Blinded by the (White) Light: A Critical Examination of Whiteness in the Context of Urban Aboriginal Education

Abstract

This research explores the discursive identity that leads to White teachers' reluctance to engage in urban Aboriginal education in a Northern Central Canadian school board. Focus groups and sharing circles were conducted with both elementary and secondary teacher participants (N=71) that revealed that White teachers easily and often occupy the position of "perfect stranger" (Dion, 2007, 2009) to their Aboriginal students. Drawing from bodies of work around Eurocentrism, critical Whiteness studies, and decolonization we bear witness to the deconstruction of the "perfect stranger" stance. The vantage point from which we observe this stance unravel is the blurred space in-between a strange/familiar binary: the strangeness of the familiar case of White teachers not knowing themselves as cultural beings and the familiarity of the strange stereotypical images White teachers hold of their Aboriginal students. As this binary breaks down, how this stance is created, justified, and maintained, despite its unstable nature, will be unpacked. Coming to an understanding of the "perfect stranger" stance through deconstruction in an educational context aids in understanding how this identity is constructed and upheld by White teachers. This understanding represents a positive step towards transforming educational relationships between White teachers and their Aboriginal students and making education more equitable and accessible to urban Aboriginal students.

Introduction

While we do not consider ourselves to be or identify as racists, we recognize that as White[1] people, we systemically enact and uphold racism through numerous unconscious daily interactions, namely through spending the privilege that being White affords us. Given our particular commitment to Aboriginal[2] education, we seek to expose the systemic racism against Aboriginal students in urban schools that are Eurocentrism and Whiteness.

The closely linked ideologies of Eurocentrism and Whiteness are those possessed by the dominant: they are the colonizers' lenses onto the world (Battiste, 2005; Blaut, 1993; Rasmussen, 2002). They can be defined by "several strong features including, capitalistic market society structure; belief in progress and science, possession of modern concepts of family and societal group structures based on individualism, competition, social mobility, and belief in Eurocentric culture, philosophical, and economic superiority" (Frankenburg, 1997, p. 104). As Western cultural values are often used as the meter stick against which to "rationally" judge all things, non-Western cultural values and their associated cultures are always viewed at a deficit, or not recognized at all (Atleo, 2004; Deloria & Wildcat, 2001; Lewis & Aikenhead, 2000; Smith, 1999). At its essence, Eurocentrism is a strategy of difference that perpetuates racism by reinforcing Whiteness as the culture that the dominant peoples of the world maintain (Battiste, 2005; Frankenburg, 1997; see also Kovach, 2009; McKinley, 2000). Regardless of whether we are of Western or non-Western-colonized backgrounds, we are hegemonically implicated within the process of upholding these dominant ideologies (Battiste, 2005; Kincheloe, 2006).

As such, we recognize that "Whiteness is not now, nor has it ever been, a static, uniform category of social identification" (Twine & Gallagher, 2008, p. 6). Whiteness is appropriately viewed "as a multiplicity of identities that are historically grounded, class specific, politically manipulated and gendered social locations that inhabit local custom and national sentiments

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[1] Like Lopes and Thomas (2006), we capitalize "White to interrupt the privilege of having Whiteness go unnamed" (p. 272), or unnoticed.

[2] We use the term Aboriginal to refer to Indigenous people in Canada: First Nation, Métis, and Inuit and we capitalize Aboriginal to acknowledge its distinction and nationhood status.

within the context of the new 'global village'" (Twine & Gallagher, 2008, p. 6). This multiplicity of identities is important to note as Whiteness "as a site of privilege is not absolute but rather crosscut by a range of other axes of relative advantage and subordination; these do not erase or render irrelevant race privilege, but rather inflect or modify it'" (Frankenberg 2001, p. 76). Through this article, we examine how Whiteness as ideological components of identity fails to be acknowledged and addressed by White teachers working with Aboriginal students as well as shapes their preconceptions of their Aboriginal students.

