression indicated previously in this paper. Therefore,

it is significant to understand the ways in which difference is essential to normality and the ways in which difference is reproduced historically and contemporarily in upholding dominance.

Gender as Difference

The dominating tool of difference is not merely about the dominant and the subjugated, it is also about the fluidity and interplay of the Other's racialized and gendered positions within colonial systems. Mills (2007c) highlighted the historic work of Anna Julia Cooper, a Black scholar, who aptly asked "When can I enter?" when addressing the universalism of feminism by white women and anti-racism by Black men. Even within the confines of Otherness, systems of oppression, such as global white supremacy and patriarchy, still operate and work to create a prioritization of dominance within non-dominant groups. Mills (1997) acknowledged the plight of Black women and women of colour who exist within the intersecting confines of male supremacy and white supremacy. Crenshaw (1991) and Collins and Bilge (2016) conceptualized this point of juncture as *intersectionality*, which illuminated Black women's multiple oppressions by addressing their raced and gendered realities through Critical Race Theory and Black feminist perspectives. Through intersectionality, Crenshaw (1991) demonstrated the ways Black women must operate in accordance to the Othered confines etched out under the guidelines of Enlightenment and universality, but that their plight was not homogenous with their Black male nor white female counterparts. This was also central to Black women's theorizing of their owned lived realities through Black Feminist Thought (e.g., Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 2016; Davis, 1989; hooks, 1981; Lorde, 1984), because white feminist movements "forgot" to listen to Black women's raced and gendered positions, which intersectionality sought to uncover.

The Politics of Divide-and-Conquer

It is important that colonial divide-and-conquer politics be called into question and brought forth into an analysis of its vital role in the Othring and domination-subjugation in minoritized, feminized, and racialized sites of oppression. Divide-and-conquer politics cause oppressed groups to fight for and seek resources or bits of privilege among each other, rather than having the oppressor admit their privilege through action. Examples of divide-and-conquer politics are evident in Pateman's (2007) account of the Japanese in South Africa receiving "honorary white" titles for economic reasons or the fight for "white status" for non-Western European whites, and is demonstrated in people's race to whiteness for better material conditions (p. 138). Many cases were brought forward advocating for U.S. naturalization for those who could be considered a true white person (Pateman, 2007). However, the race to whiteness leaves out people of colour, especially those who are racialized as Black. Divide-and-conquer politics are powerful in separating people from the history of others, their own histories, and the implications of these histories. Proximity to whiteness within Blackness is alive and well within mainstream media's fixation of Black female characters in most novels wishing to become white, ideals of good and bad hair, lighter and darker complexions, and other standards of whiteness within Black and other communities of colour (Mills, 2007c). However, as Lorde (1984) stated, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (p. 25). Proximity to whiteness within Black communities and such false ideals also prop up the colonial masters' house and perpetuate a relentless race to whiteness.

Colonized or oppressed people who seek to escape their difference through claims of neutrality and proximity to the dominating group, demonstrate the strength of divide-and-conquer politics and the race to liberal ideals of sameness and equality. An example is identifiable in Coulthard's (2014) work on the rejection of the politics of recognition. Coulthard identified the concept of recognition as a widely acknowledged contemporary and social-political thought when it comes to Indigenous land claims, women's care-work, the wearing of religious headdresses, and gay marriage, to name a few. This is akin to a race to ideal and sameness or to a place of an erasure of difference. There have been great strides made in the form of liberal recognition that cannot go unnoticed; however, the recognition is on the "master's" terms (in terms of Hegel's master-slave dialectic, as cited in Coulthard, 2014, p. 27). This positioning presents one group with access to success and acknowledgement of their own proximity to whiteness or the mainstream contract, while often leaving another group or segment of a group utterly unnoticed. Problematically, one can only become human or fully human on the terms of the master/colonizer.

