

Towards Critical, Engaged, Antiracist Learning Environments

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Abstract

Racism is not an anomaly, rather it is an ordinary feature of our world and is a symptom of white supremacy. This article draws from critical race theory and critical pedagogy to make sense of this assertion and to contemplate possible responses. Using an autoethnographic research paradigm, we draw from our own contrasting experiences and perceptions; for Lilian as a black naturalised Irish educator and for Camilla as a white, indigenous Irish educator, to offer reflections, analyses and concrete examples that might help other adult educators to respond to a topic that many people tend to avoid.

Keywords: White Supremacy, Structural Racism, Adult Education, Critical Race Theory, Critical Pedagogy, Autoethnography

Introduction

In 2009, Barack Obama became the first African American to be elected US President. Both of us remember how the images of his inauguration that were beamed across the world included a tearful Jessie Jackson — a former Democratic presidential nominee who is also African American. The mood was electric as people dared to believe that our world was perhaps moving in a better, less racially-divided direction. Eleven years later, a very different image of race relations dominated our screens when, in 2020, the murder of George Floyd by a white police officer was captured on video and shared virally. Countless panels and programmes were organised to debate the demands of the US Black Lives Matter Movement, which originated in the middle of Obama's presidency when three women, Alicia Garza, Parris Cullors and Opal Tometi, responded to police inaction following the death of teenager Trayvon Martin in 2013.

Floyd's death seven years later galvanised the movement and many Irish people got involved. For days, the hashtag #blacklivesmatter trended domestically and over 5,000 people protested outside the US embassy, chanting 'Black Lives Matter' and 'defund the police'. The crowd also drew connections with discriminations in Ireland by demanding an end to our much-criticised Direct Provision (Pollock, 2020), a for-profit system of accommodation supports for people seeking international protection from persecution who often live for many years in sub-standard conditions.

Exactly seven months after the death of George Floyd, George Nkencho, a 21-year-old Black man from North Dublin was shot dead by Irish Police (the Gardaí) in the front garden of his home in Dublin 15. Nkencho had a documented history of mental illness and had been involved in an earlier incident where he wielded a knife at staff in a local convenience store. Gardaí pursued him as he made his way home. He rang his own doorbell and his sister answered but was soon ordered to close it again. Despite her pleas that he was no threat to the family, Nkencho was shot in the back (Gallagher, 2021). Nkencho's family have repeatedly raised concerns about the progress of the Gardaí's internal investigation into his death (which at the time of writing is yet to conclude) and have called for an independent inquiry. In a country that had a few months before his death been so outraged by the death of George Floyd, the silence surrounding Nkencho's death was deafening. In fact, some of the loudest voices heard were those modelled on US Blue-lives Matter rhetoric, a discourse that seeks to equate the dangers of police work with the deaths of people of colour whilst in police custody. Quinn (2020) argues this rhetoric does little to protect anyone's life, rather it perpetuates police violence by fostering an environment of fear, hatred, and racism.

This is also not the only situation where we believe a person's ethnicity cannot be ignored. Ireland is one of a number of European countries where statistics reveal that women of colour fare worse within maternity services. Rather shockingly, Ireland's Confidential Maternity Death Enquiry has recorded 'a five-fold difference in maternal mortality rates amongst women from Black Ethnic backgrounds and an almost two-fold difference amongst women from Asian Ethnic backgrounds compared with white women' (CDE Ireland, 2019, p.9). In the last nine years alone, inquests into the deaths of six women who were all migrants have all returned a verdict of medical

misadventure⁴. No surprise perhaps that Ronit Lentin (2013) has described ethnic-minority migrants who enter into Ireland's maternity services as 'm/ others', subjugated within a system that privileges white bodies.

Our decision to forefront this contribution with stories that can seem quite separate to adult education is because we believe there are connections between these situations, and the less catastrophic, but much more pervasive everyday impacts of structural racism on the lives of people of colour. This contribution explores what adult educators might (or might not) do in response. We draw from a conceptual framework that is underpinned by Critical Race Theory which we interpret as a set of ideas that views racialisation as a social construct that disregards socio-historical contexts (Lentin, 2004), and that minimises white supremacy, something bell hooks (2013, p.153) describes as 'the bottom line of race and racism'. We also apply a critical pedagogic lens, an approach to education that Henry Giroux (2021) argues is needed more than ever if we are to combat injustices in a world that is increasingly shaped by perpetual crisis. He writes:

Inequality under neoliberal capitalism is a cancer that functions as a form of violence that attacks the social fabric, the welfare state, and the body politic [...] It relentlessly subjects workers, the disabled, the homeless, the poor, children, people of color, and frontline hospital and emergency workers and others considered at risk to lives of anxiety, misery and in some cases death. (Giroux, 2021, p.179).

