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## The ICCTE Journal

*A Journal of the International Christian Community for Teacher Education*

# "Is it because I'm black?": Creating Space for Diversity in the Christian University

Mary Ashun, Ph.D. & Steve Sider, Ph.D., Redeemer University College

### Abstract

This paper examines the experiences of a black female faculty member as she enters the Christian university where there is limited ethnic diversity. She experiences critical student responses to her teaching which lead her to consider the reasons why she may be experiencing such resistance. As she confronts the possibility that it's because she's black, she enters into an on-going dialogue with a white male faculty member. Their experiences and conversations create a space for shared learning. The paper raises the question of how Christian universities might intentionally create space for faculty of color to feel welcome and embraced in the community.

### Introduction

In this paper, we discuss the collaborative efforts of a black female professor and a white male professor in a predominantly white Christian university as they attempt to make sense of the resistance the black faculty member experiences from her students. She was experiencing the classroom in a way that was significantly different from that of her white colleagues – male and female – and sought to find out why. The search for understanding is not unusual (Stanley, 2006) but since much of the research into how faculty of color cope in predominantly white institutions is related to secular institutions, it is our hope that a discussion can be opened into the Christian university experience. Specifically, this paper raises the question of whether a black female faculty member and a white male faculty member can create space to enter into each other's lived experience around the issue of color. The paper provides insight into the conversations and critical questions which were shared. In broader terms, the paper considers how the culture of academia, with its strong division between private and public identities, responds to non-white cultures that emphasize relationship and are therefore deeply relational and conversational in

how they present themselves and their subject matter. Further, we raise the question of what we should be doing as Christian faculty, and within Christian universities, to provide space for dialogue around issues of diversity. These are the key questions which guide this paper. In the spirit of sharing the lived experience, we have chosen to write in the personal tense. We are Mary, the black female faculty member, and Steve, the white male faculty member.

The context for our experience is a Christian university in a highly diverse area of Canada. The university is relatively "young" (less than 30 years old) and predominantly white in both its student and faculty make-up. Mary enters this context as the first black faculty member after 10 years of highly successful teaching experience in two different Christian school contexts. This teaching experience, combined with her background in the sciences (including a Ph.D. in bio-chemistry), has provided her with what would seem to be an exemplary skill set for teaching in a university education program. Steve has been at the university for two years prior to Mary coming and has had a similar teaching and educational background. One thing they share in common is a background of living and being educated in international contexts.

### Literature Review

As we explored the conversations we were having within the context of our work, we also considered what others might have contributed regarding the negotiation of conversational space within the university context. As a result, in this review of the literature we look first at the issue of race and cultural background within Canada and within the university. From this, we provide a brief examination of how professorial identities are defined and formed in this setting.

Canada is often considered a civil and tolerant society. Canadians will point to the

Multiculturalism Policy (1971) and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1981) as examples of ways in which Canada supports people of different ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds. Unfortunately, there is a veneer to the Canadian landscape, and discrimination based on color and language does occur. Canadian author Lawrence Hill (2001) in *Black Berry, Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White in Canada* suggests that the favorite question of Canadians is “Where are you from?” He suggests that this is code for “You’re obviously not from here.” A number of recent studies have demonstrated that there is significant racism in Canada (Friedel, 2010; Hébert, Wilkinson, & Mehrinnusa, 2008). Often this racism is not in the form of confrontational activities and protests, but in latent attitudes which are quieter, but just as insidious.

Even within the academy, racism exists as highlighted in the recent book, *You Must be a Basketball Player: Rethinking Integration in the University* (Stewart, 2009). The low number of black professors teaching white students may account for the void in the literature concerning the phenomenon of racism within the academy. There are few professors of color and, as a result, little attention is paid to their experiences. For many students, having a black professor may be their first experience with having a teacher of color. Students may have to recognize that the stereotypes they have comfortably (and perhaps unconsciously) accepted are not factual or accurate. How they cope with this disequilibrium is interesting and a bit confusing. For example, Ladson-Billings (1996) reports that a culture of silence permeated her class, where students were showing their defiance of her, and what she was teaching by being silent. In a university culture where lecture tends to dominate other forms of teaching, a classroom that should thrive on discussion and dialogue becomes stale and boring if no one speaks. The use of silence is a form of resistance to and against the faculty member of color. When race is the reason for the silence, educators are often at a loss as to what to do.

