UNAFFIRMATIVE ACTIONS: LESSONS ON REFUSAL, RACISM, AND YOUTH RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT
We are all girls of colour attending an independent secondary school in downtown Toronto, where we learn from a majority white teaching and guidance staff, despite having a racially diverse student and city population. We used our school as an example of what we view as a widespread problem, both in our personal experiences in Toronto and as researched throughout Canada and the United States: a lack of racial diversity in secondary school faculty. Using youth participatory action research methodologies, we set out to investigate the source of this problem at our school, but instead encountered refusal and evasion by school administration and teachers of colour. They appeared to use various defense tactics to avoid acknowledging racism in our society. We categorized the ways staff refused and evaded our study into three groups: dismissiveness, rationalization, and sugarcoating. Our study became an example of the difficulties of youth research and of trying to subvert constructs like the teacher-student hierarchy.

KEYWORDS
participatory action research, critical race theory, youth, educators, teachers, racism, youth participatory action research, youth research

INTRODUCTION
In the fall of 2016, one of the three researchers started the new academic year enrolled in a politics class. A few classes later, she dropped out, telling her guidance counsellor that she did not feel that the course interested her and that she would be too busy during the school year for the extra course anyhow. What she did not feel comfortable mentioning to the white counsellor was the fact that an hour beforehand, her white teacher had refused to let her, a student of colour, express her opinion and perspective on racism in the context of state politics, making her realise the racism of the teacher and lose interest in the class. Frustrated by her experiences, she began to wonder why so many of her high school teachers were white, and why such few were of colour.

The City of Toronto’s motto is “Diversity, Our Strength.” Canadians pride ourselves on our country’s acceptance and diversity, but institutions like universities are still primarily made up of white faculty (Henry et al., 2017). The three authors of this article are researchers and girls of colour attending an elite, independent secondary school in downtown Toronto, where we see an
overwhelmingly large ratio of white to non-white teaching staff and guidance counsellors. The diversity of our city and student body are not reflected in our teachers. This problem is not exclusive to our school; we are aware that other schools in Canada and the United States have a similar disproportionality. For example, Bree Picower found that in the U.S., 90% of preschool teachers are white (2009)¹. This points to a greater trend that our school follows: that there are in general more white teachers and white teaching staff than there are of colour.

We counted only seven teachers of colour out of 59 teachers during the 2016-2017 academic year, and we have not seen a single person of colour hired as a guidance counsellor or social worker in at least the past six years. As girls of colour ourselves, we have felt the impact of the lack of teachers of colour at our school personally. A lack of diversity leads to feelings of isolation in students of colour, as well as a lack of differing perspectives for all students to learn from. Having teachers of colour is important to us especially because they act as role models and have an inherent understanding of our identities that white teachers do not. They can also introduce different viewpoints as people of colour and lend these perspectives and opinions credibility through their position of power.

With all these advantages, then, why has there not been a noticeable movement toward hiring teachers of colour? Picower found that U.S. teaching demographics are unlikely to change because of the fact that 80%-93% of teaching students are white, and that they themselves are taught by staff that are 88% white (2009)². This may not necessarily mean that people or institutions are uninterested in the idea of diversifying their staff populations, but still may reflect an unconscious bias and preference for sameness and whiteness—white admissions and hiring staff continually admit and hire other white people (Essed & Goldberg, 2002; Smith, 2016). In fact, as Shumona Michelle Ray found, in Canadian universities, diversity rhetoric does not reflect practice despite decades of equity initiatives. In Canadian teachers’ colleges, issues of racism and other such issues were

