

Gathering on the Wrong Side of the Road: Critical Race Scholarship Across the Health Humanities

By Bryan Mukandi, PhD, MBChB, GCHEd, MA

Not very long ago, I found myself in yet another post-COVID Zoom meeting, debating yet again whether to bite my tongue or risk the potential fallout from speaking my mind. Even in supposedly safe spaces, even among people who understand themselves to be champions of equity and diversity, I associate frank speech on race with the scatological. By that I mean whenever I arrive at the point at which I feel compelled to address race or racism, I assume that an eruption of effluence is not far off.¹ The source of this filth, you ask? It could be me, them, or just the situation. In the moment, the question of diagnosis is eclipsed by the dread, anxiety, indignation and/or rage that accompany being unjustly soiled. So despite the fact that one of my chief areas of academic expertise is the critical philosophy of race, I generally try to avoid, like the plague, discussions of race—save for those held among a small, trusted circle of friends. Unfortunately, despite my best efforts, as Dambudzo Marechera warns, “[e]verywhere you go, some shit word will collide with you on the wrong side of the road.”^{2(p48)}

This collision takes numerous forms. In “The Lived Experience of the Black”, Frantz Fanon sketches its

broad outlines. The protagonist of this central chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks* inhabits a world in which they are subjected to the impossible commands: “whiten yourself or disappear,” and “accommodate yourself to your colour.”^{3(pp142, 172)} Various encounters with the white world drive home the demand that one acquiesce to whiteness, paralyzing and fracturing the protagonist. As the reader turns the page at the end of the chapter, they leave Fanon’s Black weeping. The critical race scholar who is a person of color must navigate the grinding mill that is an academy that is no longer an ivory tower, but a fortress committed to the entrenchment of whiteness. It is while dealing with those teeth, and attempting to evade unpleasant collisions, that we engage in scholarship directed toward the preservation of those who find themselves, by design, perpetually on the wrong side of the road. Such work, as Chelsea Bond explains, “is not without risk.”⁴

This was my frame of reference when approached to review Hughes and colleague’s contribution to this critical section of *JHR*, “Exploring How Racism Structures Canadian Physical Therapy Programs...”⁵

My impression of the initial draft was that, in the attempt to illuminate everyday racism, the reader was granted permission to interrogate students. The structure of the physical therapy community of practice however, as is often the case, was left largely unexamined. My fear, I explained to the authors, was an inadvertent reiteration of the idea that the inclusion of people of color in health disciplines is a matter of charity rather than justice. More to the point, it supports the convenient belief that justice requires white people to be even more accommodating, bending backwards, rather than stating the need for white people to shift—divesting from present violent, oppressive systems.⁶ I had in mind the kind of inversion that Janet Stajic accomplishes, recounting her experiences of racism in a manner that does not reinscribe racist violence, but instead shines a light on various interlocking cogs in an expansive, racist, colonizing machine.⁷

Having submitted my review, I braced myself. I have come to learn that truth—or in less grandiose terms, careful, accurate scholarship—affords little to no defense from power. To my surprise and joy, I was greeted instead by a group of people, themselves familiar with the grinding mill, wanting to huddle with others also on the wrong side of the road.

Some years ago, I wrote an article in which I critiqued easy notions of solidarity and community. Yet at the same time, I recognized their profound importance. Community enables us to “learn from each other’s attempts to light lanterns and from each other’s comportment [...] We can laugh at and with each other about the paradoxes, the entanglements, the

complicities and struggles of attempting to get beyond the limitations of coloniality by means of colonial tools in colonial institutions through colonial communities of practice.”^{8(p79)}

It’s good to be able to laugh with Hughes and colleagues.

Acknowledgement: Hughes and colleagues made this contribution possible by virtue of openness, integrity and a disposition that is sadly rare. Similarly, Setchell and Gibson made the decision to use what power they had to amplify critical race scholarship in this field. To them, and to all who share the same ethos, thank you.

References

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