Race continues to be an area where educators, whether overtly or covertly, demonstrate a variety of beliefs and responses. The result is that, “Understanding the salient role played by race/ethnicity in the ways we care for students and their educational needs is an important challenge

facing educators” (Rolon-Dow, 2005, p. 107). As important, in our context, is to recognize the role that color plays in the way we care for each other as faculty. With this in mind, we need to consider how various contexts help formulate our sense of self. This reflects Volf’s (1996) continuum of acceptance. Within institutions, faculty and administration either can create space for tolerance (or intolerance), civility (or incivility), and embrace (or rejection). These values are often demonstrated more through day-to-day practice than through policy development and implementation.

Of particular importance for this paper is whether space can be created for two faculty members, of different color, to share in dialogue and experience. Baker (2000) suggests:

*Identities are never static or permanent, they are becoming rather than being, never singular and rarely unified. . . . Cultural, ethnic or language identity is often less about a return to roots than making sense of our past, present and future routes. (p. 23)*

It is this ‘making sense’ which is done in these spaces. We require an awareness of our past and present so that we might work for a more hospitable future. In a way, identity is not so much about what the person does, but how he or she views him/herself (Sfard & Prusak, 2005, p. 16). As a result, the narrative of the person’s life *is* his or her identity; it does not just provide a window *into* identity (Sfard & Prusak, p. 17). We see that this narrative is a shared one in which both of our identities are formed as a result.

## Methodology

The study developed from an emergent design framework. As noted in the introduction, the two authors are the two professors involved in the study. As a general framework, we used Van Manen’s (1997) phenomenological work in investigating lived experience. The experience of entering a small Christian university as the only black faculty member certainly framed the key research question of whether this experience could be shared with someone who is white. As Van Manen states, we wanted to investigate whether we could “‘borrow’ other people’s experiences and their reflections on their experiences in order to better be able to come to an understanding of the deeper meaning or

significance of an aspect of human experience" (p. 62).

We recognize that there is significant difficulty in interpreting interviews and conversations. As Fontana and Frey (2000) state, "...we cannot lift the results of interviews out of the contexts in which they were gathered and claim them as objective data with no strings attached" (p. 663). We also note that there are challenges involved in investigating our own experiences and for this reason we have taken Van Manen's (1988) "confessional style" in recognizing our own biases in and through this experience. Silverman (2000) suggests looking for particular outcomes from conversations and working backward to trace the "trajectory" through which a particular outcome is produced. This approach provides us with the opportunity to develop an understanding of the "why" associated with our experiences.

Over a period of two years, we met together regularly to discuss what challenges, concerns, and joys we were each encountering specific to Mary's experience. Our meetings began after Mary had received a particularly critical series of negative comments from student evaluations. She could not identify why she was receiving such negative feedback: was it because she was a poor teacher (but, her previous school teaching experience was very positive)? Was it because she was not prepared (but, she prided herself on her creative, well planned lessons)? After considering all of the options, she was left with the one option that was most challenging: was it because she was black? Steve happened to ask Mary how she was doing on a day in which she was seriously contemplating this question. The initial conversation was the catalyst for much dialogue over the next two years. The conversations often centred on Mary's questioning of her ability and identity. Steve's input incorporated his own questioning of why these negative comments and experiences were occurring and what was contributing to them. This is the backdrop for the narrative accounts which follow.

