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**RACE-BASED EPISTEMOLOGIES: THE ROLE
OF RACE AND DOMINANCE IN KNOWLEDGE
PRODUCTION**

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Abstract

In this paper I draw from critical work on the historical, social, political, and economic functions of race to show how Eurocentrism, hegemony and colonialism (re-)produce “legitimate” knowledge and knowers in the Western world. Specifically, I discuss how mainstream academia in the West reinscribes colonial and racial thinking by strategically reducing the vast theoretical contributions of racialised and Indigenous scholars to experiential insights or “stories.” As such, these critical contributions remain marginalized in the mainstream, western scholarly canon. In my analysis, I outline the need for race-based epistemologies, in order to resist the ideological, discursive and material racism in research and knowledge production. I also argue that employing critical white supremacy as a theoretical framework would de-center and contextualize western ways of thinking and knowing, and intervene in projects which seek to know, essentialize, and represent bodies of color by unearthing the historical, colonial, and racial relations that have desired the “Other” as a category of analysis. This paper presents important theoretical positions on epistemology, and contributes highly to critical theory and practice.

Keywords: race, epistemology, knowledge-making, critical research

Introduction

I begin this paper with a reflection on an event in honor of a well-known, well-respected feminist scholar of color; one who has inspired my work and much of the work of my friends and colleagues. During the celebration of this scholar's contributions to the field of academic research, scholars, academics and researchers argued, publicly, over whether the honoree's contributions were in the form of theory (having enriched the scholarly canon with theoretical concepts and frameworks) or in speaking from her experience (from her location as a racialised woman, offering insightful gains for research in general). The room felt tense, divided, and very uncomfortable. That a woman of color's contributions to scholarship could be either theoretical or lived experience, but not both, angered quite a few attendees. That certain bodies in the room could even reduce her contributions to experience angered many others, who felt that the comments reflected the tendency of many western academics to pigeonhole women of color into experiential/emotional writers (Trinh, 1989). The assumption made (or inferred) by some was that the lived experience of a racialised woman in academia counted for something, but that it wasn't really "book knowledge" (hooks, 1994). Or, more to the point, that in speaking from her experiences, this scholar offered no other value than to occupy the role of the native informant (Khan, 2005) who "translates her culture for the researcher, the outsider" (p. 2023).

I would like to note here that this reflection does not disclaim or discredit the many white feminist researchers and scholars who might also have their scholarship be reduced to "experience;" nor for that matter to shadow what experience has meant (or not meant) to the field of research in general from any non-dominant group member. I simply want to trouble the multiple axes of power that for some, would reduce this racialised woman's scholarship merely to moments of experiential insight, as connected to and building upon what others before her have done and what others after her will continue to do. This analysis cannot be done independently of complicating the ontological and epistemological traditions that

secure what is knowledge and what is not knowledge, or more accurately, who is a knower and who is not a knower.

This paper seeks to examine the role of Eurocentrism, dominance, hegemony and colonialism in the production and re-production of “legitimate” knowledge and knowers in the western world. Using race-based epistemologies, I will argue that the subaltern body is socially, politically and racially marginalized so that they can never express their ways of knowing and reasoning without being “Othered,” oppressed and repressed, across time and space. However, I also argue that, while the racialised Other is marginalized, s/he is also a *necessary condition* for the continuation of colonial and epistemic violence in mainstream institutions. The acknowledgement of this position is not meant to destabilize movements by racialised groups (or any other oppressed groups for that matter) to challenge the epistemic violence of imperialism that powerful groups continue to defend. Conversely, it is a matter of identifying an epistemologically sound space for racialised bodies *in relation to dominance* that secures these “alternative” ways of knowing; that allows for a “racialised Other” to speak. As such, the role and rigor of dominance is central to race-based epistemologies, and central to this paper. To begin however, we must link Eurocentric, western dominance to its historical and ontological roots, specifically to understand the nature of reality upon which racial classifications are based.