¹. We could not find more recent data, nor any research on Canada -- which demonstrates a greater problem in that statistics on racial diversity are not collected, which means that others are also likely having difficulty studying it.
². We apply Picower’s American research to Toronto because of the similarities between the two countries’ societies and cultures.
not recalled to have been addressed (2007). This created an interestingly layered, but difficult and contradictory environment for us to research within—with participants claiming to support diversity initiatives, but at the same time fighting against the idea that there even is a problem. Through our research, we discovered the ways white people and people of colour alike avoid talking about racism, which we classified into three strategies: dismissiveness, sugarcoating, and rationalization. We use critical race theory to inform our analysis and discussion. Our results were coloured by the power differential between us as students and youth researchers, and our teachers as adult and teacher subjects. Through our study, we realised the difficulties of youth research, but learned how to navigate institutions to gain credibility and feel satisfied with our results. We aim to support other youth researchers with the publishing of this paper.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND FRAMEWORK

We carried out this study as part of a youth participatory action research (yPAR) project in collaboration with the University of Toronto’s Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) and its Youth Research Lab. yPAR is a youth-centered research methodology that analyses social issues and inequities from the perspective of young people, on the basis that these unique outlooks provide important insights into matters that are otherwise mostly unheard. yPAR enables young students to examine issues that directly affect their lives, as well as generate ideas and methods to resolve them (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Our project was facilitated by three scholars at University of Toronto, who helped us learn research methodologies and frameworks, as well as support us throughout the research process during the school year.

We planned to collect data by (1) analysing documents and statistics relating to racial diversity from our school, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), and the Canadian Accredited Independent Schools (CAIS), (2) running a focus group of self-identified teachers of colour, and (3) surveying administrators at our school, OISE, TDSB, and CAIS. We received no responses to requests for documents from outside of our school, and were told by our school administration that no such documents existed; they instead requested that we interview the principal, head of human resources, and head of academics. We used our survey questions, as approved by the University of Toronto’s Research Ethics Board, in the interviews as well:

- Please describe the overall hiring process.
- Where do you advertise?
• What is required in the application?
• What do you look for? Describe your ideal candidate.
• How does the final decision work? Who makes it?
• At [our school], there are more white teachers and counsellors than people of colour. At OISE, there are more white students than students of colour. This is disproportionate to Toronto as a whole, which is very racially diverse. Why do you think that this disproportion exists?
• Do you think that the disproportion is a problem?
• If you could, would you try to increase diversity to match Toronto’s? Why or why not?
• If yes, what would you change? Why? What impact do you think it would have?
• If not, what makes the current system effective?

No teachers signed up for the focus group, so we switched to anonymous surveys with the same questions and received five responses from self-identified teachers of colour at our school. We asked some of our planned focus group questions:

• Why did you become a teacher? Did you encounter institutional, cultural, social, or other barriers in the process?
• What was the ratio of white people to people of colour in teachers college?
• What is the ratio of white people to people of colour in your school?
• Why do you think this is so? How do you feel in this environment?
• If you were in charge, would you change how hiring protocols or how your school/teachers’ college was run? What would you change?
• Do you think it’s possible/impossible to increase racial diversity of teachers/counsellors?
• Do you think having racial diversity of teachers/counsellors would make a difference for your students, or for the world?

Although we ended up with far less data than we had anticipated, we found that what we did receive combined with our own experiences were enough to analyse through critical race theory (CRT).

CRT is a framework based on legal scholarship in the United States. It states explicitly that race is a social construct, and that racism exists and is normal in America (Ladson-Billings, 1998). The way conceptual categories are applied differently to different races is a production of white supremacy, which we define as the racial ordering of the world that places whiteness as superior to other races. For example, positive categories like “intelligence” are coded as white (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Other race theorists (Razack, 1998) have shown how this is also the
case in Canada. CRT criticises U.S. legal ideology for portraying U.S. society as a meritocracy and failing to acknowledge racism (Ladson-Billings, 1998), which applies to our school as well. Findings from a previous yPAR study on our school showed that teachers were proud to work in a “meritocracy”, both in the admissions of students and in the hiring of staff, and yet do not seem to notice its failings (Ali et al., 2016). White guidance counsellors defended the faculty’s whiteness in that study by saying that they are hiring the “best person for the job”, and that increasing racial diversity is a “slow change” (Ali et al., 2016). Using CRT as part of our theoretical framework allowed us to understand racism, conceptualize whiteness/white privilege, and find the critical lens needed to process these seemingly rational defenses of whiteness.

