THE SUBJECTS OF OBLIVION
Subalterity, sanism, and racial erasure

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As Sherene Razack has described,

When we depend on storytelling, either to reach each other across differences or to resist patriarchal and racist constructs, we must overcome at least one difficulty: the difference in position between the teller and the listener, between telling the tale and hearing it … wherever storytelling is used, that it should never be used uncritically, and that its potential as a tool for social change is remarkable, provided we pay attention to the interpretive structures that underpin how we hear and how we take up the stories of oppressed groups.

(Razack 1998:36–37)

I often find myself thinking about my connections and affinities to Mad Studies, critical disability studies, studies of colonialism and critical race theory in research, teaching and in practice. I remember sitting at an event on white privilege where an all-white panel took turns sharing stories of how they learned about their unearned sane, abled, gendered, class privilege and histories complicit with racism. They did this through expressions of guilt, acknowledging the privilege attached to their obliviousness and how systems of education as well as structures around them contributed to how this was possible. As they spoke, I recall feeling a mix of sadness and rage. A feeling that is all too familiar. I thought about how my entire life has been forged within the relations that they seemed oblivious to in my world around me. My experiences of racism in schools, by police, in mental health and healthcare, as a child of immigrants to Canada from Guyana. I felt that teaching others that they were oblivious to these contemporary forms of discrimination and violence often set up a situation where trainings and workshop are the answer. This answer is inadequate.

Often, I attend to the confluence of problematic themes that flow together from common historical trajectories that are still maintained within professional distinctions, pedagogical practice, policy, law and totalizing regimes of taxonomic knowing (Joseph 2016).

I am drawn to the ways perspectives and experiences that are lived realities have been engaged for their fundamental disruptive power to dominance and subjectivity with the intent of transformation (LeFrançois et al. 2013; Faulkner 2017; Castrodale 2017; Ingram 2016; Aho
et al. 2017). I am also drawn to consideration of how historical discourses of innocence are forged and claimed through the appropriation of this counter-knowledge (Beresford and Russo 2016). This is carried out by the same structures of dominance and oppression that have historically erased the histories, lives, knowledge and experiences of people who are the very subjects and objects of these erasures and extractions (Russo & Beresford 2015; Voronka 2017).

I have learned a great deal from those who have calculated through experience how to speak back into the darkness of their own erasure, the ways in which these erasures are deeply connected to historical projects of incarceration, eugenics, eradication, and genocide (Ingram 2016; Leblanc & Kinsella 2016; Ben-Moshe et al. 2014; Reville & Church 2012; Sweeney 2016; Friedlander 2001). I have also learned a great deal from those who have shared the importance of attending to how these practices, social relations, discourses and technologies have become embedded within contemporary manifestations of professions, their regimes of knowledge, and pedagogical practices (Poole et al. 2012; Thomson 2010; Liegghio 2013; Joseph 2019; Kanani 2011; Patel 2014).

What I continue to struggle with are the ongoing forms of historical erasure/exclusion/silence that continue to carry out the work of global projects of elimination and how some of these practices are still quite connected to historical/contemporary projects of racial and eugenic projects of eradication (Pickens 2019; Mitchell & Snyder 2003; Meerai et al. 2016; Gramaglia 2009; Smith 2014). All of this is also deeply connected to me.

When confronted with ableism, sanism, eugenics, and white supremacy a common response is to acknowledge how oblivious some people, professions, disciplines and forms of knowledge are, and this then becomes a distancing from complicity. This is frequently presented as individualized privilege, bias and stigma, sometimes implicit or unconscious rather than systemic and structural infrastructure established to perpetuate ongoing forms of transnational denial and colonial violence (Belenen 2016; Howe 2010; Graham 2016; Torino 2018; Case & Rios 2017; Bamgbade et al. 2016; Schwartz 2019).

Often the language of invisibility is associated with white, sanist, ableist privilege. A continuation of the pedagogical practice of Peggy McIntosh encouraging an audience (presumed to be white) to unpack their privileges in order to see them and appreciate them (McIntosh 1988, 2015). Leslie Margolin among others has directly named how this pedagogical formation, while intended to challenge racism, produces complacency (2015). Specifically, as a method of anti-Blackness Margolin notes that,

by focusing on personal identity (whites’ personal identity) over institutional structures, by paying more attention to whites’ experiences than to Blacks’, by falsely claiming that the confession of white privileges leads to social action beneficial to Blacks, and by restoring and expanding whites’ sense of moral righteousness.