Ontology of race

Scholars argue that in order to challenge racism in social research, we must be vigilant about deconstructing the nature of truth and reality upon which epistemologies are generally based (Anzuldua, 1987; Bernal, 2002; Canella & Lincoln, 2004; Denzin, 2002; Hill Collins, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2000, 2003; Pillow, 2000; and Soloranzo & Yosso, 2002). In her book on racialised and gendered bodies in institutions, Puwar (2004) states that colonialism is the foundation of the fully human, individual white male subject, the irrational woman, and the wild, uncivilized non-white figure. The onset of modernity validated pure rational thought as mind over body. In the European imperialist project – whites are associated with

the mind, the flight from the body. Non-whites (or savages) are associated with nature, wilderness, and the body (Puwar, 2004). Women, as irrational, are also “of their bodies,” but men are not. Logic and rationality thus become symbolically white and male (Puwar, 2004). The pre-capitalist, modern, European cognition also created the white master and the non-white slave (Anderson, 1991). The exclusion of non-whites and women as persons, as humans, begins in this moment of (non) racial and (non)gendered colonial dominance. Many black and Aboriginal scholars contend that defining racialised bodies as animalistic, natural, or non-human denies their subjectivity and perpetuates dominance (Cheney, 2005). “Black Marxism” also begins by tracing the ontology of official non-human, non-personhood that is the black body (Mills, 1998). Edward Said furthers the distinction between the fully rational white male and the non-human racial Other in *Orientalism*, the epistemological and ontological distinction that continues to exist between the west and the east. In the European idea of the Orient, the east is primitive, backwards, heathen, and uncivilized; the west is natural, civil, Christian, and normal. Expanding on Hegel’s constitution of the subject as needing to negate the very diversity it produces, Said’s western subject is constructed by mediation through the other; the west (as natural, normal) cannot exist without the primitive and backwards east (Yegenoglu, 1998). “I am because we are,” (Mills, 1998, p.11; and Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 257) the African saying, purports that the black body does not exist unless in relationship with others. As such, the denial of black existence is not individual; a black body does not exist because blacks as a group do not exist. “The non-existence is racial.” (Mills, 1998, p. 11)

For race-based epistemologies, social reality is constructed through a hegemonic lens that rejects the racialised Other (Anderson, 1991). European whiteness is taken as the norm (DeVault, 1999). This is rarely questioned. This social ontology of the world is not just about the racial non-human, non-whites, it is also about the unmarked, non-raced whites. Man’s relationship to the universe prevalent in white, male philosophy takes this natural, unmarked personhood for granted (Mills, 1998). The ontology involving the racial non-person, the existence of a racial hierarchy, and/or white supremacy as

“real” explains the exclusion of racialised bodies from several spaces, across time. For example, at the time of the Frankfurt School formation, Du Bois and Woodson (African American scholars) challenged the dominant European paradigm at the same time as Adorno, Marcuse, Weber and Horkheimer; yet they were not included in scholarly canon because they were seen to be “Negro” intellectuals, having “Negro” concerns with a “Negro” problem (Ladson-Billings, 2000; and Pascale, 2008). Hill Collins (1990) also states that central to many feminist scholars’ viewpoints is that women are objectified as sex objects by men because they are identified with nature. Stanfield (1985) states that the ontologies and epistemologies of the dominant group that have continued to dominate for hundreds of years become so deeply embedded in contemporary society that they are seen to be “natural,” rather than socially constructed throughout history. However, as Anderson (1991) argues, race and racial representations are not just social constructions; they have less to do with the “truth” and more to do with the material interests they serve.

Far from being part of the natural world, race has been a historically specific way of seeing and practice, linked in an ideological circle to the global extension of European domination. Race is the displacement of the will truth with a will to power (Hook, 2001). Western modernism and culture has deeply embedded normative assumptions and beliefs of the world and one’s (white, male) experiences in it (Bernal, 2002). It is in the context of hegemony and colonization that categories of race need to be situated, as during the rise of power the classification of race acquired its meaning as non-white, non-human, uncivilized. After hundreds of years, Anderson (1991) argues that the screen through which racialised groups are filtered has been subtly revised and recycled, not radically transcended (p. 246). As Mills (1998) states, “reality continues to be racialised.” (p. 11) It is in this vein that we need to examine what is the stable reality that constructs “race” as “truth” in race-based epistemologies.