This critique of capitalism is, and always has been, a central feature of critical pedagogy, a set of ideas that often focuses on the work of Paulo Freire who asserts that education is never neutral and that much traditional education domesticates rather than liberates because, to quote Freire directly, it becomes 'easy spaces for selling knowledge which corresponds to capitalist ideology' (Freire and Shor, 1987, p.8). Instead, critical pedagogy invites us to think critically about our lives using problem-posing, dialogic methods.

4 These women were Bimbo Onanuga, whose inquest was in 2013, Savita Halappanavar, whose inquest was also in 2013, Dhara Kivlehan (2014), Nora Hyland (2014), Malak Thawley (2017) and Nayyab Tariq (2021). In the week we were finalising this paper, a young woman who was resident in a Direct Provision Centre in Co. Kerry dies in hospital whilst in labour. The cause of death is not yet known. We send our sincere condolences to the friends and families of these women.

Not everyone writing about race agrees that critical pedagogy can play a part. The activist and academic Kehinde Andrews, who principally locates critical pedagogy within universities, argues against viewing it as a panacea. He writes:

By presenting itself as some kind of solution to an issue it can never solve, critical pedagogy is in fact a regeneration of the problem that is 'particularly perverse' because of its good intent while actually contradicting the core theoretical foundations of CRT. (Andrews, 2018, p.242)

There is much to agree with in Andrew's assertion in that it rightly identifies universities as often in the business of separating 'thought' from 'action' (Andrews, 2018, p.243). However much adult education has resisted this separation, and the history of Irish adult education is rooted in 'community education,' an endeavour that has praxis, a radical union of reflection and action, at its core. Notwithstanding the neoliberalisation of many adult education structures in the last few decades (Fitzsimons, 2017a), much critical pedagogy works best when it is in collaboration with communities and social movements. Many university-based critical educators maintain close relationships with these civic society spaces.

Our research methodology is autoethnographic, which Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011, p.1) describe as 'an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience.' Autoethnography allows the stories that shape our lives lead us towards the power dynamics that shape that world, an approach McCormack, O'Neill, Ryan, and Walsh, (2020, p.74) describe as 'wholly congruent with adult education.' They are not the only fans of drawing from our own lives as a source of knowledge. The educational philosopher Paulo Freire (1992, p. xii) believes our lives are the 'narratives of liberation' continuing 'what stories we choose to tell, and the way we decide to tell them form the provisional basis of what critical pedagogy of the future might mean.' We model autoethnography by infusing vignettes from our lives throughout this contribution. Our perspectives are very different. Lilian is a black naturalized Irish woman who migrated to Ireland as an adult. Camilla is white-Irish and was born in Ireland, as were her ancestors. Although she has worked overseas in the past, including time spent working in the Middle East, that was many years ago now and she has spent most of her life in Dublin.

We have collaborated on publications before including an indepth investigation into structural racism within maternity care (Fitzsimons et al., 2021) and an autoethnographic contribution on experiences within Higher Education (Fitzsimons and Nwanze, 2021). We've also previously reflected on our racialised identities, alone (Fitzsimons, 2019) and in conversation with others (Akinborowa, Fitzsimons, and Obasi, 2020; Nwanze and Pshyk, 2021). As well as leaning on these previous contributions, we will especially rely on contributions from bell hooks, a prolific philosopher and writer across critical pedagogy, feminism and race-related discourse since the 1980s. bell hooks sadly passed away in December 2021. Her tremendous influence on our practice will remain indelible. We also draw from some practical methods proposed by Stephen Brookfield who has written extensively about reflective practice in adult education and who, in more recent years, has more deliberately turned his attention to addressing race within adult education. This article thus converges three strands of enquiry: 1) the theories of critical race theory and critical pedagogy; 2) our own autoethnographic dimensions and; 3) some literature from others to offer concrete suggestions on what adult educators might, and might not do, if they are to better respond to a global phenomenon they are often reluctant to tackle head on.