### **Mary's Story**

As a new faculty member in a Department of Education, I experienced a myriad of emotions in my first year of teaching in a university. I had several years of successful teaching at the high school level after obtaining my Ph.D. and came highly recommended to the hiring committee. My

confidence in previous places of work – despite always being the only black female teacher – was probably due to the fact that I was always the only one with a Ph.D. On arriving at the university, a senior administrative officer, while interviewing me, asked if the issue of color would bother me. I replied that I did not think it would since I'd successfully handled it (the color of my skin) in my previous places of work. This to me demonstrated an awareness that race could be an issue in the academy, if not with my colleagues, then possibly with students.

In my first year, I taught various math and science education classes and felt that my experiences in elementary and high school classrooms were invaluable to my students. However, there was a glaring difference I noted within the very first month of teaching: the class that comprised teachers planning to teach Primary-Junior (P/J) grades (kindergarten-grade 6) was more dialogue-driven than the class comprised of those planning to teach the Junior-Intermediate (J/I) grades (grade 4-10). Another interesting note was that the P/J class was predominantly women (~95%) and the J/I class was more evenly divided between men and women. Casual jokes interspersed during my lecture were heartily received by the P/J class but the J/I class sat in stone cold silence. This unnerved me so much that for the first time in as long as I remember, I had stomach cramps as I walked to that class. By mid-semester, I decided to teach without humor or warmth since that was getting me nowhere. I lectured like an automaton. In the P/J class, I was myself, sharing anecdotes, inviting others to share, coming up with ideas to change requirements to more adequately reflect student beliefs and perceptions of teaching. I looked forward to that class. Needless to say, at the end of the year when I received my first set of evaluations, they were starkly different. The P/J class gave me a passing grade – and being my first year of teaching university students, all I wanted to do was pass – but the J/I class tore me to bits. According to them, I was "inconsiderate", "pompous", and "over confident." I was also "boring them to death" with my personal stories, even if those stories had a bearing on the class discussion. One student even said he/she wished he/she was never required to take this course. For someone so successful previously, this cut me up in a million different pieces and I wept uncontrollably in my office with

the music playing loudly from my laptop, sitting on the floor behind my desk, with the lights turned off so that I wouldn't be seen. I wondered what had gone so wrong when I was teaching almost the same thing, to two different groups. I purposed to change things around and sought advice from my head of department and other faculty. By the beginning of the second year, I had changed my course outline to be more open, giving students choice in assignments as well as how they presented and delivered their assignments and I walked confidently into my classrooms, willing and confident that I could turn things around.

The classroom demographic didn't change that second year. This group of J/I teacher candidates was a little warmer towards me, I think because I had taught some of them in an introductory course to teaching in their first year of the education program. Dialogue was not as driven as the P/J class but it was markedly higher than what I found in the J/I class in my first year. While teaching, I saw a few women nod their heads in agreement with what I'd said and a few more students participated. On the whole, it seemed better than the previous year but silences still prevailed. I looked forward to reading my evaluations the second year and was amazed that they were only marginally different from my first year. This broke my spirit as I started wondering what the problem was. I'd changed my course outline, I'd tried to cater to different learning styles by varying my teaching style, I'd given far more choice than I feared I was allowed to without comprising the rigor of the program, and was certainly far more available to my students via our online discussion board, email, and face-to-face meetings. My department head had given me more visible assignments; for example sharing in devotions with our education students and openly supporting my addition to the team at every educational gathering. And yet, the feelings of rejection continued. What was I doing wrong? Or was it because I was black?

### **Steve's Story**

I sat on the hiring committee when Mary was hired. Mary was hired on her merits: a solid school teaching record as well as exemplary academic qualifications. Color was not an issue in the hiring process although there was a sense of "it wouldn't hurt the university to have a little color." Reflecting

on this, I recognized the naivety, and even latent racism, of such a statement.

When Mary began her work at the university there was a great energy, joy, and enthusiasm to her work. We didn't talk about color or identity. Then we started encountering resistance from students and our conversations changed. Mary started questioning her role, her identity, and her sense of belonging in the university. Some of the joy was gone and there was a nervous foreboding in her comments. She kept wondering what the problem was: was it her teaching style? The content? Her color?