Race-based epistemologies and dominance as a stable reality

Gunzenhauser and Gerstl-Pepin (2006) purport that epistemology “*is a theory of what gets to count as knowledge.*” (p. 332) From a race-based epistemological standpoint, when we ask the question, “Is racism real?” we also need to ask ourselves, “Who says that it is not?” and “Whose interests does it serve to say that it is not?” Or, from a race-based epistemological standpoint, we might ask in return, “Is dominance real?” As Mills (1998) poignantly states, the concern of what he calls “alternative epistemologies...will not be the problems of other minds but the problem of why women were not thought to have minds; not an investigation of the conditions under which individual memory is reliable but an investigation of the social conditions under which systematic historical amnesia about the achievements of African civilizations became possible; not puzzlement about whether physical objects exist but puzzlement about the cognitive mechanisms that make relational social properties appear under capitalism as reified intrinsic natural properties.” (p. 22) All of these concerns can be grounded in the social reality of the dominant white male as the knower, as the purveyor of “truth.” Bernal (2002) and Ladson-Billings (2000) state that the concept of epistemology is not just a way of knowing, but a *system* of knowing, having specific interests and worldviews which are validated, both internally and externally, through living and learning. Black feminist thought, as a race-based epistemology and as specialized knowledge, is one which rejects and opposes the European, white male as the universal knower (Hill Collins, 1990). Critical raced-gendered epistemologies such as Black feminist thought offer insights into various ways of knowing, living, and resisting in the world based on experiences of race and gender, as forms of oppression (Bernal, 2002). Hill Collins (1990) argues, however, that the universality of western epistemologies actually reflects the “interests of their creators,” (p. 15) and that this *standpoint of domination* obscures the questions of legitimacy or the right of oppressed groups to define and represent themselves (Bannerji, 1995; author’s emphasis). In fact, as Pascale (2008) affirms, we often find studies on race that reflect more about dominant hierarchies of

power than about people's experiences within them. As such, race-based epistemologies should not be considered "preferences," because they represent a conscious choice of liberation, self-determination, and human emancipation over hegemony (Gramsci, 1971). The work that these epistemologies seek to accomplish is premised on the socio-political agenda to challenge the hegemonic structures that sustain inequity and injustice. Rodriguez (2006) for example states that we must deconstruct Eurocentric and patriarchal ways (or systems) of knowing that have come to dominate our spaces. She also notes that in understanding the social ontology of the world as sustaining a racial hierarchy, we must use and promote the particular knowledge of racialised groups to decolonize our minds and make significant moves to challenge the exploitation and oppression that we as racialised bodies continue to experience.

However, as many scholars of color indicate, the point of race-based epistemologies is not to "color" the scholarship; not to claim to be the truth; or to dismiss European and Euro-American epistemologies. Race-based epistemologies challenge the epistemological practices and activities that naturalize western ways of thinking. Race-based epistemologies serve to de-center and contextualize western ways of thinking and knowing, to define their limits. They advocate that other forms of knowing and understanding need to be respected, included, in order to deconstruct past and resist future epistemological colonization (Bernal, 2002; Hill Collins, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Maffie, 2009; and Rodriguez, 2006). For example, "polycentric global epistemology," as noted by Maffie (2009) is premised on the survival of indigenous peoples and their knowledges, drawing heavily from "post-Eurocentric," "postcolonial," "feminist," and "emancipatory" scholars (p. 60). Maffie argues that unlike traditional truth seekers, who want to "find the facts" and discover the ways in which the world works, the "way-seekers" of a polycentric global epistemology search out forms of action to promote the socio-political goals of emancipation and liberation of women, working people, and indigenous peoples. Indigenous post-colonial scholars trouble the implicit domination inherent in questions like "Are indigenous beliefs

epistemologically justified?” and “Are indigenous peoples rational?” As an indigenous, post-colonial scholar, Maffie (2009, p. 59) asks: “Why do they ask these questions? Who bears the burden of proof? Who is in the position to demand self-validation, and from whom is self-validation being demanded? Whose concepts, standards, rules, and criteria govern this exchange?”

These questions reflect the role of dominance, as a stable reality, that race-based epistemologies must explicate and challenge in order to legitimize subaltern ways of knowing and living. As Mignolo (2002) argues, colonial difference inscribes a concept of knowledge in which “there can be no Others.” Yegenoglu (1998) asserts that production of knowledge and subjugation by colonial power are not operating in isolation from one another. The knower and the known cannot be independent of one another; to know is always to know on some pre-defined terms. Still, the social and ruling relations between a colonial investigator and the colonized reality rarely comes into question when assumptions are made and “truths” are claimed (Bannerji, 1995, pg. 55). Eurocentric epistemologies validate the perspectives of Europeans and/or Euro-Americans as the norm, while continuing to invalidate the experiences, ways of knowing and thinking of people of color (Bernal, 2002).