During our interviews, the centering of Whiteness in a Northern Central Canadian school board resulted in the White teachers easily and often claiming the position of "perfect stranger" (Dion, 2007, 2009) to their Aboriginal students. This "perfect stranger" stance, which is characterized by a stated lack of knowledge of the Aboriginal *other,* offers a seemingly neutral moral position from which White teachers can continue to "rely on dominant discourses to give structure to their approach to teaching without recognizing the inadequacy nor questioning the effects of those discourses" (p. 332).

This article focuses on deconstructing the "perfect stranger" stance in order to explore the complex identities of White teachers who are reluctant to engage in urban Aboriginal education in a Northern Central Canadian school board. Dion (2007, 2009) emphasizes that the responsibility to investigate and transform relationships with Aboriginal peoples belongs to non-Aboriginal people. As White teachers and researchers seeking a decolonized, respectful approach to our practices as researchers and teachers, this is a responsibility that we take seriously. Speaking to identity as a metaphorical text, the identity and stance associated with the "perfect stranger" can only be deconstructed from within. On this matter, Derrida states: "the movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures" (p. 24). While White teacher is an identity that we are critical of, it is nonetheless one that we must inhabit and content with daily.

While it is impossible and irresponsible to reduce White teachers to a fixed, singular identity, this research addresses Whiteness as a dominant ideology which shapes many, if not all, White teacher's interactions with those students that they deem to be *other*. Furthermore, this work is not intended to be a discourse in blaming White teachers for the qualities that they lack, nor does it intend to vilify teachers for the racial marginalization that they practice and maintain, because White teachers are generally well intended in their practices, believing their profession to be innately "good" and their primary role to act as "helpers" (Britzmann, 1999; Schick, 2000; see also Rasmussen, 2002).

Rather, this research is an attempt to witness the lack of deconstructing discourses of the "perfect stranger" stance occupied by most White teachers in a Northern Central Canadian school board as well as explore the complex identities of teachers who hold this stance. Appropriately, this deconstruction takes place on the unsteady, shifting space located between what is strange and what is familiar to White teachers. Using this binary, we reveal that the "perfect stranger" stance should be self-deconstructing. In reality, however, White teachers actively resist the unravelling of this position by claiming innocence through ignorance; they are innocent of racism or Eurocentric privilege because they know nothing about Aboriginal culture or Indigenous knowledge.

In order to make "the constructed character appear as such" (Derrida, 2002, p. 16), this research (1) witnesses Whiteness within the context of Aboriginal education in Canada, (2) explores the stance of the "perfect stranger" held by most White teachers, (3) address the

strangeness of the familiar case of White teachers not knowing themselves as cultural beings, (4) address the familiarity of the strange stereotypical images White teachers hold of their Aboriginal students, and (5) confronts the avoided deconstruction of the "perfect stranger".

Aboriginal Education in Canada: Witnessing Whiteness

For Aboriginal students, the effects of a Canadian educational system that constructs and reinforces a set of normative and oppressive "educational" values that do not recognize or include Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies have been well documented (Battiste, 2005; Kanu, 2002; Kirkness, 1999). Currently, these effects are quantitatively evidenced by a considerable gap in achievement at both the secondary and post-secondary levels between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students[3] (Statistics Canada, 2007) and qualitatively by negative schooling experiences for Aboriginal students (Battiste, 1998, 2005; Kanu, 2002, 2006). Many scholars (Kanu, 2002, 2006; see also Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005, 2008; Cajete, 1999; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008) have claimed that these problems are not ones of Aboriginal student capacity for achievement, but rather the results of a culturally inappropriate, Eurocentric curriculum and Western pedagogies in school systems that clash with the communication and learning styles of Aboriginal students.

As a result, strategic policies have been implemented to strive towards improving Aboriginal education in Canada (e.g., the Ontario Ministry of Education's *First Nation, Metis, and Inuit education policy and framework*, 2007; the Association of Canadian Deans of Education's *Accord on Indigenous education*, 2010). One of the ways in which these policies address this problematic relationship is by advocating for teacher professional development that aims to increase Aboriginal student engagement and success through culturally responsive education and approaches.