As the months went by, the resistance to Mary continued. She started to investigate working elsewhere and I feared that she might quit. I began asking myself more deep questions about Mary's experience and whether her skin color was indeed the reason for the resistance. I noted in one of my journal entries that I did not want to be part of a place that marginalized people for color, or any other reason.

We took some practical steps to forge ahead. We designed a course together. We started doing some research together, given our interests in education in Ghana and Haiti. We began to have more frequent conversations together offering encouragement as we continued.

Mary's questions were echoed by my own questions which I recorded in my journal: "It can't be", "This has to be a blip" ("a few backward students," I wrote), "Is she really a poor teacher and she's blaming it on color", "typical ... students ... so close minded", "I don't want to be a part of a place that does this", "Why are there so few students and faculty of color at our university?", "Why do we not talk about these issues?", and "What does the silence say?".

### **A Common Story**

Although other members of the education department had entered into some of these conversations, they had not occurred in the broader faculty or with administration at the university. As a result, we decided to raise the issue of color and diversity at one of our monthly faculty soup lunches. Here, faculty members are encouraged to share what they are doing and others are invited to comment, encourage, and suggest other perspectives to the researchers. We had each

attended some of these soup lunches. They had typically been a cozy group of five or six professors who had been able to take time from their busy schedules to share a meal. Our soup lunch attracted about fifteen faculty members, some coming in for a short time and needing to leave for a class but about ten to twelve who remained throughout the one hour discussion.

We shared the reason for our interest in the topic and dared to suggest a reason why we thought it was timely for us as Christian faculty in a Christian university to be discussing this. In this context, there was a litany of responses. However, the overall tone was very encouraging and many of the faculty expressed shock and sorrow for the experiences which Mary had undergone. Apologies were offered. Parallels were drawn with early experiences for female faculty entering a predominantly male-oriented faculty body. Encouragement was provided for Mary to keep working for change. Our story had now been shared with a number of our colleagues. Our ability to create conversational and emotional space for challenging topics such as racism and acceptance was lauded. Yet, the space had really just entered a new trajectory.

### **Mary's Story (continued)**

Despite the outpouring of overwhelming support, I felt oddly exposed. I felt that I had revealed my vulnerability and somehow, that did not feel like a good thing. My ability to remain removed from any hurt depended on no one knowing that I was hurting. By discussing my experiences, I was not sure that I had done any good thing; at least not for myself.

I had lunch with a faculty member who had earlier mentioned that he needed to get to know me and found it enjoyable and fruitful. I came away enlightened by his white immigrant experiences and I think that I shared enough of myself that we will no longer pass each other in the hallway with just a "Hi." One faculty member who was not at the soup lunch met me in the hallway and said he'd heard of the discussion we'd initiated. He wondered if I wanted to be referred to as "Black Woman", "African Canadian Woman", or "Woman of Color." I indicated that I didn't care since I had no idea what the context was for the identification. He responded that he just wanted to make sure he was not being discriminatory or racially offensive. I

walked away from that exchange knowing that the tip-toeing around me had begun. People were not sure what to talk to me about, how to talk to me, or how to refer to me. This had apparently not been a problem until I revealed that I might care. I was beginning to wish I hadn't agreed to this revelation.

Another faculty member met me in the hallway, we exchanged pleasantries, and he confessed that he'd not been at the faculty soup lunch either. He wanted to let me know that he was sorry he had not been aware that such situations could develop in the classroom when a faculty member of color entered a predominantly white academy. I thanked him and reminded him that the lack of awareness could be perceived as good or bad, depending on how you looked at it. It was good in the sense that he didn't view me as so different that he needed to think about my "fitting in." It was bad because he really had no idea that he needed to "enter my space" and, even if he did, he had no idea how to do it. We talked about opportunities on campus that may provide students with the space to discuss these issues openly without fear of recrimination and realized that there were probably not that many. As always, the question was: what next?