The role of ideology and discourse in knowledge production

Smith (1990, p. 83) argues that in the relationship of ruling and dominance to the construction of knowledge “ruling writes over subjectivities, experiences, and agencies of people in history.” Ermine (1995), Schrieber (2000) and Hunter (2002) each begin their work by challenging the ideology that western discoveries are the only valid sources of knowledge. Ermine (2005) further states that the exclusion of “Other” knowledges as truth by the dominant group is fundamental to the subjugation of Aboriginal peoples, and that we must first unpack the political and ideological function of the white male figure as the norm and the knower before moving forward with our goals of transformation. This brings us back to the ideological circle of whiteness and dominance. Here I would like to provide an example from a textual analysis I conducted

of the City of Toronto's Plan for the Elimination of Racism and Discrimination, to uncover the ideology and ruling relations that coordinate anti-racist legislative efforts "in one of the most diverse cities in the world." (Policy and Finance Committee, Report no. 3, Clause no. 3) The plan was sparked by the Ornstein Study "Ethno-Racial Inequality in the City of Toronto: Analysis of the 1996 Census," (2000) which concluded that for ethno-racial minorities with similar education, the level of unemployment and poverty is significantly higher than persons of European origin. To prepare the plan, the City of Toronto undertook over 50 consultation sessions across the city to gain input from its residents, community groups and organizations on how to combat racism and discrimination. Some of the comments from the consultations included "Since 9/11, Muslim is a euphemism for walking bomb;" "Racism is a growing problem in Toronto. How do I know? I know because the number of attacks on me keeps increasing" and "There is no safe place..." (There were many more comments reflecting experiences of racism in the city of Toronto, unfortunately too many to name here). The official Plan of Action was approved at the April 14th, 2003 meeting of Toronto City Council, prefaced with the following: "Diversity is a fundamental characteristic of our city. It gives Toronto strength through an ability to value, celebrate and respect differences. It is this recognition of diversity, which makes Toronto one of the most creative, caring and successful cities in the world." (Policy and Finance Committee Report no. 3, Clause No. 3, 2003, p. 20) There is a certain irony attached to writing that diversity makes Toronto one of the most caring cities in the world, in a report which seeks to eliminate racism and discrimination experienced by its residents. Those who experience being Muslim as being equated to a walking bomb, who experience increasing racial attacks, or who never feel safe, would hardly call the place in which they live "caring."

We need to ask ourselves what broader interests are served when these experiences of pain are consumed, pacified, and are made to fit within a pre-existing agenda. Instead of asking about what is revealed by authors in their texts, Foucault suggests we ask instead about what subject-positions are made possible within such texts; "discourse is not simply that which

translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle.” (Foucault, 1981, pp. 52-53) Foucault (1970) also describes discourses as being linked through various textual forms as an ideological force, shaping knowledge of the everyday world and interests in a particular way to reify conformity. The relationship between power, ideology, discourse and what passes as systems of knowledge in the west are perhaps nowhere more evident than classifications and hierarchies based on race (Anderson, 1991). As Stoler (1995) argues, power organizes knowledge in a way that justifies and re-produces historical, social, and racial distinctions and exclusions in the world. It is those who experience the effects of these classifications, who have distinct ways of knowing, that are continuously marginalized in the dominant, mainstream, western scholarly canon of epistemology. I offer that the (re-)production of hegemonic knowledge, in and across mainstream institutions, is dependent on *the presence and engagement of the racial Other*; that it is through multiple encounters with the racial Other and their ways of knowing that the western epistemological tradition reproduces and asserts itself, by continuing to draw false dichotomies between experience, or “stories”, and “truths” in knowledge-making.

We now move to what is considered knowledge in race-based epistemologies, with some caution. There are many epistemologies that can be considered to be race-based, but we must be conscious of the fact that there are multiple ways of knowing in racialised communities. To ascribe one way of knowing would be to essentialize racialised groups much in the same way that dominant groups do in order to “know” these groups better. For example, Aboriginal communities have distinct ways of knowing through the self, the spirit, and the unknown. Knowing becomes possible through the mysterious force that connects all life. *Mamatowan* is the self connected with this force. The connection with this force is the subjective experience which becomes knowledge (Ermine, 2005). In the Kwara’ae community, Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo (2001) also explain that sensory information is privileged, direct communication from ancestors and signs are sources of knowledge, and that knowledge is created through a dialogic –

through trial and error, through debating, questioning and analyzing evidence, and through “epiphany” moments (Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 2001). There is no “racialised Other” faction that we can make generalizations about, and it is also near impossible to account for the ways of knowing or what is considered knowledge in all racialised communities. What these race-based epistemologies do all share is their resistance to traditional, Eurocentric epistemological frameworks which assume neutrality, objectivity and/or universality. They all contend that these frameworks hide the actual nature of social relations founded upon racial constructs. Further to this, they all argue that race *is* relevant, that the subjectivity and experience of race is valid as knowledge. However, in light of the goal of this paper to explicate the role of dominance in the formation of race and race-based epistemologies, we will proceed in the direction of asking what is considered knowledge by reflecting on what dominant group(s) might say is *not* knowledge; that is, the subjective experience of being racially Othered.

