Preface

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This book isn’t really about diversity. What started as a study of diversity in City of Toronto transformed into a book project that carefully traces the unrelenting and productive dimensions of race; specifically, how race continues through “progressive” discourses like diversity alongside varying modes of racial inclusion, beginning with the multicultural turn of the 1970s. At the heart of this exploration of discourse, race, and the City of Toronto is Stuart Hall’s (2021) call:

We have to uncover for ourselves in our own understanding, as well as for the students we are teaching, the often deep structural factors which have a tendency to persistently not only generate racial practices and structures but reproduce them through time, which account for their extraordinarily immovable character. (p. 126)

Hall brilliantly explains how economic and socio-racial/relational factors work in tandem and are reinforced in the political realm, to continue Britain’s explicitly racial character. This is an especially important point, one that is also echoed by this book: the structural cannot be divorced from the political. It is in the political realm that race is continuously remade to make sense, and by extension, where structural factors find their footing. We need look no further than the devastating global impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly for Black, Indigenous, and racialized communities. Perhaps these impacts are discussed or even measured by some governments, including the City of Toronto, but never really in ways that explicitly point to state-led pandemic responses as an exercise in biopolitics, a kind of modern-day racially informed “survival of the fittest.” If this pandemic has taught us anything, it is that structural factors are rooted in racial histories that both predate the state and inform its workings.
Hall also warns that race is not a matter of (ill) feelings. As such, race cannot be done away with by inviting or amplifying “good feeling,” “gentle reform” (2021, p. 126), good racial deeds, and feel-good discourses such as diversity. In fact, the opposite is true. As this book will show, diversity keeps race going. Our collective work is thus to carefully uncover what rests below the surface of diversity and other institutionalized discourses – the ideological conditions that are deeply organizing, penetrative, and unrelenting, across time and space.

In this sense, although set in the City of Toronto, the findings of this book have more far-reaching implications. Diversity moves are becoming increasingly globalized, and with them, a widespread reorganization of discussions on race/racism, especially in institutional spaces like government, organizations (both public and private), and the academy. Understanding the terms of this reorganization is crucial. However, the interventions that this book makes begin with an understanding that diversity thrives in each of our locations across the globe, under specific terms and through specific practices. Following Sara Ahmed (2012), I thus ask that, in our respective locations, we trace how and under what terms diversity discourse also becomes a reorganizing tactic. When we do this work – tracing how and under what specific terms diversity reorganizes race/racism – we can begin to build a global reservoir of critical knowledge and strategies that illuminate and address the enduring effects of race, in and across our spaces.

I have attempted to tackle this work in the context of the City of Toronto. But in the spirit of building collective knowledge and strategies, I might say that this book is not really about the City of Toronto either – at least not exclusively, once we consider the eerie familiarity of the racial tropes I trace and illuminate.

As the late brilliant Black feminist writer, professor, and activist bell hooks (1992) also reminds us, racial Others get consumed in spaces of whiteness. Discussions on interrogating, decentring, and/or abolishing whiteness are mitigated or even deemed irrelevant because the very presence of “diverse” bodies in institutional spaces affords institutions the all-too-familiar “room for all” rhetoric. Put simply, diversity reorganizes race through presence. As I write in the case of the City of Toronto, any critical questioning of diversity becomes difficult when racial Others are invited to the table, and even more so when they make up the whole table. What this means, and what we must reckon with is that racial inclusion (alone) is not necessarily a good thing. Of course scholars such as Trinh T. Minh-ha, W.E.B. Du Bois, bell hooks, and others have been warning us about the dangers of racial inclusion in institutional contexts for years now. My hope is that this book adds depth
to these claims, by carefully tracing how, why, and under what terms racial inclusion can be complicit in projects of whiteness.

As diversity discourse lives on, we are also witnessing an orchestrated full-on attack on everything (and everyone) in the field of critical race theory (CRT). This has translated into un/de-funded critical projects, denied tenures, hate mail, and the outright silencing of critical, often Black, Indigenous, and racialized voices, alongside the retention and promotion of vitriolic public intellectuals, calls to cancel “cancel culture,” and denials of racism, in and outside of the academy. In the academy, many attacks on CRT are justified under the supposedly neutral banners of “academic freedom” and/or “freedom of expression,” which, as I have written elsewhere with some of my colleagues (Joseph et al., 2019), are ultimately meant to protect white supremacy. It is worth noting here that I and many of my racialized friends and mentors in the academy are no strangers to the roadblocks when pursuing critical race work, including the denial of funding for our scholarly research and publications. This book project has certainly been no exception. But as my dear friend and colleague Professor Marty Fink wrote to me recently, quoting Sarah Schulman (2021), “When you make a film that is a blueprint for challenging authority and the powers that be … you can’t expect that the powers that be will reward you” (p. xxii).

Whether inside or outside the academy, whether through a film, book, article, research project, classroom space, meeting, community, organization, protest, or revolution, one thing remains clear: that we continue to remain hopeful and fight for change, for justice, is a testament to the resilience of our desire to build for the better.

This – not diversity – is our strength.
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