Is racism really an issue in Ireland?

Lilian: I had come to pick my baby up from the child minder... She graciously offered to walk me back to the car. I had parked my car a few houses down the road as her drive way was really narrow and she lived at a bend on the street where it was not safe to park. 'So, what programme are you studying for in Maynooth?' she asked. 'My Doctorate,' I replied.

'Wow! A doctorate? That's some hard work. How long does it take and what are you researching?'

'It should take me about four years and I am researching the effects of racism on black women in Ireland.'

'Sounds interesting... but in Ireland?' she quipped, looking surprised. 'Is it that bad in Ireland?' I smiled and nodded.

When I talk about the focus of my research, I've lost count of the amount of times white people in Ireland have responded with surprise asking, 'is racism really an issue in Ireland? Is it not something that happens more in America or in other parts of Europe?' There is an almost palpable element of shock or disbelief when I say that racism is rife in Irish society.

Consistently, research has uncovered what O'Halloran (2019) describes as 'worrying patterns of racism' across Ireland. As far back as 2009, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) stated it was 'gravely concerned' at the findings of one EU report which 'shows Ireland among the worst of all the EU countries when it comes to victims of racial discrimination and abuse' (IHERC, 2009, [no pagination]). High levels of both Islamophobia (Carr, 2017) and Afrophobia (Michael, 2015) have been uncovered with both populations experiencing high levels of hateful discrimination on a regular basis. The situation is also stark for Mincéir (Irish Travellers), who have endured a prolonged history of prejudice and discrimination. One report by the IHREC, Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre and the Department of Equality found that Irish Travellers experience some of the worst discrimination in Europe, with more than two-thirds reporting overt experiences of racism as a regular feature of their lives (EUAFRA, 2020). Given the fact that most Mincéir are racialised as white, their experience reveals the malleability of white supremacy as it adapts to meet the needs of the dominant group (hooks, 2013, p.5), in this case Ireland's mostly white settled population. Moreover, McGinnity, Creighton and Fannye (2020) found that over one quarter (27%) of educated people in Ireland hold concealed racist views which are enacted when making important decisions such as when they are voting in elections or hiring people for jobs.

In seeking to understand these levels of racism, discussions are often framed through an individualist lens and with an emphasis on moral values. Or to put it another way, a person is either 'racist' or 'not-racist'. The difference between the two is easily recognisable. A person who is racist should be held accountable, reasoned with, educated and supported to re-evaluate their behaviours. Whilst interpersonal acts of racism are completely unacceptable, they go hand in glove with a much more pervasive, covert system of structural racism which permeates every aspect of society. As Reni-Eddo Lodge (2017, p.640) puts it 'structural is often the only way to capture what goes unnoticed – the silently raised eyebrows, the implicit biases, snap judgements made on perceptions of competency.' Critical Race Theory (CRT) makes sense of structural racism. Drawing heavily from critical legal studies, it originated as an ideology in the US in the 1970s when a group of Black lawyers became concerned that gains from the 1960s Civil Rights Movement were being eroded (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017). They sought to design a tool to examine the relationship between race, law and power. At the heart of CRT are several taken-for-granted propositions. The first of these is that racism is not aberrant or unusual rather it is a normal and everyday experience for people of colour. Because it is so

intricately intertwined in the systems and institutions of society, racism is often difficult to articulate or clearly identify and it is frequently not deliberate. As Kehinde Andrews (2018, pp.240-1) argues 'even with good intent from teachers and policy makers, racism is reproduced because it is a necessary feature of the nature of the system.' A second proposition of CRT is that racism only exists because of a corresponding 'system of white- over-colour ascendancy,' or white supremacy that 'serves important purposes, for the dominant group' (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017, p.8). bell hooks (2013, p.3) describes white supremacy as 'the glue that keeps white folks connected irrespective of many other differences,' continuing;

Politically, White supremacist thinking was created to serve this purpose. Imprinted on the consciousness of every white child at birth, reinforced by the culture, white supremacist thinking tends to function unconsciously. This is the primary reason why it is so difficult to challenge and change.