Some will argue that experience in race-based epistemologies can be conflated with feminist standpoint; that positions, social locations and political struggles outside of the dominant group can advance knowledge in some way (Harding, 2004). I do not entirely disagree with this conflation. Standpoint theory deconstructs rational, scientific projects by “studying up - ” mapping the social relations and practices of power that continue to oppress women in different ways and the role of institutions in maintaining those relations. It also refutes the value-neutral, objective position that modern, western science continues to claim. Standpoint theory argues that no knowledge production could be immune to social influences (it is no coincidence that the sciences just “happen” to repeatedly support industrialization, European expansion, military conquest, and so on). Standpoint theory also asks which “problems” get to count as scientific ones in the first place (Harding, 2004, p. 32). All of these tenets (and others, I am sure) are commensurable with the value of experience in race-based epistemologies. What I would like to draw out here is the role of experience of in knowledge production, in race-based epistemologies, and in relation to dominance.

Moving across boundaries: the subjective, liminal experience

Earlier, I described an example in the City of Toronto to illustrate how the (re-)production of hegemonic knowledge, in and across mainstream institutions, is dependent on the presence and engagement of the racial Other. What is required here is an examination of how the “knower” attempts to contain encounters with the racial Other; encounters which force a constant state of re-negotiation of what counts as “stories” and “truths” in knowledge-making, in specific times and contexts. Du Bois’ notion of double-consciousness is central to the value of experience in race-based epistemologies (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Ladson-Billings (2000) describes this double-consciousness position as not one of marginalization and oppression but as an *advantage* that racialised bodies have in positions of exclusion and inclusion, having viewpoints from the margins and the mainstream. Wynter (1992) calls this position liminal; between two worlds or states of understanding. I argue that this position is pivotal to the deconstruction and dismantling of the white, western knower. It is through this position that we can uncover, as Fanon (1952) suggests, how the white man constructs the black man, but also how the white man (as knower) constructs the white man through the black man (he who is to be known, and negated). This position is not due to inherent racial difference (i.e. not from experiences of racism, per se) but from the constructed Otherness that moves racialised bodies beyond the conception of self/Other that is inherent in the construction of the white, male subject as the norm. To revisit Hegel and Said, the white male subject constructs himself by negating the other. The racialised subject, however, cannot be constructed out of the negation of the white male subject, because *if he negates the white subject, he no longer exists as the racialised Other*. Ladson-Billings (2000) suggests that double consciousness does not only apply to racialised groups but to all marginalized groups who find themselves on the fringes of the mainstream. For example, we will find more women identifying themselves as feminists than men because women have greater experience with the consequences of gender oppression in mainstream

society (Hill Collins, 1990). We can also use the example of people from the poor or working class. They have perspectives on their own experiences, yet they also come to know the dominant class by interacting and participating in how the dominant class functions (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Similarly, while racialised groups have their own experiences as racialised bodies, they also must acquire knowledge and practices of the dominant group, at least minimally. The point of this liminal perspective is that it can reveal insight into how the dominant group operates, through power, to distort realities of the Other in order to maintain and reify that power, and to keep subordinate groups out of the mainstream (Ladson-Billings, 2000).

Mills (1998) argues that some experiences lay outside the dominant group's grasp, and that the defense to be articulated by alternative epistemologies is that a marginalized group's access to multiple perspectives and experiences gives her/him a wider-angle view of the social world. As such, racialised bodies do not present something new; they present something familiar from a different angle. Liminality, and the experiences in liminal spaces, offer counter-hegemonic knowledge of, and liberation from, the socially and racially constructed classifications, distinctions and exclusions in the Western epistemological tradition, and provide insight into how and why certain bodies come to be marked as "storytellers," in the academy and beyond. Furthermore, it is through liminality, in particular the multiple and embodied experiences of being marked as "storyteller," that the repeated co-options of difference into a logic of sameness are brought to light. I contend that this undermines western epistemological hegemony, by exposing its anxieties and limitations as an absolute site of truth and power.

Limits of experience – if one person says it, can it be true?

What is important here is not necessarily what racialised bodies feel, innately, is a limit of their experience, but rather how dominance constructs limitations of experiences of the Other to reify their own positions of power. The irony of the critique against experience and stories as knowledge is in the idea that dominance has nothing to do with experience or storytelling.