We were fortunate to have guidance and help from our facilitators in the yPAR program. They helped us learn about both traditional and non-traditional research strategies and how to code and analyse data, which made this process much easier than it would have been had we done it alone. All three were women of colour who encouraged us when no one at our school would. However, we still think that young people without the support of yPAR or other projects can and should go ahead and do their own research. We hope that others can learn from and build on our experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To our surprise and dismay, respondents were largely dismissive of this study. We think this was due in part to the power differential between researchers as students and respondents as teachers. Respondents showed a need to educate us as teachers even outside of the classroom. This created a patronizing or condescending tone in many of the responses, such as when a teacher of colour “clarified” a detail included in the question—we included the term “teachers and guidance counsellors” and the teacher told us “For clarification, Guidance Counsellors are teachers in Ontario”—rather than responding to the question itself.

Administrators defended the school. Teachers of colour, who have less power than the administration in both school and racial hierarchies, often defended the school as well by responding with vague or clichéd answers alluding to the idea that racism is not an issue at school. We think that this was an act of self-preservation, to avoid backlash from the school administration in an attempt to maintain their social power and position. Teaching has historically been a medium for colonization and promoting whiteness: in Canadian residential schools, for example, and in missionary schools worldwide. We were disappointed because
teachers clung to this power, rather than work with us to try to overcome this racist system as we expected. We coded data from surveys and interviews together by searching for recurring themes in tactics to circumvent conversations about racism. We then grouped each code into three groups: dismissiveness, sugarcoating, and rationalization.

Dismissiveness can be otherwise worded as the insistence that a lack of racial diversity is not a problem. Teachers of colour and administration alike ignored issues and changed subjects repeatedly to avoid discussing or even acknowledging the presence of racism in an establishment like our school. For example, one teacher wrote that “The school I am at now is very inclusive and diverse in other ways than colour”, despite students such as ourselves voicing our issues with this shortcoming. Being “inclusive” in other ways does not mean the school is exempt from racism. We cannot discount race under the banner of “intersectionality”, especially considering that Kimberlé Crenshaw’s intersectionality theory was developed specifically to theorize Black women’s experiences (1989). Meanwhile, rather than address the issues in the staff population that we brought up, members of the administration told us about their plans to attend to “diversity” by “looking into” hiring language interpreters for non-English-speaking parents at curriculum events. The fact that this was a response to a question about racial diversity also reflects the preconceptions and stereotypes held by the administration by linking people of colour to people who do not speak English. Not only did they not answer our question, but they showed us that even other, slightly more palatable “diversity” initiatives are hardly being instituted—in the year since this interview, no interpreters have been brought to parent events.

Sugarcoating is used to create the illusion that what is already being done is sufficient, or that the problem is not as bad as we make it seem. It allowed our respondents to quickly dismiss any idea that racism is an immediate problem that must be dealt with. We chose this word to cover responses with ideas of inclusivity and diversity, patronization, the phrase “quality over quota”, and the word “trying”. One teacher of colour wrote, “Despite some blind-spots and personal biases, the hiring protocols are in place at my school to recruit a more diverse teaching staff” (emphasis ours). Another wrote that “the school is making an effort” and so they “feel very comfortable [...] it’s one of the most inclusive environments I’ve ever been a part of.” Interestingly, this teacher continued on in the same paragraph
to say that it was only parents who have made racist comments and that “I still hear such [prejudicial] things once in a while,” while discounting the staff’s involvements in racism. When we asked human resources personnel why she thought the racial disproportion might exist, she instead explained in detail how the school practices gender pay equity—unrelated to race nor to her hiring practices. A white member of the school administration told us that simply caring about equity was enough to create and be creating change. In reality this has not led to any action or visible change in our school. She called this “a learning experience”