It is not only black and brown writers who recognise white supremacy in this way. Steven Brookfield (2018, p.3), who is racialised as white, describes white supremacy's operationalisation eloquently when he posits how it 'places whiteness as the preferred norm in society, white people as the natural authorities in any situation, and white knowledge (and white forms of knowledge production) as the most valid of humankind.' White supremacy runs so deep, people of colour equally internalise its tenets (hooks, 2013; Eddo-Lodge, 2017). In sharing the impact of everyday situations as imprinting the neutrality of whiteness, Reni Eddo-Lodge (2017, p.85) shares:

When I was four, I asked my mum when I would turn white, because all the good people on TV were white, and all the villains were black and brown. I considered myself to be a good person, so I thought I would turn white eventually. My mum still remembers the crestfallen look on my face when she told me the bad news.

Lilian: I've shared in other spaces about how when I was out in a shopping centre somewhere in Dublin, I saw a group of four or five young Black men walking in my direction. I immediately clutched my bag tighter. I had completed the act before I realized that I had just exhibited racist and invariably white supremacist tendencies, I had been socialised into seeing Black men as dangerous, aggressive, and prone to crime.

We are not suggesting that there is a common, homogenised experience of being non-white, rather we support the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill-Collins and Bilge, 2016) which conceives of each of us as affected by a series of interlocking, fundamental and consulative structures mainly social class, gender identity, dis/ability, ethnicity, and/or sexual orientation which overlap to create very different experiences for people. Arguably, the most dominant point of difference, and also connection, is social class. As hooks (2013, p.2) observes, 'it is much more likely that a white person will bond with a black person when the two share a common class lifestyle. It is less likely that a materially prosperous person will develop a bond with someone who is poor and indigent.'

As well as the assertion that racism is pervasive and normal, and the belief that white supremacy is its root cause, a third tenet of CRT is to reject the myth of reverse racism, or the suggestion that people of colour can be conversely racist against white people. Certainly, there can be inaccurate assumptions about white people such as that they can't rap, are terrible dancers or are inferior athletes. But these assertions are more light-hearted and are suspended from the systemic relations of Eurocentric power where the world is largely viewed through a European or Western Perspective. As Eddo-Lodge (2017, p.89) points out, 'there simply aren't enough black people in positions of power to enact racism against white people on the kind of scale it currently operates at against black people.' Rejecting the myth of reverse racism also includes interrogating neutral perceptions of cultural difference. Typically, and not incorrectly, culture is understood as the conscious and unconscious enactment of certain customs and rituals. But less emphasised, is how the 'cultural fields' within which these differences are exercised repeatedly privilege existing social hierarchies (Fitzsimons, 2017b).

A final concept of CRT we rely on is that racism is not just deeply embedded within our psyche but is a fundamental feature of capitalism, a system hooks repeatedly describes as an imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy. Capitalism was built on colonialism, and it was white supremacy that enabled the dispossession of millions of indigenous people for economic gain. Although less stark than the slavery models of the past, expropriation remains a core feature of our contemporary social world. As Arruzza, Tithi and Fraser (2019, p.43) argue:

In every phase [of capitalism] up to and including the present, the expropriation of racialized people has enabled capital to increase its profits by confiscating natural resources and human capacities for whose

replenishment and reproduction it does not pay. For systemic reasons, capitalism has always created classes of racialized human beings, whose persons and work are devalued and subject to expropriation.

It was Obama's principal commitment to neoliberalism, an economic world order that prioritises profit over people and that places its trust in the so-called 'free-market', that makes him as culpable as his predecessors in undermining a range of democratic institutions including civic models of education (Giroux, 2021, p.76). In fact, the structural position of African Americans declined during Obama's presidency as they were disproportionately impacted by rising poverty, homelessness, and unemployment (Andrews, 2018, p.11).