Delgado (1993) notes that “majoritarians tell stories too. But the ones they tell – about merit, causation, blame, responsibility, and social justice do not seem like stories at all, but the truth.” (p. 666) Bernal (2002) responds to those who disapprove of using stories for knowledge production by stating that it is interesting that critics do not acknowledge how Eurocentrism as a dominant perspective circulates and re-circulates mainstream stories about race, which constitute knowledge. These stories, however, are seen as “facts” because of the invisibility and dominance of white privilege and Eurocentrism. As such, criticisms against stories and experience as knowledge often end up being critiques against alternative ways of knowing (Bernal, 2002). Furthermore, as Ladson-Billings (2000) argues, just because research communities have started to move away from positivist, scientific ways of knowing to more qualitatively-based investigations which involve narratives and/or storytelling does not mean that academic disciplines will be receptive to all kinds of stories, or that all stories will be considered as knowledge.

Questions often asked of racialised and Indigenous scholars are: if one person says it, can it be true? How do we know that the story is legitimate? To answer this, we must return to the role and rigor of dominance in race-based epistemologies. As Campbell and Manicom (1995) state, to begin with the everyday experience is not to set out to claim that experience is “real,” but to locate the meaning of that experience beyond the local setting. We do not look to experience to understand individual meanings and intentions, but to understand what ruling relations and dominance shape the experience, and others’ experiences in similar ways. Campbell and Gregor (2004) also argue that we should not be looking for some kind of bias in the individual knower, because it is her/his experience that will offer us insight into how power operates, whose interests are served, and how knowing is organized. What is important here is the work that scholars do to turn a critical gaze on dominance, to expose hierarchies based on race (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Stories from racialised groups can reveal a lot about hierarchies based on race that shape their lived experiences but they can also identify

moments of transformation and solidarity that can be carried across racial boundaries. Hill Collins (1990), for example, notes the importance of establishing connections with other subordinated groups with standpoints from the margins, such as white women, black men, and other people of color. Subordinated groups have their own partial, situated knowledge and perspectives (meaning that there is no one truth “out there” to be uncovered) linked to the contexts in which they are created. If these perspectives are shared (Hill Collins calls this “pivoting the center,”) we can see how hegemonic structures and representations are insufficient in our own lives and the lives of others. We can better understand how hegemonic views are also partial and situated, and that the supremacy of one way of knowing should be challenged.

Knowing in place

The question of who is a knower in race-based epistemologies is also a challenging one. For example, Hunter (2002) offers examples of five racial epistemologies that represent some ways of knowing in research on race in society. Each of the five epistemologies has a different knower, or rather, a different perspective on knowing. For example, in the Black/White epistemology, the knower is African American; yet in the Assimilationist epistemology, first generation immigrants who have successfully assimilated into the dominant group are knowers (Hunter, 2002). Again, it is dangerous to make the assumption that there is one definitive knower across all race-based epistemologies. However, drawing on Black feminist thought, I will make the argument that racialised bodies have distinct ways of knowing, and as such, racialised bodies should be central to work on race and knowledge.

Hill Collins (1990) carefully states that not anyone can produce Black feminist thought. I say carefully because Hill Collins wants to separate biology from knowing, “separation of biology from ideology must be made” (p. 20) while at the same time reconciling that Black feminist thought cannot be produced in isolation from the Black women who experience multiple layers of oppression based on gender and race: “a definition of Black feminist thought must also avoid the idealist position that ideas can be evaluated in isolation from the groups

that create them. Definitions claiming that anyone can produce and develop Black feminist thought risks obscuring the special angle of vision that Black women bring to the knowledge production process.” (p. 21) As Hill Collins argues, non-academic knowledge is also “expert” knowledge, created by African American women in their everyday lives.

Central to Black feminist thought is that Black women need to be leaders in producing knowledge about their lives. Relying on other epistemologies in which “outsiders” produce knowledge of marginalized groups, regardless of intent, only perpetuates the de-centering of lived experience that racialised and other subordinate groups are trying to privilege (Hill Collins, 1990). This does not mean that others cannot participate in the production of knowledge; it means that people who actually live a certain reality and have experience in that reality should be central to producing knowledge of that reality. We can make the same argument for Aboriginal communities, who also have distinct ways of knowing and living. Ermine (2005) argues that western ways of knowing that rely on the physical “outer space” alone are fragmentary and limited, and they restrict and displace the capacity for holistic thinking in Aboriginal communities. From a race-based epistemological perspective, we would privilege the knowledge produced by an Aboriginal knower above knowledge produced about an Aboriginal community by a white male, or by any “outsider” for that matter. From a race-based epistemological perspective, this does not mean that Aboriginal communities cannot co-produce knowledge about their ways of knowing with outsiders, it simply means that knowledge cannot be produced about Aboriginal ways of knowing without an Aboriginal knower. As Campbell and Gregor (2004) argue, knowing requires a body and a consciousness. This “embodied knowing” affirms the value of subjective, lived experience, and rejects Eurocentric, male-centered systems of knowledge production.