Culturally responsive education (Gay, 2000) can actively respond to the unique worldviews of Aboriginal youth; it is education that uses "the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively" (Gay, 2002, p.106). It requires, at a minimum, that teachers acknowledge that reality can be perceived in a wide variety of ways, and that these perceptions are largely shaped by factors such as race, ethnicity, social class, and language (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Additionally, culturally responsive education requires teachers to believe that all students are capable learners who possess diverse bodies of knowledge that can be built upon. Unfortunately, culturally responsive education and approaches are often unsuccessfully implemented in practice because many White teachers hold a deficit view of students who are not like themselves, and do not acknowledge the importance of culture and race in learning (Conklin, 2008; Sleeter, 2008).

Within the current Canadian schooling system, roughly 95% of teachers (both urban and reserve) are non-Aboriginal (Kanu, 2005) or White, Euro-settler Canadians (Banks, 2006; Carr & Lund, 2009). The sheer enormity of this proportion reinforces and normalizes Whiteness as the dominant ideology in schools.

During a focus group in this Northern Central Canadian school board, when prompted by the interviewer to discuss educational researchers' push for teachers to add Aboriginal content and perspectives into their classroom, a teacher participant responded, "I teach from a White perspective, that's all I know". The Canadian (and global) teaching population is a literal sea of

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[3] 38% of the Aboriginal population in Ontario aged 15+ has *less* than a high school diploma compared with 22% of the non-Aboriginal population. Nationally, the proportion of the Aboriginal population with a university degree is 9% compared with 26% of the non-Aboriginal population (Statistics Canada, 2007).

Whiteness which is problematic when Whiteness is a systemic barrier to enacting an empowering pedagogy for non-White students, be it through anti-racist education (Carr & Lund, 2009; Sleeter, 2008), culturally responsive pedagogy (Tompkins, 2002), or Aboriginal pedagogy (Dion, 2007; Kanu, 2003; Strong-Wilson, 2007). In other words, regardless of the composition of their student body, the vast majority of White teachers deliver a "White education" to Aboriginal students because it is all they want to know and feel comfortable teaching (Battiste, 2000; Churchill, 1999; Hodson, 1998; MacIvor, 1995; Roberts & Wills, 1998).

Considering the dire state of education for Aboriginal students and the persistent failures in implementation of Aboriginal education initiatives by White teachers, there is an urgent call to examine how Whiteness hinders White teachers' abilities to educate those who are *other* to them. Examining the position of the "perfect stranger" that White teachers hold with regards to their Aboriginal students represents a promising opportunity to disrupt and shift this stance in order to make education more accessible and equitable to Aboriginal students and their families.

Research Framework

Research Study. Conducted in 2009 through 2010 at a Canadian university, a mixed-method research study investigated how and to what degree and depth two stakeholder groups, elementary and secondary teachers (N=71), are engaging or not engaging in urban Aboriginal education in a Northern Central Canadian school board. For the purposes of this article, data from elementary and secondary teacher stakeholder groups have been combined and participants are referred to collectively as teachers. Teachers were asked to self-identify as Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal. While both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers were invited to participate, the overwhelming majority of teachers (> 95%) interviewed were White and of European heritage, which is consistent with the demographics of the teaching staff both in the Northern Central Canadian school board along with the greater Canadian teaching population (Kanu, 2005) as well as the overall North American context (Sleeter, 2008; Zumwalt & Craig, 2005).

During the quantitative phase of the research, 109 teachers completed an on-line questionnaire, providing the research team with numerical data, as well as shaping the themes discussed during focus groups. The qualitative research phase included educators that teach assorted subjects at levels varying between kindergarten and Grade 12. Overall fifteen focus group sessions were conducted. The majority of the teacher data (nine of fifteen focus groups) comes from focus groups conducted immediately following professional development sessions focused on urban Aboriginal education.

Article Methodology. Derrida (1988) would not refer to deconstruction as a methodology, an analysis, a critique, nor even an act that one can do. Nonetheless, it is the lens that we are using to address Dion's (2007) critical issue in Aboriginal education of the "perfect stranger" stance occupied by White teachers in a Northern Central Canadian school board in relation to their Aboriginal students. Biesta (2009) asserts that through the process of taking ideas apart, deconstruction in an educational context is able to aid in better understanding how ideas are constructed and upheld: "while it's not up to us to let deconstruction happen or prevent it from happening, what we can do… is to show, to reveal, or, … to witness the occurrence of deconstruction" (p. 394). It is exactly that which this article achieves: witnessing the deconstruction of the "perfect stranger".