After our faculty soup lunch presentation, a faculty member posted a link to an article by Anthony Stewart on perceptions of racism in the academy (<http://www.universityaffairs.ca/you-must-be-a-basketball-player.aspx>). Previously, faculty had been quick to respond to articles posted on this intranet, some serious academic material, some political, some Christian, and others less serious like the announcement that there would be a computer engineer Barbie. Interestingly, no faculty member posted a response to the article. The computer engineer Barbie garnered many comments. Of course, faculty could have replied directly to the faculty member who posted the article, like I did. However, given that this was a conversation starter and that we had been engaged in these conversations over the past weeks, it was interesting that no one continued the conversation.

### **Discussion**

What started as an investigation into whether there was space for a white faculty member to share in the journey of a black faculty member into the academy continued with many core and tangential questions and issues: identity, acceptance, racism, intentionality, and can we move from tolerance to

hospitality and then further on to embracing “the other”?

In her study of the schooling of Puerto Rican girls in the United States, Rolon-Dow (2005) found that “present-day forms of racism are often invisible to the well-meaning individuals who perpetrate them” (p. 98). In our context, this may be true of the students in Mary’s class. They may not have been able to articulate the reasons why they were being critical of Mary’s teaching. It is unlikely that they would have suggested that they were being racist. However, the ways in which they demonstrated their feelings toward Mary, certainly suggest that there may have been an invisible racism at work. We could also consider the responses of the different faculty members to and with Mary. Did some of these well-meaning members of the community actually perpetuate latent forms of racism?

One of the challenges we faced was for Steve to “buy in” to the idea that Mary was experiencing a critical push-back as a result of her color. He asked himself a progression of questions as he heard the complaints: it must be her (Mary’s) teaching abilities ... but I know she is an excellent teacher. It must be her teaching style ... but I have been part of sessions she has led and have been impressed with the way in which she communicates. It must be the provincial nature of the students ... but many have had global experiences. The last question remaining was: is it because she’s black? The fact that Steve went through a similar process of questioning (and similar conclusion) indicates that he had entered the space which Mary had inhabited. Of significant difference is that he did not process these questions in relation to himself but in relationship to the context within which he was working.

We recognize that it would be difficult for Steve to enter into this space without Mary first “inviting him” into the conversation. It is our sense that space must be created for dialogue as we remain obedient to Christ’s call to love and care for our neighbour. In Guinier and Torres’ seminal work *The Miner’s Canary* (2003), they argue for building cross-racial coalitions to remake the structures of power. We would argue that the space which we created for dialogue is a step toward redeeming and reclaiming the relationships which God desires in His creation: black and white, children of God, striving for justice.

The issue of justice is central to this discussion. As Wolterstorff, Stronks, and Joldersma (2002) state, “Not only is the Christian school called to *exhibit* justice in its educative practice and structure, but it is also called to teach *for* justice” (p. 282). This teaching for justice requires faculty and administration commitment. We also need to recognize that, “the struggle for justice requires attentive listening and looking – not ceaseless talking but, rather, listening with empathetic care to someone’s description of being wronged” (Wolterstorff et al., 2002, p. 283). Many of our conversations required this careful listening attention. Steve could not always connect or relate to the experiences and feelings which Mary was sharing. Yet, he was willing to listen. In a sense, this attentive listening is the beginning of acting justly. It also appropriates space by acknowledging the experiences of the other. However, listening is only the beginning of acting with justice and of creating space for diversity within the Christian university.

We believe that further research needs to be done regarding diversity in the Christian university. Who needs to be spear-heading this kind of research? One would think that it is the people going through the experience of finding that they have no place or identity in academia because of their color. As Amba Oduyoye (1995) indicates, issues of oppression should be defined by those who experience it. However, when a person of color identifies racism, “students tend to see that person as self interested, bitter or putting forth a particular political agenda” (Ladson-Billings, 1996). Students who have a professor of color seem shocked, belligerent, and suspicious and tend to question the validity of the course, how they are going to be graded, and whether their reflections on racism and other isms will put them at a disadvantage (Ahlquist, 1991). Whether the difference is in communication styles, background and experience, or just plain teaching styles, people of color continue to face hardships in academia with respect to teaching, research, and progression to tenure.