Objectivity versus subjectivity – the racial structure and experience in the body

Many scholars argue over whether race is objective or subjective. Omi & Winant (2005) maintain that the concept of race is significant and fluid in its meaning, despite centuries of

effort by western thinkers to package it as an ideological construct or an objective condition. This notion of race as an “objective condition” evolved with European Enlightenment. Scholars argue that western knowledge is significantly limited by defining race as an objective condition because it fails to account for history, the social construction of race, as well as multiple meanings in identity (Hill Collins, 1990; and Omi & Winant, 2005). Bernal (2002) also argues that race/ethnicity or gender are not static, essentialist, or unchangeable. Instead they should be looked at as constantly shifting in relation to the social order, which creates the experiences central to a critical race-gendered epistemology. However, objectivity and race continue to be contested and debated by scholars and between academic disciplines. I hope to unpack some of the debates here, for my own clarification and to better understand how dominance invokes the racial object. To begin, we will return to the ontology of race; the fully human, individual white male subject, the irrational woman, and the wild, uncivilized non-white figure.

As noted earlier, from the modern period, non-whites (or savages) are associated with nature, wilderness, and the body. Women, as irrational, are also “of their bodies”, but men are not (Puwar, 2004). The body (and being “of” the body) is central to the argument made by some racialised scholars that the black body is seen as an object. Hook (2006) for example states that black bodies in particular are the objects and symbols which continue to confirm disembodied whiteness. Mills (1998) argues that the black body is the material standpoint, “what incarnates one’s differential positioning in the world.” (p. 16) Mills also notes that the woman of color experiences double hegemony in their bodies; experiencing the sexism that values women most for their bodies and the racism that promotes white beauty as standard. Hill Collins (1990) discusses the objectification of Black women as Other, as objects to be measured and controlled for western thinking. In her book *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, bell hooks (1989, p. 9) writes that Black women learning to speak from an oppressed, colonized position, to “talk back”, means “an expression of our movement, from object to subject, and to gain a form of liberated voice.” Mills (1998) also argues that

the question of “What can I know?” excludes the subperson and the body it occupies (p. 17). The body is the object which indicates subpersonhood along racial lines. Mills discusses the various ways in which whites have confirmed racialised bodies’ subpersonhood, through appropriating Native and African languages, ways of knowing, customs, land and property; without any acknowledgement (1998). Hegel’s defense of European slavery, positing it as a civilizing influence which increased human feeling amongst Negroes who had no history or culture to begin with, is another way in which the subperson is invoked (Mills, 1998, p. 78). This notion of subpersonhood is projected in many ways, from the higher levels of unemployment and poverty for racialised bodies (Ornstein, 2000), to the continuing subjugation and violence performed on Aboriginal communities (St. Denis, 2004), to the racial profiling of Muslim men and relentless de-veiling efforts towards Muslim women (Yeegenoglu, 1998). Hook (2006) contends that in these moments, racism never loses sight of the body. Mills (1998) also argues that the continued subjugation of racialised bodies, historically structured across time and space, become naturalized by “*the objective logic of the racial system.*” (p. 88)

If the body is the object of race, then what, or who, is the subject? I argue that the experience of the connection to one’s racialised body is what determines the subjectivity of race. For example, Hill Collins (2000) and Rodriguez (2006) note that Black women continue to be connected, in the white mind, to the image of the welfare mother. The Black, female body as an object is what constructs this connection in the white mind. How the Black female experiences this connection is something different. One can speak to the social relations that make this connection without necessarily having embodied knowledge. What a Black woman provides is her own experience within that reality. The Black woman’s standpoint exists in this situation as characterized by dominance. She occupies a position from the margins and at the crossroads of race and gender, a perspective that only she can provide.

Epistemological racism

A major objective of this paper has been to demonstrate the dimensions of race-based epistemologies and how dominance actively shapes the experiences and stories that we wish to center. However, we must also be cognizant of how race-based epistemologies come to be included in critical academic scholarship. Mignolo (2002) states that epistemology is not ahistorical. Mignolo's concept of "border thinking" is also helpful when discussing race-based epistemologies in education. A double bind is created by western philosophy's political and cultural domination across the globe. African philosophy, for example, either needs to be so similar to western philosophy that it eventually gets discounted, or so different that its genuineness will always be in doubt. Subaltern epistemology as such must be somewhat commensurable with western philosophy yet at the same time reject a re-colonization of subaltern knowledge and its properties. Mignolo (2002) argues that this double bind is what invokes "border thinking," and what eventually shapes epistemologies from a subaltern perspective (p. 71).