As deconstruction most visibly occurs around the porosity of constructed binaries, this is where we will set our research gaze. In particular, we work to focus on the duality between what is strange and what is familiar to White teachers who remain "perfect strangers" to their

Aboriginal students. The blurred space in-between this strange/familiar binary, the strangeness of the familiar case of White teachers not knowing themselves as cultural beings and the familiarity of the strange stereotypical images White teachers hold of their Aboriginal students, is the vantage point from which we observe the position of the "perfect stranger" unravel.

White Teachers as "Perfect Strangers" to their Aboriginal Students

The problematic position that most White teachers hold in relation to their Aboriginal students, and Aboriginal peoples in general, is that of the "perfect stranger" (Dion, 2007). It is a stance that is "informed by what teachers know, what they do not know, and what they refuse to know" (p. 331), each of which will be discussed in this section. The "perfect stranger" enables White teachers to justify knowing little or nothing about Aboriginal peoples in Canada because they view the "perfect-stranger" to be a respectable and safe position to occupy in relation to Aboriginal peoples. It is how White teachers claim neutrality, as knowledge implies moral responsibility to do or enact. White teachers maintain this stance by arguing that their lack of knowledge results from a lack of exposure to Indigeneity during their own formal schooling and in their day-to-day lives. Essentially, they are shifting the responsibility for their ownership and learning from themselves onto others.

Our research suggests that White teachers possess very little knowledge of Indigeneity, which includes knowledge of Aboriginal peoples' worldviews, histories, cultures, and current issues. The vast majority of teacher participants directly, and unapologetically, claimed ignorance of Aboriginal peoples and issues that affect their lives and communities. Consider a typical response from one of the teachers from the Northern Central Canadian school board who is occupying the position of "perfect stranger" to Aboriginal students by identifying and locating herself with another culture:

> *I have a different cultural background. I'm not opposed to learning different cultures. I love all cultures. However, I don't think we are doing them [Aboriginal students] a service, by myself, with a Polish-French background, to be teaching something [Aboriginal culture] that I just barely understand, because I'm not immersed within that culture.*

Similarly, some White teachers demonstrated a lack of knowledge of Indigeneity when they shared stories of their attempts to incorporate Aboriginal culture and perspectives in their classrooms. On speaking about using *White Mist* (Smucker, 1987), a novel written by a White author set in an Indigenous community in the United States in the 1830s, a teacher-participant stated:

> *We have a high population of Aboriginal kids, so I did the novel White Mist with them because I thought they would connect to it. I was flabbergasted at how little they knew about their culture … I have been exposed to all sorts of teachings for a long time … I thought they should know a little bit about their culture and heritage.*

In the absence of understanding the multiplicity of Aboriginal cultures and community uniqueness (Costello, 2011), this teacher assumed that her urban Aboriginal students in a Northern Central Canadian school board would identify with the culture possessed by a Native

American tribe, located on the shores of Lake Michigan (1500 kilometres away) two centuries ago.

Teaching White teachers about aspects of Indigeneity is challenging in professional development practice because the knowledge that teachers lack often becomes the knowledge that they resist (Sleeter, 2010). White teachers resist "acknowledging the significance of constructions of race to identity formation and of perceiving themselves as [W]hite and therefore implicated in systems of domination" (Strong-Wilson, 2007, p. 115). Concerning Aboriginal education, the systems of domination White teachers are resisting are directly related to colonization and Eurocentrism. Within our research, teacher-participants were very reluctant to confront colonial legacies and realize their acquiescent participation in neo-colonialism as "perfect strangers". White teachers were visibly uncomfortable and reticent with the "C" word, colonization, during focus groups where urban Aboriginal education professional development sessions were discussed. Colonization, "the imposition of a common language, a common culture, a common allegiance to a national entity ... achieved through centuries of violence and destruction" (Chomsky in Meyer & Alvarado, 2010, p. 42), was a concept often viewed as past history by the White teachers. It is important to note, however, that the colonizers never left; instead, they settled and entered into a treaty partnership with Aboriginal people. Yet, colonialism to this day continues as the colonial legacies of the past persist through the neo-colonial practices of the present (Adams, 2000; Battiste, 1998, 2005; Smith, 1999) such as White teachers not recognizing that they themselves are treaty partners, living on First Nation traditional territories or teaching in a school system still contaminated by the legacies of Indian Residential Schools. By downplaying or denying the relationships between race, culture, and identity formation, White teachers take a resistive stance that makes them strangers to themselves as cultural beings. Their perfection of the stranger stance acts as a colonial cloak, protecting them "in the dark", while also blinding their sight to their own neo-colonial teaching practices.