(2015:1)

I would argue that this ethos is continued with Robin DiAngelo’s commentary on white fragility highlighting how white reactions of “anger, fear, and guilt and behaviours such as argumentation, silence, and withdrawal” when confronted with racism are a product of the fact that people who are white are intolerant of “racial stress” in daily life and this is “born of superiority and entitlement” (2018:2).

I am concerned with how these ideas continue to supplant the perspectives of those who do not experience racism as invisible, who do not see reactions of anger to naming racism as fragility but active manifestations of projects of complicit erasure, denial and violence. These projects not only participate in the manufacturing of innocence broadly, they do so in very
concrete ways. Specifically, these projects enable the continuation of historical projects of
eugenics and racial erasure via their reliance on discourses of obliviousness as an individualized
product, while maintaining control over the forms of knowledge, voice and experience per-
missible in these conversations (by overdetermining that which might be required to be known
in order to confront the invisible). This process contributes to the ejection of subjects outside
of the realm of what is most often rendered for palatability, and consumption for innocence-
making – who are rendered as unknowable, unseen, rendered into oblivion.

Here, I intend to highlight how Mad Studies, critical disability studies, critical race theory
and perspectives on colonialism via intergenerational knowing, can and do contribute to peda-
gogical practices that undermine a focus on obliviousness that renders the Other into oblivion
by challenging the historiographies of invisibility/innocence as ongoing projects of white
supremacy. This pedagogical practice also provides a way of exemplifying how Mad Studies,
critical disability studies, critical race theory and postcolonial, decolonization studies can be
applied in practice, in teaching for transformative ends.

Invisibilizing complicities and manufacturing innocence through
obliviousness

In Mad Studies, histories and experiences of those who challenge psy disciplines often evade a
presentation of violence by exposing ongoing forms of dehumanization and violence as sym-
bolic, epistemic, relational, individual, systemic and structural. When I was a teenager and
was taken to hospital and was immediately treated with Narcan (Naloxone – the anti-opiod
overdose drug) as an assumption that I had overdosed, and later questioned about my parents’
abilities, I was able to put my experience into a broader context. A context that appreciates
the racial assumptions that are automated within professional mental health and health practice
(Nestel 2012; Metzl 2010; Keating 2016).

When learning about critical race theory, I learned about how racism is instituted in daily
life, in law, and space. When I was pulled over too many times to count while driving to my
placement in grad school, I was able to look back on this while thinking about why. Was it
because I was driving past Westmount Golf and Country Club, did I stand out driving through
that white neighborhood? Was I going too fast every day? These ideas already had roots. Was
I really that bad of a kid in elementary school? Reading Charles Mills (2014), bell hooks (2003),
Patricia Hill Collins (2002), Kim Crenshaw (1990), Sherene Razack (1998) and Derrick Bell
(2004) helped me appreciate historical continuities and structures that can be challenged and
that are acknowledged as having life and death consequences. I challenged my driving charges
after the fact and won. My parents called a race relations counsellor who confronted my prin-
cipal and teacher in my elementary school, and I was moved into another class. In my example,
I survived, I am still alive.

Through critical disability studies, I learned that my experiences with my mothers’ progres-
sive supranuclear palsy, and being denied basic human dignity were not isolated incidents related
to particular individuals but deeply connected to systems of dehumanization, and institution-
alization, problems of access and professionalism over experience (Castrodale 2017; Nabbali
2009; Beresford 2000).

Through studies of colonialism I learned about how Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak
(1988) transformed the Gramscian concept of the subaltern referring to those who have been
historically jettisoned outside the lines of social mobility across the globe and often at the same
time have been forced to internalize interests outside of (and often oppositional to) their own
interest. When attempting to trace change and erasures by attending to the lived experiences
of those rendered historically invisible, complexities continue to entangle the relations through which we are forced to be strategic about how we navigate existing oppressive, violent systems and structures, while not serving them. Simultaneously, we need to be ever critical of positions taken under the banner of resistance that perpetuate ongoing outcomes of oblivion. I thought about this concept of the subaltern specifically in relation to those who have been historically and contemporality speaking back into the voids rendered through colonial projects of obliviousness and innocence making.