In the context of these discussions of the role and rigor of dominance, it is important to discuss "epistemological racism" (a term coined by Scheurich and Young, 1997) in research. Epistemological racism goes beyond issues of individual racism, societal racism, and institutional racism. Scheurich and Young (1997) contend that in our work as researchers it is critical to consider whether the epistemologies we use are racially biased. As such, we need to look at the epistemologies we use and endorse from a civilizational racism perspective. This level of racism troubles the values and assumptions that we hold in our ontologies (the nature of reality), our epistemologies (the ways of knowing that reality), and our morals and ethics (axiologies). Scheurich and Young state that "epistemological racism means that our current range of research epistemologies, positivism to postmodernisms/post-structuralisms, arise out of the social history and culture of the dominant race; that these epistemologies logically reflect and reinforce that social history and that racial group (while excluding the epistemologies of other races/cultures)." (p. 8) Most, if not all of the epistemologies currently legitimated in

academia do not arise out of the histories of racialised groups. This is not to say that those who employ a range of epistemologies from positivism to post-structuralism are racist. It says something about the “natural” (see: dominance as natural) tendencies to use epistemologies from the social and historical experiences of whites. We need to ask ourselves what negative consequences this might have for people of colour, as well as scholars of colour.

Conclusion

Racialised scholars and researchers must learn and apply mainstream epistemologies to their work, in circles that mostly exclude or reject alternative ways of knowing (Scheurich and Young, 1997). The critical tradition (those who reject the idea of objective knowledge) is mainly made up of ontologies, epistemologies, and axiologies created by white scholars, which are situated in their own histories, from what Stanfield (1985) contends are “European-derived paradigms.” (p. 399) These histories have traditionally excluded racialised bodies. Scholars from the critical tradition may argue that they do include “new” race-based epistemologies. The point argued by Scheurich and Young is that these race-based epistemologies need to be legitimated, reviewed and discussed at the same level and with the same efforts as dominant epistemologies are reviewed and discussed, not simply on an ad-hoc basis (1997). We cannot just rely on scholars and researchers of color to “supplement our epistemological basket.” I believe that we need to take this one step further. As critical scholars we also need to deconstruct the epistemologies of the critical tradition and the epistemologies we choose to use in our own work. Research epistemologies in the critical tradition can also legitimize studies of the “Other” by western, white intellectuals. Not only are these epistemologies used to reproduce colonial interventions which seek to “know” the Other, in order to legitimize the historical and racial truths and knowledge that make up western, hegemonic scholarship; they also reject racialised scholars and/or scholarship through the assumption that neither are theoretically rich, distinct, *or even necessary* in the sphere of knowledge-making in the global context. We should be asking what racial, gendered, or other

subordinate violence we are re-circulating by legitimating these methods. This requires an active dismantling and dissecting of the epistemological frameworks and white supremacist thinking that we identify with, which we must be prepared to do. I offer that by centering the role of white supremacy in the critical tradition, we can come to understand how research epistemologies are employed to reinforce and normalize the legitimacy of the white, western scholar. It is not the case, by applying a lens of critical white supremacy, that we necessarily assume that everyone is racist. Nor is it the case that white supremacy should be the only lens in which research epistemologies are filtered through. The goal of critical white supremacy, as a political and theoretical framework, is to explicitly draw out the racial character of systems. Critical white supremacy explicates how histo-racial ordering privileges or disadvantages individuals and groups across the globe, structures race(ist) relationships, and structures systems to be advantageous to whites. Through white supremacy, “what seems like a neutral starting point is actually already normatively loaded.” (Mills, 1998, p. 106)

Here I return to my reflection that I noted at the beginning of this paper. The idea that experience was what made this celebrated feminist scholar of color who she was, and that experience was her most valuable contribution to scholarly canon, is steeped in colonial thinking, and is dangerously simplistic and strategic. In addition to this, as Scheurich and Young (1997) state, “that scholars of color have successfully become epistemologically bi-cultural to survive as scholars is a testament to them – their strength, their courage, their perseverance, and their love of scholarship – rather than a testament to the race/culture-free nature of mainstream research epistemologies (p. 9). Our ways of knowing (and the dominant paradigms that shape them) need to be deconstructed and de-raced in critical scholarship, and the embodied experiences and liminal positions of racialised scholars are pivotal not only to the decolonization of knowledge production, but also to our efforts to challenge the production and normalization of power and privilege.

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