The Strangeness of the Familiar: White Teachers as Strangers to Themselves

The stance of the "perfect stranger" is not only dependent upon White teachers being strangers to their Aboriginal students, but also on knowing little to nothing about their own history and culture. Given that teacher-participants claimed that they taught "what they know", or a "White education", it is interesting to note that they were also strangers to that which should thus be familiar: themselves as cultural beings (Sleeter, 2008). On the topic of being encouraged to incorporate Aboriginal issues and perspectives into her classroom in a professional development session, one White teacher participant stated: "I felt hypocritical … who am I to do a good job [of incorporating Aboriginal issues and perspectives] if I don't know myself?

In order to understand why White teachers are strangers to themselves as cultural beings, one must begin by exploring the worldview that shapes the perceptions of White settlers in general: Eurocentrism. Lewis and Aikenhead (2000) define Eurocentrism as:

> the idea that the people, places, and events of Western European cultures are superior and a standard against which other cultures should be judged. Conversely, non-Western cultures are inferior, and relevant only if they have a relationship to Western culture. (p. 53)

Through diffusionism, or a forced spread of culture, the Eurocentric consciousness "in which all of us have been marinated" (Battiste, 2005, p. 124), erases, assimilates, and lessens non-Western cultures, making it difficult to hear the voice of the *other*. Blaut (1993) defines Eurocentrism as:

> the colonizer's model of the world in a very literal sense: it is not merely a set of beliefs, a bundle of beliefs. It has evolved, through time, into a finely sculpted model, a structured whole; in fact a single theory, a general framework for many smaller theories, historical, geographical, psychological, sociological, and philosophical. This supertheory is diffusionism. (Blaut, 1993, pp. 10-11)

The Eurocentric supertheory of diffusionism is far more complicated than simple racism. It encompasses the many Western rulers used to measure the worth of knowledge, including that which is used to determine whose knowledge is deemed worthy of measurement at all (Blaut, 1993). Universality is arguably the most problematic facet of diffusionism; in establishing "the dominant group's knowledge, experience, culture and knowledge as the universal norm" (Battiste, 2005, p. 124), the *other's* or Indigenous knowledge, culture and sense of self are lessened, or worse, not acknowledged at all.

While Eurocentrism's claim to universality is obviously detrimental for Aboriginal students, it also prevents White teachers from seeing themselves as cultural beings or understanding how they share a longstanding history with Indigenous peoples (Saul, 2008). By exerting dominance over other worldviews, Eurocentrism makes it seem as if there is no other worldview. Through the centering and normalizing of all that is Western in schools (e.g. Western thought, Western history, Western philosophy, Western science), White Euro-Canadian teachers become centralized. Whiteness thus ideologically and uncritically becomes the norm, the standard, the good, and in the process overrides one's own distinct culture or culture as a recognizable articulated quality. This subtle assimilation of European cultures into a homogenized Whiteness is the key to how White teachers become "perfect strangers" to themselves.