Spivak also used the term “sanctioned ignorance” in her book *Death of a Discipline* (2003) and Eber Hampton talks about “perverse ignorance” in the book, *The Circle Unfolds* (1995). I thought about how I never learned about slavery and indentureship and colonialism, my histories or my stories and how these are still rendered into oblivion or crafted into palatable products for consumption divorced from ideas of complicity and ongoing violence to address white able, sane obliviousness. I think about Sarah Isabel Wallace’s work on South Asian immigration exclusion based on ideas of fitness and that immigrants carry some sort of contaminating hereditary defectiveness and how this is also bound to histories that saw us as beast of burden, and carriers of lack, to be eradicated through eugenic policy, practice and law (2017). I also think about Achille Mbembe’s idea of necropolitics, that appreciates that “to exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power” (2008:152).

I am grateful for all these contributions and analyses. I sought them out and continue to do so as they help me to cope, struggle with, frame and interrogate the ways in which I am made to feel that my experiences are a series of coinciding products of individual bias or discrimination. Common to them are the critical practice of storytelling for transformation.

My ongoing struggle is to appreciate the confl uences of analyses and ideas that help me to name my experience within nationalist and transnational context across time and space.

I think about how my experiences with my mom’s progressive supranuclear palsy, racism in school, racism by police, racism in mental health and healthcare, someone screaming at my dad to go back to his country in a drive through, writing the n word on his license plate, these all already had roots related to the practices that render subjects into oblivion.

My great-grandmother was born on a boat named *Temple*, which sailed from Calcutta to Guyana in 1889. On my grandfather’s birth certificate, she is identified by the boat she was born on and a registration number without a last name. Her history is actively suppressed by the technologies of eradication that actively authorized dehumanization for the specific purposes of colonial nation building and exploitation. She was brought over with a group of indentured labourers to toil in sugar cane fields. With indentureship, colonialism and empire came the erasure of languages, the supplanting of faith, belief, religion and knowledge, inferiorization, dehumanization and abject humiliation. Extreme poverty and subjugation also came with disease, violence experienced inside and outside the home, systemic alcohol use tied to sugar production, and structural exclusion. My mother grew up in a shack on stilts with cow dung flooring, whose survival depended on a story rendered into oblivion by the intentional obliviousness of the powers that crafted our circumstance. All of these tied to global projects of conquest, colonial, eugenics and national building and the establishment of human hierarchy. I have come to appreciate that this is not a story for consumption nor innocence making, but one that helps me challenge historiographies from the place of oblivion. A key contribution by subaltern studies specifically has been the contestation of erasures within historiographies of change. Rather than accepting the dominant discourses of change as transitions or progressions, we must actively work to name these as sites of struggle or “confrontation”. This critical
acknowledgement positions these conversations in relation to broader contexts and “histories of domination and exploitation” (Guha & Spivak 1988:3). As Spivak notes, “The most significant outcome of this revision or shift in perspective is that the agency of change is located in the insurgent or the ‘subaltern’” (Guha & Spivak 1988:3). This form of attention resists appropriating maneuvers by hegemonic entities that claim progress, exploit identity and experience, and operate to reclaim positions of innocence or obliviousness to avoid transformation. It acknowledges that our circumstances of racism in daily life are bound to histories that crafted a people worthy of death and argued that this was all necessary for a more supreme people to exist.

I also think about this as someone who, worked for mental health, criminal justice and immigration organizations and agencies complicit with systems of violence that reproduce ideas of human hierarchy and professional innocence. I have come to appreciate that my own experiences are places of knowing. That Mad Studies, critical disability studies, critical race studies and studies of colonialism were a way to help me grapple with this aspect of my own struggles for liberation. I was intergenerationally born into violence rather than coming to know it afterwards via a profession or discipline and field of study. I am also complicit in ongoing practices of historical and contemporary obliviousness and innocence making that are deeply connected to colonial relations of racial and eugenic eradication.

In my research, teaching and practice I now wield this respect for intergeneration, transnational contexts of necropolitics alongside the fields that have also respected the voices, knowledges and experiences of those deemed mad, the subaltern, those actively worked against in a-historical, individual, simply local ways and into oblivion. This begins with critically reappraising historiographies of ableism, sanism, white supremacy as a confluence actively working to forge subjects of oblivion. This begins from intergenerationally lived experience and embodied knowing as epistemic disobedience. Not within an innocence-making project nor through the confrontation of obliviousness in consumable ways but rather to undermine these projects across professional and disciplinary hegemonies, while actively confronting complicity. I have learned to listen and look into the erasures of oblivion and see histories of survival and struggle, of nuanced complexities of intergenerational transnational emancipation. These are the stories I want to tell, stories resistant to appropriation, and consumption but with transformative potential.

References


The subjects of oblivion