There is a growing body of evidence on the structural experiences of non-white Irish populations. Black-Irish people are less likely to be employed, less likely to hold a management role and five times more likely to experience discrimination in the workplace (Pillinger, 2006; McGinnity et al., 2018). Even when organisations describe themselves as 'equal-opportunity,' the dominant discourse is one of meritocracy where a person's qualifications (and not their whiteness) is viewed as the principal mechanism through which their career moves forward (Joseph, 2020, p.9). To give an example of how this works in practice, meritocracy blames a racialised person for their inability to get a job whilst ignoring the structures that work against them at every level. There are other examples too. Non-white populations in Ireland are more at risk of having their children taken into care (Gilligan, 2019) and young black males are at greater risk of physical assault than their white counterparts (O'Curry and Michael, 2014). Amidst Ireland's well-documented housing crisis research by Grotti et al. (2018, p.ix) found:

African migrants are also over-represented among the homeless. Concerning housing discrimination, while Asians and non-Irish White people are no more likely to report discrimination than White Irish nationals, we find that Black people and people of other ethnic groups are more likely to report discrimination.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, migrants were more likely to be frontline workers, less likely to be able to work from home and, along with ethnic minorities including Irish Travellers, were over-represented in infection rates (Shannen et al., 2020).

Educational outcomes are also often worse for people who are racialised. A recent UK report by Universities UK and the National Union of Students (2019) found inequalities in Higher Education (HE) that mirror wider social inequalities where a student's race and ethnicity can significantly impact their performance. White students are more likely to go to college, less likely to drop out, and more likely to get first-class honours when compared to Black students, Asian students and students from mixed ethnicities. There is limited but growing research into the educational experiences of ethnic minorities in Ireland. One comprehensive study by Darby (2020) found universities are dominated by Eurocentric curricula and predominantly staffed by white people, both of which help to ensure the continuity of white privilege where the expectation of ethnic minorities is to quietly assimilate despite enduring a range of microaggressions on a regular basis. Where refugees or asylum seekers go to college, research by Meaney and Nwanze (2021) found that many educators have little understanding of the living conditions of these students, such as sometimes needing permission to leave Direct Provision centres, the absence of study spaces and the challenges when asked to pay international fees in contravention to their legal residency status. The researchers found some educators had no clue who 'refugees' were or what rights this categorisation gave them. There are complexities too and it is important not to essentialise. For example, Chinese populations tend to perform well in European universities (Archer and Francis, 2007). However, students often struggle to adapt from China's collectivist culture to Ireland's more individualistic society, a struggle that can be compounded by language barriers, homesickness, and a lack of friends (Sun and Nolan, 2021).

Outside of university settings, there is a higher-than-average uptake of migrants in Further Education, many of whom are non-white. Ebun Joseph (2020, p.85) alerts us to potential problems with this when describing this practice as an exercise in 'down-skilling' rather than 'up-skilling' so people are better able to access low-paid jobs they are often overqualified for.

What might adult educators do?

Given the tremendous significance of structural racism and the powerlessness people often feel in addressing this situation, it is perhaps understandable that many adult educators are reluctant to address the topic of race in any meaningful way. Stephen Brookfield (2018, pp.5-6) ranks the reasons educators avoid addressing race as a fear they might say the wrong thing, concern about opening uncomfortable discussions, a sense that race just isn't relevant to what

they are teaching, a worry that if they do broach the subject their actions might go badly wrong, and (for white educators) a reluctance to confront their own racialised privilege.

In the absence of addressing race, many occupy a colour-blind perspective meaning they simply do nothing. This is despite the way, that unless interrupted, dominant cultural norms, including perceptions of superiority that exist in society at large, also shape what happens inside an adult learning group (Fitzsimons, 2017b, p.265). These same individuals might be critical of neoliberalism and are sometimes able to describe how its structures perpetuate racial inequality at a macro-level, but they fall short in turning the mirror on themselves to recognise their own actions as part of the institutional structures they objectively criticise. In these situations, white people are mostly well-meaning and often claim to be led by a commitment to equality. People might say things like ‘I don’t see race’ or, ‘I treat all my students the same’ or ‘I see everyone as human’. However, this inaction doesn’t eliminate racial dimensions of power rather this meritocratic perspective simply deepens racial inequality (Hearne, 2009). In another publication, Lilian discusses being on the receiving end of colour-blindness when studying in an Irish higher education institution:

Teachers were fantastic. They knew their onions. Course content was good enough. But I was invisible. No one spoke to me. I spoke to no one. Honestly, I was afraid to speak to anyone [...] I was always the last to be chosen by my peers to belong in a group. And even when I was, I was never chosen to speak. I never shared anything in the classroom even when I knew that I had things to say that could buttress what the teacher was explaining. I just came to class and went home. I was invisible. If the teachers noticed my presence in the class, it didn’t show. They went on engaging with other students and said not a word to me. (Fitzsimons and Nwanze, 2021, p.12)