Our research findings support the claim that White teachers have perfected the stranger stance and are strangers to themselves as cultural beings. In some cases, teacher-participants reported that they knew very little to nothing about their own culture. The vast majority of White teachers did identify some sort of cultural identity and values of European lineage but they were unable to connect their identities as Canadians to the historical and current relationships with Aboriginal peoples and Canada's Metis foundation (Saul, 2008). Caouette & Taylor (2007) posit that the reason this inability exists is because "Canadians do not appreciate that historical events are linked first, to societal barriers faced by Aboriginal people and second, to the unearned privileges White Canadians have gained as a result" (2007, p. 77). A White teacher participant stated: "My cultural background is Scottish, White. I can't connect with them [Aboriginal students] on their cultural level. I don't know enough about their cultural level. I can share mine with them." By occupying the position of "perfect stranger" to himself as a cultural being, this teacher is able to ignore the shared Canadian history between his British ancestors and early Aboriginal peoples.

This stance also led most of the White teachers to ignore the unique position that Aboriginal peoples occupy in Canada's cultural foundation and ongoing identity development. The White teachers advocated for a multi-cultural education that celebrates Aboriginal peoples in

a similar manner to more recent immigrant cultures that have come to Canada. On this topic, one White teacher stated:

> *So, I understand that we need to integrate, but don't we need to integrate all cultures? Cause we have many cultures, especially in this region, we have tons. If we are supposed to be a mosaic, how do we make our education more culturally relevant to all of us as opposed to just one major cultural group [of Aboriginal peoples]?*

White teachers' comments suggested their ability to "see" race. Nonetheless, we argue that "seeing" race is not a sufficient condition in itself for engaging in Aboriginal education. The act of seeing is an act of interpretation, which is obscured by the belief that vision is transparent, that vision is truth (e.g. "seeing is believing", "show me"). As such, what needs to be attended to is not the notion of "seeing" Aboriginal as race, but rather the Eurocentric ideology which shapes how Indigeneity is understood through colonization, a historical ideology that conditions our lenses onto the world (Alcoff, 2000; Applebaum, 2008).

In addressing perceptual ideology, we draw from Gadamer's (1975/1998) hermeneutical notion and visual metaphor of horizon. A horizon is "the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point" (p. 302). As hermeneutics is about "producing change as well as discerning meaning" (Strong-Wilson, 2007, p. 118), the notion of horizon implies a critique of self: "to acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand, not in order to look away from it but to see it better" (Gadamer, 1975/1998, p. 305). The notion of horizon also indicates a stipulation for beginning to see that which the *other* sees: "we must always already have a horizon in order to be able to transpose ourselves into a situation" (Alcoff, 2006, p. 305). Thus, for White teachers to even begin to understand their Aboriginal students' culture(s), they must first become familiar with themselves as having cultural identities (Mazzochi, 2006).

The Familiarity of the Strange: Not the "Indian" they had in mind

While White teachers' paucity of knowledge of Indigeneity is well-documented (Agbo, 2004; Dion, 2007; Kanu, 2005; Heyer, 2009), little research depicts the types of images of Aboriginal peoples that White teachers hold. Our research findings support Francis' (1992) claim that "our views of what constitutes an Indian today are as much bound up with myth, prejudice and ideology as earlier versions were" (p. 6). White teacher-participants in our study often evoked stereotypical images of Aboriginal peoples, an "Imaginary Indian" (Francis, 1992), that figured early in their biographies of relationships with Aboriginal peoples. One elementary teacher recalled feelings of adventure associated with Aboriginal peoples stemming from childhood memories:

> *The favourite game when we were kids was to pretend that we were Indians. It seemed kind of romantic and dangerous and fun. Playing at being Indians meant that we could be free; that we could break free from any of the constraints of adult supervision.*

> *I grew up thinking I didn't know or hadn't seen any real Indian people in Toronto … but I just didn't recognize them as such because they weren't wearing feathers and banging tom toms.*

Similarly, White teacher participants held stereotypical images of Aboriginal peoples as stewards of the Earth. One teacher participant explained how he included an "Aboriginal perspective" in his science course:

> *We were looking at energy conservation in science … [and working on] posters and slogans for energy conservation. I said, "From an Aboriginal perspective, what sort of slogan might you do on a poster for energy conservation?" and we came up with some ideas and like "Use what you need".*

Teacher participants also discussed the perception held by White teachers of Aboriginal people as artists. One visual arts teacher was noticeably frustrated during a focus group because guidance counselors continually placed Aboriginal students in her art courses because they were Aboriginal not as a result of students expressing an interest in learning art:

> *I'm a visual arts teacher and there are stereotypes [amongst school staff] that Aboriginal students are naturally gifted in the arts and all these sort of pre-conceived ideas. Frankly … I'll have a regular visual arts class with a small percentage of Native students who are failing.*

In practice, the familiarity of White teachers with strange stereotypes of Aboriginal peoples, results in their disengagement in Aboriginal education or engagement through a lens clouded with their own prejudices and preconceptions. One teacher commented negatively about Aboriginal students' lack of appreciation for an Aboriginal cultural day organized by the Northern central Canadian school board:

> *I found, in watching, that the Aboriginal kids were the least engaged by these things. They were showing fish preparation and skinning and drumming and story-telling. I was very surprised that some of those kids that are Aboriginal could care less whether they saw it or not That's not their cultural upbringing anymore.*

This observation that urban Aboriginal students did not connect with one-time token special events on Aboriginal culture or what White teachers believed to be "real" Aboriginal culture was a common theme repeated during focus groups. This surprise was often coupled with grief for a "vanishing" traditional culture, which they perceive as increasingly threatened by a society fueled by consumption. Francis (1992) explains that the images of Aboriginal peoples held by these teachers are "fixed in a traditional mode and [cannot] change without becoming something else, something not Indian" (p. 59).

White teachers were inclined to hold on to the perception of stereotypical images of Aboriginal peoples that had been molded by dominant discourses and media rather than knowing Aboriginal peoples through direct relationships with local Aboriginal community members. As a

result, Aboriginal culture is essentialized to a monolithic form, which exists in the absence of context. In this school board, Aboriginal culture became something that is often consumed outside of the classroom and daily curriculum, but never reflected upon (Rivière, 2008). The "Imaginary Indian" deeply problematizes relationships between White teachers and their Aboriginal students in schools, as well as with themselves. From the White teacher's perspective, their Aboriginal students become strange in these contexts because they are "not the Indian they had in mind" (King, 2003). Furthermore, the "Imaginary Indian" is problematic because White teachers are able to forsake Aboriginal students in an exotic world that they rarely acknowledge in their daily lives. This positioning does not require White teachers to confront difficult colonial legacies or question their own participation in neo-colonialism (Schick, 2000) and is necessary to uphold the stance of "perfect stranger".

Resisting Deconstruction

The position of "perfect stranger" is one that should be naturally deconstructing because the familiar/strange binary which shapes this stance is far from hermetically sealed. Rather, this duality is porous and unstable, as demonstrated through exposing the familiarity of the strange (e.g., White teachers not knowing themselves as cultural beings), and the strangeness of the familiar (e.g., the "Imaginary Indian" that White teachers have in mind). The ideological stance of "perfect stranger" should be self-deconstructing or unraveling on its own, however, many White teachers who hold this position work hard against its dismantling. Were it not resisted, deconstructing the "perfect stranger" would entail that White teachers become familiar with themselves as cultural beings, and that they see the strangeness of the familiar "Indian they had in mind". Through daily teaching interactions, White teachers working with Aboriginal youth are presented with multiple opportunities to come-to-know their own historical and cultural relationships with Aboriginal peoples, and more importantly, to perceive their Aboriginal students as cultural beings whose cultures have evolved to be more than that of the essentialized, decontextualized, and monolithic "Imaginary Indian". Despite this, White teachers continue remained closed to this knowledge. It is perhaps one of the reasons why the term ""[W]hite teacher" has become virtually synonymous with resistance" (Strong-Wilson, 2007, p. 115).

White teachers' resistance to familiarizing themselves with their Aboriginal students is largely linked to their refusal to acknowledge how colonial legacies have impacted the "Indian they have in mind", as well as the role(s) they play in this neocolonial legacy (Dion, 2007; Heyer, 2009). Gaining such awareness may be difficult for White teachers because this knowledge places them in the uncomfortable position of having to inherit a legacy of colonization. This knowledge inevitably ties and implicates them in the history of colonization, a traumatic story that includes genocide, cultural and linguistic violence, as well as stolen land. In resisting knowledge which would implicate them as oppressors (Bishop, 2002), and surely bring feelings of guilt (Rivière, 2008), White teachers often remain "stuck" as they are unable to perceptually shift, and continue to fall back on "what they know": the safety of dominant discourses (Dion, 2007).