It is comfortable for us to think that we have token representations of color on various rungs of the academic ladder (for those people of color who do attain administrative positions). We may think (like our students) that the problems and injustices visited on us by racist attitudes vanished with the

civil rights movement or with the declaration of the end of slavery. Grant and Sleeter (1988) describe this perception as the "illusion of progress", where people of color, women, and other minority groups are given some power and responsibility in a superficial way. Considering that there are several "degrees of privilege" within our societies, permit us to say that in North America, the white male has the most privilege, followed by a white female, a black male, and then a black female. This, of course, is an overly simplified spectrum of color and does not consider the First Nation, Asian, or Latino/Latina members of our university communities. In some communities, the black male, if he is very highly educated, well spoken, and able to fit in with the white establishment will supplant the white female in that order. If the black female is therefore at the bottom of this ladder, what does that mean for a black female teaching in classes made up predominantly of white males?

University campuses in North America, in both secular institutions as well as faith-based ones, have become increasingly diverse. In Canada, most faculty of color are found in the larger, more diversified, secular institutions, perhaps allowing conversations of acceptance and hospitality to be more easily raised than in smaller, private institutions. In the academy, there are layers to the experiences of faculty of color. The first is at the outer level and can be described as the differences we see, experience, and react to at an impersonal level. For example, a person might walk around campus, see a person who is racially different and may wonder who they are, what they do, and so on. This is like the outer peel of an onion. At the next level, commonly observed in academia, is where many stereotypes have fallen by the way side. For example, the myth that people of color are not capable of being highly educated. At this level, the person of color, teaching in the academy is on par academically with his or her colleagues and able to participate in dialogue in a way that does not hint at difference based on level of education. On the third level, is the religious/secular level; one that is difficult to get to because of the reluctance to mention that people of faith have some bias of a racial nature. When these biases are never raised or discussed, students in the academy who already harbor these biases by virtue of lack of exposure find that their misconceptions are given credence by

virtue of the silence of the faculty on these same issues.

Although professors, individually and collectively, play a significant role in supporting their colleagues of color, universities cannot discount their roles. Issues of race and identity need to be discussed openly at the faculty, administrative, and board levels so that systemic problems and opportunities may be addressed. Support systems need to be put into place so that new faculty of color do not feel marginalized or that there is no space for them within which to enter. It is also critical that university administrators communicate, both in word and deed, the importance of faculty of color within the university. This may mean developing alternative means for tenure which do not rely as heavily on westernized concepts. For example, recognizing different teaching styles of people of color would be a valuable first step. Further steps would be to consider different ways in which faculty of color might contribute to research, such as alternative pieces of writing, and to the university's service expectations, such as community involvement. God's freedom provides a big enough space for difficult decisions and Christian universities must be challenged to create appropriate space for faculty and students of color.

### **Conclusion**

Issues of race and diversity continue to be an area of tension and silence at all levels of academia. Whether the issues are raised in a course or in the university faculty lounge, and whether the university is homogenous or heterogeneous with respect to race, a culture of silence, anger, and misunderstanding often continues to persist in classrooms of higher education. This is true even (perhaps more so) in Christian institutions.

There is much work to be done to create space for faculty of different color in which to dialogue, listen, and learn. Yet, we need to remember that, "it's crucial that we see clearly what has been fixed while retaining the ability to continue focusing on what remains broken" (Stewart, 2009). We propose that Volf's (1996) continuum of acceptance serve as a framework by which Christian university faculty and administration consider how they are doing in ensuring that all faculty are welcomed and embraced. This continuum suggests intolerance on one end and an embracing of each other on the opposite end of the spectrum. Most Christian



universities have moved to a tolerance and civility of faculty of color but how are they doing with moving to an ethos of hospitality within their institutions and of embracing faculty of color?

For this we have great hope. We recognize that there are Christian universities which have, with great intentionality, created space for dialogue and acceptance. As others gain a vision for such “color-full” institutions, we will see an en-fleshing of God’s creation regained.

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