Camilla: A few years ago, I was in a classroom that, on the surface, embodied everything that is good about a dialogic, collegial adult education approach. I was a student. We were sitting in a circle, and ‘students’ were interspersed with ‘educators’. It was an established group with a fluid membership meaning people entered and left depending on how their research was progressing. On this day, and out of the blue, the lead educator suggested that instead of dividing up the time equally for each student, we would try a new way where people could spontaneously contribute as they wanted. ‘Not everyone will get to speak,’ they prefaced, ‘but we’ll

all get to speak in the long run.’ One by one, students enthusiastically spoke about their challenges as researchers and unpicked the intricacies of Irish systems and structures. Others (mostly ‘educators’) responded. About fifteen minutes from the end of a three-hour class, I suddenly realised that the only people who hadn’t contributed were the three people of colour. As they were also migrants, it seemed likely they didn’t have the same fluency in understanding what was discussed to that point so might have been feeling a little distant from proceedings. In a panic to make amends, I clumsily put one of them on the spot making everyone feel uncomfortable. My co-facilitators noticed none of this, in fact, their evaluation, shared some time later, was that the class had gone great. My analysis was different. Not only had some voices been excluded, but the knowledge uncovered was partial and West-centric.

As well as a form of silencing, the colour-blindness evident in this vignette is a mode of avoidance (Flowers, 2010). But what are we to do? Stephen Brookfield (2018) suggests three methods for ‘teaching race’ regardless of the topic. The first is a process of scaffolding where students should be eased into talking about race in a way that is invitational and respectful of the interpellated nature of our backgrounds. Educators can start with their own experiences of race. For white educators (like Camilla) this often means naming their own realisation about the privileges they hold and being upfront about how this benefits them.

Camilla: I can’t write a line like that without naming that I have known for some time that my academic collaborations with you Lilian, and with other people of colour, often benefit me more than you. I worry that I lean on your ‘blackness’ in a way that makes me more credible as I progress within the hierarchies of academia. I try hard not to pull the ladder up behind me, and I face a different set of sexist prejudices, but I inevitably fail to make much of a difference in tackling structural dimensions of racism. The privilege I hold, as part of imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy (hooks, 2013), is strong. Even in writing this article I worry I am ‘using you’ to advance my argument.

Lilian’s response: I agree that our collaborations may be of more benefit to you than they may be to me. This is unfortunately the structure of the white supremacist world that we live in. The question I would however be inclined to ask is, what is the alternative? When I contemplate what the alternative could be – your silence and reluctance to name this inequity that is racism – then I not only wholly welcome these collaborations that appear to benefit you more than me, I also appreciate them. I appreciate your consciousness and the naming of ‘your privilege’. It took

centuries for the damaging structure of racism to take root and to deeply etch its tentacles in the psyches of people the world over. It will be naïve of me (or anyone else) to think that dismantling it will be easy. It won't be. But as the saying goes, 'little drops of water make an ocean'. Your interventions may be little, but you have made them. Imagine a world where every white person actually does something (no matter how little) to dismantle racism...

To my mind Camilla, anti-racism work is not only moral but is deeply spiritual. You are doing your part. This is a good thing.

The second method Brookfield encourages is one of modelling where the educator normalises the topic. In another article Camilla wrote about deliberately carving out space to share her own sense of whiteness in a group and, more specifically, a moment of realisation when she re-evaluated many of her own past encounters through the lens of privilege (Fitzsimons, 2019). She has also acknowledged times when she still leans on this privilege when it advances certain situations (Fitzsimons, 2019). Conversely the black adult educator George Yancy (2018, p.20), tells us about the extent to which his students 'see a black man first' before anything else and explains:

The question of race, for me, is not simply about philosophical abstraction or the mastery of a set of key philosophical concepts. Rather, race involves and raises importantly lived, personal experiences of exclusion, marginalization, and even trauma.