In moving beyond difference as deficit, I turn to Bakan (2014), who stated that anti-oppression theorists have continuously embraced difference as “theoretical and epistemological starting points” (p. 99). In reflecting on ways to improve systemic issues around difference and othering in education, it is important to think of ways forward. One way to move forward, which has been advocated by scholars, educators, and activists alike, is rethinking difference beyond its negative connotations. As indicated, difference is dealt with and managed in educational settings instead of fully embraced or contextualized. Highlighting difference as Other serves as a dominating tool in the creation and reproduction of the Other and upholds the ideal of the Euro-colonial, Western-European, universal, all-knowing white man. In striving for excellence in schools, it is that very difference-seeking/difference-removing that serves a system of oppression. The dominant group cannot be made without the construction of the Other. However, if difference is presented as peoples coming in from their own unique-historically lived-realities, which are implicated and connected, then the reproduction of the Other would not have such stark effects within education. Thinkers like Fanon (1963) have stated that amid anti-Black racism, Black people must embrace Black pride and empowerment. In an educational sense, this is what advocates of Afrocentricity have fought for (Brathwaite, 2010; Dei, 1996). Moving beyond difference as a deficit helps negate the desire to engage in divide-and-conquer politics and leads to unity, resistance, hope, and change.

Concluding Thoughts

The goal of this paper was to explore some of the facets of the foundational elements of systems of oppression in relation to educational realities. The paper highlighted the role of ignorance and objectivity and their implications within education. Through a historical foundation and further analysis, I have highlighted systems of oppression, including colonialism, slavery, capitalism, and racialization. The last section took up the idea of difference as a dominating tool by providing examples of Othering through gender, divide-and-conquer politics, and ways forward by moving away from difference as a deficit to moving toward difference as an asset in creating new possibilities for change in education. Using an exploratory approach, this essay highlights the plethora of converging and diverging thoughts about oppressive systems, both historic and contemporary.

Often, when thinking of inequalities and injustices in the education system, Canadians turn their eyes to the United States, allowing Canada to present the façade of the kinder, friendlier neighbour. However, in Canada, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (TRC) Final Report of more than 6000 testimonies of Indigenous residential school survivors indicates that Canada (and its school systems) has a history entrenched in racist and oppressive action, the effects of which are still evident today (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). An important category among the TRC’s Calls to Action include advocating for the Canadian government to address gaps in funding of First Nations children’s education, creating culturally-appropriate curricula, instituting language preservation, showing respect for treaty relationships, and advocating for full parental-community participation in education, among others. Though there is a long road forward, it is a good step towards fostering dialogue, community, and allyship (Abawi & Brady, 2017). This is a reminder, and one of many, that issues cannot be historicized into the past, but must be engulfed into action in the present, and are a starting point for such conversations that can take place in educational settings. As well, a number of school boards, including the Peel District School Board, are working to address anti-Black racism in the education system (Research and Accountability Office, 2016). Such actions to address racism and injustice taken at the federal, provincial, and School Board level demonstrate that racism, domination, and oppression are alive and well in the Canadian education system, and there is important work to be done in addressing such systemic injustices, since this is a system that historically and contemporarily pushes out Black and Indigenous bodies.

Dei (2016) explained that “decolonization cannot happen over a cup of tea” (G. J.S. Dei, personal communication), meaning that learning and unlearning, and processes of decolonization are uncomfortable, difficult, but ongoing. However, in reimagining an education that can be fulfilling, engaging, and connecting for peoples who have been silenced and erased, their voices, their histories, and their stories need to be centred within the education system. As emphasized in the discussion above, this is done, not by providing hollow representation strategies, which Other and alienate students, but instead, by having brave decolonial conversations outlining the truth of our histories here on Turtle Island (North America). An entry point to such a systemic overhaul in education would move away from difference as deficit and instead embrace the

unique histories, realities, and struggles of students who have, and continue to be, pushed out of the dominant education system. This is essential in working towards creating an education system with full accountability of the good and bad of Canadian history and will serve the many rather than the few.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Janelle Brady: Janelle Brady is a researcher, lecturer, community activist, and doctoral student in the Department of Social Justice Education at OISE/UT. Janelle's work looks at anti-Black racism in K-12 and higher education settings drawing on Black feminism, decolonial and anti-colonial theory, and Afrocentricity.