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for her. What about the students’—our—negative experiences occurring while she is busy “learning”? Rationalisation is the attempt to justify the issue of diversity with causes other than racism, which makes sense superficially and allows one to swerve around addressing the problem itself. These include ideas of affirmative action, socioeconomic barriers, societal value of teaching, lack of jobs in teaching, and wanting to impact students more in the public board—using reasons similar to in dismissiveness but to argue something slightly different. Several teachers and administrators pointed out that “institutional change is slow” rather than answering a question on how to create change or accelerate it. One teacher of colour specifically wrote that the problem is one of “socio-economics” because teaching is not highly valued or considered a lucrative profession, and immigrants of colour seek high-class positions in their new countries. While we acknowledge that this could be a factor, the complex nature of race as tied to class was completely written off by this teacher, as well as the fact that not all people of colour are recent immigrants, or immigrants at all. This answer also places the onus on applicants and evades any responsibility on the part of the school. The sole administrator of colour protected the school in this way as well, telling us that “minority” teachers want to work in public schools to have a greater impact on “students like themselves” than they could in an independent school. Interestingly, he distanced himself from discussing race by describing himself as “the gay teacher”—using his sexuality rather than his race—to allow him to impact white gay students and not just students of colour. The way he shied away from talking about race showed us that he was, perhaps subconsciously, rationalising away the problems at our school while simultaneously prioritizing white students.

This study taught us about the realities of racism in today’s Toronto society. Institutional racism can be difficult to pinpoint intellectually—because it is built into the structure of institutions
and therefore is not always obvious—but it continues to pervade our experience as girls of colour. The evasive tactics employed by teachers and administrators alike avoid talking about racism so as to sustain a predominantly white school, justifying the whiteness of the school and their roles in reproducing it, through these three strategies: dismissiveness, sugarcoating, and rationalization. In doing so, they protect their own social power, in the form of their institutional whiteness, so they can maintain the realities that they are used to. Adults also showed a desire to educate us because of their positions as our teachers in school, even outside of the classroom when we would like to be considered equals. We have unique perspectives that we can teach teachers as well, if they will let us.

**CONCLUSION**

The resistance and refusal that we encountered from the majority of participants made us unable to answer our original research question. However, our findings do suggest a problem with what seems to be the dominant way of approaching social issues in Canada: the idea that problems do not exist, at least not to a significant extent. This mindset arises from an unwillingness to restructure problematic systems, i.e. being “all talk and no walk”. Our study reflects the depths and complexities of racism, how deeply it pervades our minds, and how it both passively and actively affects how we view others. We observed evasion tactics: dismissiveness, sugarcoating, and rationalization, used by everyone involved—teachers of colour and white administration alike—to preserve whatever social power or institutional whiteness that they may have.

Our experience in this youth research project has implications for other youth research endeavors. We were greatly aided by our three research facilitators and other yPAR researchers to validate our experiences and keep us motivated. Despite their actions, our school administration did openly support the yPAR project, giving us legitimacy within the school, and served as a source of data. Even while working in a supportive and highly privileged environment, we had to face the attitudes and condescension of our teachers and administration. Youth research can often feel like an uphill battle because of the strength

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3. We use “social power” to mean credibility and dominance in society. By taking advantage of “institutional whiteness,” people of colour can latch onto white supremacy to reap its rewards as though they are white themselves (Ahmed, 2012), and increase their own social power.
of the social hierarchy within which we live. Nevertheless, we urge all youth researchers to keep working to rebuild just worlds.

We learned that we needed to be adaptable to changes and results we were not expecting, though it can be difficult. Researchers also need to maintain clear lines of communication between each other and with our research subjects. In our case, that was our elite school. We had to use the prestige of University of Toronto and the term “research” to get data and support from administration. To avoid repercussions from the school once we realised how critical we were going to be, we decided not to name it and to wait to publish this article until we graduate. Our greatest strength was our research community, so we want our research to help and contribute to other youth and their research. We are only releasing our work within yPAR Toronto and in:cite (which one of the authors co-founded while this study was being carried out), specifically because we want to prioritize youth. In November 2017, we published a blog post with in:cite. We hope that the blog post and this article can serve as a foundation for future youth anti-racist research, as well as encourage new young scholars.

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