Brookfield's third strategy is community building, encouraging educators to carefully and deliberately create conditions for peer learning in a safe and supportive environment. What could have happened for example if the facilitator leading the adult education classroom described in Camilla's vignette had interrupted the 'Irish' students chatting freely about cultural particularities and had deliberately invited the migrants in the room to share alternative perspectives so we might compare Irish common sense with alternative outlooks? Importantly, building community is more than just a repertoire of facilitative tactics, it means creating learning environments that are built on deep trust and collaboration. This only happens if time is set aside to excavate our experiences (as we have done here) an approach that hooks (2010, p.56) describes as 'one of those powerful ways to educate [and] to create community in a classroom.' This means rejecting a banking approach to education where the educator's principal function is to transfer certain fixed

ideas into the minds of the passive learner in a way that re-enforces, rather than disrupts, the status quo (Freire, 1972). Instead, we must ‘transgress those boundaries that would confine each pupil to a rote, assembly line of learning’ (hooks, 1994, p.13) and embody what hooks describes as a progressive, holistic engaged pedagogy that challenges the status quo.

What adult educators must avoid

In a rush to advance reforms, mistakes have been made and many schools and colleges have adopted the vernacular of anti-racism. In seeking to practice diversity, people of colour, and also disabled people, are often asked to join committees and working groups. More and more minority groups are listed as ‘allies’ to predominantly white organisations whose mission statements have been re-crafted to ‘acknowledge’ and even claim to understand intersectionality first-hand. This all-important image change is topped off with websites, leaflets and posters that reflect a range of abilities and ethnicities. In no time at all, an intersectional, self-aware group is outwardly presented to the world. The reality of these freshly ‘woke’ environments is that the experiences for people who are structurally oppressed is often worse. They are always in demand for photo-shoots and representation on committees, often without pay. When they do get a seat at the table and are expected to speak respectfully and on behalf of the homogenised group they are supposedly representing, they are not listened to, or have their comments passed over. In her book, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminism, Thinking Black*, hooks (2015, p.292) shares her experiences within universities, where colleagues wanted a Black person in their department, ‘so long as that person thinks and acts like them, shares their values and beliefs, is in no way different.’ She explains:

[This] compelled me to use the term ‘white supremacy’ to identify the ideology that most determines how white people in this society (irrespective of their political leanings to the right or left) perceive and relate to Black people and other people of color.

Sometimes people are even asked to retrospectively legitimize work that has already been done.

Lilian: I was asked to do this once. Someone asked me if I would be interested (on an unpaid basis I might add!) with some research that had been done on ethnic minorities in a particular institution. The overall aim was to develop teaching tools to support educators in creating ‘diverse environments’.

Camilla: As I remember it, I tipped you off that the work was already complete so you would be forewarned when the inevitable phone-call arrived. I suspected the research team had panicked when they looked around the table at each other and saw nothing but white faces in the room. I'm glad that I work to a 'nothing about us without us' mantra.

As well as virtue signalling, we also think that white people should resist an aforementioned trend in describing themselves as 'ally'. Again, this is often well-meaning and can be driven by a sense of unity over division. But it can often be little more than an act of self-aggrandizing with little or no thought given to the harms that are continually inflicted on some population groups. As Brookfield (2018, p.38) puts it 'you don't become an ally by saying that is what you are rather you become an ally by consistently showing support for minority groups in your actions and by taking sides against oppressive forces.'

Conclusion

This article proposes a pedagogy that is shaped by several factors. Its starting point is to accept that white supremacy is the precursor to racism and that its endurance is rooted in capitalist structures that depend on inequality for its own survival. One way to challenge these structures is to become more aware of the relationship between our own social position and structural white supremacy, whatever our racialised identity. From this, we are better able to create conditions that actively promote respect for difference and where each person's lived experience can be validated and interpreted as knowledge creation. None of this is easy and the task ahead can be daunting. But unless we teach against colour-blindness, our every-day practices will alienate many of our students. Invariably we'll get it wrong. In fact, Brookfield (2018, p.15) argues 'the fundamental reality and experience of teaching race is feeling as if you're not getting it right.' But if we can accept that things won't always go the way we planned, we can learn from our mistakes. None of this can happen unless we turn our gaze away from assumptions that racism is solely interpersonal and instead view it as a social construct that permeates the capillaries of society. Only then can we embody education as a practice of freedom and perhaps contribute to creating a better world.

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