

How it Looks: Optics and White Ally-ship

For Tania

I am white – not completely, and my kids aren't at all – but, to look at, I am – in the Marxist sense. And that means in a privilege kind of way – in that good old “no problem hailing a taxi at 3 am” kind of way. I also teach at a community college here in Toronto, Canada.

So. I was extremely embarrassed at a recent Aboriginal Education workshop at my institution's mental health conference. Oh honey. This white woman who was clearly and profoundly at risk herself, a psychiatrized individual, she hijacks the space with “...but all white people aren't evil; those were my great-grandparents; you can't blame me for the residential schools, etc...” Your oppression's not my fault and I'm not going to feel guilty 'cause I would never do that! Oh, honey.

It's not hard to understand why this particular woman would have trouble swallowing the notion that she is in any way privileged. The aftermath of trauma and abuse based on her class, her gender, and her mental health status makes any lucky feelings, I am sure, quite elusive. But her attitude represents –

Well wait a minute though, first of all she had the sense of entitlement, figured she had the right, to commandeer 15 minutes of an Aboriginal woman's half hour workshop... but wait again, maybe it was simply that her so many shades of lost and brokenness – resulting from the above-mentioned trauma – made her oblivious to how she was taking up space.

In any event, her attitude represents a monumental failure to approach these themes at the level of ideas, to talk about racism as structural, as systemic, as framework – a failure to think through the generations to find the contemporary face of colonialism. We can't discuss these things only at the level of the individual. Though it is important to name our experiences, we won't get anywhere new if we remain at the level of the personal. Power structures were never out to divide and conquer *us personally*; they just want to control us all. It's simply convenient for that agenda that many of the best people are caught up with bickering with each other, caught up with “process”.

So. I'm thinking lately that all this has a lot to do with optics. That means how things look, by definition from the outside. It started off at my workplace with a discussion about “hustling”. I had bristled (and I knew better too) at the idea that my blue eyes had helped me along my professional path, due to growing up poor and working so hard to live over the years, sole wage earner for my kids etc etc. I hustle, baby!!! But my dear friend asked me how differently the hustling I have done (say, taking on extra work) might be perceived, talked about, and experienced, by a woman of colour. Oh... yeah.

Chastened, I realized that I had gotten hooked on how painful it is – how very much it hurts – to have the non-privileged parts of my identity erased/invisibilized. My knots of class and gender-based oppression were calling out for attention, sore at being undermined by my skin privilege. It was not unlike what was happening with the interrupting woman at the Aboriginal Education workshop. It is not an option to “let go” of the story as personal and see it as structural or systemic when that personal experience is “stuck” in trauma. But I suppose it's precisely that “seeing” I am seeking to explore, hence framing all this as a question of optics.

Perhaps here it's better to tell a story than to trace out my poststructural analysis of the intersectionality of identities. Boo! Okay, story:

When I was small, I lived in a poor neighbourhood, literally on the other side of the tracks, in an unremarkable mid-sized Canadian city. At school I was in French Immersion (half day in French), and my little flock of friends from grades 1 – 3 were Tania Tanya Maya Wendy Julie or something. Tania with an i was Black. After grade 3, the French program discontinued at my school, and we had to be bussed to another neighbourhood, way across those tracks.

Tania was one of the students who did not continue (a fact in itself I can read in a perhaps more meaningful way now, looking back), and I never saw her again after grade 3. Until I was about 17 or 18.

Picture this: Tania drives past me in a car on the main downtown strip. A car!!! No one in my life, in my world – had a car. And I had been really aware of and bitter about my class ever since I'd shifted to that ritzier school, too. So, because I'm a real cool teenager in combat boots, and real invested in my edginess and realness, I took my hand like the Fonz on the hood of that car and slid across it, glided to the driver's window that a grinning Tania had opened: "Hey!"

"Heeeey," I go like the Fonz. Now, listen sweetly and remember that my story is about optics. I go: "Holy shit did you *steal* this thing?!"

See it? *Of course* I didn't mean anything racist; I was just trying to sound tough, hadn't thought it through at all, much less assumed that she had stolen it. And *of course* she said, I forget but it was something along the lines of "No... um... fuck you..." – and I never saw her again.

A young black woman was asked in public by a young white woman if she had stolen a car. I am certain you are not failing to dig my story. From mine informed by class, to hers informed by race – things look and sound different from different locations.

So my husband, upon hearing this Tania story, asks me skeptically: "Do you really think that moment was about race?"

-*You better believe it boy*, I answer in my head. But I never say "boy" out loud to my husband, who is Black; I was there when a racist streetcar driver did once, and it was a bad scene. See, it sounds different to him, from his location. And each of us sits, hurting and being bewildered, in our own. Even the simple act of remembering that each location is a vantage point contributes to healing some of the hurt.

"Optics", though expressing appearances, isn't a term for a superficial conceptual field; it is next to the tender heart of what we must address if we are to ground the anti-oppression conversation in structural realities. And I wonder if to be better allies, more white people could more actively take on the intellectual adventure that is a cornerstone of education in the first place: seeing things from places other than behind our own eyes.

-Heather Lash