For many of the same reasons they resist knowing their Aboriginal students, White teachers resist knowing themselves as cultural beings: such knowledge positions them as the cause and beneficiary of systemic racism (Rivière, 2008). The implications of being involved in racism, even if the racism is systemic, conflict greatly with White teachers' self-desired identity: that of the teacher as helper or positive influence (Schick, 2000). As such, teachers adopt the amorphous and safe identity of "Canadian" and enact a "discourse of denial" (Solomon et al.,

2005) or one of "innocence through ignorance" (Carr & Lund, 2009) when their White privilege or implication in systemic racism is brought to light.

Conclusion

"Given that the education system – as a social institution – preserves Whiteness and, thereby, perpetuates social inequalities such as racism, it makes sense to investigate how White teachers are implicated in this process" (Rivière, 2008, p. 357). In other words, there is a call to investigate how Whiteness breeds more Whiteness (Carr & Lund, 2009; Sleeter, 2005). Since the majority of the teaching force in Canada is White, it is of critical importance that the ideologies of Whiteness are deconstructed, while paying particular attention to those unique to White teachers. Within the context of Aboriginal education, these ideologies surface in White teachers taking the position of "perfect stranger" to their Aboriginal students by refusing to know themselves as cultural beings who share a rich cultural history with Aboriginal peoples, in holding stereotypical images of their Aboriginal students, and in resisting the process of deconstruction that would destabilize this position.

Our research illustrates that White teachers "see" their Aboriginal students as different. Consequently, what needs explicit attention is not White teachers' perceptions, but rather their perspectivity. White teachers must be made aware of how their positionality, reflected in the "perfect stranger" stance, places Aboriginal students at a deficit. As White teachers become critical of Eurocentrism which molds their perspectivity, they are able to recognize it as the ideology that centers and normalizes Whiteness within urban school boards (Costello, 2011), as well as teacher education (Dion, 2007; Nicol & Korteweg, 2010; Strong-Wilson, 2007) and alternative education (Belczewski, 2009; Higgins, 2010; Root, 2009). While Battiste (2005) states that addressing Eurocentrism is a difficult task, as "Eurocentrism is not like a prejudice from which informed peoples can elevate themselves" (p. 22), we are nonetheless, like Dion (2007), hopeful that White teachers can:

> come to recognise themselves as something other than "perfect stranger" to Aboriginal people and begin to recognise how their own engagements with dominant discourses have informed their understanding contributing to a reproduction of dominant ways of knowing about Aboriginal peoples" (p. 340).

Our research points to the need for teacher education to be a site of transformation: "Education is the key piece to the puzzle in order to address, throughout myriad experiences, activities, courses, events and teaching and learning, what [W]hiteness is and how it can be best addressed" (Carr & Lund, 2009, p. 53). A few studies are emerging that focus on Euro-Canadian teacher educators' attempts to confront their own colonial legacies and examine their deeply rooted Eurocentrism in order to shift towards decolonizing their practices (Belczewski, 2009; Nicol & Korteweg, 2010; Oberg, Blades, & Thom; 2007). Similarly, within teacher education there are multiple positive pedagogical practices being explored by teacher educators that expose, disrupt, and shift White teachers' perceptual horizons (Dion, 2007; Strong-Wilson, 2007; Tompkins, 2002); a move which better positions these teachers to engage in Aboriginal education. This process, recently referred to as the decolonization of the White subject (Strong-Wilson, 2007), can become the means to open up "the possibility for teachers to take up alternative ways of knowing, to imagine new relationships and to think about how they might want to work toward transforming their practice" (Dion, 2007, p. 330). In order to change the way in which

Aboriginal education is delivered in Canada, policies must be reflect the aforementioned practices and demonstrate a commitment to making education responsive, inclusive, and equitable to Aboriginal students and their families through honouring their languages, cultures, and epistemologies. Deconstructing the "perfect stranger" should be performed in both pre-service teacher education and in-service professional development.

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