



Creative Intervention

Unmasking Racism

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As a social worker, I am committed to promoting social justice by challenging implicit racial bias and overt racism that structure private and public spheres of life. Conversations about racial injustice are particularly important in societies that characterize themselves as multicultural, such as Canada. By integrating two novel arts-based methodologies – photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997; Wang, Yi, Tao & Carovano, 1998; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001) and poetic transcription (Richardson, 2002; Sjollem, Hordyk, Walsh, Hanley & Ives, 2012) – this work attempts to unmask some of the racism that economically and politically organizes Canadian society.

The two photos featured here were taken by immigrant/refugee women in the context of my doctoral research (Sethi, 2014). The purpose of that study was to understand immigrant/refugee women's employment and health related experiences in a mid-sized region of Ontario. I employed a qualitative photovoice methodology to understand how 17 immigrant/refugee women were experiencing work opportunities and health outcomes in the post-migratory context. Participants documented their experiences in written form in a diary, as well as pictorially using a camera. They also participated in individual interviews about the photos they took, and a focus group, in which they shared their perspectives on work factors that impacted their health and overall wellbeing (Sethi, 2014; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001).

I selected these photographs – *The Toilet* (by Rudo) and *The Tool* (by Harmony) – because they address participants' experiences of racism as Zimbabwean refugee women of colour, and demonstrate their resilience in the face of such racism. I used “poetic transcription” to create “poemlike compositions from the words of interviewees” (Glesne, 1997, p. 202). Because poetic transcription “approximates poetry through the concentrated language of interviewee shaped by researcher to give pleasure and truth,” this methodology has the potential to reveal “the ‘small t’ truth of description, representing a perspective or experience of the interviewee, filtered through the

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researcher” (Glesne, 1997, p. 213). However, “it may not reach the large ‘T’ truth of seeing ‘with the eyes of the spirit’ for which poetry strives” (Glesne, 1997, p. 213). To foreground participants’ voices, experiences and meanings of racism, I drew on direct quotations from interview transcripts to construct the poems. I paid particular attention to repeated words and phrases. For example, Rudo used the phrase “They call me Nigger” several times during the interview, which became a key aspect of the poem associated with her photo.

Rudo used a photograph titled *The Toilet* to represent the everyday racism she faces as a refugee in Canada. In her words, “The toilet is a place of filthiest excretion.” When she was called a “Nigger” by a resident at the nursing home where she is employed, she felt filthy and dirty. She also felt dehumanized by some white colleagues and clients. However, she does not allow racist experiences to define her. With pride in her eyes and a smile on her lips, she announces, “I am beautiful.” She continues to work with dignity, and eventually received the Employee of the Year award.

In *The Tool*, Harmony also experiences dehumanization, by her employer, who expects her to perform like a machine because of her status as a refugee woman of colour. At work, she is viewed as “less than” a human being, a tool that is expected to be perfect and shiny. Her employer expected her to work incessantly like a machine, without considering the impacts this amount of work had on her physical and mental health. Further, she was expected not to show any emotions, and perform her work with perfection, remaining “perfect” and “shiny.”

But, like Rudo, she refuses to be defined by these racist experiences. She continues to do her work with dignity and pride. Both women demonstrate remarkable resilience as they find a way to value their immigrant identity and self-worth despite their experiences of dehumanization and racism.

As arts-based research methodologies are participant driven, they entail a “bottom-up” rather than “top down” approach to research. Such an approach offers marginalized individuals, who are often objects of research, more control over the research process. By producing and narrativising their own photographs, participants have an opportunity to communicate to policy makers in their own terms the social inequities that impact their lives, thereby advocating for social change in their communities (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001).

By using photovoice and poetic transcription, I hope to convey the race-related concerns of the participants in this study in *their* words and images. These pieces provide symbolic evidence of racism in their working lives. When viewed in non-academic settings, they may affect how service providers, health practitioners, policy makers and social workers understand everyday racism in Canada, thereby promoting social justice outcomes through altered social service practice.



The Toilet (Photo: Rudo)

“They call me Nigger. They spit on me”
Some co-workers and residents in the nursing home.
I took this picture of the toilet to explain how I feel
Deep within my soul.
The toilet is a place
Of the filthiest excretion
It has the sting of the word “Nigger”
Of insult and humiliation.
Of being dehumanized.
I want to flush *it* down
The toilet
The shame that I feel
Oh! I feel dirty
So dirty!
White residents don’t want my black skin
To touch their white bodies
Even when I am trying to help them,
The frail, the aged and the lonely.
I am skilled.
I am smart.
But all they see is my Black immigrant body
My blackness is regarded as ‘dirty’
Sometimes I want to flush *it* down the toilet.
This racist attack on my beautiful body.
I am tired of the ‘war on colours’
Which is more beautiful – black or white?
“They call me Nigger. They spit on me,”
Some of my co-workers and residents at the nursing home.
“They shove their fist at me.
They see me as a useless dirty thing.”
They make me feel that
I am nothing.
Nothing
Just like the toilet.
I smile at the face of Racism.
I am beautiful.



The Tool (Photo: Harmony)

I was brought up
To be a strong and intelligent woman
In my country.
I have the ability to flourish
Even when the road is long
And the path is filled with thorns.
I am resilient.
Post-migration
I am reduced to a piece of tool.
At work
I am expected to function
Like a piece of tool.
I am expected to perform to perfection
Just like the piece of shiny perfect tool.
My black skin is expected to be shiny
At all times.
I am human.
Yes! I am human.
I am not a machine
I am not perfect
I am not *just* a piece of tool.
I am a strong and intelligent woman.
I am a refugee woman.

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